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SHIELA STEWART

Surviving
THE
DARKNESS

BOOK 8 IN THE DARKNESS SERIES

Surviving the Darkness

by Shiela Stewart

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Surviving the Darkness
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*To anyone who has ever survived
a horrific ordeal. Keep up the fight.
Hold your head high and know
that with each day brings new
light and better days.*

CHAPTER ONE

These tours were beginning to drain her. How many cities had she been to this past week? She'd lost count. Deborah watched through the tinted limo windows as the shops passed her by. It was good to be home in her apartment in New York. If only she could stay here longer than a week. It was just past ten in the evening and though the shops were closed, people still mulled about, walking carelessly without a worry. Deborah wished she had that, wished she could lumber along the sidewalks window shopping, without someone coming to her and asking for an autograph. It wasn't that she didn't appreciate her fans; she did, and she wouldn't be where she was today without them. Still...she longed to be as carefree as the people enjoying a nice evening out with a friend or lover.

Things were worse for her now that she had a crazy stalker after her. Before he'd been sending her obsessive letters and showing up at every one of her concerts, trying desperately to get up close to see her, she'd had some freedom at least. When his notes began to show malice then turn to threats, Bruce, her bodyguard insisted he stick to her twenty-four/seven. She had no peace or privacy now, and she so badly missed it. Bruce was a great guy and she loved him dearly. Still...having him around all the time tended to wear on her nerves.

She always felt as if she couldn't breathe.

But it wasn't just hard on her. She knew Bruce was struggling with it as well, especially since he rarely ever got to spend any quality time with his girlfriend. Casey was a patient woman, but even Deborah knew her patience must be wearing. Now might be a good time for both her and Bruce to have a break from each other. It seemed that her obsessed fan had taken a few days off as well. She hadn't received a single note from him in over a week, and he hadn't shown up at her last concert. Deborah could only hope he'd given up on her.

They came to a stop in front of her condo, and Deborah waited for her door to open. When it did, she took Bruce's hand and climbed from the car.

"Home sweet home," Bruce chimed, holding his free arm out to the building.

"For the time being, at least." She drew in a deep breath then walked to the front doors. Standing there, ever dutiful, was James, the night guard. "Good evening, James."

"Pleasure to see you again, Miss Carmichael."

With a soft smile she walked past him to the elevator. It had been two months since she'd been home last and nothing had changed.

"Get out."

"Excuse me?"

She turned to Bruce squaring her chin and giving her voice a firm tone. "We're home now. Things have settled down for the time being. This is the perfect opportunity to spend time with Casey. Go out, surprise her, show up at her apartment and make wild passionate love to her all night."

One dark bushy eyebrow lifted as he spoke. "Where did this come from?"

"It's been a long tour for us and I know I'm feeling it. You must be, too. Take a night and have some fun."

"We both know I can't do that."

She stopped the elevator and turned to him. "I'm in my apartment. I'm safe here. All I plan to do when I get inside is soak in a hot bubble bath then fall face first into bed. I can call you when I wake up in the morning and you can go about your duty of making me safe." She took his face in her hands when she saw he was about to protest. "Don't argue with me. I'm the boss. It's one night, Bruce. What could possibly happen in eight short hours? Go, get laid." She pressed the resume button sending them back on their way to the penthouse suite.

"Well, if you put it like that."

They both laughed. The doors swung open and Deborah stepped out of the car. "Tell Casey I say hi."

"Are you sure about this, Deb?"

She stepped back as the doors began to close. "Have a good night, Bruce." As the doors closed she turned away and headed to her suite. Oh how she'd missed her own place and she would finally have some privacy even if it only was for a possible eight hours. She was betting Bruce showed up at her door by seven.

The guy was loyal and she loved him for it.

Pulling her keys out of her purse, visions of soft frothy bubbles filling her head, Deborah unlocked her door and entered.

It truly was good to be home.

He came out of the kitchen, throwing one arm around her waist and clamping one hand over her mouth. As he kicked the door shut the sound reverberated throughout the room like thunder. She was frozen with panic and riddled with fear. His hot breath on her neck was like fire ready to scorch.

"Finally, I have you."

He dragged her to the bedroom, her feet dangling off the ground. The taste on his hand was bitter and salty. She wanted to scream but the sound was lodged somewhere between her belly and her throat. As he dragged her to the bedroom she saw the ropes tied to her bedposts, and she knew exactly what he had in mind.

He flipped her face down onto the bed, pinning her with a knee to the small of her back. The hand knitted blanket on her bed smothered her whimpers. She heard him grab something from the bedside table, felt him shift and when he flipped her onto her back, she had only a moment to breathe before the cloth was shoved into her mouth. With wide eyes, she stared up at her abductor.

Peter Milligan.

"This should do it."

He slapped tape over her mouth in a quick fluid motion—then, smiling down at her, kissed her head.

Do something. Don't just lie here and let him do this to you. Fight!

But the voice inside her head was squelched by the fear.

"Now, the finishing touches."

He dragged her to the head of the bed, yanking first one arm up and tying it to the post then the other. When the knots were securely fashioned, he leaned back, his rump resting on her belly and looked down at her with evil intent in his eyes.

"Now, you'll finally be mine."

Lost in her fear, all Deborah could do was stare at the man who had sent her numerous notes, promises of making her his, threatening her if she didn't return his calls. The countless pictures he'd sent her didn't show the true evil he personified.

Sitting beside her on the bed, he patted her leg. "I've been waiting a long time for this and I had to make everything perfect. Do you like the atmosphere? I know how much you like candles so I thought filling the room with them would help you relax."

It did anything but relax her. How could she relax when she was tied to her bed, knowing full well what was going to happen to her? He'd vowed many times in his letters that when he finally had her, he would never let her go. And the only way they would ever part would be in death.

"I've been here all day, preparing for when you came home. I bought brand new bed linens for you. I know how much you like the color blue. They're silk. Can you tell? No, probably not. But you will once I get you undressed."

Dear God no! But instead of trying to scream or even attempting to break free, she lay there, quivering like a fool, her voice sucked away by the fear.

She cringed when he touched her face, then felt the bile rise as his fingers grazed over her cheeks, down her chin to her shoulder.

"You are so beautiful, Debbie, and I love how you don't have one of those stick figures like so many women these days. It's a tragedy that women think they need to starve themselves in order to look beautiful. Not that I think you're fat. Far from it. You're just not anorexic." He squeezed her shoulder before getting up off the bed. "Well, enough chatter for now. I better go lock up. Wouldn't want anyone waltzing in here right now." he turned back to her, resting one hand in the pocket of his jeans, the other on the door jam. "Especially not your guard. Where is he tonight anyway? He never leaves your side." When all she did was stare at him, he slapped a hand on his forehead. "What was I thinking? You can't respond with that tape over your mouth. Oh well, it doesn't matter. I'm prepared in case he comes back."

Her entire body turned to jelly when he lifted the gun from his pocket and waved it in the air.

"I'll be back in just a bit."

Deborah whimpered as he left the room. She was utterly relieved that Bruce had agreed to take the night off. If he'd come into the apartment with her, he would have been shot.

She swallowed the bile that thought produced and wondered if she would make it out alive.



Stealthily, Zach moved about the street, his feline eyes searching. When he finally found his brother he was going to give that kid a piece of his mind. What the hell was he thinking, escaping from his bedroom in the middle of the night? And if he was hanging with those delinquents again, Zach was going to string him up by his toes. What was he thinking? Their parents were already pissed off at both of them and with just cause. He should have kept a better eye on his brother but between setting up the Demon's Lair and getting Simone out of her abusive marriage he'd let Eli slide. He wasn't about to do that again.

Spotting his kid brother in the distance, and yes, hanging with his usual crowd, Zack sped up. As he gained ground he transformed back into his human form. Reaching out, he laid one hand on his brother's shoulder, catching him off guard.

"What the hell—Zack? Oh, shit!"

He narrowed his eyes at the four other kids. "Scram boys," Grabbing his brother by the shirt sleeve, he hauled Eli off. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

Jerking his arm free, Eli straightened his shirt and snarled in response. "I was trying to have some fun."

"At two in the morning on a school night? Do you have any idea how worried Mom and Dad are right now?"

His back straight, his chin defiant, Eli remarked snidely. "Fuck 'em."

Zach spun on him, gripping him by the shirt front and lifting him several inches off the ground. "You will respect our parents."

"I was a mistake anyway. It's not like they care about me."

Was he for real? Zack felt like shaking some sense into the kid. "Where the hell do you get that from? You were not a mistake. Mom and Dad planned on having you, and they had wanted several more but the doctor told Mom to stop. Don't you get it yet? They love their kids. All of them." He set Eli on his feet and took a deep breath. "You were supposed to be the start of a new generation—a younger generation—but if you keep up the way you have been, you'll either end up dead before you're twenty, or in Juvenile Hall."

"Well maybe I don't *want* to be the next generation. Maybe I just *want* to have fun."

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“You can have both, but do it right. Disobeying them will only make them tighten their reins on you. Now, let’s get you home.” With his brother at his side, Zach headed to his parents’ home.

Kids.

CHAPTER TWO

She was shivering. It wasn't cold, yet her body was acting as if she were chilled. Even her teeth were chattering. She could hear him moving around her apartment and wished to God he would leave. But that would be too easy.

Her body went to stone the instant he stepped into the room.

"I've locked the door and the balcony, closed up the curtains, and now we're ready to go." He walked to her bedroom window and pulling the shades, turned back to her with a sly grin on his face. "I've been waiting a long time for this, Debbie."

The whimper that escaped her taped mouth didn't seem to have come from her. The fear was lodged so tightly in her chest that she couldn't muster anything more.

"How is it you don't own a pair of scissors? I searched the entire apartment but came up empty. I guess this will have to do."

Her heart sped up as he held one of the butcher block knives in the air. The overhead light glinted off the steel blade as he turned it over.

"I should have undressed you before tying you up, but I didn't want to take the chance of having you escape." He sat on the edge of the bed and her body began to shake even more. She tried tugging her

hands free, but the ropes cut into her wrists with a scorching sensation. The cloth in her mouth was wet with saliva and the tape over her lips was beginning to irritate her skin. Dear God, wouldn't someone save her?

"Now, let's get you out of those clothes."

She whimpered, and when he lifted the large steel knife she felt her blood drain.

"Now, now; this doesn't have to be unpleasant." Sliding the blade under her pant leg, he began to slice along the seam. "As long as you stay still."

As the cold steel touched her skin, she flinched. Her heart was pounding so hard she was sure it would bruise her ribs. And as he slid the blade up her leg the tears drenched her face.

"Brown isn't your color. I think I've told you that before. You should wear yellows and reds. You have the complexion for those colors. Brown makes you look washed out."

She cringed when the blade slid along her other leg and when he angled the blade over her crotch and sliced the fabric up her belly, her whimpers turned to sobs.

"Now, now; no need for hysterics."

Her body shook as he slid the blade along her blouse, tearing open the fabric. He parted the center and sat back staring down at her. She tasted bile and the stomach acid stung her chest, but she swallowed it back. Then his fingers slipped beneath the center of her bra. She whimpered again but he kept going. He slipped the blade of the knife beneath the fabric and as he tipped it up to cut the fabric, it clipped the inside of her breast, searing the flesh.

She began to sob.

"Oops, sorry about that." Parting the cups, his fingers skimmed her breasts making the bile rise a little higher. Then to her horror, he bent over and slid his tongue out and over the cut. "You're very tasty. I can't wait to have more. And I just knew you'd have great breasts."

Placing the blade between his teeth, leaving both hands free, he cupped each breast firmly. With a hiss between his teeth, he fondled her.

Why was this happening to her? She tried not to think about his hands on her breasts but she couldn't. She felt everything—the scrape of his callused palms, how his fingers gripped one nipple and squeezed tightly.

God, just let this be over.

He took the knife from between his teeth and sucked in a breath. "Yes indeed. You are mighty fine. Let's see what the rest of you looks like."

She could feel her body shaking and could do nothing as he slid her pants away. When the tip of the blade touched her hip she squeezed her eyes tightly shut and prayed. She heard the fabric tearing, felt the cloth parting.

She was completely bare now.

"Oh my...you are sweet. I love a woman who keeps her feminine area bare."

She jumped when his fingers touched her and began to sob.

"Jesus, you are nice. Yes indeed."

His fingers slid over her, tugging the dry flesh. When his finger penetrated her, she began to sob so hard, her body shook the bed.

"Stop crying!"

But she just couldn't stop the tears or the way her body shook with them. He was going to rape her and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

"I said stop crying," he demanded, holding the knife to her chin.

She yelped when the blade came down between her breasts.

"Stop crying or I'll give you a reason to cry."

She couldn't help herself and let her fear show. She bawled like a baby, flipping her head back and forth, bucking to get him off of her. When the tip of the blade sliced into her chest, she screamed through the cloth.

"I said stop crying!" The fire erupted as the blade slid between her breasts and down to her belly.

"Deb. Are you still up?"

She was never so relieved to hear Bruce's voice as she was now. Until she remembered Peter had a gun.

"Fuck!" Peter dropped the knife as he jumped up off the bed. She began to cry out as loud as she could as Peter made his way to the bedroom door, gun ready. She tugged at her wrists, crying out.

The shot rang out, making her jump.

She screamed through the muffled cloth. Bruce was probably dead and when Peter came back into the room, she knew she'd be next. Then she heard the scuffle, heard what sounded like fists hitting flesh. Helpless, all she could do is listen and hope Bruce would be able to overpower Peter.

Then it all went quiet.

Fully expecting Peter to come back into the room, Deborah closed her eyes and cried.

“Deb? Oh, sweet Jesus.”

Her eyes flew open to see Bruce staggering toward her. The sleeve of his left arm was drenched in blood, and his face was bruised and bloody.

He was alive.

“What the hell did he do to you? This might hurt.”

With a quick tug he pulled the tape from her mouth. Though it stung like hell, she was glad to finally have her mouth back and when he pulled the cloth away she took a deep breath. She’d been saved.

“I need to call an ambulance. This cut is deep.”

“You need an ambulance too,” she managed though her throat was a more than a little dry. “He shot you.”

“This,” he nudged his head to his bleeding arm. “Just a flesh wound. Let’s get you free.” But before he began untying her, he pulled the blanket from the chair by the window and draped it over her.

“Is he...”

“Dead? No. I knocked him out and tied his hands and feet with the silk curtain ties. One down.”

“Why did you come back?”

“Casey’s out of town visiting her parents. I figured instead of booking a hotel room, I’d come back here. There you go.”

Her hands free, she pulled them together and rubbed her wrist. She saw the welts, felt the pain and remembered all she had been through. And like a damn that had burst, her tears came flooding out.

“Oh, Deb. I am so sorry.”

He took her in his arms, carefully holding her while she sobbed against his chest.



Lying on the uncomfortable hospital bed, Deborah stared up at the ceiling. She had an I.V. in her left hand that was making an odd humming noise at the same time as it drip, drip, dripped. She’d been listening to it for who knew how long now. There was no clock in the room she was in, but she was sure it had been over an hour since she’d been left alone.

She’d been through hell tonight, and she had the wounds to prove it. Because the doctor hadn’t wanted her scarred any more than possible, he’d opted for gluing her chest back together rather than stitch-

ing it. The wound hadn't been too deep and for that she should have felt grateful, only...she didn't. She'd rather she didn't have it at all.

Bruce was in a room somewhere down the hall, though she wondered if he'd stayed in bed as he'd been instructed. He'd been wrong about his injury being merely a flesh wound. They'd had to dig the bullet out of his arm and because of that, they'd kept him in the hospital for observation. Last she'd heard he was bitching up a storm, insisting to be released.

She owed him her life.

The police had taken her statement and reassured her that Peter Milligan would not be getting out of jail anytime soon.

She could only hope that was true.

Closing her eyes, she drew in a deep breath and reminded herself she was safe.

Yet every sound she heard put her on edge.

She jumped when the door to her room opened, then relaxed when she saw the nurse.

"I've been instructed to give you a sedative."

Deborah stayed silent as the nurse inserted a syringe into her I.V.

"There you go. That should help you sleep."

Deborah smiled politely, and before the nurse made it to the door she could feel the drug taking effect.

Her eyes drooping, Deborah let the drug take her down.

CHAPTER THREE

Deborah woke with the scream choking inside her chest. She gasped, gagged and fought for the air that was stolen from her in her dream. She sat up, her eyes wide as she stared into the space around her. It took her several moments to realize where she was.

She was safe, in her hotel room.

It was just a dream. It was just a dream.

But Deborah knew better.

Her head was throbbing with the mother of all headaches, which she'd had ever since her ordeal. Well, she'd managed three hours of sleep before the nightmare had woken her. Not bad. Not good, but these days, Deborah didn't seem to mind the lack of sleep.

Tossing the blankets aside, her body drenched in sweat, she slipped her feet into the pink fuzzy slippers on the floor then grabbed the white robe tossed carelessly over the chair by the bed. What she needed was a good hot shower to wash the nightmare away.

Though the hotel room was fitted with a Jet tub, Deborah preferred the shower. After her nightmare, she didn't want to chance falling asleep in a bath. She dreaded falling asleep as it was.

Tucking her cell phone in the pocket of her robe, Deborah grabbed one of the steel chairs from the kitchenette and took it with her to the shower. Once inside, she went about her usual ritual of peering

behind the door to make sure no one was hiding behind it. Her pulse sped up and her heart raced. Seeing no one inside, she let the breath out she'd been holding and stepped through the doorway.

She closed the bathroom door, jammed the chair under the door knob before turning to the tub. The shower curtain was still in the exact place she'd left it, folded neatly on the gigantic vanity. Taking the cell phone from the pocket of her robe, she set it on the back of the toilet, then began to undress. If the phone were waterproof she would have preferred taking it into the shower with her. But since it wasn't she had to make do with leaving it within reach outside.

She hung the robe on the hook on the inside of the washroom door, and dropped her nightgown on the floor along with her underwear. She started the water, good and hot—it had to be hot enough to scorch away the memory of his hands on her skin—Deborah stepped beneath the spray.

And let the tears fall.

She hated the dreams, hated that the brute who had abducted her had invaded the last place she had as a sanctuary—her sleep. Opening her mouth, she gulped down the water that poured from the shower head but still she tasted his hand. She wondered if she would ever be rid of it. Nothing had taste any longer; everything tasted like the grease on his hand when he'd held it over her mouth. Grabbing the toothpaste sitting on the shelf in the shower, she squirted a good dollop into her mouth and though the mint burnt, she held in for several minutes.

It helped to take away the taste even for a little while.

She washed her hair. She spent more time scrubbing it than she knew was necessary, but she couldn't get it clean enough. Anything he'd touched never got clean enough. She lathered her body, careful of the scar along her chest which was slowly healing, and scrubbed her skin nearly to the raw point. She still felt his hands on her. She rinsed the suds off, and then turned off the water.

Grabbing a towel for her hair and another for her body, she stepped out of the tub and walked to the mirror. Wiping the mist away, she looked at the pale woman staring back at her.

She hardly recognized her.

Her finger trailed along the wound running along the center of her chest. It was healing slowly, but she would forever have a reminder of her ordeal.

Not so long ago, she had been pretty and full of life. Now...she was broken. Pulling the towel from her hair, she blotted it dry before

hanging it on the rack. Once upon a time her brown hair shone like gold. Now it hung lifelessly to her shoulders.

She ran the brush through it, pulling it away from her face which only made her hollow eyes stand out more. She'd lost far too much weight in the past few months, and even more so the past few days.

Had it really been three days?

She dried off, then threw her robe on and scooped up her clothing before pulling the chair from the door and tucking the cell phone in her robe pocket.

Holding her breath, she slowly slid the door open—at first, only an inch, then another, and another. She felt dizzy and nearly closed the door again and locked herself in. Instead, she held her head high and moved on. When she had it open all the way, she cautiously looked out around the room. Her heart was pounding, her hands were shaking, and she thought for sure she might black out. When she saw no one waiting for her on the other side, she finally exhaled.

Grabbing the chair in her free hand, she set it back with its twin at the table, then dumped her nightgown on the bed.

She nearly jumped to the ceiling when her cell phone rang. Her heart pounding, she pulled the phone from her pocket and with a great deal of fear, looked at the caller I.D.

She was safe. He was in jail and she was safe.

With a heavy sigh of relief, she answered it with a shaky, "Hello."

"Deborah? Detective Michaels here. How're you doing today?"

She sat on the bed and she was sure it shook with the pounding of her heart. "I've been better."

"I'm sure. Um...I wanted to come tell you this in person but my wife had the baby early this morning and...well..."

"Congratulations. What did you have?"

"A boy," he laughed and she could hear the proud father coming out. She imagined he was beaming from ear to ear.

Detective Michaels had been so kind to her in the hospital when he'd taken her statement. He'd been patient, understanding as she fought to tell her story through her sobs. He'd told her about his wife being due any day now and how they were both looking forward to their new addition. It looked like there was some happiness in the world even if it wasn't hers.

"How wonderful for you both. I hope mother and son are doing well?"

"The wife is tired but good. My son is...well, perfect. Look, I'm not calling with good news, so I hope you're sitting."

She really didn't like the way this was sounding. "I am."

"Good. Milligan was released this morning on bail."

Her heart stopped, the blood drained from her body, and she had to take several deep breaths to prevent herself from blacking out.

"Deborah? You okay?"

No, she was far from okay. "Why?" she managed in a croak of a voice.

"No priors, upstanding citizen. Judge saw no reason to keep him behind bars. I'm sorry."

Upstanding citizen? The guy was an obsessed lunatic. "How can this be? He abducted me, held me against my will, assaulted me, and shot my bodyguard. How is it the judge can let him go?"

"It's shitty, I know, Deborah. The law doesn't always work."

He was so right about that. When a psychotic abductor was released because he was supposedly an upstanding citizen, how were the innocent supposed to feel safe?

Released. He was free. Her hand started to shake, her heart was hammering. She ran to the door, double checking the locks. "He'll come after me."

"He doesn't know where you are."

The laugh that bubbled from her mouth startled her. "Like that's ever stopped him before. He'll find me, Detective, and when he does, he'll finish the job. I can't stay here."

"Look, I wish I could do more for you, and it kills me that he's been released—"

"I know. It's out of your hands." A lot of good that did her, though. "Thank you for calling to tell me. Give your wife my congratulations, Detective." She shut the phone off, stood in her spot just staring out at the room. She'd registered under her mother's name but still, he practically knew everything there was to know about her. He could call around looking for her. She wasn't safe here.

She had to get out, go somewhere he couldn't find her. But where?

She threw her clothes into the suitcase by the bed, not bothering to fold them neatly. She tossed her toiletries into the sack then into the suitcase. It was then she realized she wasn't even dressed.

God...what was she going to do?

Falling down to her knees, she wept with sobs that shook her body.

How could they release him after what he'd done? He'd been caught, red handed as it were by her body guard, Bruce. Even after

Peter shot him, Bruce had taken him down. And now the bastard was out on bail?

What kind of world did she live in?

Grabbing a shirt and a pair of jeans, Deborah threw them on. She had to get out of here before he found her.

When her cell phone jangled again she actually let out a scream. Calming her rapid breath, she looked at the I.D. and answered it with a sigh of relief. "Hi, Ginny."

"Hey, BFF. How you doing today?"

"He's out." It just all came bubbling out. "They released him on bail. He's free, Ginny. Free to finish the job," she babbled breathlessly as she held the phone against her shoulder while she dressed.

"What? That's nuts. Shit, what are you gonna do?"

"I don't know." She slid her feet into her sneakers forgoing the socks.

"Okay, sit down, take a few deep breaths. I can tell you're close to hyperventilating."

She did as Ginny suggested but it didn't make her feel any better. "I'm so scared, Ginny. I can't go through that again."

"I know. Just keep breathing. Okay, here is what you're going to do. Pack your bags and come stay with me."

"I couldn't do that to you. I don't want anyone else getting hurt." As it was she felt bad enough that Bruce had been injured.

"No one knows where you grew up, well, aside from your manager and Bruce. But the press, you never give a place of birth. You'd be safe here and besides, it's been ages since we've seen each other. I'd love the company. This place is rather...dead. No pun intended."

"I told you to start over somewhere else."

"I know, but hell...this place is home. I couldn't bear the thought of moving somewhere else. Seriously, Deb. Come stay with me, for however long you need to. Please. I worry about you."

Deborah took a deep breath and thought it over. It would be nice to see her friend again. Ginny was right, the outside world didn't know where she'd grown up. "Are you sure?" And it would be nice to see Ginny again. They'd grown up together and even after Deborah had gone out on concert tours, they'd still kept in touch. Aside from her mother, Ginny was all she had that was as close to her as family.

"Would I have asked if I wasn't? It'll be fun. Come on, you know you want to."

The smile that filled her face was foreign to her. It had been far too long since she'd had a reason to be happy. "Okay, you twisted my arm."

"Yippee. So when can I expect you?"

"In about seven hours. I'm leaving now." Hanging up, Deborah tucked the phone in her jeans pocket and grabbing her suitcase, rushed from the room.

The sooner she left the better.

CHAPTER FOUR

Taking the elevator up from his underground suite, Zach ran through the e-mails on his phone. He preferred the privacy and darkness of the basement suite in the Demon's Lair over his Penthouse suite in Los Angeles. Given his office hours were typically nights, being underground gave him more peace and quiet than the penthouse did. Finished with his e-mails, he tucked the phone back in his jacket pocket as he stepped from the elevator to the sound of a heavy metal band thumping the walls. Though he preferred the soft sounds of Bach or Mozart he knew his customers like the harder stuff. So he gave them what they wanted, in music and anything else they desired.

The Demon's Lair was the only demon/human friendly club in Jacob's Cove and practically anything was allowed once you entered. As long as the other patron agreed to it. Oh, he'd made sure everything he did was on the up and up, insisting everyone who entered his establishment sign a waiver, but that didn't stop the cops from harassing him whenever they had the yen.

As was the case now.

Since the darkness had been lifted and the city taken over by the Royal Vampire family, rules had been put in place. Vampires were no longer permitted to grab innocent victims and drink their blood. The

penalty for doing so was not only a jail sentence but if the vampire was a repeat offender, his fangs were removed.

A vampire friendly blood bank had been set up for the vampires to get their life source but there were still those who enjoyed the thrill of taking it fresh from a human's veins. They could do that in the Demon's Lair. For a price.

The back of the nightclub was set up for those who liked to get their blood from something other than a glass. It was quite like a brothel in that he had paid ladies and gentleman supplying their bodies for a price. Whether it be to have their blood drawn, or some kinky sexual act, it was allowed. Providing his employees agreed to it.

It was all on the up and up.

Still...he was harassed.

Zach greeted the waitresses with a smile as they passed his way, threw a hand in the air to wave at Wade, his loyal bartender to let him know he was here now. He saw the two officers sitting at the bar impatiently waiting for him to come out. Zach figured they could wait just a little longer.

When Wade came over, Zach stepped off to the side to talk. "Did they say why they were here this time?"

Wade, a rather large man in height but as thin as a rail frowned as he ran a hand through his dusty brown hair. "They wouldn't tell me. Said they needed to talk to you and only you."

"Perfect. Well, let's not keep the boys in blue waiting much longer." He smoothed out his black Armani jacket, ran a hand over his hair still tied back and in perfect place before stepping out to greet the officers.

He could easily go a week without seeing them.

Though he despised cops, he knew better then to piss them off. "Officers," he spoke in a friendly manner. "How may I be of service to you today?"

They swiveled in their stools almost simultaneously and Zach recognized both as having been in his establishment several times in the past few months. Officers Headly and Lewis were becoming a thorn in his side he eagerly wanted removed.

"We've had a complaint from a young woman stating that she was assaulted in your bar this evening."

"Oh how dreadful." Though he didn't permit it, often the patrons got rough.

"By one of your employees."

Zach paused a moment, his eyes shifting from officer to officer before responding. "Does this employee have a name?" Zach thought of all of his employees on duty tonight and who it might have been. There was Wade at the bar, Thor at the door, Mollie, Kalista, Simone and Angel, waitressing. Denny was in the kitchen doing dishes and Keith and Dud were patrolling to ensure everything was running smoothly. He couldn't picture any of them assaulting an employee unless it had been called for.

"Simone Dumont," Officer Headly spouted, his eyes shifting to the room.

Now that surprised him a great deal. "Simone? There must be a mistake, officers." He'd known Simone all of her life and couldn't picture her assaulting anyone. Not with her past.

"I assure you, the woman was insistent it was Miss Dumont. Now, your bartender tells us she's in the ladies room but it's been nearly five minutes. We want her brought out immediately so we can question her."

The smile slid slowly into place as Zach kept his temper. "Well... officers, you know women. They do tend to take longer in the ladies room than most. I'm sure she's just refreshing her make-up. I'll go see if I can hurry her along. Wade, would you supply these fine men with a beverage of their choice." As he walked off, he heard Wade ask for their orders.

Waving at familiar faces as he walked through the bar, Zach didn't bother to hurry. If the officers wanted to disrupt his club, they could just stew for a while.

Stepping into the back room, Zach headed to the staff ladies room and knocked on the door. "Simone. Are you in there?"

"Depends; are the cops still out there?" she asked through the closed door.

Leaning against the wall, Zach examined his nails and decided he was in need of a manicure. "They are. Mind telling me what happened?"

She stepped out of the washroom and he could see she'd been crying. Her eyes were red and puffy despite the attempt to make them look otherwise. She was such a delicate beauty and had been through so much this past year.

"That bitch grabbed my tits and crotch."

He pulled himself up from the wall and cocked his head to the side. "Excuse me?"

She pulled the twist from her hair, letting the long red curls spill out to land on her shoulders. Using her fingers, she rubbed her head, ruffling her hair. She had a delicate frame, a soft face and had been his best friend since birth.

"This woman at my station. She'd had too much to drink and I was going to cut her off. Told her she had to either drink cola or water or take herself home. She followed me to the back, cornered me, grabbed my tits with one hand and shoved her hand up my skirt to my crotch. Said she could persuade me to let her have another drink." Simone drew in a deep breath, swallowed. "So I slugged her. I don't need that shit."

When her eyes began to water he took her in his arms and ran a soothing hand along her back. "You should have come to me as soon as it happened."

"I didn't want to bother you and mostly, I wanted to handle it myself."

Releasing her, he lifted her right hand and seeing the red swollen knuckles, smiled warmly. "You went with your right. Good girl." He'd been teaching her self defense and was utterly proud to see she was using it. He kissed her knuckles then thumbed away her tears. "Go to my office. I'll have the officers brought there and we can talk this out. You want to press charges of your own?"

She shook her head repeatedly. "I just want to forget it."

He could understand that. "Go, sit in my office, take a breather and relax. I'll be there momentarily." He left her with a kiss to her forehead hoping she could manage to settle down.

Simone wasn't a temperamental woman, the exact opposite really. She'd been married to an abusive jerk for five years who managed to strip a once vibrant woman down to a cringing, fearful person with practically no self esteem left.

Zach had managed to rid her of her abusive husband and had taken her in and helped her heal. There was no damn way he was going to allow some drunken whore to send her back to her cowering corner.

The cops were sitting right where he'd left them, looking more than a little unimpressed. Tough. "Officer's. If you would follow me to my office, I'm sure we can straighten this whole matter out." As he led them through the bar, the chants and evil glares amused him. There was hardly a soul in the place who cared for the cops. And he liked that just fine.

He led them to the back and down the long corridor to his office. Opening the door, he saw Simone sitting on the sofa, her head between her legs. He hoped she was practicing her deep breathing and not trying to prevent herself from blacking out. "Simone." When she lifted her head, he saw that she was much calmer now than she'd been moments ago. Good girl.

"These officer's would like to talk to you."

She stood up, smoothed out her skirt, squared her shoulders and held her head high. With a curt nod, she indicated she was ready.

"We'd like to ask you some questions, Miss Dumont," Officer Lewis began.

"I would like Simone to explain to you what happened first. Then you may question her. Simone..." Zach motioned for her to begin.

Taking a deep breath, she gave the officers a recount of what had happened and what she had done. When she was finished, she walked to his mini bar and pulled out a bottle of water. She drank nearly half down before recapping it.

"Do you have any witnesses to this assault, Miss Dumont?"

"Well sure, but I don't want to press charges."

Officer Headly blinked like an owl at her. "Why not?"

She shrugged as she sipped her water. "I don't want the trouble. I just want it to go away."

"Unfortunately it can't, Miss Dumont," Officer Lewis added. "She's accusing you of assaulting her and she has the black eye to prove it. We need to bring you in for booking."

"I'm not going." She looked at Zach with panic in her eyes. "I can't go there again. I just can't."

"It's okay, Simone." Taking her by the shoulders, he gave her a reassuring look. "I'll be right there by your side and I promise I won't let anything happen to you. We'll go, get this over with and then you can go home and crash for the day. Okay?"

She nodded, her eyes growing glossy from tears.

"Okay." Tucking her in his arm, he led her from the room, the officers right on their heels.

CHAPTER FIVE

It took her longer than she'd expected. Having to stop along the way to throw up from a panic attack tended to slow travel time down some. Once she'd felt secure enough to get back behind the wheel, Deborah continued on her journey. The only other time she'd stopped was for gas.

As she pulled into Jacob' Cove, Deborah was struck by the ruins of the city. Ginny had told her all about the darkness and how it had been brought on by a ritual used to bring back the king of all vampires and blot out the sun. Ginny had told her how people had fled the city when the vampires began to take over and she'd talked about the destruction they wrought. But seeing it first-hand was a heck of a lot more shocking. Though it had been nearly seven months since the ritual had been broken and the sun again shown on the once-beautiful city, it didn't resemble the home she remembered from her girlhood days.

Ginny had said that the city was being rebuilt, and Deborah could see it in some aspects, but there were still burnt-out buildings, dead plant-life and a general emptiness to the city. Maybe it would look better in the daylight, Deborah decided as she drove through the city streets.

It had been over two years since she'd been here last, but she hadn't forgotten how to get around. She knew the streets almost as well as she did the back of her hand. She followed Harrison road for several blocks before turning left on Duchess. Six blocks down, she made a right on Hunt Street and followed the line of houses to Ginny's place. Like so many other residents of Jacob's Cove, Ginny had left when the darkness had begun and had only moved back three months ago. And as Deborah pulled up to the address she'd been given, it surprised her that her friend could afford such a lavish home.

It was a two story split level with white siding and blue trim. The front yard looked big enough to fit another house and down the long driveway was a two car garage.

Exactly how much money did Ginny make waitressing at the bar?

She parked in the driveway and as she slid from her car, Ginny came running out of the house.

She was as sight for sore eyes. God had Deborah missed her.

"You finally made it. I've been sitting on pins and needles for hours. Jesus, Deb, you look like hell."

As her friend threw her arms around her, Deborah sucked back her tears. "Aw, what a sweet compliment." But she knew Ginny was right. Deborah had lost weight, her face was gaunt and pale, and her eyes were dark. She had most definitely looked better. "You look as good as ever."

Ginny had the tall, thin, shapely figure that Deborah always envied and wished she'd been born with rather than her five-foot-five stature.

Stepping back, holding Deborah's hands in hers, Ginny beamed like a goddess. "I do, don't I. That spa I went to did the world for me. You should have joined me. Hell, you should go right now. Oh God I missed you."

Since Ginny let her tears fall, Deborah felt she could do the same. As they stood outside, two grown women holding each other and sobbing, Deborah felt safe for the very first time in months.

"Okay." Ginny sniffled as she pulled away. "If I don't stop now I'll have puffy eyes and I used the last cucumber for my salad. Come in. You're probably exhausted from your trip."

She was but oddly enough, she also felt rejuvenated. Ginny had that effect on her. Ginny was always so bubbly and full of life. It did Deborah good to be around her right now. Pulling her suitcase from the back seat, Deborah followed her friend to the house.

It was just as beautiful on the inside as it was on the outside. Ginny had always been a tidy person, so the cleanliness didn't surprise her. The beauty did. "This is a gorgeous house, Ginny."

"I know, isn't it? And the best part is—it was cheap." Her laughter bubbled up making her pretty brown eyes smile.

"I don't want to be intrusive but I'm curious how you can afford a place like this?"

She swung her arm over Deborah's shoulder, drawing her closer. "We've known each other long enough, Deb for you to not be shy about asking me something. He really did a number on you. The owners of the house didn't want to come back to Jacob's Cove now that it's run by vampires, so they were willing to sell me the place for a song. I know, I shouldn't have taken advantage of them but hell...it's their fault for being chicken. Come on, let's get you settled."

Carrying her suitcase, her heart suddenly hammering, Deborah followed Ginny up the steps. Her eyes flitted about the house as she moved through it. Though she knew there was no way he could be here, she was on guard no less.

When Ginny opened the door to a room to their left, Deborah took a step back and felt the air around her begin to swirl.

Then Ginny flicked the overhead light on and stepped inside. Cautiously, Deborah followed her. The room was decorated in vibrant blues with a bed covered in a beautifully hand-knitted blanket. If she were to guess, Deborah would have to say the room had belonged to a teenage girl. The posters of hunky rock stars and actors pinned to the walls were a dead giveaway.

"The house came with the furnishings. They didn't even come back for anything. Man, I tell you...people really need to loosen up." Ginny shrugged. "I'm sure you're exhausted from your trip."

She wasn't and even if she was, sleep was not an easy thing for her these days. "Don't you have to go to work?"

"I took tonight off to welcome you." She ran her hand along Deborah's cheek, her face softening. "I wish this never would have happened to you."

Her eyes clouded and the tears ran down her face. She cried on her friend's shoulder while they sat on the pretty blue bed, and when the sobs eased she began to talk. "I keep having nightmares."

Ginny handed her some tissues she'd grabbed from the washroom. "I don't doubt it. You went through hell."

She blew her nose, set it aside then took another to wipe her eyes. "I keep reliving it and all I want is for it to go away."

"It's only been a few days, Deb. Give yourself time. Are you taking the pills the doctor prescribed?"

Nodding, she blew her nose again. "They don't stop the dreams. All they do is make me sleepy."

"You need to sleep in order to heal. How are your wounds doing?"

Deborah's hand instinctually went to her chest. "They're healing slowly, but getting there. How could they let him go?"

Ginny shrugged, handing her another tissue. "It sickens me. What's the point of having laws if they're not enforced? I know some pretty tough guys, and some of the vamps might like some fresh blood. Want me to sic 'em on the guy?"

Deborah laughed and the sound was so foreign to her. This was what she needed. Blowing her nose one more time, she tossed the tissue in the trash can as she spoke, "I still can't believe you work with them. Aren't you afraid they'll...you know, bite you?" And how foolish did she sound saying that.

"Hell no...well, not unless I ask—which I don't," Ginny added when Deborah's eyes went wide. "It's a great place to work and Zach makes it safe. He doesn't tolerate anyone getting out of control, and he makes sure all of us girls are protected. You'll have to check it out while you're here."

"I've had enough of monsters for one lifetime, thank you very much." The sleeves of her sweater rode up her arm as she stretched her hands in the air.

"Oh God, Deb, look at your wrists."

She pulled her arms down and tugged the sleeves back in place. She should have been more careful. "They're not so bad, now." The red welts from the rope he'd used to tie her up were still bright red, but the scraped flesh was healing over nicely.

Taking her left hand, Ginny slid the sleeve back. "This is better? My god! When I think about what he did to you, what he could have done if Bruce hadn't checked on you...It just makes me sick." She took Deb in her arms, stroking her back gently.

Thinking about it made Deborah sick as well, which was why she tried so hard not to. It wasn't easy though, when you had the constant reminder on your wrists, ankles and chest or reliving it in your dreams. "Bruce feels so bad for leaving me and I keep reminding him I insisted he go. How were we supposed to know Peter Milligan had picked my lock and would be waiting for me in my apartment?"

"Still, I can see how he feels." Ginny laid her hand over Deborah's, gave it a light squeeze. "You're both safe and that's all the matters now. Does Bruce know where you are?"

Was she safe, really? Not as long as the madman who had done this to her was roaming free. "I told him as I was leaving. He wasn't impressed and insisted he go with me. I reassured him I'd be fine." Her tiredness got the better of her and she yawned.

"You need to get some sleep." Kissing Deborah on the head, Ginny climbed off the bed, scooping up the pile of soiled tissue. "Sleep as long as you want. You need it."

"Thanks, Ginny. For everything."

"Hey, that's what friends are for. See you tomorrow and hey, if I'm not up, snoop around, make yourself at home. I work tomorrow night so I'll probably sleep until four."

"You're the best."

"And don't you forget it."

Smiling, feeling better than she had in weeks, Deborah watched her friend leave. The instant the door was closed, her heart began to speed up. She was in a strange room and she wasn't familiar with all the hiding places. Grabbing the lamp beside the bed, she yanked the plug from the wall then began to search the room. She started with the bed and cautiously, knelt down on her knees and lifted the blanket. She felt the air clog her lungs and didn't exhale until she saw no one was beneath the bed. She gave herself a moment to catch her breath before she stood up and continued her examination of the room. Holding the lamp in one hand, she eased the closet door open, breath held again. She shoved the clothes aside, her heart pounding. She felt lightheaded and sick to her stomach. Leaving the door open, she sat down on the bed, resting the lamp beside her.

Would she ever feel safe again?

Not as long as he was free.

Since there was no chair in the room, and the door didn't lock from the inside, Deborah dragged the heavy dresser until it was pressed against the door. Huffing from her effort, she turned to the window next. Dragging the bedside table, she set it below the window, then piled lamps, books and anything else she could find to give her warning if he should climb through the window.

Feeling marginally safe, Deborah stepped back, took a deep breath then realized she needed to use the washroom.

With a heavy sigh, she stared at the dresser.

Why hadn't she thought of that before moving the darn thing?

CHAPTER SIX

He hated cops and worse, he hated being in a cop house. Sure, the Jacob's Cove Police Department wasn't as bad as some of the cop houses he'd been in previously, but despite the lack of officers, the place still smelled like cop. Having spent two hours in one made him feel dirty.

He'd deal with himself after he'd taken care of Simone. Letting them both into his suite, Zach led her to the guest room where he sat her on the bed and took her face in his hands. "Forget about what happened for a few hours and just sleep."

"I can't go to court, Zach. I can't do that again."

He wiped the tears from her face then kissed the top of her head. "Sshh, don't worry about that now. Let me deal with it."

"Zach—"

"Sshh." He silenced her with a kiss to her mouth. "Now, change into a night shirt and get some sleep." He held his hand out and in it, the package of sleeping pills he'd picked up on their way home. "Take one and go to sleep."

"I don't know what I would do without you, Zach." She took the pills with a watery smile.

"Another thing you don't have to worry about." He kissed her head one more time before leaving her to get ready for bed. He'd wor-

ried about having her come back to work so soon after leaving her abusive jerk of a husband but she'd insisted she needed something to keep her occupied and he'd agreed. Having her sit alone in her apartment would only have led to dire consequences.

He paced the spacious suite, furious that Simone had been through hell tonight, and he hadn't been able to do anything about it. Then.

There was nothing stopping him now.

He waited until Simone fell asleep, checking to make sure she was out before he left. She was not going through the agony of testifying in court or having to deal with cops and lawyers. She'd had her fill of both for a lifetime with her husband. This time, Zach was going to make damn sure she didn't suffer.

He drove toward Cali Anders' house—changing into a cop to get her address hadn't been the most pleasant experience, but it had been worth it—and parked three blocks away to avoid suspicion or being seen. Slipping from the car, he locked it up; making sure the alarm system was engaged before walking away. He shifted into a black lab and sprinted down the street. When he came up to Cali's house, he went around the back where it was dark. He figured her room had to be on the second floor and looking up, saw two windows facing the back. He hoped one was her bedroom.

Shifting from the black lab to a black cat, he pounced his way up the trellis to the second floor window. Using his nails and the strength that was bestowed upon him, he ripped the screen open enough to slither through. He pounced onto the floor and saw Cali asleep in her bed. Wasn't he lucky to have found her room right off the bat?

Changing back to his human form, Zach walked to the bed. So this was the woman with grabby hands. She didn't look that troublesome now, asleep in her bed. But Zack new perfectly well that looks could be deceiving.

It was time she understood who she was dealing with.

He kicked the foot end, calling her name loudly. "Cali, wake up." When she rolled over, pulling the blankets up to her chin, he decided just to yank them away.

"What the he—" She broke off as she sat up, and seeing who was standing by the bed her eyes went wide. "How did you—"

"You're going to listen to me very carefully now." Having her completely naked did nothing for him. He'd come for a reason and it hadn't been for sex.

“Get out before I call the cops,” she warned him, yanking the blanket up to her chin to hide her nudity.

He kept his cool and continued as if she hadn’t spoken. “You will contact the cops but not now. Tomorrow. And you will tell them you wish to drop the charges against Simone Dumont.”

She snorted a laugh. “The hell I will.”

“Oh, you will, if you know what’s good for you.”

Her brown eyes narrowed on his and her voice grew dark. “Not only will I not drop the charges, but I’ll add to them by telling the cops you broke into my house while I was asleep and assaulted me.”

He hadn’t laid a finger on her but he was damn close to doing so now. Instead, he morphed into the officer who had taken her statement. That should show her who she was dealing with.

Her chin dropped, her mouth fell open, “What the—”

“Can you be sure who it is you’ll be speaking with?” He changed into another one of the cops she’d spoken with. “You won’t know if it’s the real officer or if it’s me. I can change into anyone, and anything.” And to show her, he changed into her lawyer, then a cat and as he pounced up on the bed, then changed into the black lab. He bore his teeth and growled at her.

She yelped, crawled up to the head of the bed, clutching the blanket to her breast.

He changed to his human form again and leaned in real close. “Now, let’s try this again. First thing in the morning, you will contact the officers and inform them that you wish to drop the charges. Is that understood?”

She quivered as she spoke, “Ye...eesssir.”

“Wonderful. Have a good night then.” He climbed off the bed and sauntered to the window. Turning back into the cat, he scurried away.

That should do it.



She whimpered when he lifted the large steel knife and she felt her blood drain. It glinted in the overhead light as he climbed onto the bed. His eyes were dark and dangerous and when he smiled, it sent chills down her spine.

“Now, where was I when we were so rudely interrupted?” He pressed the knife to her chest and as he stared down at her, slid the knife along her skin.

The fire erupted as the blade split the skin.

"I hate causing you pain, but...well...you need to learn who is in control." She sucked in a breath when he leaned down and to her horror, his tongue slid out to lap up the blood. "You're very tasty. I can't wait to have more."

She began to sob even harder, her body shaking with it.

"Stop crying!"

The tears spilled out and her body shook with them.

"I said stop crying!" She screamed when the blade came up over his head, then plunged down into her chest.

Deborah woke with the scream choking her. Eyes wild, she looked around the room and it took several moments before she realized where she was.

She was safe, at Ginny's place.

Falling back against the pillows, Deborah wept as she always did after her nightmares. The wound on her chest was healing but the pain was still clear in her heart, and the scar would always be there as a reminder. And apparently her fears were manifesting into horror in her dreams.

Laying a hand over her chest, she traced the mark with her finger. It ran between her breasts and nearly to her belly button. He hadn't killed her, but she knew perfectly well if he were to find her, he wouldn't hesitate to do so next time.

She had everything she could possibly want in life. She was an award-winning concert pianist with enough money to live comfortably and more. She was able to supply her mother with all the comforts needed to help her live her final years with Alzheimer's disease. She had plenty of friends, had her share of lovers in her day and had the best friend any girl could ask for.

Yet at this very moment, Deborah wished she were dead.

Was she courageous enough to end her life? Far from it. Did she wish Peter had killed her instead of her being found? Sometimes she did. At least then she wouldn't have to deal with the memories, the nightmares and the reminders.

She stared up at the white ceiling lit by the bright sunlight coming from the window and wondered why it had to happen to her. Sure she had fame, but still... she'd gone nearly her entire career without being bothered much. She had fans, some very devoted ones, but none had become as severe as Peter had. Each one of her fans had been cherished, and Peter had been at the beginning as well. Until his letters had become hostile and he'd begun stalking her.

Surviving the Darkness

She still remembered his first hostile note. He'd sent her a bouquet of red roses on her birthday and inside the card had read, *"I'll be waiting for you tonight and finally you will be mine."*

When she had switched hotels to be safe, he'd sent her an angry note the next day telling her he would have her one way or another and nothing would stand in his way. From that day on, Bruce had not left her side. That had been six months ago.

Well, Peter had made good on his threat. He'd broken into her apartment and had managed to capture her. And now nothing would ever be the same again.

Closing her eyes, she wished it would all just disappear.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Deborah couldn't believe she'd slept until two in the afternoon. She never slept that long. Sure, she'd awakened at seven to the nightmare, but the fact that she'd fallen back to sleep had been astounding. She had never been able to fall back to sleep before.

Maybe it was the comfort of knowing she was safe in Ginny's house.

Setting the coffee to brew, Deborah snooped in the refrigerator and cupboards for something to eat. Good old Ginny—she could always be counted on for the pick-me-up foods. Ginny must have stocked up knowing she was housing a junk food addict for a friend. Grabbing the chocolate cake out of the fridge, Deborah cut off a huge slice, slid it onto a pretty floral plate which she assumed had belonged to the previous owners, then poured a cup of the still brewing coffee.

Taking the first bite of the chocolaty delight sent her taste buds into heaven. She'd polished off half the plate by the time Ginny sauntered into the room.

Ginny stretched her back, pulling her arms up over her head and smiled. "Knew you'd like that. How'd you sleep?"

Deborah swallowed what was in her mouth before speaking, "Same as always. This is really good cake. I know you didn't bake it so tell me where you got it from."

"There's this new bakery that opened up a few months ago. I could practically live in the place. They have this French torte that's to die for." Eyes dreamy, Ginny sighed as she filled her own cup with coffee.

Deborah jumped, let out a muffled cry and dove under the table at the sound of the knock on the back door. Her heart was pounding so hard she thought she might pass out.

"Oh my God, Deb! It's just Mitch. Come out of there."

Though it pained her, Deborah let Ginny pry her from under the table. She was shaking like a leaf on a tree blowing in the wind when she tried to stand.

Ginny gave her a hug before setting her back down in the chair. "Just sit here. I'll send him away."

"No, no, I'm okay." She felt foolish at her display of fear. She didn't want Ginny to send her boyfriend away on account of her.

"He'll understand. He borrowed my car last night. He's probably just here to return it. I'll only be a minute."

Deborah sat at the table, her body beginning to level and listened as Ginny stood in the back deck speaking to her boyfriend. The last thing she'd wanted was to disrupt Ginny's life.

When the door clicked shut, Deborah jumped.

"My God, Deb. He really did a number on you."

She didn't want to talk about it. "I feel so foolish. You should let him come in. I can go to my room and give you both your privacy." She stood up only to have Ginny lay a hand over hers.

"Don't be silly. He has to go to work anyway. Sit down and finish your cake."

Despite the deliciousness of the cake, she'd lost her appetite. "I'm full." Lifting her cup, she sipped the coffee, not really tasting it.

"We both know that's a lie. You've lost so much weight since I saw you last. Have you been eating?"

"You know what my schedule is like. It's hard to eat a decent meal," she lied, picking at the cake that had at first tasted delightful but now held no appeal to her.

"I've seen you on TV and in your concerts. This weight loss is new. It's because of him, what he did to you isn't it?"

"I'm fine, Ginny. It's been a rough few months tour wise, but I'm fine now." If only she could believe her own lies.

Ginny laid her hand over Deborah's again and gave her a somber look. "I heard you move the dresser last night." Ginny gave her hand a squeeze. "You're safe here. He won't be able to find you."

"I know; still..." Deborah let out a long breath. Sure she was safe here, now, but what would happen when she left and went back on tour?

"I could call Zach and tell him I need the week off. You shouldn't be alone—"

"Don't you dare do that," Deborah insisted. "I didn't come here to make your life hell. You have a life. You need to keep living it. I'll be fine. It might take me a few days to get used to the place but I'll be fine." She squeezed her friend's hand. "Really." She hated making her friend worry and she hated the way Ginny looked at her now.

Ginny sighed, squeezed Deborah's hand back. "Anytime you need me, just call. Zach is very understanding. He'll let me go if you need me."

"I'll be fine, Ginny." Deborah smiled though inside, her body was still shaking.



There was coffee brewing which Zach had yet to touch. He hadn't brewed it for himself; it was there for Simone when she woke. His preference was Earl Grey tea with a sprinkle of sugar and a dash of lemon. With the New York Times open on the table, Zach looked over the stock reports. It looked like his stocks were up, again. It had been a good week for him in business. He'd have to reward his employees with a raise. Why should he be the only one to benefit when it was his employees who kept his businesses running smoothly, and made it possible for him to invest in the stocks? Grabbing his Smartphone, Zach made the notation in his memo then decided while he had the thing open, he might as well check his emails. He heard Simone enter the room by the slide of her feet. She always walked like a zombie when she woke up.

"You know, I honestly think you would go into withdrawal if you lost that thing."

With a wry smile, Zach looked up at Simone. She looked rested and a hundred percent better than she had the night before. The nightshirt she wore landed mid thigh and though it was baggy, it didn't hide the trim body beneath. Her red hair was piled up at the top of her head spilling out like a wave of messy curls. The make-up she'd forgotten to take off the night before was smudged from crying and sleep. But to him, she looked beautiful.

He was happy to see some color in her cheeks. "Probably. Just like you refuse to leave the house unless your hair and make-up are perfect. We all have our vices." Email could wait a few more moments.

"True. Coffee smells great." She slid along to the cupboard where the coffee pot sat.

"And just how you like it. Wickedly strong. There are fresh bagels in the toaster oven, warming. Cream cheese and strawberry jelly are in the fridge, second shelf to your left."

"You crack me up, Zach, with your need for organization and tidiness."

He stood after she'd gotten what she needed from his fridge and opening the door, saw that she had shifted the butter and milk to the opposite side of the shelf as he'd expected her to do. She loved to mess with him in any way she could. Always had. He set them back in the spot where he preferred them and closing the door, saw her shift the coffee maker a quarter of an inch to the right. "Aren't you the funny lady this morning." He shifted it back. Everything in his house had its place and he liked it that way.

Grabbing a plate from the cupboard, she slid a bagel out of the toaster oven and began slathering cream cheese and jelly on it. "I decided last night while I was crying myself to sleep that I wasn't going to let that gropey-handed bitch get the best of me. I'm better than that."

"Good for you." He dusted the counter after she'd finished preparing her bagels then set the milk, jelly and cream cheese back in their exact spots in the fridge. "And on that subject. There's a message for you by the telephone."

He took his seat, picked up his Smartphone and continued going through his email as Simone took the note he'd left for her by the telephone. He glanced up to see her brow curl in a frown.

"What?" She turned to him, surprise on her face. "Is this for real?" She held the note up, giving it a wiggle.

"Right from the officer's mouth who called." And Zach couldn't be more pleased—well, he'd preferred the incident hadn't happened but some things he couldn't change.

"This says the charges have been dropped."

"Yes it does." He deleted the junk mail, sent the business notes to his 'Important' folder and decided the jokes could wait until later. When Simone slapped her hands on the table beside him, he casually looked up. "Yes?"

"What did you do?"

His brow lifted and he tried to sound as innocent as possible. "What do you mean by asking me what I did?"

"Don't play coy with me, Zachary Adams. I know you better than that."

Pushing up from his seat, he kissed her forehead with a smile, and took his cup to the dishwasher. "Your bagel is getting cold."

"Screw the bagel."

"An interesting suggestion and quite plausible with the hole in the center and all but I would only manage to crumble the thing with my size." He turned around only to see her stare at him with absolute seriousness. "Did it occur to you that the woman came to her senses after a good night's sleep?"

"No."

"Well, she might have. Things always look different in the daylight. Perhaps she realized what a fool she had made of herself and preferred to just let things go without further embarrassment."

"Nice try."

Simone knew him too well. Still...he wasn't about to admit he had *encouraged* the woman to drop the charges. "I have some business to attend to upstairs. Feel free to take a shower before you leave. You know where the towels are."

"Zachary!"

"Love you, Simone." As he closed his apartment door he heard her cursing. Laughing boldly, he took the elevator up to his club.

She could be angry at him all she wanted for helping her out, but it didn't matter as long as she was safe.

CHAPTER EIGHT

They'd had a wonderful day together which ended with a delicious meal at a new restaurant that had opened only the month before. Though being in a busy restaurant had given her palpitations, Deborah had done her best not to let it show.

Ginny had introduced her to the man she claimed was the love of her life and as far as men went, Mitch was pretty good. He certainly doted on Ginny which of course, was exactly what Ginny deserved. But they were a good pair. His sense of humor was as weird as Ginny's.

By the time they were finished eating it was time for Ginny to go to work, and though Deborah told her she would be fine alone, her insides were like jelly.

After Mitch and Ginny dropped her off at the house, she let herself in then stood in the foyer, back pinned against the wall, her feet frozen to the floor. There were a dozen or more hiding places in this huge house. With her heart pounding, she stared into the open living room and kitchen. This part of the house would be easy to search. The only real hiding place on this level was the broom closet. It was the upper and lower levels that terrified her. There was no way she could look in every spot in this house alone. She just wasn't up for that.

Why had she told Ginny she would be fine going inside alone? She should have asked either her or Mitch to go in with her to check the place out. But she'd wanted to be nice and let the two lovebirds have some time by themselves before Ginny had to get to work.

So here she was, alone, in a huge house with over a dozen spots for an abductor to hide. And she just couldn't bring herself to move from the foyer.

Sliding down, she planted her butt against the door. The only light that was on came from the kitchen. So Deborah stared into the lit room, her ears primed for any unusual noise. She heard a creak on the upper level and hurrying to her feet, yanked open the door and ran for her car. The instant she was inside, she locked all four doors then sat, heart pounding as she stared at the house.

Putting her keys in the ignition, she turned it over and clicked on the radio. She could drive around the city; get to know the place she'd once called home. But then what? She certainly was not going to come back here and try her luck in the house again. That was just not going to happen.

No, she was better off just staying where she was until Ginny came home from work.

Checking the clock on the consol, Deborah sighed. That was only nine hours away.

Pulling the Blackberry from her purse, Deborah decided to order a book. She could pass the time reading.



It was a quiet house tonight. He didn't like it when it was quiet in his nightclub. As Zach wandered around, he stopped to talk to the patrons who sipped their alcoholic beverage of choice, some laced with blood, some straight, and wondered where everyone was.

"Is today some sort of holiday?" he asked Wade while taking one of the stools at the end of the bar.

"Not that I'm aware of. Pretty dead, I know. Your usual?" Wade asked while drying one of the bar glasses.

Zach tipped his head. Something was keeping his patrons from coming in for the evening. "How are the wife and kids?"

Wade set the steaming cup of Earl Grey tea in front of Zach then slid the sugar and lemon bowl toward him. "Maggie's great. She's into redecorating mode so that's been keeping her pretty busy. Sam and Lily are annoyed because they'll have to start school soon."

Zach added a spoon of sugar, then squeezed a lemon into the tea. "Ah...they found enough teachers to make it worth opening the elementary school again. That's great."

"Great for Maggie and I, not so much for the kids," Wade remarked, getting back to drying his glasses.

"Kids never like school. Personally, I never understood why. I enjoyed school."

"Yeah well, being a straight A student might have had something to do with that. Not every kid is that lucky. So...," Wade drawled. "Simone tells me the charges have been dropped on her. Pretty decent, hey?" Wade eyeballed Zach as he set the glass down.

Keeping his cool, Zach replied, "It is at that. And look how much happier she is now. I've instructed Benny and Mark to keep an eye on her for a while. She's feeling a tad bit shaky since last night, understandably. I'd hate to see her relapse." It had been unfortunate that the way Simone had coped with her abusive husband for the past year was to shove coke up her nose. When she'd shown up at work five months ago, stoned out of her mind sporting a black eye and a swollen mouth he'd hauled her off into his office and made her see what a waste her life had become. She'd crumbled that day, and begged him to help her. He'd gotten her clean of both drugs and the hubby and this hand grabbing incident was not going to smash all those months of hard work Simone had put into her rehab.

"I think it helps that you convinced the woman to drop the charges." When Zach eyeballed him, Wade only smiled.

His friends were too damn clever.

"Hey, Zach." Ginny bumped hips with him as she came up to the bar. "I need a gin and tonic, Wade. So, looks like I missed some action last night. Simone filled me in," she explained when both men tilted their heads at her. "Glad you were there to get her out of the jam, Zach."

"Why does everyone think I had anything to do with the charges being dropped?" And he should have known better than to think he would get away with it.

"Because you love Simone and you would do anything to protect her. Thanks, Wade." Taking her drink, Ginny sauntered off.

It was true, he did love Simone and he would do just about anything for her. Still, he hadn't wanted anyone to know what he'd done. "The woman simply decided it was in her best interest to drop the charges." Lifting his tea, Zach sipped quietly while Wade continued

to stare at him. "Oh fine. I did nothing more than talk to the woman," he said at long last.

"Which is good. Talk is good. Need that tea topped up?"

"It's fine, thank you." Taking it with him, he headed to his office. His employees knew him too damn well. But he smiled thinking about it.

The instant he entered the office he felt the familiar presence. "Hello, little brother."

In the corner of the room, Eli Adams transformed from the tiny mouse he'd cloaked himself back to his human form. Zach walked casually to his desk, set his tea down before taking his seat. The look on his brother's face said it all. He'd been caught.

Walking toward him, Eli rested both palms on the desk, and frowned. "How did you know I was there?"

Elijah was years younger than Zach—a precarious fifteen year old who loved to spy on his older brother any chance he got. He'd only recently come into his full shape shifting abilities, and Zach knew he should have placated the boy, but he'd had a rough day. He didn't feel like playing. "I could hear you snickering the moment I entered the room. You know you're not allowed in the bar while it's open."

With a careless shrug, Eli walked around the office, examining everything that caught his fancy. "No one saw me come in. Besides, the place is dead. I figured you could use some entertainment."

"Do Mom and Dad know you're out of the house?"

Eli turned and the look on his face spoke volumes. "Of course."

Zach casually picked up his telephone. "So if I called them right now, they'd say it's all right for you to be out at midnight on a school night?"

Eli grimaced. "Fine! No, they don't know I'm out." Zach began to dial, only stopping when Eli pleaded, "Come on, man. I was bored and school's a drag. You have to help me out. Convince Mom and Dad to give me some space."

Ahh...the agony of a teenager. He set the phone back down. "You have plenty of space, Eli."

"You know what I mean. They expect me to be in the house at nine. Nine! I'm fifteen years old! None of my friends have to be home that early."

Zach picked up his cup, wishing he'd had just a moment alone to savor the tea before having to deal with his baby brother. "And why is it you have to be home by nine in the evening, Eli?"

“Okay, so I snuck out of the house, but I just wanted to have some fun. It was one time,” Eli justified in a typical teenage whine.

Zach carefully set his tea down as he responded, “One time? Might I remind you of why our parents put such a strict curfew on you?”

The shame came into his eyes as he lowered his head. “No, you don’t. Okay, I know I was involved with Chaos.” His head came up, eyes fierce. “But I walked away before the shit hit the fan so at least they could cut me a break on that. I did what was right in the end.”

Chaos had been one bad-ass vampire who had cloaked the city of Jacob’s Cove in darkness by performing a ritual using five innocent girls. He terrorized the city for nearly a year before the now-Mayor and Chief of police, Trinity and Basil Hawthorn, put a stop to it. “The fact that you lied to everyone; that you fell into the ranks of such evil should be excused because you finally came to your senses? You’re still doing it—hanging with the wrong crowd. You’re not proving to them or anyone that you’ve changed.”

Eli kicked the desk as he grumbled. “Who else am I supposed to hang with? All my friends left.”

He was not going to fall for the sob act. “There are still decent individuals in the city. You just need to look.”

“Well how am I supposed to find them if I can’t go out past nine? You have to talk to them, Zach. Please.”

“You think they’ll listen to me? I’m the one who brought you along when I came here to start this club.” Eli had been on summer break and his parents had thought it would be good for him to tag along with Zach and help him get the bar started. What Eli had done instead was get into a shit-load of trouble. “You did the crime, little brother; now you do the time.”

Look at him sulk, and he wants to be given more space and treated like an adult. Zach only shook his head.

“This sucks. It sucks big time.” Eli kicked the desk one more time.

“Welcome to life, little brother.” Zach picked up his phone. “I’ll have one of the bouncers take you home.”

“I can—”

“No!” He stopped him mid attempt. “You will not be walking home.” How stupid did his brother think he was?

“Fine. Then can’t one of those sexy waitresses of yours do it?” Eli lifted his brows, wiggling them.

“Absolutely not.” As he called the front to have Benny drive his brother home, Eli sat on the sofa and sulked.

Weren't brother's fun?



She lay, tied to the bed, her body exposed to him and all she could do was whimper. He touched her intimately as a lover would but had no right to. His long fingers glided over flesh that quivered not in anticipation but in fear. She was helpless to his advances yet she did nothing to stop it.

She was tied to a bed.

"You are so beautiful, my sweet Deborah. I have longed to feel you, to touch you, to make you mine."

As he leaned down to kiss her, the tears slid down her face.

Deborah jolted awake at the tapping on her window. Eyes wide, she stared at her best friend through the fogged-up glass. Her heart was pounding, her breath rapid, and she reminded herself that she'd been saved.

Swallowing, though it wasn't easy with her throat as dry as bone, Deborah slid her window down.

"What are you doing sleeping out here in your car?"

"I..." She tried so hard to hold back the tears but they were stronger than her. Everyone was stronger than her.

"Oh, Deb." Through the open window Ginny unlocked the door then pulling it open, took Deborah into her arms. "Come on. Let's go inside."

She leaned on her friend's side as she was led in the house. She paused by the door, her feet refusing to carry her further.

"What's the matter?"

She sniffled as her eyes darted around the house. "He could be hiding here, anywhere. There's so much space. I can't...I can't go in."

Taking her by the shoulders, Ginny looked her in the eyes and spoke softly. "He isn't here, Debbie. Is that why you were sleeping in your car? You thought he was here?"

Her head bobbed up and down rapidly.

"Oh, sweetie." Pulling Deborah into her arms, Ginny stroked her back. "I hate him for doing this to you. You're safe here." She took Deb's face in her palms, and wiped the tears away. "You are safe."

All Deborah could do was sob. She was so spineless and she hated that he'd made her that way.

"Come on, we'll do a search of the house together."

"No! I can't," she gasped.

"I'm here. It's okay. I know this house inside and out. Do you trust me, Deb?"

"Of course I do, that's not the issue. He could hurt you too." She didn't want anything to happen to Ginny. To anyone else she loved.

Ginny wiped the tears from Deborah's cheeks again and gave her a soft smile. "Honey, he'd be too busy swallowing his balls to hurt me. Besides, my boss showed me some great protective moves. He's given all the waitresses a few lessons on self defense. We can do this, Deb—together." She held her hand out to her friend.

Looking down at it, Deborah let out a long breath before taking it. Her legs were like jelly and her chest ached but she managed to take that first step, and as they searched the house from top to bottom she began to feel a little more stable.

"I won't do that to you again," Ginny promised after she'd settled Deborah in her room. "From now on, I come in the house with you. I'm sorry, Deb."

"No, I'm sorry. I should have gone somewhere else instead of burdening you with my problems." She felt like such a fool now. She'd let her friend see just how terrified she really was. Deborah hadn't wanted that. She didn't want anyone to know how scared she really was.

"Hello. That's what best friends are for." Laughing, she kissed Deborah's head then got to her feet. "You need anything, you just call."

"I will." Deborah waited a few more minutes after Ginny had left before she hurried to the door and dragged the chair she'd brought up earlier that day. She shoved it under the door knob then went about placing objects in front of the window.

As she crawled into bed, the sun began to rise.

The darkness was gone and he had nowhere to hide now.

CHAPTER NINE

This is what he loved to do.

Disguised as a black cat, Zach ran through the forest, no worries, no cares, just running. He climbed trees, looked out and admired the city that was slowly being rebuilt. He'd left Jacob's Cove fifteen years earlier to pursue other avenues and had bought some of the top nightclubs and bars world-wide. That was something to be proud of. Okay, sure, not all of the money used to start those businesses had been attained legally, but he wasn't about to admit that openly. He'd used his ability to shape shift to his advantage. He'd have been a fool not to. And it wasn't as if he used it to steal money. All he'd done was disguise himself in different forms to attain information to get what he wanted. Though he preferred not to change into another human, he'd done it to fool people into giving him what he needed.

He'd become privy to plenty of rising companies as well as failing ones and had invested his money wisely. And of course, there was the gambling and the selling of horses that weren't really his.

He was filthy rich now, and loving it.

His nightclubs were flourishing. The businesses he had shares in were doing well and all his investments were paying off. He truly was living the high life.

And he was only in his mid thirties.

Yet with all his money, with everything he could have, he could do, this was what Zach enjoyed the most—to run free.

He pounced from the tree with no effort whatsoever. He scurried through the wooded area, climbed hills and waded through creeks. And by the time he made it to the clearing, the sun was beginning to rise. It really was a beautiful scene to see the day come to life with vibrant colors.

He sat there for the longest time, watching the city come awake and civilians going about their usual daily duties.

This had been his home for the majority of his life. He'd been born in Jacob's Cove as had every one of his ten siblings. But as he grew he felt the need to travel, to see the world, and so he'd set out to explore. He'd lived in practically every corner of the world, but this was his home.

When the darkness had fallen and the city became the property of the vampires, his parents had moved to Angel Creek to stay with his aunt. Eli had attended school there, and for the most part, they'd lived happily.

Until Zach had decided to start a demon bar in the one city that accepted his kind along with all the other races of vampires, demons and werewolves. His mistake had been taking Eli with him. But he'd felt so sorry for the guy, alone, no siblings in the house like he'd had growing up. Unfortunately, it had backfired on him.

While Zach had been scoping out locations, Eli had been sneaking out of the house to hang with a gang of vampires ruled by a very nasty vampire named Chaos. By the time Zach had found out what his little brother was up to while he wasn't home, Eli was knee deep in the gang. It was sheer luck that his brother had seen the error of his ways when Chaos had decided to kidnap the daughter of two very powerful vampires. Those two vampires happened to be the town mayor and chief of police now, Basil and Trinity Hawthorn.

Eli had gone with Zach when he'd dragged him back to their parent's home in Angel Creek—not that he'd had a choice—but at least Zack could be grateful Eli hadn't made a run for it.

And now Eli, along with his parents, were back home in Jacob's Cove, and Eli was beginning to get into trouble. Again.

Zach felt his parents were somewhat responsible for Eli's behavior. For one, he was the baby in the family, but that aside, there was fifteen years difference between Eli and their sister, Anna. Anna was mostly independent when Eli was born. So Eli was spoiled, and he

knew how to wrap their parents around his little finger and get what he wanted.

Now he was giving them trouble, and since Zach was the only sibling who still lived near his parents, it was his job to help them control Eli.

It was moments like this, all alone in animal form that he could forget about his responsibilities.

And just breathe.



Deborah wondered if her eyes looked as bad as they felt. Not only did they burn, but they felt puffy and sore. Was it any wonder they felt that way after only having three and a half hours sleep? Sure, she'd dozed on and off in the car, but it hadn't been restful by any means.

Sitting at Ginny's kitchen table, Deborah fought the fatigue that was attempting to drag her down. These nightmares were killing her. She wished with everything she had that they would just go away. That the whole ordeal would just go away. The drugs that were supposed to help her sleep did just that, but they didn't stop the nightmares. And falling asleep after a nightmare was never easy. That was the reason she sat at the table now, sipping strong black coffee. Two in one night was more than she could take. Maybe it would be better if she just didn't sleep.

Right...like that was going to happen.

Her fingers tapped in time to the music playing in her mind. She missed playing the piano. But Deborah wasn't foolish enough to get back on her tour bus and continue the stops she'd planned before she'd been...attacked. She knew perfectly well her fans were disappointed over her cancellations, but she also hoped they understood she just needed to take time off to heal body and mind.

Not all of the details of her abduction had been made public, and for that she was grateful. The press release her manager had given had stated that an obsessed fan had taken her hostage, keeping her tied up before she was discovered by her bodyguard. The rest was too private to divulge and Deborah was glad none of the other details had leaked to the media.

When her cell phone rang she nearly fell off her chair. Calming her heartbeat and pulse, she checked the caller ID then breathed a sigh of relief to see it was her bodyguard. She answered it with a breathy, "Hi, Bruce."

"Hey, sweetie. How are you doing?"

"I'm managing. How are you doing? How's the shoulder?"

"Stiff, but I've had worse. Seriously, how are you doing?"

She sighed, running a finger along the rim of her cup. "The nightmares are still pretty bad. Can you believe they let him go?"

"It kills me, Deb, it really does. I should be with you right now."

The sympathy and kindness she heard in his voice did wonders for her. "I'm okay here, really, and you need to get better."

"I'd get better faster knowing you're safe and the only way that'll happen is if I come stay with you."

She didn't want to admit to him that in a small way, she preferred this time alone, not to have him hovering around her day and night. "I'm safe here, Bruce, really. You're the only one who knows where I am so I feel pretty secure knowing he won't come after me." Yet she still jumped at every shadow and refused to enter a house alone. Wasn't that pathetic?

"I know. Still..."

"Bruce, stop worrying about me. For once in your life, worry about yourself. Enjoy being pampered by Casey." She wished she could see his face now because she was pretty sure he was beaming from ear to ear. He really was head over heels in love with Casey, and Deborah couldn't be happier.

"All right, but if you need anything, sweetie, you just call me. Okay?"

The guy was a worrywart and she loved him for it. "I will. Get better soon, Bruce."

"You too, Deb."

She closed up her Black Berry then dropped her head on the table and closed her eyes. Would she ever feel safe?

She bolted straight up, eyes wide when a hand touched her shoulder. Deb blinked a few times before she saw it was Ginny standing beside her. "Oh, hey."

"Did you sleep here all day?"

Blinking her tired, sore eyes, Deborah stared at her friend with confusion. "I didn't sleep here. I just put my head down for a second after talking to Bruce and then you came down. And what are you doing up so early? It's not even ten in the morning."

It was Ginny's turn to look confused. "It's nearly one in the afternoon, Deb."

"What? No way." She laughed but as she looked at the clock on the stove she saw her friend was right. "Oh...wow. I must have dosed off."

"Apparently for over three hours. Did you get any sleep last night?" Ginny scuffed her feet along the linoleum on her way to the counter.

"Some." She watched as Ginny took the coffee pot, dumped out the cold coffee then set it to brew a fresh batch. As odd as it may seem, she felt more rested now than she had in days. Maybe she should sleep at the table more often. Maybe that was the key. Being in a bed reminded her too much of her ordeal.

Yet she'd dreamt of it in the car...

"Some." Ginny shook her head as she sat across from her friend. "You look like hell, and you have a line across your face from the table. Go upstairs and get some rest."

Frowning, Deborah felt her face and to her shock there it was, the line Ginny spoke about. Wonderful. "Actually, I feel pretty good right now. As a matter of fact, I feel like cooking. What would you like for lunch?"

"Breakfast for me and you don't have to cook."

"I don't have to but I want to," Deborah stated while getting to her feet. "How about an omelet?" It would give her something to do and keep her mind off of her problems.

"Um...not sure what I have in the fridge that would work in an omelet."

"Then I guess I'll have to figure it out." As she began snooping through Ginny's fridge, Deborah felt as light as air. Maybe cat naps were the trick.



Two days in a row of slow business was not to his liking. Seeing the scant twenty people in his bar was disturbing. Taking the spot at the end of the bar, Zach signaled Simone. She sat beside him, and recited her orders to Wade before turning her attention to Zach. "What's up, handsome?"

"What is with the deadness?"

"Well, it is a demon bar, sweetie," Simone giggled, putting a palm to his cheek

He took her hand, kissed her palm then nipped the tips of her fingers with his teeth. "You're a riot. Where is everyone? Anyone talking? You pick anything up?" It wasn't just that he was losing business but more worry as to why his usual crowd wasn't hanging out like they did on most nights.

"Wanna give me a bottle of water, Wade? Thanks. I've heard some talk," she said to Zach. "And I feel to blame for this. Seems some of the regulars are a little leery about coming in because of the...cops being here so much lately."

"You are not to blame," he insisted, taking her chin in his hand. "So wipe that thought from your brain. I guess I should have suspected as much with the cops coming in and asking around about that serial killer. I'd hoped it wouldn't bother the customers, but I guess I was fooling myself." Even though he promised a safe haven for the underworld, having cops frequent the place was still unnerving.

"They'll come around," Simone reassured him with a squeeze to her hand.

"I'm sure they will. In time. How are you doing? You look great." Which shouldn't be a surprise considering she always looked great, but after her ordeal, he'd been a bit worried she might slip back down.

She fluffed her hair and smiled. "You know just what to say to make a girl feel special. I'm doing great. Told myself to let it go and move on and so I am. Well, I better get these drinks to their owners before they start bitching." But before she left, she took several gulps of water from the bottle Wade had set in front of her.

She really did look good, and Zach hoped it stayed that way.

"Well isn't it a fun, lively house today," Ginny joked as she came up to the bar. "I think I'll take my break now while it's slow. Do you have a minute to spare for me, Zach?"

He acknowledged Ginny with a tip of his head. "You bet."

"Can we...um...maybe talk in your office?"

Whatever it was she wanted to discuss seemed serious by the look on her face. "Of course. Wade, put the word out that the Demon's Lair is still a safe ground and for the next two days, all patrons will get one free drink."

"Will do, boss." Wade saluted him as Zack walked off with Ginny at his side.

He let Ginny into his office and led her to the sofa rather than the office chairs. He had a feeling it was more of a personal chat than a professional one. "What can I do for you, Ginny?"

She folded her hands on her lap and let out a long breath before beginning. "I need some suggestions on what to do about my friend. You know that friend I told you about that was coming to stay with me for a while?" He nodded, she continued. "Well...she's...um...hell, I'm just going to come out with it. She was abducted last week and held against her will by a guy claiming to be her biggest fan. He hurt

her, not just physically but emotionally—so much so that she can't sleep, she jumps at every noise, and she pushes the dresser against her bedroom door at night."

It tore at his heart to think of this poor woman's ordeal. "It takes victims time to heal."

She let out another breath. "I know and it really hasn't been that long. Still...She slept in her car last night while I was at work because she was too afraid to go into the house alone. She's a mess, Zach. When I got home and convinced her to go into the house, she was shaking like a leaf and while we searched the house to reassure her he wasn't there, I thought she was going to black out on me. This is a woman who is used to crowds, used to people clambering for her autograph, tugging at her as she walks past them. She used to be fearless, and now..." she held her hands out, palms up.

"Is she a celebrity?"

"She's a renowned concert pianist. Maybe you've heard of her. Deborah Carmichael."

One of his waitresses knew Deborah Carmichael. He was envious. "Yes. I've heard her play. She's brilliant." She really was. She had a way with the music that drew you in and kept you hooked from the very first note.

"Yeah, she is, and now that bastard has her cowering. What can I do to help her?"

He leaned back in his seat, smoothed out his trousers. "Is she seeing a therapist?"

"No. She refused. Said she could handle it on her own. She isn't doing so well."

"You could suggest she take some self defense courses."

"And that's why I'm here, asking you." She blinked her eyes sweetly. "Would you help her?"

He smirked, gave his chin a scratch. "I should have seen it coming. I could try." He could never turn down a damsel in distress.

"Thanks. You're the greatest." Throwing her arms around his neck, she gave him a loud smooch on the cheek. "She's going to be coming in soon. I convinced Mitch to bring her in for a drink. She didn't argue too much because we both know she didn't want to be alone in my house all night. As soon as she comes in, I'll let you know."

"You do that." He stood and held his hand out to help her to her feet. "But be prepared, Ginny. She may not accept my help or yours."

"I know, but I have to try."

CHAPTER TEN

Why had she agreed to this? Was she crazy? She had to be to have agreed to go to a demon bar to visit her friend. A *demon bar*, for pity sake. She should back out. She should tell Mitch to turn the car around and take her back to Ginny's house. But the idea of being there alone wasn't any better than stepping into a bar where demons hung out.

She hated this. She hated what she'd become. A spineless coward is what she was now, and it sickened her. She'd never been terrified of anything...well, practically nothing. Snakes terrified her, but it certainly didn't affect her life. Her abduction was, and there was nothing she could do about it.

"Here we are."

With a deep gulp of air, Deborah looked out at the building before her. It looked so normal on the outside. It actually looked nice. The brick and wood worked well together, and the colors were very pleasing to the eye. It was silly of her to expect it to be painted in bold blood red just because demons and vampires frequented it. The dark brown wood with the red brick was a very nice touch.

Yet when Mitch parked the car, she found herself glued to her seat. When he pulled her door open, her heart sped up so much that she felt lightheaded.

Then he held his hand out to her.

Swallowing her fear, Deborah took his hand and faked a smile. Could he see how scared she was? Did he feel her shaking?

"You're safe here, Deb," he reassured her with a squeeze of her hand. Obviously he could see she was terrified.

She was being foolish, and Mitch was being so understanding and kind to have done this for her. "Ginny is a lucky woman."

His face brightened when he smiled. He really was a cutie with that boy-next-door face covered in a light dusting of hair on his chin and upper lip.

"Gee, thanks." Still grinning, he led her to the front door.

The instant it was opened the music shot out at her with heart thumping-rhythm. She wasn't a huge fan of rock, especially not the harder stuff, but she was willing to endure it for a few hours.

When the huge man stepped out of the shadows her heart nearly stopped. She couldn't breathe.

"Hey, Benny. How's it going?" Mitch asked him and Deborah let out the breath she'd been holding.

"Can't complain. Ginny know about you dating other women?" Benny smirked as he looked Deborah over while holding a clipboard with a piece of paper attached to it.

She faked a smile and told herself to stay calm.

"Well sure. She's big into threesomes."

"I'm her friend," Deborah piped in, appalled at the line of conversation.

Mitch swung an arm over her and laughed. "He knew you were coming. We were only kidding. You need to sign that before we can go in," he added lastly as he took the clipboard from Benny.

She took the pen, scowling at both men. She didn't find that funny in the least. "What's this?" she asked, glancing over the form in front of her.

"It's a waiver stating that you're aware of the bar you're entering into and the clientele that come in to enjoy drinks and...more." Benny smirked.

"More?"

"Sometimes, vamps want to drink from humans and humans find it arousing. It's like a drug for them. By signing that waiver, it says that you know what you're in for if you agree to let vamps or demons drink from you."

Had the color just drained from her body? "I don't want vampires or demons drinking from me. I don't think this is such a good—"

"Debbie!" Ginny squealed, drawing Deborah's attention. She came running toward her, arms open. "I'm so glad you came."

She went into her friends arms with a frown. "I don't know that I can stay. I don't want a vampire or a demon drinking from me." Had Ginny allowed her blood to be taken by these monsters?

Ginny released her but took hold of her hands. "You don't have to let them drink from you. And they won't take you unless you agree to it. You're safe here, Deb, trust me."

With a heavy sigh, Deborah signed her name on the form and handed it back to Benny. She still wasn't sure about this.

"Come on, I want to introduce you to all of my friends. Hey, baby." Ginny leaned in and nibbled on Mitch's lips, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"Wondered when you'd get to me." Mitch tweaked her nose.

Ginny took one of Mitch's hands in hers, and Deborah's in the other and dragged them into the bar.

Bright lights flashed, red lights glittered, and smoke filled the dance floor. It was an interesting set-up, with a balcony above, which Deborah assumed was to allow the patrons there to watch the dance floor below. All and all, it was pretty decent looking.

Ginny led her to the bar and though she told herself not to stare, Deborah couldn't help but gawk at the weird-looking demon three seats down. He had fangs coming out of his chin. What the hell?

"Wade, this is my best friend, Deborah. Deb, this is Wade. He's our regular bartender and an all around great guy. He's married with two kids but he likes to flirt with the waitresses."

Wade was a tall man with sandy hair cut short against his head. He had a broad face, a strong face with a smile that told you he was an easy-going person.

She took his hand and returned the smile. "Pleasure to meet you." She didn't see fangs or horns or oddly tinted eyes so she figured he was human.

"Pleasure's all mine. Ginny gave me one of your albums for Christmas. The wife listens to it while she's doing yoga. She absolutely loves it."

"I'm glad she enjoys it."

"This is Simone," Ginny introduced. "Simone, my BFF, Deb."

Deborah turned to the sultry brunette before her and was instantly envious of not only her height but her silky smooth skin as well. "Nice to meet you."

"So you're the famous Deb that Gin is always talking about. It's great to finally put a face to the name."

"I brag about you. What can I say?" Ginny blushed. Come on, I'll get you a table." Dragging them once again, Ginny led both Deborah and Mitch to a table near the dance floor. "You make sure and take her for a few spins, Mitch," Ginny insisted, leaning down to kiss him in a slow passionate move that actually made Deborah uncomfortable. "Now, what'll the two of you have to drink, this fine evening?"

"Um...I'll have a Cosmopolitan." Deb responded while watching the creatures of the night dance on the brightly colored dance floor.

"Beer, whatever's on tap for me, and another kiss."

Obliging, Ginny leaned over and once again, took her time drinking in his lips.

Deborah took that moment to watch the patrons as they danced and entertained. It was odd, being this close to vampires, werewolves and demons. Though she'd grown up knowing such things existed, she'd never seen one up close. They acted no differently than a human would. If it wasn't for the fangs, horns and disfigured skin they'd almost seem normal.

"I'll be right back with the drinks."

Startled, Deborah nodded at Ginny then let out a long breath.

"It takes some getting used to. I know." Mitch laid a hand over hers, gave it a gentle squeeze. "But it really is a nice place and everyone knows to respect others. Zach demands it and anyone who steps out of line is promptly escorted from the place."

"My ears are ringing."

Deborah looked up and for a brief second she lost her breath. Before her stood a tall man, dressed in a very dapper deep-blue suit which if she were to guess would be an Armani. He was tall, thin and had the face of an angel. His long blond hair was tied back from his face which she thought was so that people would see how handsome he really was.

When his gaze shifted to her, eyes an interesting shade of blue, her heart actually sped up.

"Hey, Zach. I was just telling Deb here about your bar. Deborah Carmichael, this is Zach Adams. Ginny's boss."

He held his hand out to her, never taking his eyes off of hers. She took his hand and when she expected him to simply give it a shake, he lifted it to his lips and brushed a kiss over her knuckles.

Her heart began to hammer.

"It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Deborah."

He released her hand and she could still feel the heat from his lips on her skin. "The pleasure is mine."

"Mind if I join you?"

"Sure, that would be great." Mitch nodded his approval.

Zach took a seat, releasing the button on his jacket as he sat. "Ginny tells me that you plan to stay for a while. Taking a small hiatus from your concerts?"

"Something like that." What had Ginny told him she wondered? And why didn't she just come out and ask. Because she was chicken. "She's told you about me, then?"

"She has." Zach looked up when Ginny stepped up to the table with their drinks.

Deborah's eyes met her friend and as Ginny set her *Cosmopolitan* on the table, she leaned into Deborah's ear to whisper, "He knows about your ordeal."

But before Deborah could say anything, Ginny turned her attention to Mitch. "Wade wants to chat with you about his car, honey."

"Sure thing. I love car talk." Taking his beer from Ginny, Mitch followed her to the bar.

"That was conveniently planned," Deborah muttered then sipped her drink. The first moment she had alone with Ginny, she was going to give her a piece of her mind. She was not ready to be hooked up with anyone.

"It was, wasn't it? She asked me to speak to you and I can see by your reaction that displeases you."

Hell yeah! "I know Ginny means well, but..."

"You'd rather not talk to a stranger about your ordeal. Understood. I told her it was up to you to get help but I understand her feeling helpless. She loves you and she wants to help you."

"I know that..." She sighed heavily. "When did she talk to you about me?"

"Today, actually."

Deborah frowned. "I scared her last night. I knew this was wrong. I shouldn't have come here. I should have...gone somewhere else." There was a loud crash that jolted Deborah, visibly. She jumped in her chair, her eyes going wild. Her heart began to pound, her head became light and suddenly the room began to swirl.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Give her room to breathe," Zach shouted out as people gathered around the table. He'd gotten to her fast enough to prevent her from falling onto the floor. Scooping her in his arms, he pushed through the crowd and saw Ginny running toward them.

"What happened? I was helping Wade clean up the broken glass and when I looked up there was a crowd around the table. Is she okay? Deb?"

"She blacked out. I'll take her to my suite. This might have been too much for her." She was light in his arms, and he couldn't help but feel protective of the small woman.

As the elevator doors opened, he hurried inside followed by Mitch and Ginny.

"I didn't want to leave her alone at my place again. I knew she'd just stay in her car. I didn't think it would come to this though. God, is she even breathing?"

Zach stepped out of the elevator and hurried to his bedroom. "She's breathing. She'll be fine once I can wake her up. Grab a cold cloth will you, Ginny." He laid Deborah on his bed, straightening her legs and arms and the instant Ginny entered the room, he took the cloth and laid it on Deborah's face. "Come back to us now, Deborah."

He stroked her hand in slow soothing motion, running his fingers along the inside from wrist to elbow. Her pulse was slightly erratic but nothing dangerous. "Come on now, time to wake up."

"Her eyes are fluttering." Ginny pounced on the bed, taking Deborah's other hand. "Come on, Deb. Wake up now."

Her eyes fluttered open once, then twice before they shot wide open. She gasped, staring up at them with a great deal of fear.

"It's okay, sweetie. You're safe." Ginny leaned into her face, smiling. "You're okay now."

"Ginny?"

"Yeah, it's me."

"What happened?" She tried to sit up but Zach held her down by her shoulders. Her eyes shot to him, wide and fearful.

He released his hands. "You blacked out in the bar. I brought you down to my suite. You should rest a few minutes more, until your body has a chance to recoup." Zack didn't like how pale she was.

She took the cloth from her forehead, looking around, confused. "I blacked out?"

"I suspect it was the breaking glass that set you off. It was rather startling. Ginny, I have orange juice in my refrigerator. Would you pour Deborah a glass?"

"Definitely. I'm sorry I pushed you to come here, Deb." Ginny kissed her head before crawling off the bed. Mitch followed her from the room.

"I'm so sorry." Deborah sat up, her face a little red which Zach assumed was more from embarrassment than anything.

"You have no reason to apologize." He took the cloth from her and set it on his nightstand.

"Oh sure, because I didn't pass out on you and more than likely cause a scene."

"You didn't cause a scene. Your eyes simply rolled to the back of your head before you slid from your chair," he reassured her humorously.

She looked up at him, blinked a few times before she finally smiled at his attempted humor.

"You have a lovely smile. It really brightens your eyes. Ah, Ginny. Thank you so much."

"Here you go, Deb." Ginny handed her the glass of orange juice then just stood at the side of the bed, wringing her hands.

"Stop worrying, Ginny, and stop blaming yourself. If I didn't want to be here I wouldn't have agreed to it," Deborah reassured before sipping the juice.

"Still...I'll get Mitch to drive you home."

"No!" Deborah took a deep breath before continuing. "I'm fine, really. And you should go back to work. I'm fine," she emphasized a little firmer.

"I'll stay with her until she feels well enough to leave," Zach reassured. The terror he saw in her eyes bothered him.

"Okay...sure." With a heavy sigh, Ginny turned, and with her arm around Mitch, left the room.

"I really appreciate your hospitality, Zach. And I just have to say I feel completely foolish."

"Plenty of women black out in bars. It's a combination of the heat, the dry ice and the alcohol. You're not my first and I assure you, you will not be my last. Did your abductor break in through a window?"

She cocked her head to the side, her face filled with confusion. "No, why do you ask?"

"I assumed that might have been why the sound of broken glass set you off."

"It sounded like a gunshot," she admitted quickly then took another sip from her glass.

"Were you shot?" Ginny hadn't said anything about her being shot. Why would she leave out something that serious?

Resting the glass on her legs, she shook her head. "No, not me. What did Ginny tell you about what happened to me?"

"She was vague, only said that you were abducted and held against your will for several hours and that it's deeply affected you." Though seeing her now, Zach would bet his fortune she'd endured something horrific during her ordeal.

Deborah took another sip before she continued. "He tied me to the bed, stripped me and...the glass reminded of the gunshot. Long story short. My bodyguard found me and the guy shot him. I don't feel so good."

Was it any wonder she was beginning to hyperventilate? He took the glass then swung her legs over the edge of the bed and pushed her head down. "Take a few deep breaths," he instructed her as he rubbed her back with slow smooth strokes.

She did as he asked and after several moments of calming her breath, she finally sat up. "I hate this. I hate it, hate it, hate it!"

He took her in his arms while she wept. Her tiny body shook, but no sound came out with her sobs. His mind swirled with what could have happened to her and if she hadn't been raped he would be ut-

terly surprised. He held her, stroking his hand along her arm while she cried. When he felt her begin to still, he reached across her for the box of tissues. She took one, wiped her face then took another before sitting up.

"And once again, I make a fool of myself." She blew her nose.

"I see no fool. All I see is a woman dealing with a horrendous ordeal." One that was obviously still fresh. "Was your bodyguard—"

"No! No, he wasn't killed. The bullet went into his arm, and there was no major damage, thank God. But he saved me, despite his injury. That happened a week ago, though." She sniffled and wiped her nose with another tissue.

"And what? You think that's enough time to get over what you endured?" he grunted.

"Now you sound like Ginny."

"I've always said she was a smart woman."

Deborah snickered, which made him feel marginally better.

"What you went through won't go away overnight, or in a week, not even two. And if you don't seek help, it may never go away."

"Help? Like a psychiatrist?" she snorted, then took the glass and gulped the remaining juice down.

"Perhaps, or a self help group."

She snorted again. "Oh sure, I could join a self help group and maybe they can tell me why it is the bastard that did this to me was released."

"Excuse me?" Had he heard her correctly?

She blew her nose then taking a fresh tissue, wiped beneath her eyes. "He was released on bail because he's an upstanding citizen with no prior arrests. Not even so much as a parking ticket." She tossed the tissue onto the pile accumulating beside her on the bed.

There was anger there, but she was preventing herself from letting it out. "Is it any wonder we have vigilantes' in this world? Is that why you came to stay with Ginny? Because he was released?" He just didn't understand this world and how such animals were allowed to carry on their business after causing so much pain.

She nodded. "I know he won't find me here. No one except my bodyguard knows where I am. But I'm not sure I should stay. I'm causing Ginny nothing but stress being here."

"You'd cause her more if you left. She'd only worry about you more if she couldn't see for herself that you're all right. You're safe here, and you'd be foolish to go elsewhere."

Her eyes narrowed. "Don't call me foolish."

"Forgive me. I should have said it would be foolish for you to leave."

"Not any better."

"I can help you," he stated firmly. "I teach self-defense to my waitresses. I could show you a few moves. It would make you feel like you have more control."

"I wouldn't want to put you out."

He lifted his brow and his lips curved up in a smirk. "Would I have suggested it if I didn't want to help? You have more color in your face now. It's nice to see."

She touched a hand to her cheeks, sighed. "Thank you for helping me and for being so kind."

"Kindness and helpfulness are my middle names."

She laughed and the sound went right to his heart.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Because the place was slow, Zach gave Ginny the rest of the night off. Deborah might have believed that if she hadn't blacked out in her friend's place of work two hours earlier.

"I need to know something, Ginny, and I don't want any lies," Deborah insisted as soon as they'd entered the house and she felt safe her abductor was not hiding anywhere.

"Okay..."

"Did you ask your boss to let you go home early because of me?"

Ginny set her purse on the counter then opening the fridge, pulled out a bottle of wine. "Nope."

"You're lying."

"I am not." Ginny poured two glasses then carried them to the table. "I'm not lying," she insisted when Deborah gave her a sideways look. "Zach told me to go home. Who am I to argue with my boss?"

Deborah didn't like it one bit. Taking her glass, she sipped the wine. Maybe she'd believe Ginny if the fainting spell hadn't happened. Her eyes narrowed at her friend.

"He did."

"Because of me. This is why I should leave."

"Don't you dare," Ginny demanded, grabbing hold of one of Deborah's hands.

"All I've done since coming here is scare you, make you worry and have your boss send you home so you can babysit me—"

"I'm hardly babysitting you. If you hadn't come here to see me I was fully prepared to go to you. I was. I'd asked Zach if I could take a week off. Told him a friend needed me. I was worried about you, Deb. I could have...lost you," she sniffled back the tears blurring her eyes.

"Oh, Ginny. I'm so sorry I worried you." She took her friend into her arms, stroking her hair and back.

"I want you to stay, Deb. Please tell me you'll stay?"

How could she disappoint her best friend? "I'll stay."

Sitting up, Ginny sniffled. "Great! Are you going to take Zach up on his offer to teach you self-defense?"

Shrugging, Deborah lifted her wine. "I'll think about it."

"He's really good, knows what he's doing. And he's not bad on the eyes, either."

It didn't take a genius to figure out the meaning behind her friend's innuendo. "If you're thinking of trying to hook us up—"

"I'm thinking how much Zach could help you."

"Yeah...I bet." That innocent look Ginny was giving her wasn't working. Much. "I don't know..."

"Come on, Deb. What harm can it do to try?"



Later the next night, as Deborah sat at the bar waiting for Zach—demons, vampires and god knew what those bumpy, brown-skinned creatures were around her—she thought just how much harm it could do. Lord this bar was creepy and why any human being would want to come here and socialize with these creatures was beyond her.

Why her friend enjoyed working here was another quandary.

She spotted Zach the instant he entered the room. He wore a tailored gray suit and black shirt and tie. His blond hair was tied back revealing a soft and very handsome face. Ginny was right about one thing, he definitely was easy on the eyes. He was the type of man who commanded attention but didn't go out of his way to achieve it. He just had that certain flare.

She watched as he walked through the club, shaking hands, stopping for a brief conversation, laughing at whatever comedic yarn had been told. He kissed ladies' hands, swung his arm around some in a friendly manner that no way indicated a sexual nature. And as he headed her way, those lovely blue eyes of his found hers and teased a smile from her lips.

"You're looking refreshed today."

Much to her surprise, he took her hand in his and holding it delicately, brushed his lips across her knuckles. Words escaped her.

"I hope you're ready to take charge?" he asked as he released her hand slowly.

She gathered herself, nodding. "Though, I will admit, I'm a bit apprehensive about doing this."

"Oh...?" He raised a hand in greeting as one of the patrons waved at him. "Apprehensive about what?"

"Learning to fight." His eyes shifted back to hers and for a brief moment, she thought she saw something shift in the color. "My hands are my living. I don't want to injure them."

One blond eyebrow lifted as did the corner of the left side of his mouth. "You think I'm going to teach you how to use your fists in defense?"

"Well...yes." How else was she going to defend herself?

Taking her hand in his, he helped her off the stool. "Then you're in for a world of surprise."

He led her down via the elevator, to his suite beneath the club. As before, she couldn't hear a single note, or a voice from the club overhead. She supposed if he were to spend his time here away from work, he wouldn't want work interfering with his personal time. Still, to have it that sound-proof was astonishing.

"I like your place." He had interesting tastes and not just in the Monet and Picasso paintings hung on the walls. How he could afford such extravagant paintings was beyond her. The night club business must pay very well.

He seemed to like bold statements in his decor. The black leather sofa and chair were accented by scarlet red throw pillows and rug that sat on the dark mahogany hardwood floor. The window treatments were also in bold reds and whites. The walls were a soft brown. And from what she remembered of his bedroom, it was done in chocolate brown satin and silk. The man had taste.

"Did you bring a change of clothing?"

"No, I didn't realize I would need to, and how silly that was of me. Of course I'd need something a little more comfortable than a skirt. What was I thinking?" She hadn't been, obviously.

"You're nervous. No need to be. Just take a few deep breaths and relax."

Easy for him to say, he wasn't the one terrified for his life. But

she did as he instructed and closing her eyes, she drew in several deep breaths. And felt herself relax.

"That's better. What I meant actually was that when you're finished you may be a little sweaty and want to shower and change."

"Oh," she felt even more foolish now.

"Not a problem. I believe I might have something that you could work out in. I'll just be a minute."

"It's really not a problem. I'd hate to put you out." But even as she said it, he was dashing off to some room across from his bedroom. Letting out a nervous breath, Deborah wondered what he had in store for her. Would she be practicing punches? Maybe wrestling moves? Oh lord, maybe it was karate. What had she agreed to?

"These should work for you."

She jumped, and by the look on his face she deduced that's he'd seen it. Trying to disguise her jitters, she looked down at the clothes he held out to her. "Did these belong to one of your girlfriends?"

The corner of his mouth lifted and she caught the twinkle in his eyes. "One of my sisters, actually. She likes to stay with me when she comes back home from one of her many modeling gigs. She's about your size."

Taking the black lycra capri shorts and sleeveless tank top, Deborah examined their size. "You're sister is a model?"

"You might have heard of her. Jessica Adams."

Deborah's eyes flew open wide. "Get out! Jessica's your sister? We've met a few times at functions we've both attended. She is lovely."

"She is indeed. All of my sisters are pretty," he bragged.

"How many sisters do you have?"

"Five. I also have five brothers. You can change in the bedroom just down the hall and to your left."

He led her to the room then left her to change. She waited until he'd left before she stepped into the room. It was large, similar in size to her bedroom back home. The one she'd been... Swallowing the lump in her throat, Deborah glanced around the room. The queen-size bed sat in the center of the room on a platform, which thrilled her. At least no one could hide under it. To her left was a closet and straight ahead was a window. It was fairly straight forward yet she stood there a few moments quivering.

Unable to close the bedroom door completely, she stepped behind it and began to change. It gave her the vantage point of seeing out into

the hall through the crack and watching the closet door to make sure no one jumped out of it.

Feeling somewhat secure, she began to change.

Zack had ten siblings? And one of his siblings was famous. Deborah just couldn't get over it as she changed into the workout gear.

She couldn't imagine having that many children, or that many siblings. Though she'd always wished for at least one sibling, she wouldn't want to have had ten. Fighting for the washroom alone must have been a chore.

Feeling more than a little awkward in the skin-tight garments, Deborah inched her way out of the bedroom. She was glad the top came up high to her neck and hid her chest wound. She found Zach doing push-ups on the floor between the dining and living room. He wore a pair of gray sweat pants and a sleeveless, white tee shirt. His arms were fairly muscular, which surprised her. Apparently beneath those tailored suits was a buffed man.

He jumped up when he spotted her and, grabbing a towel from a chair nearby, mopped up his face. "That fits perfectly. So, are you ready?"

"No," she giggled nervously, wringing her hands in front of her.

"There's nothing to be afraid of. We'll start off simple and work our way up. How physically fit are you?"

"I jog twice a week...or, I did before..." she trailed off on a sigh.

"You'll have good leg strength then. What about your arms?" He pulled up the chair he'd taken the towel from and knelt down beside it. When he placed his elbow on the seat holding his hand up, looking at her, she wasn't sure what he was doing. "Join me. We're going to arm wrestle."

Her eyes must have shot wide open because his face filled with a smile. "Are you serious? You want to arm wrestle me?"

"Just to see what arm strength you have. I promise I'll go easy on you."

With a frown, she got down on her knees, placed her elbow on the chair then clasped her hand with his. His grip was firm.

Then his gaze shifted to her wrist, and the red welt-like scar circling it. She saw the sorrow come into his eyes.

"Maybe I'll be the one going easy on you," she said, catching his attention. She didn't want him to focus on her injuries.

He met her eyes and it was as if he had read her mind. "I love a surprise. Look at my eyes." He motioned with his free hand. "Focus on my face and don't think too hard about trying to beat me."

Pursing her lips, she locked her eyes to his. They were such a beautiful deep blue and he had incredibly long eyelashes. When she felt his hand squeeze onto her, she did the same.

And then her hand was on the chair, his over top of it.

"Hmmm..."

"I wasn't ready."

"That's the whole point. Even though you were caught off guard, you're instincts to protect, to resist, should kick in. Try it again."

Annoyed, she set her elbow back on the seat and grabbed his hand. This time he would not get the better of her.

"Focus on my eyes."

She narrowed hers, clasped his hand a little tighter. This time when he pressed her arm back, she resisted. Using all the strength she had, she held him back, preventing him from winning. Her upper arm burnt like fire but she was not about to give in just yet.

"Good. I guess playing the piano has its merits when it comes to physical fitness." He released her hand and stood.

Giving her arm a shake as she stood, she said with great pride, "When you have to sit before a piano for hours on end, day after day, you'd better be sure your arms and hands can handle it. I wear wrist weights when I jog."

"Interesting." He smiled and the charm shot right into her belly.

"Okay, let's see what else you've got."

He charged at her with fists raised and her first instinct was to duck down on the floor and curl her arms over her head.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

He knelt down beside her, not touching her because he knew it would only make her jump. What had this bastard done to her to make her so afraid? "You're safe here, Deborah. I'm not going to hurt you."

Slowly, her head came up and he watched as her eyes went from terrified to relative calmness. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize to me. You did what came naturally to you. Now let's see if we can change that." Holding his hand out to her, he waited for her to take it, giving her as much time as she needed. When she finally took hold, he helped her to her feet. "First, I have to know that you trust me."

"I do."

"Completely?"

"Yes."

Zach stood there a moment, just looking at her before he responded, "Then you wouldn't have cowered. We need to build your trust in me first. Turn around."

"Pardon me?"

"Turn around so that your back is to me."

She hesitated a moment, which he'd expected, before she did as he asked. "Good. Now let yourself fall."

She spun around, eyes wide. "Excuse me?"

"You don't trust me. Until you do, this won't work. You can change now." Grabbing his towel, he headed to his bedroom to change his clothing. Until she trusted him there was no point in him trying to help her.

"Wait just a minute." She raced after him. "Let me get this straight. Because I don't trust you, you won't teach me how to defend myself?"

"Yes."

She darted out in front of him, stopping him mid stride. "What does my trusting you have to do with teaching me self defense?"

"When you were in training to become a concert pianist, did you not trust what your teacher told you to be true?"

"Well, of course." She rolled her eyes.

She had beautiful eyes. "The same goes for me. You have to believe and trust in me in order for what I teach you to have merit. Until that happens..." He held his hand out to her, shrugging.

"This is crazy."

"Think what you like. Now, if you'll excuse me, I would like to change."

"No."

He waited a beat. "Excuse me?"

"No. I will not excuse you and I will not accept that you won't teach me until I trust you. If I didn't trust you I wouldn't be here now."

"True." He let her go on.

"We're going to finish this here and now." She turned her back to him and when she let herself fall, he was ready to catch her. She tipped her head up to look at him. "See. I trust you."

"Good thing I have fast reflexes." Pushing her back to a vertical stance, he smiled as she turned to him. "Now you are ready."

He led her back to the living room, laying his towel over the back of the chair before getting started. "Was that the first time since your ordeal that you said that word?"

"What word?"

"No."

Her head tilted as she responded. "Of course not."

"Think about it. I'm not talking as a casual statement. I'm talking telling someone no to something you did not want or like." He saw her mind working and waited.

"I...I guess so."

“Good. It’s a start. Now, what do you know about protecting yourself?”

“Um...the basics I guess.”

“Which are...?”

“Use my fists and feet.”

“Well...yes, but there’s more to it than that. What is a woman’s first instinct when confronted by a forceful man?” When she stared at him, he continued. “Knee to the groin.”

“Seriously?”

He nodded. “Of course. But that only helps if you’re facing your attacker. Turn your back to me again.” This time there was no hesitation. “If I came up behind you and grabbed you like this...” Stepping in behind her, he wrapped his arms around hers, pinning her to his chest. “What would you do?”

“I...I don’t know.”

“Just breathe, Deborah and remember. I won’t hurt you.” He could feel her heart hammering in her chest and knew if she didn’t calm down soon she would blackout. “What is your first instinct?”

“Struggle,” she stated breathlessly.

“That will only cause me to tighten my grip. Lift your foot and slam it down on your abductor good and hard.”

“Seriously? But won’t that just piss him off?”

“Probably, but in the instant that you slam your foot down on his, he will loosen his grip instinctually. That gives you the opportunity to break free. Another tactic is slamming your head into his face but since you’re quite short—”

“I’m not *that* short.”

“Shorter than your abductor,” he amended with humor. “In that case, if you happen to be quite a bit smaller than your attacker, your best recourse would be to jump up. What that will do is catch the top of your head on the bottom of his chin. Once again, the moment it happens he will loosen his grip on you. Now, when you break free of him, what do you do next?”

“Run like hell.”

“Yes, and...?”

“I don’t know.”

“Scream. Yell as loud as you can, draw as much attention to yourself as you possibly can. Your abductor will not try to come after you and risk being caught.” He released her now with much regret. She felt so soft in his arms and that scent of hers was intoxicating. “What do you have in your purse for self defense?”

"Um..."

"Keys?"

"Of course."

"Comb?"

"Sometimes."

"Pepper spray?"

"No." Her lips pursed.

"I suggest buying some. Anyone comes up to you in an aggressive manner you just aim it at his face and spray. How do you hold your keys when you're walking to your car or to your house?"

"They're usually in my purse."

Turning, he grabbed his keys from the dining room table. "This is how you should hold them." Slipping a key between each knuckle, he held it up to her. "Someone comes at you, tries to take you, just slam your fist into any part of their body. These keys are hard enough and in some cases depending on the force, sharp enough to penetrate flesh. He'll be too busy writhing in pain to come after you."

"My god! I can't do that. I can't hurt someone."

"It's him or you. Which will you choose?"

Her lips pursed again. "Me."

"Exactly. Now, if you're wearing a scarf, never hang the ends over your back."

"Why?"

Grabbing the towel, he swung it around her neck, leaving the ends to rest on her back. Then he grabbed both ends, and twisted just enough to give her the idea. "It's very easy for an assailant to choke you this way. Not so easy if they're in the front."

"Wow. I never thought of it like that."

"Most women don't. It is a sad fact but women are vulnerable and easy targets. But you can do something to stop that. Now, let's practice your punches and kicks."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

For the first time in too long, Deborah had slept a full six hours without a nightmare. Her workout the night before had left her feeling tired but invigorated at the same time. Although her chest wound stung a little, she was relieved it hadn't opened up. And it was healing nicely. Exercise had proven to be just what she'd needed, apparently. Maybe she needed to figure out some exercise routine before bed. If it helped her sleep nightmare-free she was willing to try anything.

Trying to be as quiet as possible so as not to wake Ginny, Deborah took her coffee to the back deck to enjoy the gloriously bright, warm summer morning—what was left of it at least. Ginny had a nice place; even the backyard was well kept. She'd never pictured her friend as a gardener yet there were flowers galore. Who would have thought?

Stretching her feet out, Deborah sipped her coffee while enjoying the beautiful view. She jumped—and was embarrassed by it—when a black cat pounced up onto the deck. “Well hello there.”

He/she wound around Deborah's legs, tickling her and making her smile. “Aren't you a friendly kitty.” Because his/her fur looked so satiny, she couldn't help but lean down and pet it. “Oh, you're a boy,” she chuckled when he lifted his tail showing off his genitalia. “What a pretty boy you are.”

Setting her coffee cup on the small table beside her, she sat down on the deck with the cat. He certainly wasn't afraid of her, which was evident when he crawled onto her lap. She sat in the morning sun, scratching the cat's head and enjoying the moment. She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so...relaxed.

"Do you have a home, big guy? You must. You're too clean for a street cat." Only thing was, he didn't have a collar on. "Your owners must be worried about you. Wish I knew where you lived." She giggled when he planted his front paws on her chest to rub his head against her chin. "You certainly are affectionate."

She sat there for over an hour, simply petting the cat, drinking in the sun until her belly begged her for food. "I don't know about you, but I'm starved. I haven't had breakfast yet. Would you like some milk?" Setting the cat on the deck, she got to her feet and headed for the door. When she turned around, the cat was gone. "Oh...well...it was nice meeting you."

More than a little disappointed that he'd run off, she went into the house to eat.



Zach sat in the small flowering brush in the garden to the side of the house, watching Deborah as she closed the door behind her. Maybe it was wrong to mislead her, but he'd wanted to see how she was doing today, after their first session. There was more color in her face, which was a blessing. She really had beautiful skin that shone when she was happy. She needed to be happy more often.

Unfortunately, someone had taken that away from her. If he knew who the bastard was, he would hunt him down and show him what it felt like to be afraid. Any man who preys on a woman isn't worth the spit in their mouth. Women were meant to be cherished. Not abused.

Zach sat in his cat form, enjoying the sunshine, wishing Deborah would come back outside.

There was something about her that pulled at him, and it was more than the need to protect. Her eyes called to him, those big brown pools. He'd felt it the moment he'd first looked at her. It was his kind's belief that each being was born to belong to another and in that moment of birth, each was linked to the other. Never before in all the years of his life had he ever felt a connection to another being as strongly as he felt for Deborah.

She was meant for him. Now all he had to do was make her see that.

Scampering off, he took one last look behind him before he headed back home.



This place didn't seem so scary now, Deborah decided as she took her usual spot at the end of the bar. Sure the creatures were everywhere and some of them were rather gruesome to look at but they seemed decent enough. And there hadn't been one single brawl in all the times she'd been to the Demon's Lair. Zach really did have a nice bar, respectable even if the patrons drank blood and looked as if they could rip a person's head off with their little finger. She'd even had a decent conversation with a female vampire named Delilah. She worked as a night receptionist at the hospital. Go figure. From what she was learning, vampires, demons, shape shifters and werewolves all held down reasonable jobs in the city of Jacob's Cove these days.

"I need two gin and tonics, neat, three lagers and a blood ball. Man, is it hopping tonight." Resting her hip on the stool beside Deborah, Ginny took a long breath. "How's it going with you? Doing okay?"

"I'm fine, Ginny. Stop worrying about me."

"Can't. I love you so of course I'll worry. You call Zach and let him know Deb's here to see him, Wade?"

"Called, said he'd be up as soon as he was finished with his call." Wade set the drinks on Ginny's tray. "I think the squirt's in trouble again."

"Man," Ginny shook her head as she hoisted the tray onto her hand. "Someone needs to chain that kid down. You need me, Deb. You know where to find me."

"Stop worrying about me," Deborah called out as Ginny headed to her table. "She worries too much."

"And you'd worry for her just as much if the tables were turned." Wade was right; she would.

"This place is nuts tonight." Simone slid up to the bar, dropping her tray loud enough to make Deborah flinch. "Is it a full moon out tonight or what? I need three Coors, and a tequila paralyzer, no ice. I don't believe we've been introduced. I'm Simone."

Deborah gave her a sideways look. "We met a few days ago. I'm Deborah, Ginny's friend." She didn't understand how the woman could forget when they'd had several conversations since meeting.

"Right. Right. You play piano. I like piano music. It's so intense yet soothing. Come on, Wade, what's the hold up."

"No hold up, Simone. You feeling all right?" Wade set the bottles on her tray then began preparing the paralyzer.

"I couldn't feel better. Chop chop, Wade. People are thirsty tonight." The instant he set the drink on her tray she scooped it up, nearly spilling the milky contents of the paralyzer as she hurried off.

Wade pulled a cell phone from his pants pocket and turning his back, spoke. Deborah had no idea who he was calling but he certainly looked intense, even when he turned back to her, tucking the phone back into his pocket. Moments later she spotted Zach stepping out of his elevator. Fully expecting him to come to her to escort her to his suite for their next session, she was surprised when he walked to Simone, placing a hand on her shoulder. She wasn't sure what he said to her, but whatever it was, Simone didn't seem pleased.



Zach kept silent as he led Simone to the waitresses' lounge. Still saying nothing, he locked them inside then turned to Simone, holding back the disappointment he felt inside. "Wanna tell me why you're so jittery and full of energy?"

She fisted her hands on her hips, tapped her left foot impatiently as she glared at him. "Can't a girl be in a good mood without being persecuted?"

"I'm not persecuting you. It was only a question." Her blood shot eyes spoke volumes.

"I had too much caffeine before starting my shift, which I really should get back to since we're short-handed tonight and man is this place hopping. I swear it's a full moon out there." But as she headed back to the door, Zach stopped her.

"Don't do this, Simone."

"Do what?" Pulling her arm free of his hold, she stepped back and once again, started tapping her foot. "I need to get back out there, Zach."

"You need to go home. I'll have Charlie take you."

She jerked her arm free when he reached out for it. "I am not going home. There's no reason for me to go home. God, Zach. Lighten up."

They'd both worked so hard to keep her sober and now it was back to square one. "Where is the coke?"

She snorted, throwing a hand in the air. "I don't have any coke."

"Please, Simone, don't lie to me, of all people. Where is it?"

She drew in a deep breath, her eyes beginning to shine as she stared at him. "My locker," she relented, dropping her shoulders.

It was hard for him to hide his disappointment. "Why?"

"Why not? Oh, Zach. Don't look at me like that. Please. I slipped up, okay? I needed something to take the edge off, to make me forget those ugly memories that keep popping up. It's no biggie. It was only one time."

He'd worried she might relapse after her ordeal with the grabby blonde, but Zach had so hoped Simone would be strong enough to face it. Apparently, she wasn't yet. "I'm going to take you home and I want you to take the next week off—"

"What? A week? No way."

"Simone," he sighed, touching her cheek with his fingers. "You brought drugs into my establishment. You came to work high. You say you just needed to take the edge off this time, but what about tomorrow, or the next day? Can you look at me and honestly say this will be the last time?"

She looked down.

He lifted her chin in his fingers, wiped the stray tears from her cheeks. "I'm going to take you home, and you're going to go straight to bed. I'll come by tomorrow and we can figure out where we go from here."

"I'm sorry."

Taking her in his arms, he stroked her hair as she wept. "Every road has detours. It's not always easy to know which one is the right one to take. Come on," Pulling the handkerchief from his lapel pocket he wiped her face. "I'll buy you a burger on the way home."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Things were starting to get ugly, Deborah thought as she watched Ginny frantically try to keep up with the tables in the house. She felt sorry for her friend and wondered why it was Zach had pulled Simone from her shift. All Wade had told her was that Zach had to take Simone home and would be back in an hour to start on their training.

Ginny had been the one to freak out and Deborah could understand why. There had to be at least three hundred patrons in the bar and only three waitresses and one was taking care of the Carnal Desires area at the back. She'd never been near there and though she was curious, she had no intention of checking it out.

"I can't do this anymore, Wade." Plopping down on the bar stool, Ginny blew out a long breath. "When's Kat coming in?"

"Couldn't get a hold of Kat so I called J.J. in. It'll take her about an hour to get here."

"No way? Where the hell is she?"

"Trenton. She was visiting her mom. An hour's not so bad."

"Says the man who isn't wearing spiked heels. Deb," Ginny burst out, startling her friend. "You used to waitress back before you were a big wig. Why don't you lend a gal a hand and serve some drinks."

Dumbfounded, Deborah stuttered. "I...oh...well... that was a long time ago."

"It's like riding a bike. You never forget. Please, pretty please with sugar and honey on it? I promise if you do this for me I will owe you big time."

How could she say no to her best friend when she was begging her with such a sappy look on her face? "I...uh...guess I could help out for a bit."

"Yes! I love you."

Deborah laughed when Ginny grabbed her in a bear hug and kissed her on the cheek.

"You take tables ten through twenty and I'll manage the rest."

What had she gotten herself into? "Okay, which tables are those?"

"It's all very easy. Zach's made it easy for us. Tables ten through twenty have red table cloths. See how each section of ten has different color table cloths?" She pointed to the rows of tables in red, white, green, blue, and gold, and those were only the closest ones in her sight. "We're each assigned a color. Think you can handle it?"

She was having serious doubts now. "I don't know, Ginny." All those people near her, possibly touching her and any one of them could be her abductor...and she really needed to stop focusing on it before she hyperventilated.

"You'll do fine." Giving Deborah a quick hug, Ginny darted off.

Feeling helpless, Deborah turned to Wade.

"I know it seems daunting, but it's not so bad once you get started and if you can't handle it, no prob. We'll manage without you." He slid a small black fanny pack across the bar to her. "Inside is a pad, pen and Debit machine. We don't take cash. Everything is through credit or debit cards so that should ease things up for you."

She stared at the fanny pack like it was lethal. Why had she agreed to do this? She couldn't do this. There were too many people, too many hands and—

"Table seven is signaling for refills."

She blinked out of her thoughts; swallowed hard then took the fanny pack. With a great deal of uneasiness, she clipped it around her waist then turned around. She saw the scrawny guy waving his arms in the air and felt her knees shake.

"You'll be fine."

Deborah wished she had Wade's confidence. As she took her first step toward the table she felt the bile rise in her chest. She was about to turn and run when she saw Ginny frantically trying to deal with the rest of the tables. She couldn't leave her friend high and dry. Swallowing, hard, she continued forward.

She stepped up to the table which was overcrowded with demons and vampires.

"About damn time! Hey, you're not one of the usuals."

"I'm filling in temporarily." She pulled the pad from her pack, her hand shaking as she poised to write. "What can I get for you?"

"Two tainted lagers and one vodka on the rocks."

Jotting it down, she nodded then quickly headed to the bar. That wasn't so bad.

"See, piece of cake."

She returned Wade's smile as she placed her order. "Two tainted lagers and a vodka rocks. What's a tainted lager?"

Smiling at her, Wade filled her order. "You know how some people like tomato juice with their beer? Well, instead of tomato juice, vamps like a shot of blood in their beer."

"Oh ick!"

"Not for the vamps. Here you go, sweetie."

To each his own, she supposed. She took it back to the table, handed the gentleman the debit machine and waited for him to punch in his code. As she thanked him for his order, she turned and saw a woman waving her hand in the air.

One down...she thought as she took the next order.

Thirty five minutes later her legs were no longer shaking but the butterflies in her belly hadn't found a different home.

"You're doing great, kid. A natural."

"Thanks, Wade."

"Say, can you do me a favor?"

"I suppose."

"Can you take these two bottles of gin to the back? Derek called, they're running low."

"To the back...as in the Carnal Desire's room?" Where vampires drank from humans and God knew what else.

"One and the same." He set two bottles on the counter. "Just go to the back, ask for Derek, give him the bottles. I really appreciate this, Deb."

"Yeah...sure." With a heavy breath, she took the bottles and swallowing the lump in her throat, started for the back. Heading down the corridor that was dimly lit, she came to a black silk curtain. Unsure of what to do, she cautiously shifted it aside and stepped through. It took her to another corridor with rooms on either side. She heard soft music, something oriental it seemed, and curious, looked into the room it came from.

A woman in a Geisha outfit sat on the lap of a man with yellow eyes and fangs. She gathered he was a vampire, but it didn't look as if the woman was because her eyes were brown. The man had his mouth on her arm and she could see the trickle of blood as it slid down her wrist.

His other hand was under her dress, busy stroking her.

The woman seemed to be enjoying it from the look of desire on her face. It was fascinating to watch and yet at the same time, it repulsed her. How could anyone allow that to be done to them?

"It's not polite to stare."

Deborah spun around to see Zach standing behind her with a smile wide on his face. "I was...Wade asked me to bring these back here and I had no idea where to take them. I wasn't...I didn't mean to—"

"You were curious. Nothing wrong with that. I can take this from you now. Derek," he called out as he moved down the long dark hallway.

Feeling like a complete fool, Deborah turned away from the erotic scene behind her and tried to regain some semblance of normalcy as she caught up with Zach. She hoped the darkened hallway hid her red cheeks.

"Would you like a tour?" he asked after returning from the back.

"No," she said abruptly.

He simply held his hand out to the left and waited for her to lead the way.

"Vampires like the taste of human blood and humans often get off on having it taken from their veins. Especially during sex."

She just couldn't imagine how it would be arousing. "Isn't it dangerous?"

He held the curtain for her. "Every room here is monitored by cameras. The patrons know their limits and most of the time, abide by the rules."

"Most of the time?" she asked, giving him a sly glance over her shoulder.

"Most of the time." He stopped them at the elevators. "I heard you helped my girls out. You'll have to let me know how you would like to be compensated."

"I did it as a favor. They were short-handed."

"They've four other hands now, but your help was very appreciated. Did you manage it well?"

"Do you mean did I freak out? No, I didn't, but I felt like throwing up."

"The fact that you did neither is a good sign. I need to talk to Wade for a moment. Wait for me here. I won't be long."

She did as he asked and waited while he talked with Wade. She had done well helping out, and though she'd been terrified out of her skin, a small part of her had enjoyed it. She'd felt so...ordinary.

"Are you ready to get started?" Zach asked, coming up beside her and pressing the down button on the elevator.

After her night, she felt ready for almost anything. "You bet." She stepped into the elevator, Zach beside her as the doors closed.

"Perfect. Did you bring a change of clothing?"

"Oh shoot, I did but I left it upstairs in the bar." She reached out to stop the elevator and change its route when Zach stopped her with his hand.

"Not a problem. I went shopping today and found something I think will fit you perfectly."

They stepped out of the elevator and headed to his suite. "You bought me something?"

He let them in, flicking the lights on as he entered. "I did indeed."

He walked to the sofa and held up a pair of red and black spandex exercise shorts and tank top. "That way you'll always have something here. I hope you like it."

She looked from him to the exercise outfit, frowning. "You shouldn't have bought me this."

"I like to shop. I'll take my room, you can change in the guest room."

Handing her the outfit, he headed to his room. Pursing her lips, she took the clothes and went to her room. Again, she stopped at the entrance, glad the door was open but still...cautious. An open door didn't mean someone wasn't still hiding behind it. With a quick snap of her hand, she flicked the light on to her right then taking a deep breath, took the first step over the threshold. Her heart hammering, she peered around the door and let out a long heavy sigh at seeing no one behind it.

She hated this.

Stripping out of her slacks and blouse, she slipped into the tight spandex. It fit perfectly, and examining herself in the mirror over the dresser she was actually impressed that it looked good on her.

She'd left her running shoes upstairs as well.

Frowning at her bare feet, she had no other choice but to leave the room as she was. It wasn't as if she could wear her heels to workout in. Her bare feet were soon forgotten when she stepped into the living room and saw someone standing there wearing some sort of...rubber suit. Even his head was encased in what looked like a helmet made from rubber.

She stood where she was, staring at him. Frozen to her spot. Was it her abductor? Had he found her?

"I thought it would fit."

She let out a long breath, told herself to calm down. It was only Zach. Then she frowned. "What are you wearing?"

"A protective suit. We're going to simulate some attacks."

"Come again?"

"I want to see you in action, know what you've got or what you can do but I also value my...well, valuables, so this suit will protect me from any blow you hand me. Ready?"

"You look...ridiculous." Biting her lip she tried not to grin.

"Be that as it may, I'm protected. Turn your back to me and walk away."

"Why?"

"Just do as I ask."

With a heavy sigh, she did as he asked and began walking away. She screamed when he came up behind her, grabbing her arm. Pinning it behind her he pushed her against the wall. Planting his body against hers, he held her in place.

And all she could do was shake.

"Fight me off, Deborah."

Through the fear that was choking her she spoke, "I...I can't."

"Yes you can. Fight me."

"I don't know how," she whimpered.

"Use what you've got available."

"My arms are pinned."

"Use your head, Deborah."

"I'm trying, damn it, but I'm scared." Her heart was hammering in her chest like a tribal drum.

He leaned in closer, whispering in her ear, making her shiver. "Literally, use your head. Slam it back into mine."

"But that will hurt."

"Damn straight it will."

"I meant me."

"I know. You want to be a victim all your life, Deborah? Or do you want to take charge again?"

Clenching her jaw, she took a deep breath, then slammed her head back, hard, into his face. He backed off, faking a stumble. Her head didn't hurt as badly as she'd thought it would.

"Now what do you do?"

"Run."

"And..."

"Scream for help."

The smile was barely visible beneath the ridiculous helmet. "Good girl. Let's try another one." He came at her so fast she barely knew what was happening and in the speed of a moment, he grabbed her hand and yanked her against his chest.

She quivered, her breath coming out in short pants.

"What do you do?"

"I..." Then she remembered and lifting her right foot, slammed it down on his. She yelped, jumped back hopping on one foot as she cradled the other that was throbbing severely.

"That was good, and the right thing to do, only I'm the one who should be in pain. Where are your shoes?"

"Upstairs." She sat on the floor to examine her heel.

With great difficulty, he knelt down beside her, taking her foot in his hand. "I don't think it's broken."

"I know it's not broken but it sure as hell smarts." It hurt worse than her head did.

"I bet. Knee to the groin might have been a better choice." Giving her foot a good rub, he released it then in a surprising move, pushed her to the floor and climbed on top.

She was in shock, her pulse racing, her heart pounding and her vision began to blur.

"What do you do now, Deborah?"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The air grew so thin she couldn't draw it into her lungs. She gasped, choked, shook then it all began to blur.

"Deborah, stay with me now. Come on, fight it. I won't hurt you. Remember that."

His voice broke through the fog but she just wasn't strong enough to fight it.

"Come on, Deborah. Stay with me. Stay with me now."

Something cool was on her face and opening her eyes, saw Zach leaning over her, his blue eyes steady on hers. He no longer wore the protective suit.

"There you are. Good to see you back."

"What happened?"

"You hyperventilated then passed out. I brought you some water. Do you feel up to sitting?"

"Yeah..." Carefully, she sat up and saw the protective suit scattered on the floor beside them. "When did you change?" It seemed like seconds had passed to her.

"Right after you blacked out. I couldn't work on you in the suit. Here you go. Slow sips."

She took the glass and drank the tepid water. Feeling utterly foolish, she hung her head down as she set the glass aside. "I'm sorry."

"You need to stop apologizing. It was a natural instinct for you to panic. That's why I'm helping you. To change your instinct from panic to self defense. I shouldn't have pulled that move. It was too soon."

She wiped her eyes, rubbed her neck and thought of the last time she'd been pinned down with a man over top of her. "I should be stronger. I should be able to get past this."

"Why?"

She blinked in response. "Because I...I just should. It's been over two weeks now."

"Oh, so because it's been two weeks you think you should be over something as traumatic as what you went through? Deborah...you're not a foolish woman."

"No, I'm not." She got to her feet, a little annoyed. "But I should be able to get past this already."

"Why?"

"Because I'm better than this," she blurted out.

"Yes you are." He clapped his hands, drawing her curiosity. "You just made it through the first phase."

She stared at him, her mind racing, her emotions scattered. "The first phase?"

"Not wanting to be a victim."

She pursed her lips, thinking about it. "How many phases are there?"

"It all depends on the person and the severity of their atrocity. With you, I'm thinking we have a long road ahead of us."

"Oh..." she dropped back down on the floor and began to sob. She felt him sit down beside her and when she opened her watery eyes, noticed the box of tissues he'd set between them. She took one, blew her nose, took another and wiped her eyes. "I just want it all to go away."

"It will never go away. It will always be a part of you, but it's up to you to find a place to put it. Do you want it to rule your life, or do you want to rule *it*?"

"What's the point in trying if it'll never go away?"

"Then you're allowing him to win."

She sniffled, took the glass of water. "He won the moment he captured me." She gulped it down to sooth her burning throat.

"Thinking like that will only make you weaker."

"I am weak," she hissed, setting the glass aside. "If I wasn't weak he wouldn't have been able to grab me, tie me up and nearly ra—"

The word caught in her throat, jamming everything down until she coughed out a sob.

He took her in his arms, stroked her back and let her cry. "Let it out, Deborah. Let the bad air out."

Her throat ached with the pain she cried out. Her chest burnt and her belly rolled. She remembered how she'd felt, tied to the bed, *her bed*, how the ropes had cut into her wrists, how his hands had felt on her bare flesh.

"I'm going to be sick." She darted up, running for the washroom and made it just in time. When she'd spilled the contents of her stomach into the porcelain, she sat back, resting against the cool tub. Zach was right there with a cold cloth and another glass of water. "Thank you." She rinsed her mouth, then sipped the water slowly.

"Feel any better?"

She set the glass down on the floor, nodded. "No," she sighed.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

She looked up at him. His blue eyes were so sincere she felt herself sinking into them. And she felt herself letting it out. "It's not considered rape because he never penetrated me. That's what the courts said. He sexually assaulted me but didn't rape me, but if Bruce hadn't come in when he had...the creep would have taken it further. And because he had no prior assaults on record, he was released on bail." She took another sip of water to wash down the rising bile.

"Our justice system is more than flawed," he said with deep raw anger.

"That's an understatement." She took a deep breath before continuing, "I see him, in my sleep, when I'm awake. I feel his hands on me, in me. I taste him, all the time. He's inside of me despite what the courts say."

"Then are you ready to push him out?"

She closed her eyes, drew in a deep breath before opening them. "Yes."

"Good."



Zach stepped out of the elevator to find his bar quiet. Checking his watch, he was surprised to see it was after three in the morning. It should be quiet, considering it was closing. He found his employees sitting at the bar, enjoying a nightcap.

"Your usual, boss?"

"No, tonight. I think I'll indulge a little. Glass of Chardonnay please, Wade."

"Coming right up."

Zach took a seat on one of the barstools, looking around the room as Ginny came up beside him. "Busy night?"

"And then some. Where's Deb?" Ginny asked, her eyes darting around the room.

"Sleeping on my sofa. We had a rough session. She's fine...now," he reassured Ginny when her eyes went wide. "Can you cover the next week, J.J.?"

The curvy redhead nodded, setting her martini on the counter before replying. "I could use the money."

He knew she could, being the only one to support her mother and pay for her care in a nursing home. "Great to know. Did you get a hold of Kat, Wade?"

Wade slid the glass of wine over to Zak, shaking his head. "I'll try her again in the morning. She's probably out with Nick for the weekend."

"We'll need her in for the rest of the week. Anyone see Simone in here, let me know."

"Will do, boss." Wade acknowledged. "Is she going to be okay?"

"She had a setback," he informed after a sip from his wine. He didn't want to get into all the details.

"That's too bad. She was doing so well," J.J. sighed.

"We all know what it's like to falter. She's going to need our help."

"We'll be here for her, boss," Wade stated with a tip of his head.

"Good. Now, any casualties this evening?"

"My feet." Ginny lifted her bare feet, wincing. "I ran a marathon tonight."

Taking her feet, Zach rested them on his lap and began to rub them. "Soak them in some baking soda and sprite and they should be as good as new."

"Where do you get these remedies?" she sighed in delight.

"Do they work?" he asked, still rubbing her feet."

"Well...yes, still...baking soda and sprite?"

"Trust me. How are we doing on supplies?"

Wade pulled out the log book. "We're running low on O neg and B pos."

"Must have been a busy night."

"Beyond. Word on the street is that the law lifted the midnight curfew for the weekends. That should bring in more customers."

"I guess we should be ready." Sliding off the stool, releasing Ginny's feet, Zach gave a nod to his employees. "Cleaning crew should be here in an hour. Go home and get some rest then do it all again tomorrow."

"Zach ... wait up."

He waited for Ginny as she hobbled towards him. "Sensible shoes for the next few days," he instructed.

"You're telling me. How is she, really?"

He stopped at the elevator, resting his shoulder on the steel doors. "Drained. She let a lot out tonight. Do you know the name of her abductor?"

"Yes." She narrowed her eyes at him.

"Can I have it?"

"I'm not sure that's such a good idea."

"I merely want to investigate him."

"I know."

"I can get it myself, I just thought I would try getting it from you first. Go home, Ginny and get some rest."

"What about Deb?"

"She'll be fine where she is for tonight. I'll see to it. Rest your feet." When the elevator doors opened, he stepped inside, saluting Ginny as the doors closed.

Nothing bad was ever going to happen to Deborah again.

Not as long as he had his way.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Deborah woke to unfamiliar surroundings and for a brief moment was panicked by it. Then her eyes and her brain began to focus and she realized she was in Zach's living room, on the sofa. There was a soft chenille blanket covering her which smelled fresh and rather floral. The lights were low, not so dark that she couldn't make out her surroundings and as she rolled over, she saw Zach sitting across from her.

"I didn't want you to wake up afraid."

She wiped under her eyes imagining she looked like a raccoon since she'd had no time to remove her make-up and lord almighty she'd been crying before she fell asleep. She probably looked atrocious.

"Did you sleep well?"

He got up from his chair to walk to the kitchen. With his back turned to her, she wet her fingers and did her best to scrub under her eyes. "I...think so. What time is it?"

"Nearly seven."

"In the morning?" When he turned around, a glass in his hand, she yanked her hands down and tried to look nonchalant.

"In the morning. You look fine, Deborah." He handed her the glass then sat directly in front of her on the coffee table.

"I'm sure." He was polite to tell her otherwise though. She looked down into the glass and saw it was orange juice. "Thank you."

"Anytime. How do you feel?"

She drank a little before responding. "Like someone sucked the life out of me."

"Understandable, considering..."

She rested the glass on her lap, staring down into it as she spoke. "I cried like a baby for most of the night."

"You're not a baby, Deborah. Would you like some eggs and toast? Or I could make pancakes if you'd rather?"

"I should get back to Ginny's—oh man, she's probably worried sick about me by now."

"She knows you slept here. If you'd like, you could take a shower while I prepare breakfast."

"You don't have to bother."

Reaching out, he cupped her face in his palm. "It's no bother, Deborah." Releasing her, he stood. "You'll find everything you need in the washroom. Towels are in the cabinet to the left, toiletries to the right. How do you like your eggs?"

"Scrambled." She didn't know what to make of his touch but she did know one thing, it gave her a warm sensation she hadn't felt in a long time.

"Scrambled it is. Enjoy your shower."

He took the glass from her with one hand and held the other out to her. Relenting, she took it and let him help her to her feet. As he walked to the kitchen, she headed to the washroom to shower. Stepping up to the threshold, Deborah stared at the closed shower ahead of her with a great deal of reluctance to move forward. She knew she was being silly; still...she couldn't bring herself to step forward.

"You're in control, Deborah. Remember that," Zach called out annoying her that he knew she was standing in the doorway and not moving forward.

She was in control...yet she still couldn't bring herself to move forward. "This is stupid," she mumbled to herself. Then she drew in a deep breath and took the first step...then the second...and third. She was in the room. Staring at the closed curtain hiding what was inside, Deborah felt her pulse speed up and her heart began to hammer.

She couldn't do this.

Spinning around, ready to run, she came up short when she saw Zach standing behind her.

Before she could say anything, he walked past her and yanked the curtain open. Saying nothing, he smiled as he left the room.

Feeling like an utter fool, she stood there a moment.

"Small steps, Deborah," his voice trailed off.

Small steps. Sure. Now she had to get up the nerve to close the door and close herself in the room. No problem.

She turned to leave, unable to do the simple task of showering with the door closed. At least at Ginny's she could leave the door open. She couldn't very well do that here. Besides, she could wait until she got back to Ginny's to shower. It was no big deal.

You're letting him win.

She closed her eyes, drew in a deep breath and turned back to the room. He wasn't here. She was safe here. He would not be waiting for her on the other side of the door when she was finished showering. Taking another deep breath, she closed the washroom door.

And she laughed.

Disrobing, she stepped into the shower and started the water.

Zach had a variety of shampoos, conditioners and body soaps, all rather feminine. It made her wonder about the woman he'd escorted home and wondered if she was his girlfriend. Of course she was. They seemed very close. Intimately close.

She showered quickly, lathering her body and hair wanting to be out of the room as soon as possible. She rinsed off, and stepped out of the shower...and realized she'd forgotten to grab her change of clothes.

With a heavy sigh she wrapped the towel around her body then cautiously turned the door knob.

She could do this. She was better than this. She was stronger than this.

Thrusting the door open, she saw her change of clothing folded neatly on the floor. Grabbing them, she closed the door, drew in a deep breath, then dressed. She brushed her hair, ruffled it up a little with her hands, and wished she'd brought her purse into the washroom so she could at least apply some mascara. Oh well...

Once again she opened the door cautiously, her heart pounding, her pulse racing. She could hear dishes clanging, smelled the eggs and coffee and focused on that rather than the fear that her abductor might be hiding in any one of the bedrooms across from her.

Racing from the room, she hurried down the hall then slowed her steps as she came to the living room.

"Breakfast is ready."

"It smells great. Thank you for putting my clothes by the door."

"You're welcome." He turned with two cups in his hands and a tilt of his head.

"I know...I'm not wearing make-up. I have some mascara in my purse. I'll just grab it and—"

"You look perfect without it. I was just noticing the color in your cheeks. It looks good on you. What do you take in your coffee?"

She touched her face. "Black. I like the shampoo you have. Your girlfriend has good taste." Taking the cup, she sat at the table.

"I don't have a girlfriend." He set a plate heaping full of scrambled eggs with bits of green onions and ham in it topped with cheddar. It smelled divine.

"Oh...I just thought. There are a lot of feminine products in the washroom and well...I guess I just assumed with that waitress...never mind." She was babbling now. It had been foolish of her to assume.

He sat across from her with his own plate. "Simone is a close friend. I've been helping her deal with a messy divorce from an abusive jerk who did more than bruise her on the outside. But we're not intimate. She stays here on occasion when she's had a rough day, and my sisters stay here as well sometimes when they're in the city. I like to keep the cabinets stocked for them. I have my own shower just off of my bedroom," he explained as he scooped up some eggs.

"I see." She took a forkful of eggs, and the flavor burst in her mouth. "Oh...wow." It had a zing to it, not spicy but crisp. "These are great."

"Thanks. It's an old family recipe."

"Does your family live here?" She enjoyed the eggs and wondered if she could manage to get the recipe from him before she left.

"My parents and my youngest brother do. They just moved back a few months ago. They decided to head to my aunt's when the darkness took over."

"I still can't believe that the city was deserted and run by vampires. Ginny told me all about it, but I really didn't grasp it until I came home. They did a lot of damage."

"This is nothing. A good portion of the city's been remodeled since it all happened. You should have been here while it was happening." Zach shook his head then took a quick sip from his coffee before continuing. "I suppose I should give credit where it's due despite my dislike for the mayor and chief of police, but the Hawthorn's have done wonders so far."

"You didn't vote for them I take it?" she grinned, lifting a forkful of eggs to her mouth.

"There was no voting. They took charge and began rebuilding the city. My problem with them is that they keep harassing my business. I run a clean establishment but that doesn't stop them from sending their cops in to check me out every week." He waved his hand, shook his head. "Don't get me started."

"That doesn't seem right, but I must admit, when Ginny first told me where she worked I was concerned. I didn't like her working in a place where creatures drank from one another without consequences. I won't say I'm comfortable with it now, but It's not as horrible as I once thought it was."

The left side of his mouth curved up in a quirky grin. "I'm not sure how to take that."

"Oh no...I didn't mean it as an insult, but of course it came out that way. I'm sorry. It's a nice place and I'm warming up to it and that doesn't sound any better." With a heavy sigh, she lifted her cup and drank. It was better to keep her mouth occupied before she said something else to offend him.

Laughing, Zach reached across the table and placed his hand over hers. "No need to apologize. I knew going in that I would come up against nay-sayers and controversy but I also knew that opening a place like this was the best thing for the city. Rather than having the blood suckers out and about grabbing innocent victims off the street, they can come here and enjoy themselves without worrying about being captured by the authorities. They also know though, that I have rules and anyone who doesn't abide by them will receive a penalty. Plus, it makes it easier on them knowing I'm one of them."

"You're a vampire?" He didn't have fangs, or yellow eyes, then again, he could be wearing contacts...but the fangs...

"I'm a shape shifter." He smiled as he lifted the fork to his mouth.

"A what?"

"Shape shifter. I can transform into practically anything. Like this."

She gasped when before her eyes he changed into...her. His body just seemed to fade then transform slowly into her likeness. Everything from the color of her hair to the shape of her nose to the clothes she was wearing. It was absolutely bizarre. "What the hell...?"

He changed back in as seamless a motion as he had becoming her. "Humans and animals are the easiest. But changing into objects takes

a great deal of energy and tends to zap everything out of me. I try not to do it very often for obvious reasons.”

“You changed into me....*me*, and I look terrible.” Lowering her head, she frowned into her plate. Her hair was a mess and her face was plain without her make-up. She should have put on the mascara. When his hand touched her chin, she flinched. Looking up, she was surprised that he sat directly beside her. She hadn’t even heard him move.

“You’re beautiful just the way you are.”

His lips brushed over hers in a surprising move that left her speechless. When he released her and stood, she simply watched him moving. He was so graceful.

“I have some errands to run this morning. You’re welcome to stay here as long as you like.”

She swallowed, reminded herself she was an adult and such a move shouldn’t leave her stunned. “I should get back to Ginny’s.”

“Then I’ll drop you off on my way out. Take your time finishing your breakfast. I have some calls to make before we leave.”

She sat at the table, alone after he left the room. Licking her lips, rubbing them together, she could taste him, feel him, and it left an interesting tingle inside her belly.

It was the first time she’d felt something akin to happiness since her ordeal.



While Deborah finished her breakfast, Zach sat in his office searching the computer for anything and everything on Deborah’s ordeal. What he found was rather surprising. Not only was it broadcasted that she’d been abducted but the entire ordeal was being disclosed for anyone to read. Including the sexual assault.

It was appalling.

He wondered if she knew about this.

Her abductor’s name was Peter Milligan.

Pulling his hands back, Zach stared at the computer screen. He could make things so simple and end Deborah’s fears by snuffing out the worthless bastard who hurt her. It wouldn’t take much and no one would ever know who had killed the slime. He could wait for the bastard some night, morphed into a wolf. The instant he stepped out of his house, Zach would be on him in a flash, ripping his throat open.

No more Peter Milligan. No more fear for Deborah.

It would be so simple.

Shutting off the computer, he pushed from his chair and left the office.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Sitting outside, enjoying another gloriously warm day, Deborah felt energized. Which was odd, she thought, considering she'd barely slept three hours. Maybe the crying jag she'd had the night before had helped. She definitely felt better inside and the ball of pressure that had been clinging to her gut didn't seem to be there today.

Not that she was proud of her crying jag or that she'd spilled everything to Zach, but at least she felt better. She licked her lips, remembering the feel of his and how he'd tasted. It had been such a sweet kiss, his lips sweeping over hers so delicately as if to whisper the need. When he touched her, it felt the same. Only a whisper, but he left behind a great deal of sensation.

When the patio doors opened, Deborah noticed she hadn't flinched as she might have before. Wasn't it odd that she hadn't felt the usual skittishness she had only the day before.

Shielding her eyes from the sun, Deborah looked up at her tousle-haired friend. "Good morning, sunshine. What are you doing up already?"

"I had to pee and when I checked your room and found it empty I decided to call Zach's and see how you were doing."

"I'm not at Zach's any longer."

Ginny frowned. "No, really? I hadn't noticed. When did you get home?" She took the cup out of Deborah's hand before sitting beside her in the adjacent lounge.

"Help yourself. About three hours ago. You don't need to worry about me, Ginny." The look her friend gave her said it all. "Go back to bed."

"I'm awake now. So...how are you doing?"

"Zach told you, didn't he?"

Ginny shrugged as she sipped Deborah's coffee.

She wasn't sure if she was annoyed that he'd told Ginny or not. "Strangely...better. Despite being embarrassed at blubbering to Zach. Give me back my coffee and get your own." She took the cup from Ginny.

"Zach's a great guy. He has a way with women. You even look better. More color in your cheeks."

Deborah touched her face, recalling Zach saying nearly the same thing. "It's the sun. He kissed me."

Ginny sat straight up in her chair, eyes wide. "Really? What was it like? I bet he's a great kisser."

Deborah fought the smile attempting to escape. "It was just a brief brush of lips. One kiss."

"And...?"

"And what?" She drank from her cup.

"How was it? Did you like it? Do you want him to do it again?"

Ginny took the cup from Deborah again, sipping while her eyes stayed glued to her friend.

"It was brief, like I said but, yes, I liked it." He had nice lips, smooth.

"And you want him to do it again. That's great, Deb. I'm so happy for you."

"It was a kiss, Ginny. A brief kiss." Did she want him to do it again? Yes.

"If I know Zach and I do, he won't leave it with one brief kiss. I want all the deets when it happens."

Deborah frowned at her friend. "What do you mean by that? Is he a lady's man? Is he the kind to—what am I saying?" She shook it off, feeling foolish.

"You're feeling something for him. Aw, that's great."

"I am not. But I certainly don't want a man making advances toward me one minute then turning to another woman the next."

“Zach isn’t like that. He’s loyal.”

“Hm...” When the cat jumped up on the deck, Deborah felt awash with joy. “Well hello there.”

“Shoo, kitty. Shoo.” Deborah waved at the cat.

“Don’t, you’ll scare him off. It’s okay, pretty boy, she’s just not animal friendly.” Scooping the cat up, Deborah nuzzled his head. “He’s fine. He visited with me the other day.”

“Just don’t go getting any ideas about bringing him inside.”

Deborah shot Ginny a stern look. “I won’t bring him in the house. I just wish I knew who his owners were. He looks well cared for.” When the cat curled up on her lap, Deborah scratched behind his ear. She’d never had any pets, never was allowed any. It was hard keeping a pet when you were on the road all the time and she had been most of her life.

“He probably lives around here, though I’ve never seen him before. So...let’s get back to our conversation about you and Zach.”

“There is no me and Zach. He kissed me, once, lightly. It doesn’t mean anything.”

Ginny snorted. “If Zach kissed you, it means something. He doesn’t lead people on, especially women. He’s probably just being cautious with you because of your ordeal.”

“I don’t want people being cautious around me. I hate the way people look at me and now that my entire ordeal had been leaked, people are going to be looking at me even more. I hate that.” That had grated on her when Bruce had called to inform her. “I just want to go back to the way things were before— I need more coffee.” Lifting the cat, Deborah slid off the lounge, placed him in the spot she’d just vacated then hurried into the kitchen before Ginny could see the tears welling up in her eyes.



Jumping off his chair, Zach pounced up onto Ginny.

“No way, fur-ball. She may like cat hair on her but I don’t. Shoo now.”

“It’s me, Ginny. Chill out.”

“Jesus, Zach,” she gasped, then narrowed her eyes at him. “Oh...that is so not nice, and sneaky.”

“I just want to make sure she’s okay.”

“Like this? Like a cat? Why don’t you just show up and see how she’s doing instead of lying to her.”

"Because she'd just do what she did now and walk away, pretend she's fine. She needs to open up, to know she can trust someone and she feels comfortable with me like this."

"It's still not right."

"Is she talking to you about how she really feels?"

Ginny frowned. "A little." Zach tilted his head, gave her a look.

"Okay, fine, she isn't opening up completely but she's getting there."

"She had a meltdown last night but she still didn't open up all the way. She's not talking about it and until she does, she won't heal."

"And you think by posing as a cat she'll open up to you?" Ginny snorted again.

"In my animal form she feels safe to talk because she knows I won't look at her differently or treat her differently. If she feels comfortable opening up to me like this, then it's a step forward and hopefully, eventually, she'll let us both in. Here she comes." He scurried off Ginny's lounge and met Deborah at the door. He could clearly see she'd been crying.

"Did you miss me?" Deborah asked as she knelt down and ruffled his fur.

"I'm going to go take a shower. Do not let him in the house," Ginny warned, sending Zach a narrowed look.

His response was to turn his backside to her, flick his tail in the air to tell her in a not so polite way to kiss his ass.

"Go take your shower and stop worrying about the cat." Scooping him up, Deborah took her seat, coffee in one hand. "We're going to enjoy the sun."

Zach wiggled his brow, gave her a smug cat like smile and nearly burst out laughing when Ginny scratched her cheek with her middle finger.



"She's never been an animal lover," Deborah explained after Ginny had left, scratching the cat's fur. "I've always loved animals, of every kind. I always wanted a cat or a dog, but my parents didn't allow it and then when I started touring it was just too difficult to take a pet along or leave it with someone for long periods of time. Maybe I should get one now, since I don't plan on going back out on the road. But that's our little secret," she whispered to the cat.

She set her cup down on the tiny glass table beside her and settled down on the lounge, enjoying both the warm sun and the cat's company. "I just don't think I can do it anymore. It's not just because of

what happened to me but I know everyone will assume that. I miss having a home, a place to call my own. I miss being able to work in the garden, or to just spend an evening lounging on the sofa watching TV. I haven't been able to do any of that in far too long. Living in a tour bus or hotels is not as much fun as most people think," she ruffled the cat's fur, smiling down at him. He really was a pretty kitty.

"If my father was alive I know he'd pitch a fit and mom...well... she doesn't even remember me most of the time. Bruce is going to be upset and I know Gary will do everything in his power to convince me otherwise. Bruce is my bodyguard and Gary is my manager," she informed the cat though she knew he didn't understand her.

"This ordeal I went through was just the clincher in my decision. I've wanted to quit for some time now, but I just didn't know how to do it. Don't get me wrong; I love to play piano, and I won't quit entirely. Just no more crazy tours. I want a life." Sighing, she rested her head on the cat's and to her surprise he didn't try to move out of her reach.

"You are the sweetest thing. I wish I knew who you belonged to." Sliding down on the chair, the cat came right up to her chest and settled in. She scratched his head, smiling.

Laying out in the sun, cat on her chest, Deborah wondered if it would be so bad to keep him.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Zach hated letting her go, but jumping into her car and tagging along on her shopping spree wasn't an option. Most stores didn't allow animals and unless he was ready to show her he was the cat she was growing attached to, he had no choice but to let her go. So he sat on the front step of Ginny's home and watched Deborah drive off.

She'd been so relaxed with him—he only wished she could feel the same for him in his human form. There was time. At least she was talking to someone, even if he couldn't respond to her.

He'd given her some comfort though, and he was glad she'd taken it. He hadn't been sure at first if showing up to her as a cat would work, but something inside told him she was an animal lover. He'd been right and being a cat was much better than a dog. For reasons he didn't know, people seemed to warm up to cats and they generally liked to cuddle with them over dogs. So he'd sat with her, resting on her chest while she'd enjoyed the sun.

It rather surprised him to find out she wanted to quit touring. She was such a gifted pianist; it was a shame for her not to allow others to benefit from her talent. Still, he could understand why she wanted to stop. Travelling was nice unless it was all you did. He knew that all too well. Before settling in Jacob's Cove a few months back, he'd moved

from place to place, running his businesses, never settling down for more than a few months. But he was here to stay now. Both Simone and Eli had convinced him it was time he settled in one spot. Eli was young enough that he could still work with him and that was what Zach was trying to do. The boy had no direction in life. His main priority was to have fun by any means possible. Zach was determined to prevent his brother's fun from becoming dangerous, as it had before.

Simone...he regretted not helping her sooner. He should have known her marriage to Bob would end up where it had. Bob was a controller, had to have things his way and with Simone having a mind of her own, the two clashed. Usually it ended with Bob's fist in her face. He'd beaten Simone down until she'd found her escape in drugs. If it hadn't been for Wade, Zach might not have known how serious it had become.

But she'd left the jerk, and Zach had helped her to get clean. Now it seemed he'd be doing it again.

Scooting off the steps, Zach pranced around the side of the house where he knew it would be safer for him to transform back. Though the city knew about his kind, he still didn't like announcing himself as a shape shifter in public. He preferred keeping it to himself for the most part.

Back in his human form, he retrieved his wallet and cell phone from the bush by the back alley and checked his messages. "Damn it."

Tucking both in his pocket, Zach hurried to his car.



It felt good to be out and about, and though the city left something to be desired, it was still nice. Deborah remembered a time when the streets were clean, trees were lush with leaves and the grass was green. She supposed after the ordeal of a year of darkness, it was going to take time to regain what it once had. And it was progressing, however slowly.

Heading to the closest supermarket Deborah hoped it wasn't too crowded. She didn't do crowds these days. You never knew who was lurking about, waiting—and she needed to stop thinking like that.

Take control of your life. Be strong.

Her first step toward being strong was going out on her own, shopping. It was her first venture out since— She had to stop thinking of her life as before and after. It was now. She needed to live for today.

That was what she was doing now. She wanted to do something special for Ginny, for being such a gracious host. It had been such a

long time since she'd cooked for anyone. Deborah hoped she didn't screw it up. Parking her car, as close to the front entrance as possible, then doing a cursory glance around, she hurried to the doors.

Entering, she felt the air choke her. There were so many people. He could be anywhere.

Spinning around, she ran into a woman and nearly belted out a scream.

"Oh dear, I am so sorry."

"No, no, I'm sorry. I wasn't looking where I was going." She had to get out, had to get away.

"Oh my God! You're Deborah Carmichael. I love your music. Oh I just need your autograph."

Standing in the doorway, her heart racing her pulse pounding, Deborah waited for the woman as she rifled through her purse for what she assumed was a pen and paper.

"Just sign it to Lara, that's me." The woman beamed, holding out a pad and pen.

Telling herself to stay calm, Deborah signed her autograph and was surprised her hand was steady.

"This is incredible. Wait until I show my friends. It's so good to see you, here of all places. I'm so sorry about what happened to you. I hope they put the bastard away for good."

"Thank you. Take care." With a shaky smile, Deborah hurried back to her car. Once inside she rested her head on the steering wheel and told herself to just breathe.

The knock on her window jolted her and this time she did scream.

"Sorry to scare you. I just wanted to make sure you were okay," the gentleman shouted through the closed window.

Deborah smiled politely, started the car and drove off.

She wasn't okay. Not okay at all.



Neither Zach nor Simone said a word as they climbed into the car. Zach started the engine, then swiveled in his seat, turning to Simone. She sat slumped over, head down. Her hair was a matted mess of curls and her clothing were wrinkled and smelt of stale smoke and booze.

He turned back to the front then shifting once more, spoke. "Why?"

"Why not?"

Facing forward, Zach started them rolling. He had to think about what he wanted to say before he said it.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?" Apparently he wasn't allowed time to think.

"For everything."

"Are you?"

"Of course I am." She snarled her response.

"Sorry means you won't do it again."

"I slipped up. Give me a break."

He pulled over to the curb, shut the car off and turned back to face her. "You were pulled over for driving recklessly. You were twice over the legal limit and I know it's not just from alcohol because your nose is running. Where did you get the cocaine?"

She wiped her nose with her hand, pursed her lips. "What does it matter where I got it?"

"Because if it's someone I know—"

"It's not. Look, Zach. I know I screwed up—"

"Don't tell me it won't happen again." He started the car, sent them rolling again. "We're going to pack up some of your belongings and you're going to stay with me for the next few days."

"Right, so you can make sure I stay in line," she grunted, glaring out her window.

"Fine, Simone. Have it your way." He spun the car around so quickly she bumped her head against the door.

"What the hell?"

"You want to live like this. Fine. I'll show you what you have to look forward to." He took her to the worst part of town, where the hookers were plenty and the drugs were everywhere and the derelicts crowded the vacant houses.

"What are you doing?"

"Showing you what you have to look forward to." He slammed the car into park, shoved out of his seat and hurried to her door. Taking her by the arm, he practically dragged her out.

"Stop it, Zach."

"This is the life you have to look forward to if you stay on the path you're on."

"Hey sugar, wanna party?"

He ignored the proposition and continued past the raunchy prostitute. "You'll be a hit with the boys. You've got great legs and your tits are big enough to satisfy any man's lust."

"Zach!"

"Which will be good for you because you'll need to fuck like a rabbit in order to keep up with your habit. Although, there's the down-

side of having the drugs and alcohol age you, but there's always some loser looking for a quick fuck with no preference to what the broad looks like."

"Stop it!"

He held her arm tight in his grasp when she tried to jerk it away. "You'll be booted out of that cozy apartment of yours because your rent money will go to drugs. So this is where you'll be staying." He dragged her into a rundown house that smelt of urine, fecal matter, booze and drugs. "Home sweet home."

"Stop it!" She finally managed to jerk her arm free. "I screwed up! I know I did, but I will never end up like this."

"No," He took her chin in his hand and changed into her. "Tell me what you see, Simone."

Her eyes glistened as she stared into her own face.

"This is one day of booze and drugs. Imagine a week, two, three—"

"I get it. Change back. Change back, damn it!" She bolted out the door, sobbing.

Changing back, he raced out after her. Zach hated what he'd just done but he'd hate it more if he watched his friend spiral downward and did nothing to prevent it. He found her back at the car, leaning over the hood, sobbing. He put a hand on her shoulder, kissed her head. "I had to do it, Simone."

"I know."

"Are you ready to deal with it?"

She sniffled, lifted her head. "Yes."

"This time, you get professional help. Agreed?"

She sniffled again, nodded. "Agreed."

"Good. Now, let's get out of here."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Deborah hadn't seen any reason to tell Ginny that she'd planned to cook for her but had chickened out of shopping. So instead, she'd ordered pizza. It was a pathetic attempt at saying thank you for letting her stay but for now, it was the best she could do.

She was determined to put a stop to her fears and to do so, she needed Zach's help. He was being so kind, taking time out of his evening when she knew he probably had plenty of work to do. She'd have to find a way to thank him as well. Taking the elevator down to his suite, she rang his bell and waited for him to answer.

She never expected the pretty waitress, Simone, to answer. Especially not in a short silky robe.

"Hi. Deborah, right?"

"Yes." She was at a complete loss for words.

"Zach's up in his office but he said to tell you he'll be down soon and to come in and get ready." She stepped aside, welcoming Deborah in.

Feeling more than a little awkward, Deborah entered.

"I just got out of the shower. It's been a rough day..." She shook her head. "I'll let you do your thing and I'll go do mine." Shutting the door, Simone paused. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"How do you do it?" Deborah cocked her head to the side and Simone continued. "If I'd been attacked and held hostage I think—no, I *know* I'd be a complete basket case. Yet you seem to be doing so well. How do you do it?"

With a faint chuckle, Debora spoke, "Would I be here asking Zach for help if I was doing well?"

"Sure, I know you want to learn some self defense but still...You seem to be managing."

Deborah dropped her bag and held out her wrists. The scars were fading but the memory was still very vivid. "These are always there to remind me of what happened. There isn't a moment in the day that I don't feel like screaming or hiding in a corner. I tried to go shopping today for some groceries to make Ginny dinner but I only got as far as the store entrance before I chickened out and ran to my car. I never enter any domicile without feeling like my heart is going to explode. I am constantly looking over my shoulder or jumping at the slightest sound. I'm not even close to managing," she chuckled nervously.

"Wow." Simone shifted to one hip, angled her head. "That's...big, but still...okay so what I'm trying to say is...do you use anything to help you get through it?"

"Use anything?"

"Booze, drugs...that sort of thing."

Deborah shook her head. The thought had never even crossed her mind. "No, nothing like that. I do take sleeping pills, occasionally but I hate taking them because they make me groggy and when I sleep I have nightmares, so it's not often. Why do you ask?"

Running her fingers through her damp hair, Simone sighed. "I don't know how much Zach has told you about me but I got out of an abusive relationship several months ago."

"Good for you."

"Yeah..." Simone smiled faintly. "Well, in order to deal with the abuse and being on my own, I turned to drugs and booze. Zach helped me get clean but...I keep slipping. I just can't do it without something numbing me. You know?" She held her hands out, let them fall.

Deborah nodded. "I do. It would be so easy to numb myself for a few hours but I know when the drugs wore off my problems would still be there. I suppose I could keep drugging myself, but where would that take me? And it would give him power over me. He'd win. Do you know what I mean?"

Simone tipped her head down. "I never thought of it like that."

"I don't know about you, but I'm tired of being a victim and I sure as hell do not want the bastard who traumatized me to win so I'm going to do everything in my power to stop him. I was someone before he attacked me and I will be someone again. It might take time, but I'll get there." Deborah reached out and touched Simone's arm. "And so will you."

There were tears glistening in Simone's eyes. "You're right. God, you are so right. I let him beat me down and I continue to let him beat me down every time I take a hit or a drink. I prided myself on my determination. Before I met my husband, I was a headstrong woman. He stripped that away from me."

"No, he clouded it, but she's still there. You're still the same person. You just have to find your way through the cloud."

The tears rolled down Simone's cheeks but the smile lifted her lips. "Thank you."

Deborah was more than surprised when the waitress threw her arms out and took her in a strong embrace.

"Well," Simone sniffled back her tears. "I better get dressed. I'm going to rehab. Before talking to you, I was going because Zach wanted me to. But now..." she wiped her face. "I'm doing it because I want to. Because I need to." She took Deborah's hand in hers, gave it a squeeze. "You ever need to go shopping, just call me. I'm the shopping Queen."

"Thanks, Simone." As she hurried off to the bedroom down the hall, Deborah picked up her bag. The door behind her opened, startling her, until she saw it was Zach.

He cupped her chin in his hand and smiled. "Thank you."

Utterly confused, she replied, "For what?"

"For convincing Simone she was better than the drugs." He released her chin.

"You were eavesdropping?"

"I came down and was about to open the door when I heard the two of you talking. I waited. The door isn't so thick that I couldn't hear most of what the two of you were saying."

"Helping others is a lot easier than helping yourself." If only she could make herself feel better.

He ran a finger along her cheek sending a trickle of a shiver through her body. "Isn't that the truth. Are you ready to get started?"

His touch left a warm sensation inside her body. "I am. Did you hear what I told Simone about shopping?"

"I did. How do you want to deal with it?"

"You tell me."

Taking her hand in his, he kissed her knuckles and smiling, released her hand. "Get changed and we'll work on it."

Heading to the room she usually changed in, Deborah thought about what Ginny had said about Zach. He was definitely making the moves on her. But was she ready to act on it?



With a strong embrace and a few comforting words, Zach sent Simone off to her destiny. He'd had to pull several strings to get her into one of the country's best rehab centers, but it was all worth it if she came out of it and stayed clean. He had a feeling this time was the charm.

When Deborah stepped into the room, he took a moment to catch his breath before he spoke. She was having that effect on him more and more. "Ready?"

"As I ever am."

He held up his hand. "With attitude like that, you won't help yourself."

"I know," she sighed. "I just feel so foolish."

"We've already discussed that. There is no need for you to feel foolish and doing so only gives him a leg up. Are you ready?" he asked again.

She stiffened her back, held up her head. "Yes."

"Better. Now, a little Q and A before we begin. "Why did you have trouble shopping today?"

She drew in a deep breath. "I was determined to do it. I kept telling myself as I was driving to the mall that I could do it. But the instant I walked through the first door, my body froze."

"Why?"

She ran a hand through her hair. "I saw all the people inside, and my mind went wild. He could be anywhere among them. He could be hiding anywhere and I wouldn't know it until he jumped out and grabbed me. It's always that way when I enter any place."

"Because he grabbed you when you entered your apartment?"

She made a visible effort to swallow as she nodded.

"Tell me exactly what happened that day. Start with standing outside your door."

With a heavy intake of breath, Deborah expelled it as she began. "I'd insisted Bruce go be with his girlfriend. He hadn't seen her in

weeks, and I knew he missed her terribly. He was reluctant, but I convinced him to go. I think we both figured I was safe once I entered my building. James, the doorman, greeted us and—

“How did the abductor get past the doorman?”

He signed in as a delivery person. Anyway—” She cleared her throat and continued. “I got to my suite, put the key into the lock, turned it and opened the door. I closed it behind me and that was when he...came at me. He was standing in the kitchen which was to my left.”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing. I stood there like a frozen fool just staring at him.”

“What did he do?” He could tell the conversation was making her uneasy but he needed to prod on.

“He spoke....Said, “Finally, I have you,” then grabbed my arm and yanked me against his chest and slapped his other hand over my mouth.”

“And you...?”

“Did nothing. What’s the point to this, Zach? I already told you I did nothing and that was why he was able to grab me and tie me down onto the bed and...What’s the point?”

“That is what we need to work on first. Your fear of entry. Go out into the hall, then come back in. Don’t knock. Pretend this is your home.”

“Zach—”

He took her face in his hand, leaned in and brushed his lips across hers in a soft kiss meant to dull her mind. “Trust me.” And from the looks of it, he’d managed to cloud it for a brief moment.

Turning, she left the room and Zach rushed to the door, and shut off the lights. He had night vision so he was able to see every move she made. When she opened the door and saw it was dark, he saw her hesitate. In a quick move, he darted in front of her and grabbed her arm.

She froze to the spot.

He pulled her into his arms and still she didn’t make a move or even so much as whimper. “Scream, Deborah.”

“I...I can’t.”

“Yes you can. Scream.” The sound she made was barely a whimper. “Use your gut, Deborah. Scream.”

“Zach—”

“Scream!” He pushed her back against the wall, his hand around her throat. This time, she did. And it nearly split his eardrums. In less than twenty seconds, one of his guards came racing down the hallway

toward them. Zach released his grip on her neck and flicked the light on.

"Is everything all right, sir?" Darius asked, his eyes shifting from Zach to Deborah.

"Everything is fine, Darius. Just an experiment to show Miss Carmichael she has a voice.

The guard's eyes shifted to Deborah's. "Miss Carmichael, are you all right?"

Deborah's head bobbed up and down. "Yes, thank you. He wasn't harming me."

"Thank you, Darius for responding." Shutting the door, Zach turned his attention to Deborah. "Our voices are powerful weapons."

She pushed him aside in a show of anger. "I know that, and thank you for pointing out my deficiencies."

"I did no such thing. I'm teaching you that you have the power."

She spun on him, eyes wide. "By proving how weak I am?"

"No, by showing you that you always have the control. Now we're going to practice screaming."

Her jaw dropped. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me. I want it to be as natural to you as breathing." He pulled out his cell phone and called Darius. "I'm going to be teaching Miss Carmichael to scream. Yes. Thank you." He tucked it back in his breast pocket. "As clichéd as is its, a woman's natural instinct is to scream when she's frightened. Which is good. It draws attention, as you saw. For some reason, yours is stuck inside of you. I'm going to help you bring it back out."

"I know how to scream, Zach."

"All right, then show me."

"This is ridiculous."

He grabbed her arm as she turned to leave and he heard the quick intake of breath. "Scream."

With a roll of her eyes, she screamed. Halfheartedly.

"You can do better than that."

Narrowing her eyes, she raised it an octave.

"Good, a little higher and louder." She didn't disappoint this time and belted it out good and loud. He gave his ears a rub. "I knew there were lungs in there somewhere. Now go outside the hall and come back in."

Heaving a sigh, Deborah did as he asked. This time he left the lights on and hid in his bedroom down the hall. He heard her enter, felt her pause. What would she do now?"

“Zach? Come on, this isn’t funny.”

He heard her moving, could gage where she was going. If he was correct, her back was to him. He changed into a spider—what woman didn’t have a fear of spiders and yes, he knew the risks—and headed down the hall. Sure enough, her back was to him. As quick as his little legs would take him, he scurried to her, running up the side of her leg.

She looked down, saw the spider and did as he suspected. She freaked out, screamed and swatted him away. Momentarily dazed, he was quick enough though to change back before she stomped on him.

She screamed again, throwing her hands to her chest.

“See, I knew you had it in you.” She slugged his arm good and hard. “Ouch!”

“That was not nice. I hate spiders.”

He fought the smile but he knew it was useless. “As I suspected.”

“I could have killed you.”

“I was hoping you wouldn’t.”

“That was not nice.”

He took her hands in his, letting the smile out. “But it worked. You screamed, not once, but twice.”

“I don’t like you very much right now.”

She was adorable when she was mad. “Hmm...I can’t have that. Let’s see if I can change your mind.” Dipping her over his arm, he sunk his mouth down on hers in a hard kiss then slowly softened it as he pulled her to a horizontal position. He didn’t release her but instead ran his hands up along her back while his lips seduced. He felt her relax, felt her give in and enjoy the moment. When he finally released her, he thought how dreamy she looked as her eyelids fluttered open.

“I’m not sure I’m ready,” she murmured breathlessly.

“There’s time.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Sitting at the kitchen table, Jacobs Cove Daily Post in her hand, Deborah sipped from her cup. The hot lemon tea was helping a great deal for her raw throat. Two days in a row of screaming was doing a number on it. But Zach was right; it was as natural to her now as breathing. Still...she hoped she didn't have to continue that lesson.

Setting her cup down, she flipped the page to the entertainment section and was utterly surprised to see her face staring back at her. It was her current press photo which had been taken only a month before her ordeal. Above it the headline read, "*Famed Pianist Returns To Her Roots.*"

With her heart racing, Deborah read the article which told of how she'd been born and raised in Jacob's Cove before finding fame with gifted fingers and a talent to bring music to life on the piano. She relaxed thinking the article wasn't too bad until she came to the section detailing how she'd been abducted and assaulted by a crazed fan.

Closing the paper, tossing it in the trash, Deborah finished off her tea.

She didn't want to be known as a victim yet that was exactly what she was. She hated that she'd been attacked, hated how people looked at her now and hated how vulnerable she felt. Sure, she wasn't as ter-

rified to enter a room now as she had been weeks ago, and she didn't jump as much when someone touched her unexpectedly. Still...

Would she ever get her life back?

"Morning." Ginny sauntered into the kitchen, sliding her feet lazily, her voice still groggy from sleep.

"Afternoon to you. Coffee's ready."

"You sound like crap." Pulling a cup out of the cupboard, Ginny helped herself to the full pot of fresh brewed coffee.

"My throat's raw. I'm drinking tea in hopes it will help." So far it was only temporary and she was growing tired of drinking it.

Ginny plunked herself at the table, set her cup down. "Is it?"

"A little; I think I may need to grab some throat lozenges though."

"I have some in my purse and some in the medicine cabinet."

When Deborah tilted her head, Ginny explained. "I suck on them after my shift. Screaming over the noise and the smoke in the room plays havoc on me."

"Ah...I never really thought about it but I suppose it would. I'll grab them later. So what are your plans for today?" She knew it was Ginny's day off and she suspected that she might want to spend it with her sweetie.

"If you're okay with staying here by yourself, I was thinking of spending the night at Mitch's. We plan on going to dinner and a movie."

Deborah pursed her lips. "I'll be fine, Ginny. But I don't want you to feel like you can't come home with your boyfriend. I won't be here tonight anyway. I'll be at Zach's all night again."

Reaching across the table, Ginny touched Deborah's hand with her own. "It has nothing to do with you. Mitch has the evening all planned including going back to his place after the movie. To be honest, I think he might...propose to me tonight."

Deborah squealed, grabbing Ginny's hands in hers. "Oh my god! You think so? Oh, I am so happy for you."

"I could be mistaken and if I am I'm going to kick myself, but... he's been hinting about our future for a while now and last week he asked me if I ever thought about marriage. Oh, I don't want to get my hopes up, yet..." Now Ginny squealed, squeezing Deborah's hands.

"I'm going to be on pins and needles all evening. You have to call me and tell me as soon as—no, no that's just stupid. Why would you call me right after he proposes? You'll be too busy boinking him with happiness." Deborah laughed. "Oh, Ginny, I am so happy for you."

"Don't get all gushy yet. Let's just wait and see what happens tonight, okay. Now, I'm starved."

While Ginny scrounged for something to eat, Deborah found herself still smiling. This was just what she needed. A reason to enjoy life again.



It felt odd, coming to the Demon's Lair without Ginny. Thinking about her friend and what the evening may have in store for her still made Deborah smile. It was nice to know someone's life was moving forward.

Pulling up a seat at the bar, Deborah smiled at the bartender. "Hey, Wade. How're you doing tonight?"

"Couldn't be better. And you?"

Deborah felt the smile creep up as she responded. "I'm pretty damn good, Wade. Thanks for asking."

"You look good, happy, like someone who knows something. What do you know?" He slid her usual glass of cola across the bar to her.

"I am happy, and I do know something, or I might know something but I can't say anything about it because I'm not sure it's going to happen."

Wade stared at her for a moment before shaking his head. "I think I need a few moments to think that one over."

"I'm sorry." She laughed, lifting her glass to her lips.

"Aren't women usually terrible at keeping secrets?" He filled an order, handed it off to the waitress at the end of the bar.

"We're the best secret keepers. Men are the ones who blab everything to their pals."

"Not all men,"

The hand on her shoulder didn't make her flinch as it once might have. Instead, Deborah turned her head and smiled at Zach standing behind her. "True, not all men. I was just going to ask Wade to call you."

"I was doing my rounds when I saw you come in. You look rather radiant today, though your throat sounds awful. No screaming today."

"Thank you." Swinging her legs around, she slid off the stool. "So what do you have planned for me today?"

"A confrontation with a dummy." He waved at Wade as he led Deborah through the crowded bar.

"Excuse me?" They entered the elevator, the doors closed and her heart did a little flip but the nausea and dizziness she usually felt was absent this time. She really was starting to heal.

"You'll see. So what brings this smile to your face?"

The simple brush of his fingers on her cheek made her pulse race. "I can't say. I've been sworn to secrecy. Oh hell. Ginny might be getting engaged today," she blurted it out, unable to keep it to herself any longer.

The elevator doors opened and Zach held his hand out to her to exit. "Is that so? Well...congratulations to her."

"Yeah, but you can't say anything because she isn't sure if he is proposing tonight or not."

"Mum's the word." Opening the door to his suite, he waited for Deborah to enter first.

She did, without any hesitation.

"Now that is progress."

"What?" She turned to him as he closed the door.

"You just walked right in."

She had; hadn't she? "I guess my mind was preoccupied." Then she turned around and saw the rag doll like dummy held up by posts on either side and she frowned. "What is that?"

"Your enemy." Taking her hand in his, he led her to the dummy. "Meet Buster."

"Buster?"

"He's here for you to beat on."

With her brow lifted, Deborah replied, "Come again?"

"I can feel you hesitating when I'm teaching you self defense. I know it's because you don't want to hurt me, so this is my solution. Today, you'll put everything you've got into Buster. Now, go get changed so we can get started."

"You want me to pound on this rag doll?"

"I do indeed. He can take it." To demonstrate, Zach threw out a right cross that had the dummy shaking on the release.

"Huh. Well...I guess I'd better get changed then." He grabbed her arm as she turned away and when she looked back, he pulled her into his arms. She welcomed the kiss, melted with it and when he released her, he was smiling. "What?"

"It's great to see you happy."

It was great to be happy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Deborah stood before the rag doll dummy with pursed lips. Zach had just explained to her that she should apply all her force when punching the dummy, yet she felt foolish doing so. Not to mention she worried that if she did, the poor thing would topple over or break.

"You can't hurt it."

"I know that," she sighed, then balled her hand into a fist and jabbed it at the dummy's belly.

Zach snorted beside her. "My grandmother can punch harder than that. Come on, Deborah, give it all you've got."

Deepening her frown, she jabbed the dummy one more time, with a little more heat.

"If he had a voice he'd be laughing at you right now. Hit him, Deborah!"

Shooting Zach a heated glare, she balled her hand and plowed it into the dummy's gut. It rocked, it teetered but it remained standing.

"See. Now kick it."

"I will not."

"Oh for pity sake, Deborah. It's an inanimate object. It has no feelings. Kick it."

He was beginning to piss her off. Lifting her right foot, she juted it out at the dummy with enough force to have it rock back and forth several times before coming to a stop. "Happy?"

"Not particularly, no." He walked behind the dummy and lifted one ragged arm. "Is that all you've got? Come on weakling, bring it on."

Rolling her eyes, Deborah laughed. "Now you're just being foolish."

"Look at you, all frail and scrawny. Those arms are like toothpicks. You can't take me; you're too weak." Zach played the dummy while lowering his voice.

"Why do you want me to beat on this poor, defenseless object? We both know I can punch and kick."

"Why did I get you to scream for two days?"

"Because you're a sadist?"

One blond brow lifted. "I've never been called that before. No, it was to open you up, bring out the fighter in you. Now kick me, Deb and do it with meaning."

"You never call me Deb." She hauled off and planted her foot in the dummy's leg. She was sure if Zach hadn't been behind it, the thing would have toppled over.

"Because Deborah suites you better. The dummy called you Deb. Do that again, only this time with your left."

She did, but she didn't have as much power in her left as she had in her right.

"Good, now try the side kick I showed you and go for his mid chest."

"This is all fine and good for a dummy, but there is no way I can do this to a human." But she did as he asked and shifting to her left, raised her right leg and jammed it into the dummy's chest.

"Yes you can and you will. Now go with the left."

She repeated the move with her left, frowning at Zach. "No I can't and I won't. I can't hurt someone."

"Oh, so you would rather they hurt you. It's your life or his—which one do you value more?"

"That's a stupid question."

"Answer it."

"Mine," she demanded with a determined expression.

"I don't think you really mean that," Zach taunted, flapping the dummy's arms at her. "Say it with conviction."

"Mine," she repeated a little firmer, throwing her right fist out to the dummy's abdomen.

"Still not good enough."

"Mine," she demanded and this time put everything she had into the kick. She gasped when both Zach and the dummy went flying. Zach came down hard on his back, dummy resting on top.

"I am so sorry! Are you all right?" Rushing to his side, she pushed the dummy away, noticing how heavy it really was, and placed her hand on Zach's face.

"Now, that was better." Looking up at her, he smiled.

"Are you hurt?"

"Nothing I can't manage."

The air rushed from her lungs as he yanked her down on top of him and plastered his mouth over hers. She was too dazed to reject him, and by the time her mind cleared, her body was reacting with delight. His lips were so smooth, so gifted and as he took the kiss deeper she felt herself melting. His arms wound around her waist as his hands came to rest on his chest. She felt his heart beating against her palm and realized suddenly that hers was matching his.

He rolled them until she was on her back and he on top. He braced one hand to her left keeping his weight from crushing her. His free hand strolled lazily along her side, over her arm until he reached her face. Then he did something so sweet, so sensual it made her body quiver. With only the tips of his fingers, he traced her face from chin to forehead and back as he turned the kiss from an urgent battle of lips to a slow melting of mouths.

She felt herself floating and never wanted to come down.

Then he released her mouth and rested his forehead on hers. "Yep, that did the trip. I feel much better now."

"Why did you stop?" she murmured. When her eyes opened she found them connecting with his. They were so blue, so...beautiful.

"How foolish of me." His lips curving in a smile, he leaned back down and continued his seduction of her mouth.

Her body felt alive, for the first time in a long time, and it felt glorious. She needed to feel him and so she let her hands search for flesh. Pulling his plain cotton polo shirt from his slacks she ran her nails up his back and took great pride when he moaned against her mouth. She continued the motion as their lips danced. His fingers skimmed along her face and she could feel the weight of him pressing into her pelvis.

"Touch me," she pleaded against his lips. When his fingers skimmed down her face, over her chin and down her neck she braced with anticipation. But instead of trailing over her breasts, he skimmed along her arm. Disappointed, she dug her nails into his back a little more.

Then his hand slipped beneath her lycra shirt, touching her bare side and made her suck in a breath. Slowly he trailed his finger tips along her belly from side to side. She parted her legs wanting to feel more of him. "Touch me, Zach. Make me feel alive."

He cupped her chin in his hand and looked down at her with utter sincerity. "Are you ready?"

"God yes," she chuckled, her body feeling hot and ready. Then he surprised her by getting to his feet.

"Not here." He held his hand out to her and as she sat up, he pulled her to her feet and against his chest.

She felt herself floating as he took her mouth in a hard demanding kiss. Then he scooped her into his arms and carried her to his room. He set her down by the bed then pulled the shirt over his head, tossing it aside. "Just say the word and I'll stop."

She repeated his action and pulling her shirt over her head, tossed it with his. Actions spoke louder than words. She shimmied out of the work-out shorts cursing under her breath that they clung to her so tightly. She kicked out of her shoes, peeled off her socks, then walked up to him and lifting to her toes, took his mouth in hers.

His hands were warm as they came to rest on her hips. The only clothing she wore was a simple black bra and panties. He backed her toward the bed and when it hit her calves she sat on the edge, bringing him down with her as she laid back. He was hard and ready beneath his trousers and pressed right into her core.

His fingers skimmed along her body as they had on her face. It tickled and aroused all at the same time. When they trailed over first one breast then the other, she began to quiver. She began to move beneath him, her body aching for more. Then his fingers slipped beneath the cotton bra to graze over the swell.

She moaned, arched and pulled him closer.

He touched her so gently it was no more than a whisper. But it did so much to arouse. She'd never felt anything like it before. When his hands slid to her back, she arched a little more to allow him access to the clasps on her bra. He released them then slowly slid the bra away.

Her breath caught when he paused, his eyes gazing at the long red line between her breasts where the knife had cut her flesh. Would he stop now? Did it repulse him?

Then his eyes met hers. What he did next took her breath away. Leaning down, he placed his lips to the tip of the scar and kissed it. His eyes met hers again, then he kissed her. His lips teasing hers, he skimmed his fingers over her very taut nipples. She closed her eyes and moaned. He twirled his finger over the top of first one then the other. With each move her body heated up even more to the point where she just couldn't take it any longer.

"Touch me, Zach. Now."

Saying nothing, he kissed his way down her face, over her neck before coming to a rest on one breast. His mouth closed around the tip and when his tongue brushed over it she swallowed the gasp. Then his fingers skimmed down her belly to the tip of the waistband of her panties. Shifting off her, he began a slow dance of removing them. She felt like he was torturing her. She lifted her leg as he slid the garment over her thigh and down her leg. When she felt it on her foot, she kicked it aside.

Then his hand touched her heat and sent her into a world of desire.

"Just say the word."

"Touch me."

Like he had done to her face and nipple, he only grazed her with his finger tips. Up and down, side to side, circling the spot that ached for release. She moved her hips in anticipation, while his hands teased and his mouth suckled. She felt it building deep within her, that slow cruise to fulfillment. Parting her legs, she begged for more.

Releasing her breast, he took her mouth as his fingers sought the well of her desires. The instant he was inside the orgasm stabbed into her. Clapping onto his arms, she bucked beneath his hand as he drove her up and over.

As she began to come down, he released her mouth, pulled his fingers out and looked into her eyes. "More?"

"Dear God yes," she laughed.

He stood up and slowly removed the belt from his pants. She watched in eager anticipation as he let them fall to his feet, stepping out of them. He wore silk black boxers which were incredibly sexy. Bracing on her elbows, she waited while he drew the black silk down past his waist, over and down. He was beautiful, so full and ready.

She couldn't wait to feel him inside of her.

Reaching into the bedside table, he pulled out a condom and slid it over the length. Then meeting her eyes, joined her on the bed. He pressed against her, and she parted for him. He held there for what

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seemed like forever, just looking into her eyes. Then he took her mouth as he slowly slipped inside.

She felt herself giving in to him as he pressed himself deeper. Then he took one leg in his hand, holding it by her thigh as he began to move.

Their mouths devoured, their bodies moved together in perfect rhythm, and all the while his fingers softly grazed her face. She'd never felt anything so moving before in her life.

He gave her everything that night as he took her over and beyond.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

"Can you change into anything?" Deborah asked as she lay lazily and very content in his arms. She felt glorious and was very happy not to have to move from her spot. There had been no hesitation when he'd touched her, as she'd feared. When he touched her, she only thought of him.

His fingers toyed with hers as he spoke. "Pretty much anything."

"Could you change into a chair or something like that?"

He angled his head at her. "Now why would I want to do that?"

"I don't know. I was just curious. Do you ever use it for your own gain?" His hesitation said it all. "You don't have to explain, I was only asking. Can everyone in your family change?"

"It's a family trait. I'm part of a long race of shape shifters. Does it bother you?"

She liked the way he played with her fingers. "Not at all. I find it fascinating." She listened to him breathing, watched him play with her fingers before she spoke again. "I never once thought of him while you were touching me. And that just sounds bad."

He sat up a little, bringing her with him. "Not at all, it's very natural. Did you think you would?"

Now he was playing with her hair. She loved how he made contact with her in such a gentle way. "I was afraid I would."

“So this was an experiment?”

She looked up at him, saw the teasing grin on his face. “Do you mind me using you?”

“Not at all. I’m here at your disposal anytime you need me.”

Laughing, she nuzzled into his chest. She toyed with the fine downy blond hair that covered his skin. “I hate that I couldn’t stop what happened to me. I hate that I just laid there and let him touch me and I hate that I didn’t try to scream. I don’t know why I couldn’t, but it just wouldn’t come out.”

“Some people freeze up when faced with danger. It’s nothing to be ashamed about.”

She begged to differ. “Thank you for helping me find not only my voice, but my courage.”

He sat up taking her with him. Cupping her chin in his hand, he responded so softly it took her breath away. “The only thanks I need is seeing you stand tall.” He released her face to tuck her hair behind her ear. “It kills me to think of what you endured, of him putting his hands on you. I won’t lie to you by saying I haven’t thought about hunting him down and ripping his throat out, but I won’t do it and do you know why?”

She swallowed the lump in her throat and responded, “Why?”

“Because I don’t want that to come between us.”

She drew in a deep breath, closed her eyes and leaned against his forehead. “Am I a bad person if I said I wished he was dead?”

He lifted her chin again. “No, it only makes you human.” He pulled her down with him as he lay back down.

She lay in his arms, his hands stroking her face into sleep and as she drifted off, she was smiling.



Not only was Ginny’s car in the driveway but Mitch’ as well. As Deborah entered through the front door, she heard the giggles from her friend and felt her excitement build. Setting her purse on the couch, she made her way to the kitchen to find Ginny and Mitch in a tight embrace. Ginny was in her white silk robe, bare feet and her hair looked as if she’d just rolled out of bed. Seeing Mitch in only his jeans told her they both had just rolled out of bed.

Deborah decided it was best if she just turned back around and left the two love-birds alone.

“He proposed!” Ginny announced as she whirled around, throwing her left hand out at Deborah. “And I said yes.”

"Oh, Ginny. I am so happy for you. For you both."

"Me too." With tears in her eyes, Ginny ran to her friend, wrapping her arms around her neck and giving Deborah a good hard hug. "I was so nervous throughout the dinner and I half expected him to do it then but he didn't. I don't even know what the movie was about. I just couldn't concentrate. We got back to his place and there were rose petals on the bed, soft music playing, and on the center of the bed was a small, black box. He got down on one knee and asked me to be his wife." She turned to Mitch, her face beaming. "Isn't he just the best?"

"Yes he is. Congratulations to the both of you. Now, I'll just leave the two of you to continue your celebration."

"I have to go to work," Mitch explained as he headed to the stairs, stopping first to grab Ginny and sweep her off her feet with a kiss.

They made a cute couple.

"Can you believe it?" Ginny boasted after Mitch headed off to shower. "I'm engaged."

Taking Ginny's hand in hers, Deborah examined the single solitaire diamond on the gold band. It was absolutely lovely. "Yes you are. And he has very good taste. In rings and in women." She met her friend's tear-filled eyes and smiled. "I really am happy for you."

"Me too. Now, what the hell are you doing coming home at two in the afternoon?"

"How do you know I wasn't here before?"

"Your bed is still made. Did you sleep in your car again, Deborah? Please tell me you didn't."

With a frown, Deborah sauntered past her friend as she headed to the kitchen. "I didn't sleep in my car."

"Then where...oh, you must have bunked at Zach's. I told you I was staying at Mitch's...but of course you couldn't come here alone. I should have thought of that. I'm sorry, Deb."

Pouring a cup of coffee, Deborah smiled to herself. "Don't be sorry. I'm not." She took her cup to the table and saw how Ginny was looking at her. "What?"

"Why did you say it like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like, 'I'm not'," Ginny said in a slow seductive tone.

"I did not say it like that," Deborah giggled knowing full well it gave her away.

Pulling up a chair, Ginny sat. "Close enough. Wait—Oh my god. You slept with Zach."

Lifting her cup, Deborah grinned like a school girl with a crush as she sipped, saying nothing.

"Oh my God, you did! How was it? Forget it. I know how it was. With Zach it has to be perfect."

She furrowed her brow at Ginny. "How do you know what it's like with Zach?" Had Ginny slept with him?

"I don't, but I can guess. The guy's so smooth I just bet he's the same way in bed. Is he?" Ginny pleaded, grabbing hold of Deborah's hand.

She pulled her hand away, laughing. "I am not going to discuss my sex-life with you."

"Yes you are. You always have so come on, spill. Was it great?"

She felt herself glowing. "It was better than great. It was phenomenal."

"I knew it!" Ginny shouted. "So tell me. How did it happen? Did he sweep you off your feet?"

"Well, yes but not before I kicked him and sent him flying to the floor."

Ginny's mouth dropped open. "For real?"

"For real, but unintentionally. It was part of my self defense training. And that's all I'm giving you." Coffee cup in hand, Deborah sauntered out the door to enjoy the warm summer afternoon.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Deborah spent the next week not only learning more self defense maneuvers but learning she could have multiple orgasms. Oh how glorious that was. She was pretty sure she could never go back to only one. She was spoiled now for sure. Zach was a gifted man in bed not only with his hands and body but his mouth as well. He'd done things to her she'd never heard of much less imagined. And she couldn't wait for him to do it to her again.

He woke her at three in the afternoon with that gifted mouth and took her over the edge and beyond. While she lay in his bed, breathless, she couldn't help but wonder how soon he would be ready for more.

"Have you talked with Simone recently?"

He fluffed his pillow then perched it up against the headboard as he sat. *"Yesterday. She sounded so much better, so upbeat."*

"I'm glad. She called me the other day to say thank you. I told her there was no need to thank me. She was the one doing all the hard work."

He took her hands in his, played with her fingers. *"I think this time she really will get better. Do you like Italian?"*

Rolling onto her side, she looked up at him. His long blond hair was messed up around his face and only managed to make him look

even more gorgeous. "I've never had an Italian but I hear they make great lovers."

His response was to put her fingers in his mouth and gently bite down on them.

"Ouch. Oh, you meant as in food. Yes, I like Italian food." She sat up, straddling him. "Planning on ordering some in?"

"No, I thought we would go out to dine for a change."

She kissed him as she positioned herself over him. As she drew him into her, she heard him moan. "That sounds nice."

"Then again, dining in sounds promising as well." With his hands on her hips, he took one breast into his mouth to toy with the nipple.

"It does, doesn't it? Still...oh..." There was that gifted mouth, stirring her up. "Getting out is nice too. Do you have any idea how crazy your mouth makes me?"

"I have some idea," he murmured then drew her nipple in and suckled it. He paused when his cell phone rang with an ominous tune similar to the death march.

"Aren't you going to answer that?" she asked, rocking over him.

"Do I look like a stupid man to you?"

She squealed when he flipped her onto her back. "Not at all." She wrapped her legs around his waist as he began to rock inside of her. "I love how your hair falls forward when you're on top of me." She swept it up in her fingers, letting the golden locks slide along as she pulled her hands away.

The bedroom door flew open. "Zach? You still in bed lazy a—oh, wow, shit. Sorry."

Quick as a flash Zach pulled the sheet over them both and cursing under his breath, pulled out.

Her heart was pounding from excitement and fright. "Who was that?" she asked, pulling the sheet tight to her breast.

"My soon-to-be-dead little brother." Throwing his pants on, Zach muttered, "Wait here. I won't be long."



He shoved from his room and was sure there had to be smoke coming out of his ears. When he saw Eli snooping through his fridge, it only made him angrier. "What are you doing here?"

"Hey, I called first but when you didn't answer I figured you were still in bed. I slipped in under the door as an ant. You have crap in the fridge to eat, bro."

Zach slammed the door shut, startling Eli. "Did it occur to you that I might have a guest?"

Eli shrugged. "Not really, but while we're on the subject, who's the hottie with the killer legs?"

Grabbing Eli by the shirt front, Zach promptly escorted him to the door.

"Hi."

Both men turned to see Deborah standing in the hall, wearing Zach's robe.

"Well hello there, pretty lady," Eli drawled seductively.

"Not even in your wildest dreams, little man. He was just leaving," Zach explained as he escorted his nosey brother to the door.

"You must be Eli. Zach's told me about you. I'm Deborah." She came forward, hand extended.

"Pleasure to meet you, Deborah." Taking her hand in his, he brought it to his lips.

"Cut that out." Zach jerked his brother to the side.

"I see the charm runs freely in the Adams family. It's nice to finally put a face to the name. I'll just be in the shower."

"Wow, Zach, she *is* a cutie," Eli sighed as Deborah left for her shower. "So not like your usual though. I wouldn't mind joining her in the shower. Ouch!" He rubbed the back of his head where Zach had just smacked him.

"She's mine so keep your thoughts to yourself. Why are you here, Eli?"

Straightening his hair, Eli responded with a snarl. "I want to come live with you." The snort of laughter Zach gave didn't do much to change Eli's attitude. "Come on. Mom and Dad are so old. They just don't get me. You gotta let me stay here."

"I don't *gotta* let you do anything, especially not staying here and yes, our parents are old but that does happen when you live a long time. Get over it."

"Come on, bro. They're killing me. I have no social life and they took my computer away because they said it's corrupting me. I have to be home right after school and I can't go out on the weekends. I'm about ready to explode. You gotta help me out."

Zach had a feeling his parents might go to the extreme with Eli. "We have got to work on your grammar. I'll have a talk with Mom and Dad—"

"But—"

"And I'll get them to lighten up on you but you have to prove to them you deserve it. You stick to curfew and help out more around the house."

Eli sulked. "I like living with you more."

"Yeah, well, we both saw how well that went last time. I'm in the hot-seat here, too, little brother. Under my supervision you got into the most trouble hanging with the wrong gang so Mom and Dad aren't too eager to trust me right now, either."

"This sucks."

"Yeah, life tends to do that some times." Swinging his arm over Eli's shoulders, Zach ruffled his hair. "Just be happy you don't have bills to pay. Now get out of here so I can get back to my girlfriend."

"She really is cute."

"I know." Opening the door, Zach gave his brother a friendly shove. "Go straight home." He closed the door on his sulking brother. He was trying to be sympathetic to Eli. Essentially he was an only child now since the rest of their siblings were grown and out of the house.

Still...there was only so much he could do for the poor kid.

And he would get to that right after joining Deborah in the shower.



His parents' home hadn't changed much over the years. Even having fled while the darkness had captured the city, the house had remained untouched. Maybe because it was on the outskirts of the city it hadn't been damaged.

Zach sat down on the dark rust sofa that had been in the very same spot for the past fifty years. The craftsmanship spoke volumes. It had to be sturdy to stand up to eleven rambunctious kids. His mother sat in her usual cream pocket chair while his father sat in his Lazy-boy. It was the most recent new addition to the house.

For a couple well into their nineties, they looked damn good.

"You're looking well, my son."

"As are you, Mother. Is that a new dress?" It suited her perfectly with its soft cotton fabric and floral print. A delicate woman in build she was not, yet her demeanor was the exact opposite. She was a very gentle woman.

"Yes it is. It's one of your sisters' designs."

"I thought as much. And Father, you're looking well also."

Jason Adams sat a little taller with the compliment and nodded. "Clean living. So what brings you by today, my son?"

Straight to the point, that was his father. Though Zach resembled his father he took after his mother more in his demeanor. "I've come about Eli."

Both of his parents let out a long sigh.

"I know he's been trouble lately, but..." He cleared his throat and went for it. "I think the restrictions you're putting on him might have him returning his attentions to unsavory ideas."

"If we don't put restrictions on him he'll end up getting into trouble."

He acknowledged his mother with a nod. "You may put restrictions on him, and still let him have some freedom."

"Freedom was what got him in trouble last time," his father added in a deep stern voice.

"He was testing his ground. It was the first time he'd been out on his own. I was a poor supervisor, I know that, and I regret not being more of a role model. But if you want to punish anyone for him becoming involved with evil, then it is I who should be punished."

"Fine," his father spouted. "You're grounded."

Biting his tongue—his father so rarely joked—Zach continued. "If I might suggest something for Eli? A job. I could help him find something that suited him. It would give him responsibilities and a paycheck. And...it would keep him out of trouble."

His father scratched his chin, his mother chewed her lip. Zach waited while they thought it over, enjoying his tea and looking over the many family photos collected on the wall. Nothing much changed in the Adams family.

"A job it is then," his father piped up, slamming his fist on the arm of his chair. "A little hard work never hurt anyone."

"My thinking exactly."

"Then so be it. Now, shall we discuss your curfew?"

With a laugh, Zach leaned back in his seat and enjoyed his tea.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“What do you mean you’re not going back on the road?”

“You sound just like Bruce.” Deborah placed the pan in the soapy water while Ginny stood beside her, dish towel in hand, scowling at her. At least she’d managed to make a wonderful meal for her friend and Deborah was quite proud at the fact that she not only managed to go into the supermarket but had spent an hour and a half shopping at the mall after grabbing the groceries she needed to prepare the meal. And she hadn’t hyperventilated once.

She was healing.

“This is crazy, Deb. You can’t stop because of what happened to you. You’re too gifted to just give it up.”

“I’m not giving it up, and I’m not doing it because of what happened to me. I’ve been thinking about this for a while now.” She set the pan in the sink and Ginny instantly scooped it up to dry it. “I’ve been on the road since I was ten. The last time I had a vacation, an honest to goodness vacation, was eight years ago. I need a break.”

“Then take a break but don’t stop playing.”

She set the cloth on the counter and turned to her friend. “Can you imagine doing something for the better part of your life because you were told to do it? How enjoyable would your job be if you never

stayed at one bar, always travelling to another one and helping out for three days then moving to the next? Your home was hotel rooms or stuffy trailers. Do that for twenty years and see if you don't need to step away."

Setting her cloth and the pan down, Ginny took her friend's hand in her own. "I can't say I know how it's been for you but you've never, not once, mentioned being tired of it until now. It just seems as if this attack is the reason for you wanting to quit."

"It's not, well, mostly not. It does play a part in it but as I said, I've been thinking about leaving for a while now. You could say the attack was my wake up call. Life is too short. I want to enjoy it while I have it and being on the road, day after day, year after year playing for others is fine, but now I want to do something for myself."

"But you love playing the piano."

"I do, and I'll still play, just not on tour. Please don't be angry at me for doing this, Ginny. It really is what I want."

Taking Deborah in her arms, Ginny stroked her back in a slow calming motion. "I'm not angry at you, Deb. I just don't want you to jump into anything and regret it later."

They parted and Deborah took Ginny's hands in hers. "What is life if not for some regrets? Be happy for me, okay."

Ginny pursed her lips, nodded. "I am happy for you, if this is truly what you want. So...what are you going to do with yourself then?"

They continued the chore of washing and drying the dishes from their meal as they talked. "I think I want to find a house here and settle down for a while."

"Really?" Ginny squealed.

"Really," Deborah laughed.

"It's Zach, isn't it? He's the reason you want to stay here. You two have been spending a lot of time together." Ginny winked with a grin spread wide on her face.

Deborah felt her cheeks flush. "It's not just Zach, silly. It's you. Aside from my mother, you're the closest thing I have to family. Besides, I want to be here to help you plan this wedding of yours."

"It's going to be huge, did I tell you that already?"

"A few times," Deborah chuckled. "And that's another reason I need to stick around. Someone has to keep you grounded."

Ginny laughed as she continued drying the dishes. "Did I tell you the colors we want for the wedding?"

"Amazingly, no."

"Green."

“Deborah paused and slowly turned to her friend. “Green?”

“Yep. Lime green to be exact. It’s Mitch’s favorite color. And oh—I found this shop on-line that has *the* perfect bridesmaid dresses. They’re backless with thin gold straps crisscrossing the back, and on the front, it comes to a point low on the bodice which will show off a lot of your boobs but hey, you’ve got great boobs, and the skirt is a straight pencil cut with gold lace bustling out toward the back and my God are you gullible.” Holding her gut, Ginny laughed hardily.

Until Deborah smacked her arm. “That was not funny.”

She rubbed her arm, calming her laugh. “It was from my viewpoint. The gold part was true though. Gold and black—girls in gold, men in black. What do you think?”

“I like it. Much better than the green. God, Ginny.” Deborah shuddered. Her friend had always had a warped sense of humor. She should have known better than to believe Ginny.

“I just couldn’t resist. What do you think of a single white rose as your bouquet?”

“I think it sounds perfect. When did you make all these plans?”

“Mitch and I have been mulling them over for a few days now.”

Deborah pulled the plug in the sink sending the soapy water down the drain. “And I wasn’t here to help.” She sighed.

“Well...you were busy being pumped to oblivion.” Ginny laughed, then dodged the hand Deborah swung out at her. “He makes you happy. I like it when you’re happy.”

“He does make me happy. I suppose I have you to thank for that?”

Ginny shrugged. “What are friends for? Maybe I’ll be helping you with wedding plans soon.”

Deborah snorted. “That’s jumping the gun a little.”

“Why? You plan on moving back here and it’s not just because of me so you must be thinking long term.”

She had been, and yes, Zach had been in the mix but not as her husband. She wasn’t ready for that big of a step just yet. “I’m content with the way things are right now and we really haven’t known each other long enough to even consider marriage. No, let’s just stay focused on yours.”



“You never think of marriage?” Zach asked as he held up the dummy for Deborah to punch.

“I never had the luxury of thinking of marriage. There was no time for it when I was on the road.” She sent a right jab to the dum-

my's face and a left to his gut. Maybe she shouldn't have told Zach about her conversation with a Ginny.

"What were you thinking of then when you were with a man?"

Her eyes lifted to his and a faint grin lined her lips. "I was thinking, 'ah, that was satisfying'." She threw another right to the face.

"So all it was for you was sex?"

"Not all, but I couldn't let it get serious, for obvious reasons."

"What reasons?"

"I was never in one place for long—always on the road. It would be wrong to expect any man to wait for me."

"I think if a man loved you he would do whatever he could to be with you. I know I would."

Bouncing on her feet, Deborah readied for a kick. "Then why haven't you gotten married?" She slammed her right foot into the dummy's gut.

"I was waiting for you."

She stopped. "Excuse me?"

He stepped out from behind the dummy. "It's my race's belief that there is only one person who we are meant for and that connection is made at birth." He took her hand in his, toyed with her fingers. "I knew the instant I first saw you that you were meant to be mine. I feel a connection to you I've felt for no other woman and I think you feel the same for me."

Though her brain was racing with thoughts, she found it hard to choose one word to start with.

"You were born here as was I yet we never met, each going our separate ways, until now. I did some research into your background and I can't think of it as a coincidence that I own a bar in every city you ever toured."

"You own that many bars?"

He brought her hand to his lips. "And then some. Yet with all those bars, all those exotic places, I chose to come back here to Jacob's Cove to settle down. You did the same. We're drawn to each other. We're meant for each other."

Her mind was still racing but when he touched his lips to hers, she felt it all calm. He made her feel that way. Had from the first moment she'd seen him. Was what he said to her true? Had they been destined for each other? She gave to him like she had never given to any other man. Mostly, she trusted him. And he was right. Of all the exotic places she could settle in, she chose Jacob's Cove, a city in ruins filled with monsters. Yet she felt absolutely at home.

When he pulled away, still holding her hands, she felt the lock on her heart click. "I think I need to sit down." He helped her to the sofa where she sat staring at her hands.

"I hadn't planned on springing this on you like I did." He sat beside her, still holding her hand in his. "I was waiting, hoping you would come to the conclusion yourself and I think I might be shooting myself in the foot but there is something else I need to tell you."

She looked up, wet her lips and nodded. "Okay, fire away."

"I'm the cat you've been taking care of these past few weeks." His hand slipped from hers and his body transformed into the black furry cat she so adored.

"My god!"

He changed back, took her hand in his. "I didn't do it to spy on you. When I first showed up it was only because I wanted to make sure you were okay. We'd had a rough night and I worried I'd pushed you too hard. I just needed to make sure you were okay."

"I love that cat." And she realized what she'd just said. "Oh my..."

His lips curled up in a smile ever so slowly.

"I'm not mad at you. Why aren't I mad at you? I should be mad at you for deceiving me like that but I'm not." She really wasn't and that was the oddest thing.

"You love me."

Her eyes went wide as they flicked up to meet his. "I do. I really do."

Pulling her closer, he brushed his lips across hers as he murmured, "And I love you."

"Wow."

"Yeah." He kissed her once more before pulling away. "But before we can proceed, there's one hurdle you have to jump over before we can move forward."

Releasing her hand he stood. She looked up at him and before her eyes, he changed...into her abductor.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

She stood there staring up at the man who had brutalized her, and all she could do was...nothing. He grabbed her hand and yanked her to her feet. And still she did nothing. Then she reminded herself it was really Zach.

"Change back."

"Fight me."

"I'm not going to fight you, Zach. Change back."

"Until you can face your abductor you won't truly be free."

She jerked her hand away, frowning at him. "You're not my abductor, Zach." Stepping around him, she wandered to the kitchen to grab a glass of water. She would admit he had given her a jolt when he'd first changed, but inside, she knew it was Zach and not the madman who had brutalized her.

"I shouldn't have done it in front of you. I should have waited and shown up at your door instead."

She spun around, her mouth dropping open. "Why would you do such a thing? You know what seeing him would do to—oh..." she understood now. "Don't, okay? Just don't." She didn't want that coming between them and she knew it would. Every time she would look at him she would see her abductor and she didn't want that.

He changed back. "Until you can face him, you won't be free. You're always going to be looking over your shoulders, always wondering if he's out there somewhere, if he finally found you. I want you to be prepared for that day when he does find you."

"If he finds me," she insisted.

"So you want to spend the rest of your life on edge? What kind of life is that, Deborah? I want to help you not be afraid."

"I'm not afraid...or not as afraid as I was before coming to you. I can go into a mall alone now without hyperventilating." That said something didn't it?

"What would you do if you saw him in the mall sometime?"

"Run."

He stared at her for a moment. "So you'll keep running. I thought you said you were tired of being on the road. That you wanted to settle down and have a life."

Her eyes narrowed as she spoke, "I don't want to get into an argument with you about this. Besides, what are the chances he'll find me here?" That was why she'd come back to her home town. Not many people knew where she'd grown up. She'd purposely left that out of her bio because it was the one thing she had to herself. Her life had been in the public eye since she'd been ten. Every move she made was reported. But her home town was private and she'd kept it that way.

"If he knows anything about you and I'm betting he does, he'll put two and two together. He has to know where you were raised and if he doesn't, there are means of finding out with today's technology."

She felt a lump form in her throat and remembered the headline in the local paper. She shook it away. "Why are you trying to scare me? There is no way he'll figure out I'm here. Not many people know I was raised here and even still, why would he come all the way out here for me and risk going to jail? This is just silly. Now stop trying to scare me." She drank down her water, set the glass in the sink. "Let's go to a movie."

He took her hand in his, held her in place. "This isn't just going to go away, Deborah. You have to face him sooner or later."

"No, I don't. I'm safe here, Zach." She touched his face with her hand, smiling at him, trying to ease the tension in the air. "I'm in the mood for a comedy. Let's see what's playing."



The movie was just what she'd needed. It was a comedy with all the laughs necessary to make one's ribs ache and have tears flowing

from your eyes. Deborah felt better than she had in years. She was in love with a wonderful man, she didn't have a care in the world, and had no plans aside from going back to Zach's place and making wild passionate love. There were no worries, no stress of making it to her next concert or dealing with fans wanting her autograph. For the first time in her life, she had nothing to worry about and no one pushing her to do what she didn't want to do. Of course, she loved playing the piano, and she would definitely continue playing but now she had the option of playing or...doing something else. She'd never had that before.

Oh how wonderful freedom was.

"It's a beautiful night. Let's take a walk," Deborah sighed as she snuggled closer to Zach while their hands linked.

"Have you forgotten where you are? This is Jacob's Cove. Home of the blood-thirsty," Zach reminded her. "Not to mention it's a full moon."

She'd noticed that but had forgotten the meaning. "Isn't there anywhere we could go that would be safe?" When he stopped them, stood before her, she was a little baffled.

"I know the perfect place. Do you trust me, Deborah?"

"With my life," she admitted with a light kiss to his lips.

"Then climb on."

He changed into the most beautiful white horse she had ever seen. His mane glistened under the fall of the full moon, and his blue eyes twinkled with amusement. Without hesitation, she climbed up onto his back.

"Wow." He felt powerful beneath her and being honest with herself, it was rather a turn on.

"Hold on."

Wrapping her arms around his neck, Deborah giggled as he galloped off. "This is so weird." But she was having the time of her life. The air was warm and tossed her hair about as she rode. This was freedom; this was living. "I love this."

"Want me to go faster?"

It was so odd hearing Zach's voice coming from the horse. "Yes," she laughed as he picked up the pace. "But don't tire yourself out. I have plans for you."

"Do you now?" He flicked his mane. "Not to worry, I have plenty of energy."

She knew perfectly well how much energy he had and holding onto him felt the power he exuded in the muscles of his neck and the

strength in his legs as he ran. He took her out of the city to a wooded area where the trees were just beginning to recover from their long sleep and the ground was rocky. When he came to a stop near a clearing, she slid off of his back, laughing as he changed back.

"That was incredible."

"I've never done that for anyone else before." He touched her face with his finger tips.

Her heart swelled with love. "I feel so alive."

"There's more."

Taking her hand in his, he led her forward to the edge of a cliff that overlooked the city. It was far off in the distance and all the twinkling lights looked like stars. It truly was a stunning sight. "It's beautiful."

He turned her to face him. "You're beautiful."

She went into his arms as his mouth took hers on a slow ride to desire. Her hands feathered through his hair and it reminded her of the horse's mane. His hands slid to her waist then up and under her shirt to find her bare flesh. He took her down, onto the ground, kissing her softly, caressing her gently, stirring her until she was putty in his hands.

"I've never been so happy. I love you, Zach."

Bracing over her, he kissed her forehead, then each eye, the tip of her nose before touching her lips. "And I love you," he murmured, then slowly stripped her of her clothing. He placed her beneath her on the ground and as he straddled her, his eyes took hers captive. "Forever and a day."

He slipped inside, took her up and as the orgasm filled her, she felt as if she were floating amongst the stars.



"I have some stuff I need to do in my office," Zach informed her as they entered the club.

"That's fine. I'll hang at the bar with Wade and chat with Ginny when I can." She kissed him softly, once, then twice before letting him go. "But first I want to take a shower. For some reason I have leaves in my underwear." She laughed, feeling absolutely glorious.

"Yeah, wonder how that happened."

"Mr. Adams?"

Zach turned as did Deborah to the tall thin Barbie doll of a woman before them. "Yes."

"Linda Marcotte. I'm a reviewer for *NightGuide New York*. I'm doing reviews of several of your nightclubs for our magazine. It's a plea-

sure to finally meet the man behind some of the most successful and sought out nightclubs in the world.”

“I’m honored and it’s a pleasure to meet you as well, Miss Marcotte.”

Her face beamed with excitement. “Oh, the honor is all mine. I was hoping to manage an interview with you but when I came in your bartender explained that you were out for the night. Needless to say, I was very disappointed. But now you’re here and I’m hoping to scoop a few minutes of your time if your companion could part with you for a few moments.” She turned to Deborah with a smile then slowly her head tilted to the side. “I know you.”

“As it seems, I do have some time to give you now, Miss Marcotte.” Zach stepped in front of Deborah obstructing Linda’s view.

“Oh my lord! You’re Deborah Carmichael, the concert pianist.”

“I am.” Deborah smiled politely.

“So this is where you’ve been hiding. I can’t wait to tell my editor. I would love to set up a time for an interview with you, Miss Carmichael.”

“That’s very nice of you, only I don’t do interviews any longer. I’ll just leave the two of you to your business.” She gave Zach a kiss before leaving the two. That was another thing she was not going to miss. Being hounded by the press.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

With the local newspaper spread out in front of her and a pad and pen on her left, Deborah searched for a place to live. Since coming to Jacob's Cove nearly two months ago she'd either lived with Ginny or spent her nights at Zach's. As of late she had spent more time at Zach's than at Ginny's. But it was time she found a place of her own. Though Zach had suggested she live with him, Deborah insisted she find a place of her own. She loved him; there was no questioning that, but she also felt that she needed some time on her own before making that commitment. He'd been such a tremendous help to her in healing, but they both knew the one major step she needed to take was living on her own.

The idea scared the living hell out of her. But she knew she needed to do it. She'd never lived on her own, not entirely. There had always been her mother when she'd been younger and out on the road. Then as she grew older, there was her bodyguard. Though he didn't technically live with her, he was always around which meant she was never alone. This time, she would be completely on her own and that was what scared her.

She circled another open apartment then wrote down the address and number on her pad. As soon as Ginny woke she'd ask her about

the area and see if it was suitable to move there. Even though she'd lived in Jacob's Cove in her youth, so much had changed since then—as in the monsters that now inhabited the city. Deborah didn't want to live in an area known for bad behavior. That was just something she wasn't ready for yet.

When she heard the familiar footsteps of her friend descending the staircase, she got up and poured a fresh cup of coffee. Setting it on the table across from her, she poured herself a cup and was just taking her seat when Ginny walked into the room. She knew her friend well enough now to know that the first thing she did was grab a cup of coffee even before she spoke. Since she'd moved in, it had been Deborah's cup of coffee Ginny habitually took. But Deborah had learned weeks ago the trick was to have a cup waiting. Not that she minded sharing her coffee with her friend. It was just nice to have the cup to herself from time to time.

Grabbing the cup, Ginny took a long sip as she eyed the paper on the table. "What's up?" she asked finally, taking a seat at the table.

"I'm apartment hunting."

Ginny looked up at her friend, her brow rising. "Why?"

"Because it's time I moved out on my own."

"What's wrong with living with Zach? You're practically there every night anyway." She sipped again, glancing down at the pad on the table. "Oh, you do *not* want to live there." She tapped the third apartment on the list. "Vamp central."

"Thanks. I want you to go over this list when I'm done and to answer your question, I need to live on my own for a while before moving in with Zach." She crossed off the apartment Ginny disapproved of and moved on.

Ginny took the pen from Deborah and crossed off all but two of the apartments on her list. "You've lived on your own forever. I think you're just scared to commit."

Frowning, Deborah took the pen back. "I haven't really been on my own because someone has always been there with me and I am not afraid of commitment." That was absurd.

Ginny left the table to rummage through the fridge. "You've never had a long term relationship."

"Because it was too difficult on the road."

"The right man would understand." Ginny came back to the table with the pan of apple pie Deborah had picked up at the bakery the day before.

"You're having that for breakfast? Really?"

"There's fruit in it and pastry is often eaten for breakfast. Don't change the subject."

"I wasn't changing the subject. Statistics show that the divorce rate for stars and long distance relationships is pretty high. Right man or not, after not being with the one you love for weeks any person would grow tired of it and look elsewhere."

"Not if they truly loved the person," Ginny responded then shoved a fork full of pie in her mouth.

"Sometimes, love isn't enough." She let out a long breath. "Looks like I don't have many options."

"Nope. Guess you'll have to move in with Zach."

Slowly, Deborah looked up at her friend. She'd been duped. "You did this on purpose, crossing out all my addresses. Why did I think I could trust you?" She folded up the newspaper and placed the pad on top. "I'll ask Wade. I'm sure he'll be more helpful." she added the last for spite.

"Fine, you want to live on your own, then stay here."

"The point of living on my own would be the alone part, which I wouldn't be with you here."

Finished with her pie, Ginny carried it back to the fridge. "Mitch and I discussed it and we're going to live in his house. If you can wait another two weeks you can have this place."

"Are you serious?"

Ginny laid her head on Deborah's. "Perfectly."

"Will you sell it to me?"

"If I sell it to you then you'll never move in with Zach."

"We could both live here instead of beneath his club."

"Ah...so the truth comes out." Ginny grinned as she refilled her cup. "Why don't you want to live at his place?"

"It's not that I don't like it but...well...it doesn't feel like my home."

"Because...?" Ginny sat back down at the table, waiting for Deborah to respond.

"It just doesn't."

"Lame," Ginny snorted.

"Fine. It's a little intimidating to see all the feminine products and clothing that aren't mine."

"Ah..."

"This would be our place. Only our place."

"Have you talked to Zach about that?"

"I plan to."

"Might be a good idea before this relationship progresses. Well, I need to take a shower. Let me know what you decide."

Deborah sat at the table staring down at the pad before her. She knew Ginny was right. She needed to talk to Zach about it. Yet...



Dinner was superb. It wasn't just the meal, but the ambiance as well. Zach always made sure there were fresh cut flowers on the table and the tiny tea-light candles in the crystal dishes were always fresh. He was meticulous that way. Just like his obsession with having his fridge products in their specific places and his cupboard items perfectly aligned.

Deborah loved that about him. She loved everything about him, including his bizarre sense of humor. She could never be sure when he would show up in a different body, or as an animal. He preferred changing into animals, she noticed.

As he cleared the table from their meal, which he had insisted he do, Deborah watched him work. And she thought about what Ginny had said to her.

She really did need to talk to him.

"Ginny's decided to move in with Mitch," she blurted out.

"Has she? I suppose it makes sense. His place is bigger and closer to work for her. I assume she'll be putting her house on the market then. I wish her luck." He refilled her glass of wine then his before sitting down across from her.

"Yes and no. I offered to buy it."

His left eyebrow curved up. "Did you?"

"It's a nice house and I feel really comfortable there—at home—and I love the gardens. I think it would be perfect for me." She paused, toying with the glass before her. "For us."

He took a slow sip before responding. "Us?"

She was doing this all wrong. "I thought maybe, you could move in with me."

He tapped the rim of his glass as he spoke. "I have a place here."

"I know, and it's nice and convenient for you for work. But wouldn't it be nice to get away from it all at the end of the night?"

He took another sip. "Maybe."

"It really isn't that far from here, Ginny's house." She loosened her grip on her glass, worried she might end up snapping it in two.

"That's true."

"I've never had a garden. I think I would like to give it a try." She bit the inside of her lip, waiting.

"I hear gardening can be very relaxing."

"So I've heard."

"And the bonus is, no girlfriends from my past to haunt the place."

She stared at him a moment before responding. "There is that."

Leaving his seat, he sat down beside her, taking her hand in his. "You think I haven't noticed how uneasy you are here?"

"I'm not uneasy." Yes she was.

He squeezed her hand. "We both know that's not the truth. I told you weeks ago to make this place yours."

"I know what you told me. Still..."

"It's not the same."

She sighed deeply. "Yeah."

"Okay." He lifted her hand to his lips. "Then we'll move into your house."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

Suddenly she felt a wave of relief wash over her and her entire body felt lighter. "I really do love you."

"How perfect is it that I feel the same for you?"

His lips were so warm as they caressed hers, and she felt as if she could melt into him. When his cell phone went off and he pulled back, she actually sighed in protest.

He answered it as he placed her hand to his cheek. "Zach here. Oh...yes, fine, I'll be right up." He tucked the phone in his pocket and kissed her hand. "I need to go upstairs and deal with a customer. I won't be long."

"I'll be waiting."

He kissed her once, hard on the lips before leaving the suite. With a heavy sigh, Deborah finished off her wine. That hadn't been as hard as she'd expected. Now she just had to tell Bruce and Gary she wasn't planning on touring again and she was set.

Why procrastinate? Might as well get it over with. Grabbing her purse, she searched for her cell phone and came up empty. "I must have left it in the car." With her car keys in hand, she left the suite and headed out the back way to her car. And there it was, on the passenger seat where she'd left it. Scooping it up, tucking it in her pocket, she locked her doors then headed back to the bar. She stopped short as a man stepped out of the shadows. Her heart sped up, her breath caught in her throat and she felt dizzy.

When he stepped under the security light near the back door her heart began to pound.

She'd come face to face with her abductor.

"Hello, Deborah."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Deborah stared at the man who had taken her captive, tied her to a bed, stripped her down and molested her—and she was frozen to the spot.

Again.

“Long time no see.”

Breathe. Think. Act for God sakes. What did Zach teach you? You can do this.

Then it hit her. This wasn't Peter Milligan. It was Zach, trying to teach her to face her fears. She let the air rush from her lungs and relaxed. “Nice try. You almost had me. Now change back.”

He tilted his head in confusion. “You stumped me. I couldn't figure out where you could have run off to. I searched the internet for sightings of you but there was nothing. It was like you dropped off the face of the earth. Then I saw the *NightGuide New York Magazine* and there you were. I had no idea you grew up here.”

“This is getting old, Zach and I don't have the patience for it.” If he wanted to play this silly game he could do so on his own. She wasn't sticking around any longer. But when she headed for the door, he grabbed her arm and something made her belly flutter with nerves. When she looked up at his face, into his eyes, she suddenly felt very uneasy. “Stop this, now.”

"I can't, I have to have you, Debbie. You are mine."

Zach never called her Debbie. No one ever called her Debbie except... "Peter."

"I have really missed you."

Everything Zach had taught her about defense came barreling into her mind. She tugged at her arm and opened her mouth to scream. Her eyes went wide when he slapped a damp cloth over her mouth and nose and wrapped his arm around her body, pinning her to his chest. She kicked, she clawed and she fought but in the end, all her efforts went by the wayside as the world around her swirled again. Her legs gave way as the darkness swallowed her up.



At least once a month they got a customer who had to test their limits. The rules were you were not allowed to drink from more than one supplier a night. If you wanted more blood you had to purchase a bottle and settle for that. But there were always those who insisted they deserved more.

While two of his bodyguards held the burly vampire down, Zach did his best to calm the hysterical female suppliers. Handing them each a blanket to cover up their nudity, he spoke as softly as possible. "Now, start from the beginning and tell me what happened."

"He wanted a threesome so we gave it to him. We made him sign the agreement that he was only allowed to drink from one of us and Bunny and I agreed It would be me 'cause she's feeling a little under the weather today," Candy explained through chattering teeth.

Zach laid a hand on Bunny's shoulder to comfort the poor girl's sobbing.

"Buck, that's his name, asked us to get started and so we did. He got undressed while we made out. I was on top of Bunny, kissing her when he came up behind us. He spread her legs and started fucking her while I was still on top. Whatever...it's his kink. I was getting pretty hot, aroused, then he bit my neck. Both Bunny and I came at the same time. He pulled out and said it was my turn. So Bunny and I switched spots. He penetrated me and bit her neck."

"I couldn't get him off of me," Bunny sobbed, pulling the blanket tighter around her body.

Zach stroked his hand up and down her back.

"We both started screaming and security came in. They yanked him off us and that's when the fight started," Candy continued explaining as she held onto Bunny's hand.

"Okay, girls. Why don't you both go shower, get changed and go home for the night. Check in with Sophia in counseling before you head out of here. If you're not up to working tomorrow just let her know." He left both women and sauntered over to the furious-looking vampire currently secured by steel cuffs locked around his ankles and wrists.

This one had been trouble from day one.

"This is your second strike, Buck. You know the rules."

"Fuck you and your rules," Buck spat at him.

"Take him to JCPD boys. I'll call ahead and let them know what to expect."

The bouncers hoisted the brute to his feet, one on either side of him holding him securely.

"This is bull-shit. It's all bull-shit. I have a right to drink from whoever I fucking please whenever I fucking please," he ranted on as they escorted him from the room.

Zach pulled out his cell phone and dialed the Jacob's Cove Police department. He informed them of what to expect and who was bringing him in. He didn't particularly like the cops, but Zach didn't like rule-breakers either. Especially the ones who hurt women. Assured that Buck would be taken care of, Zach headed back down to his suite.

"Sorry it took so long. There was an incident with a belligerent vampire, but you have my full attention now." He was baffled to find the suite empty. "Deborah?" Her purse was here, yet she wasn't. Maybe she went upstairs. Probably wanted to talk to Ginny about the house.

Leaving his suite he headed to the elevator.

Deborah was right of course. It would be better if they lived away from his club. There had been no need for him to live anywhere but beneath the club before. Now there was. Especially if he and Deborah ever had children. He hoped she wanted children. They still had so much to talk about, to figure out.

He stepped out of the elevator and headed to the bar. The place was jumping tonight, which was good. He hated it when it was empty.

"Hey, Wade. Have you seen Deborah?"

"Not recently. I thought she was downstairs with you." Wade slid two bottles of beer across the bar to the customers at the end all without looking.

"She was. I came up to deal with an altercation in the back. When I went back down she wasn't there. I thought maybe she came up here to talk to Ginny."

"Ginny's at table twelve if you wanna talk to her about it."

"Thanks, Wade." Zach headed in her direction and caught up with her as she made her way toward the bar. "Hey, looks like they're keeping you busy tonight."

"And then some. My feet are killing me. What's up?"

"I was just wondering if Deborah came up to see you. I was called to the back and when I returned she wasn't in the suite."

Ginny shook her head, shifted the tray from one hand to the other. "I haven't seen her since she first came in. She talk to you about the house?"

Zach nodded, throwing his hand in the air to wave at a regular customer. "She did. I'll let her tell you the about it. If you see her, tell her I'm looking for her."

"Will do, boss."

Baffled, Zach decided to check if her car was in the lot. If she wasn't in the club or his suite maybe she went out for something. He headed out the back to where he knew she always parked and saw her car still in the same spot it had been when she'd arrived. Even more baffled, he turned back to the building and kicked something with his shoe. Glancing down, he saw the overhead light glinting off of the object and as he knelt down to see what it was, recognized it as keys.

Deborah's keys.

Taking them in his hand, he looked around and saw nothing out of the ordinary. Only problem was, his gut was telling him there was a problem. Why would she have dropped her keys?

He threw the door open and ran to the basement to the security area. Bursting through the door, surprising the guard, he headed straight for the video screens. He went right for the one focused on the back entrance. "Did you see anything out of the ordinary back here tonight?"

"No, sir."

"Nothing? Did you see Deborah head out to her car about a half hour ago?"

"No, sir. "

He pulled the memory plate from the computer and inserted it into another computer and hit play. The instant it came on, showing the back entrance, Zach hit rewind. He jammed on the stop the instant he saw her. "How the hell could you miss this?"

There she was, in the arms of her abductor, being dragged off.

His blood went cold.

Surviving the Darkness

“I...uh...must have been in the washroom at that time.”

“Sonofabitch.” Racing out of the room, he darted out the back door, not sure what that would accomplish. The woman he loved had been abducted in his own territory and he’d had no clue.

Though he hated asking for help, he knew now he had no choice. Deborah’s life depended on it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Her head felt so heavy, fuzzy. As Deborah tried to clear the fog she could hear someone moving about. Was that Zach? Why did she feel so tired, so...drugged?

She was drugged. He'd drugged her.

Peter Milligan had found her.

Forcing her eyes open, Deborah saw him as he worked with something at the back of the room. The dim light in the room didn't allow her to see much. She had no idea where she was. It looked like a rundown bedroom, and it smelled awful. And her wrists were tied to the bed posts.

Not again!

"Ah, you're awake. Good."

She tried to swallow but her throat was utterly dry.

Carrying a lantern, he walked to the bed. "I was worried I'd used too much chloroform on you. But you haven't been out more than an hour so I guess I got it right. How do you feel?"

"Let me go, Peter." She found her voice. Rough as it was, it was more than she had done the first time he'd abducted her.

"No can do, Debbie." He set the lantern on the floor beside the bed. "This time it's for keeps. You really shouldn't have run away from me."

She flinched when he touched her cheek. At least she was still clothed. Thank God for small favors. "You don't want to do this, Peter. Please, just let me go."

He sat on the edge of the bed, stroking her hair. She wanted to vomit. "I can't let you go, Debbie. I love you. You're mine. We're meant for each other. You just need to see that."

She swallowed the bile in her throat. "I'm not yours, Peter, and I never will be."

"We'll see about that." Giving her face a not-so-gentle squeeze, he got up from the bed and left the room.

Despite her heart thumping wildly and her stomach doing cartwheels, Deborah thought about escaping. She thought about all the techniques Zach had shown her, had made her work through. Only problem was, she was tied to the bed. How was she supposed to protect herself, defend herself when she was tied up.

Giving her wrists a tug, Deborah winced when the rope cut into her skin. It hurt, but the outcome if she stayed tied to the bed was far worse. She needed to fight.

And so she did.

With each tug she felt the ropes cut into her skin, burning away the still-healing flesh to expose a raw layer beneath. She bit her lip, fighting the pain and continued to work the ropes. Even if she could manage to get one hand loose she could untie the other.

Damn, why did he have to tie them so tight?

Her eyes blurred with the tears that formed but still she pushed on. Did Zach know she was missing? Was he looking for her? She had no idea where she was so the chance that Zach would find her was slim to none. Not unless he'd seen her being taken, and what were the odds of that?

She was on her own and she needed to protect herself.

Her wrists began to bleed and though she was in a great deal of pain, Deborah used the slick moisture to her advantage. Wounds would heal, as they had before.

God, please let me get out of this alive.



Entering the Jacob's Cove Police Station, Zach took a deep breath. He hated that he had to be here but he had no other choice. He knew what the cops thought of him and his establishment but he didn't care. At least he was keeping the majority of the vampires, demons,

and werewolves off the streets. He needed help and despite his dislike for the JCPD he had no other choice.

Marching up to the front desk, he stated point blank what he needed. "I need to speak to Lieutenant Storm. Now."

The young woman behind the desk looked up at him with a great deal of disdain. "May I ask the nature of your request?"

"Just tell me where I can find her. It's urgent."

"The lieutenant is busy at the moment. If you'll have a seat I'll notify her you wish to see her Mr....?"

"Damn it, I don't have time for this." Rushing off, he burst through the door that led to a long lobby of offices. If he had to break into every damn room to find the lieutenant he damn well would.

He wasn't the least bit surprised when three officers rushed toward him from the end of the hall. He promptly changed into a spider and scurried up the wall and carried on his way.

"God Damn I hate shape shifters," one of the officers exclaimed.

Reading the name plates on the door, Zach spotted the lieutenant's door three doors up but just as he got to it, the door flew open. He fell to the floor and changed back.

"What the hell?" she gasped, her hand reaching instinctually for her weapon.

"I need your help, Lieutenant." He wasted no time and shoved her into her office. He clicked the locks, preventing the officers from entering. He wasn't surprised at all when she leveled her weapon at his chest. "I mean you no harm. I only need your help. Deborah Carmichael's been taken by her abductor and I need you to find her."

Her hand perfectly steady, the lieutenant responded. "You need to calm down." She inched toward the door to unlock it and allow the officers inside.

"We're wasting valuable time." He changed back into the spider and by the time she reached the door he'd scurried beneath it and was on his way. If she wasn't going to help him then he would have to go straight to the top.

It was so much easier moving about in his spider form so he remained incognito until he reached the floor where the chief and mayor's offices were located. He'd been here one other time before, when he'd first opened his establishment. He'd been *requested* by the mayor and chief to see them and so he had. But he'd done so with a great deal of disdain. They'd told him then that in no uncertain terms would they allow his business to continue if they got more than four complaints a month. Even after reassuring them both that he had strict rules in his

bar, he knew they still disapproved.

He didn't give a damn. He kept a relatively calm environment and entertainment for every race and he had happy customers. That was all that mattered.

He transformed as he came up to Mayor Trinity Hawthorn's door and without an invitation he walked in. He couldn't be happier to see her sitting behind her desk.

Until she froze him to his spot.

"What the hell do you think you're doing bursting in here without knocking?"

Not only did the woman have fiery red hair that fell nearly to her knees but her temperament was equally as red. Unable to move, all Zach could do was plead his case and hope she helped him. "You and I both know I wouldn't be here unless it was urgent. I need your help. Deborah Carmichael, the woman I've been seeing, was just abducted by a man who's been stalking her and who abducted her several months back. You have to help me find her."

She stood up nice and slow and eased around the desk. She was a tall, thin woman who had been appointed queen of the vampire race over a year ago by Rajanna, The Realm of Mystic's Queen. Along with being the queen came some serious powers, one of which was the ability to stop a person in their tracks and hold them there for however long she desired.

Apparently she had no intention of letting him go anytime soon.

She took a seat on her desk and stared at him for what seemed like minutes before she spoke. "You found her keys outside your bar?"

"Yes, how did—oh, you read my mind for the information. Then you know how urgent this is."

"Give me her keys."

His body gave and he was beyond relief to have movement back. Pulling Deborah's keys from his pants pocket, he handed them off to Trinity. "What are you doing?"

She clasped them in her hand and closed her eyes. "Searching for her. I can feel her. She's terrified. Hurt"

"I will kill him for that."

Her eyes opened and Zach's breath caught. They were glowing an odd icy blue. "She's in an abandoned house..."

"Where?"

"I...can't see it clearly."

"Damn it. I have to find her."

"Wait." Her eyes cleared. "She's on Hassleman Street."

The door burst open and as he turned around he saw the gun aimed at his head.

"Do not change on me again, shape shifter."

"I don't have time for this." Despite the warning from the Lieutenant and the gun she aimed at him, he changed into an ant and scurried off.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Deborah had no idea how long she would have until Peter came back into the room so she worked fast. She bit back the pain as the ropes cut deep into her wrist. If she could reach them with her mouth she would have used her teeth on the knots. She could hear movement in another room, the sounds of pots clanking she thought, and worked faster to release her wrists.

No one was going to save her this time. It was all up to her now.

Deborah thought about the house she wanted to buy, the garden she wanted to plant. She thought about the life she wanted with Zach. For the first time in her life she was looking to the future for herself, not for her music. She loved playing. It would always be a part of her, but she wanted more. She wanted a life.

Telling herself to shut off the pain, she struggled harder. The blood trickled down her arm, tickling her as it slid ever so slowly toward her armpit. She twisted her wrists, wiggled them, yanked on them and finally felt the ropes give. Curling her hands in as tight a fist as possible, she continued to work them.

When the door opened she froze.

"I figured you might want something to eat."

She didn't want food. What she wanted was to get away. "Please don't do this to me. I have a new life now. I'm in love with a wonderful man."

"You can't be in love with anyone but me." He set the tray on the foot of the bed beside her legs.

She worked her wrist slowly, hoping he didn't see what she was doing. "But I don't love you, Peter, and I never will. Can't you see that? I never will."

"In time you will. I'm a very loveable kind of guy."

"You're a monster," she blurted out. Her right wrist slid free of the rope.

He came at her so quickly she gasped. When he grabbed hold of her face, the pain she felt as he squeezed her cheeks was barely noticed. "You will respect me. Understood? Now, let's eat."

He released her face with a shove then turned back to the tray.

This was it, this was her chance. Lifting her foot, she smashed it into his face with enough force to send him flying across the room. In a quick maneuver, she grabbed hold of the rope still holding her left wrist to the bed and pulled her hand free.

She cried out as her wrist dislocated.

Clutching it to her chest, she scrambled off the bed and ran for the door. She screamed when he grabbed on to her.

"You're not going anywhere, bitch!"



Zach ran along the streets, his paws slapping the concrete, his nails scraping as he headed for his destination. The car might have been faster but in his wolf persona he had more maneuverability—jumping over cars that got in his way. He had to find her; he had to get to her before...He had to save her.

He couldn't live without her.

Barely noticing the sun beginning to rise he continued running. He knew where Hasselman was, as he'd dragged Simone to the area only a month ago to show her what her life would be like if she continued on her path of destruction. Zach could only hope he got there in time.

He heard sirens in the background and, deciding he'd had enough of running, he changed into a bird. He could always change back into the wolf when he reached the house. He was going to enjoy ripping the bastard's throat out. Though he didn't know where exactly Deborah was being held, Zach was hoping he'd be able to sense her as

he drew nearer. As he reached the area, he set himself down on the ground and changed back into the wolf. His chest burnt, his throat was dry, yet he didn't stop.

The sirens grew louder.

Why did Hassleman Street have to be so damn long?

"She's down the block. Forty three hundred."

He glanced briefly at the car beside him and acknowledged the lieutenant with a nod then burst off faster. When she pulled out ahead of him, he cursed.



His arms clasped around her waist so tightly, she thought he might break her in two. It didn't stop Deborah from fighting. Kicking her leg out, she slammed it into his foot at the same time she threw her head back, smashing it into his face. He lost his grip on her and it gave her the opportunity to run. With a brief glance, Deborah ran for the door to her right and hoped it took her outside.

She let out a loud blood curdling scream as the bullet snapped out. She felt it fly past her shoulder, tearing the shirt and the flesh in its path. She cried out in pain but it didn't stop her. She continued to run until she was at the door. Grabbing the door knob, she twisted it, wincing as her shoulder screamed with pain.

"You're mine!" Peter screamed just as she threw the door open. The sun struck her eyes, temporarily blinding her but she could make out shadows before her.

Someone was out there.

"Get down!"

"Deborah!"

As Zach's arms came around her, Deborah began to shake. He'd come for her. He'd saved her. He took her down on the ground just as another shot rang out into the air. She screamed out.

"It's okay. It's all okay now," Zach spoke soothingly as he kissed her head repeatedly.

"He's down."

"We need an ambulance."

Deborah looked up and saw a woman kneeling over a body on the ground. It was then she noticed it was Peter. "Is he...dead?"

"Sshhh, don't think about that now. Oh God, you're bleeding."

She looked into Zack's beautiful blue eyes and the laughter began to bubble up. "I love you." Then the world began to spin for the third time that night.



Deborah woke in a hospital room, unsure of how she got there. Her head felt heavy and her body felt...oddly, weightless. As she turned her head she felt as if she were wading through jelly. She saw Zach sitting in a chair beside her bed, his hand clutching hers, his head on the bed.

He was asleep.

Wasn't that sweet.

"Zach—" she cleared her rusty throat. "Zach."

His head flew up, his eyes wide. "Hi."

"Hi." She smiled.

"How do you feel?"

"Stoned." She laughed and it sounded oddly distant.

"They gave you some heavy pain meds. The bullet only grazed your shoulder but your wrists are pretty bad. They can't cast the one that's broken until the wounds heal so they have it in a temporary cast but they say it should heal up just fine after some therapy."

"Why are you talking so fast?"

He drew in a long breath then rested his head on the hand he still had in his grasp. "I thought I was going to lose you."

"You saved me."

He looked up at her, shook his head. "No. You saved you. I am so proud of you, Deborah. So damn proud."

"I wasn't going to let him take me this time. God, I've never felt so much pain in my life, but it was worth it." She looked down at her bandaged wrists feeling no pain but knew the damage that had been done would not heal up easily. "You did save me, Zach. You may not have been in the room with me, but you saved me. If you hadn't taught me how to fight for my life, I wouldn't have been able to break free. You gave me that and...you gave me the will to fight because I love you and I want to spend my life with you."

"I don't ever want to lose you, Deborah."

His lips were warm as they touched hers. She sank into him, melted with the kiss and she never wanted to let him go.

"Oh thank God you're awake."

She regretted it when Zach released her but she smiled up at Ginny as she came up to the bed. "Great timing."

“You’ll have plenty of time for necking later. I can’t believe he found you. He could have...” she bit her lip and the tears slid down her cheeks.

“He didn’t. I’m safe.” She tried to lift her hand to reach out for Ginny but the pain of the effort defeated her. “Come give me a hug.” As Ginny leaned on her, Deborah let out a long breath.

“Everyone at the bar is waiting to hear how you’re doing. I should call them.” Ginny sniffled as she stood up. “God, I’m so glad your okay.” Shaking her head, waving a hand across her face, Ginny hurried from the room.

She turned to Zach, and though she felt if she closed her eyes she would drift off again she fought it. “I love you.”

He stroked her face, kissed her head. “I love you, too.”

“Is Peter...is he...gone?”

“He is. Don’t worry about that now. It’s over.”

Yes it was. This time, it was truly over. “What are the chances our kids will have your ability?”

Tilting his head to the side, Zach grinned. “Pretty high.”

“Good. I want a family—a big one. Is that okay with you?”

He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her flat on the lips. “That is perfectly okay with me.”

“Perfect. I think I need to sleep now. I love you.” She drifted off as his lips caressed her head.

Biography

Raised on a rural farm in Saskatchewan, Shiela Stewart relied on her vivid imagination to fill her days. Never did she realize that her need to tell a story would someday lead to becoming a published romance author. In the fall of two thousand and six, Shiela published her very first book and hasn't stopped since.

When not writing, Shiela spends time with the love of her life, William and their three children. She has a strong affection for animals which is evident in the five cats, one dog, three turtles and ten fish she owns. Some of her passions aside from writing are drawing and painting and proudly displays her artwork in murals in her home. Her favorite time of day is sunset and loves to stargaze.

Other Books by Shiela Stewart

Discovery in Passion: Passion Series Book 1

Escape in Passion: Passion Series Book 2

Mercy in Passion: Passion Series Book 3

Seducing the Darkness: Darkness Series Book 1

Desiring the Darkness: Darkness Series Book 2

Embracing the Darkness: Darkness Series Book 3

Charming the Darkness: Darkness Series Book 4

Tempting the Darkness: Darkness Series Book 5

Penetrating the Darkness: Darkness Series Book 6

Consuming the Darkness: Darkness Series Book 7

Surviving the Darkness: Darkness Series Book 8