

THE CORNWALL COVEN, BOOK THREE  
KAYDEN MCLEOD

SEX, BLOOD AND  
ROCK & ROLL.

*Demonic  
Pandemonium*

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Pandemonium*

*CORNWALL COVEN, BOOK 3*

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## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

A special thank you to CFOX 99.3 and The Jeff O'Neil Morning Show; a radio-station in Vancouver, British Columbia for allowing me to use their names in this book, to add yet another facet of Vancouver to paper and ink.

In the series, the timeline of this book is 2008, and the DJ's at that time were; Jeff, Scotty, and Charis, who will appear within these pages.

Charis has recently relocated with her fiancé. Before her departure, she spent time along with her co-hosts answering my questions about the radio specifics that I needed for this book.

She will be missed.

Since I started writing this novel, Jen has joined the show with Jeff and Scotty.

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Sincerely,

Kayden McLeod

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*Ducati*: Ducati Motor Holding S.p.A

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## PROLOGUE

There are many types of people in this world, and I have no idea what type I would be classified under. I walk through life always unsure of my next move and how it will affect others. Because everything I do ripples outward, I long ago realized I had to limit my association with the "outside world," relying on no one but myself.

I couldn't rely on my family, friends, or enemies for guidance of any sort; forever alone and doomed to always be so. Such was the case with my kind — though I wouldn't know, since I didn't associate with them either.

What am I? A demon.

Hell, I couldn't even fit into that category. I'm half-mortal, a thing cursed to be complicated and dangerous — even to myself. I couldn't do the normal things that normal people did, mostly since all it would take is one wrong word or action and suddenly I would turn into a monster that made everybody else quake in fear. A Frankenstein, but of a different sort.

And I was the *only one on earth*.

My human mother hated me. And I had a demon father, who I rarely saw or talked to. Creatures of the lower realms weren't allowed on this plane without a direct access pass. And even then, it was sketchy.

So what was life like for me? Shit. Absolute uselessness.

You'd think it would be enough to drive a person just a little batty. But no. There's more.

I was an author by profession. I had an agent, an excellent career — or I'd *had* one anyway. It isn't as good as it sounds.

In the past few days, I'd realized my chosen path in life wasn't as great as I'd cracked it up to be. My agent Sam proved to be ripping me off; stealing my work right out from under my nose.

The most important book of my existence to boot. Well, to me anyway. The novel would be published, but it sure as fuck wasn't by *me*. Sam Poetize was an underhanded slime-ball who had worked on my behalf since the beginning of my writing days. He made me believe in him for believing in me. But that came to an end.

Trusting him was one of the biggest mistakes I could've made.

One of, but definitely not the worst.

Oh no, that would be reserved for the day I'd been born, if you asked my mother, Lillian.

I lay in bed staring at the ceiling while I thought of this, when the radio came on instead of an alarm clock, at



exactly six-forty am. Loud noises hurt my overly sensitive ears.

Nickelback's "Burn It to the Ground" blared through the speaker.

When it ended, one of the disc-jockeys of the Jeff O-Neil Morning Show, Charis's voice filled the room. The program was a favourite of mine with their casual banter and favoured rock; the deep concern weighing her careful words was unusual.

"It continued last night," Charis began. "The murder count is now up to ten."

"Ten?" Jeff repeated.

"The police are cautioning the people of Vancouver to be on the lookout and to report anything suspicious."

"What did they find this time?" Scotty inquired.

"The witnesses on scene were reported as saying a severed arm was found in one part of an alley and a leg on the other side of Hornby Street. No weapon was found or determined."

I sat up in bed, listening closely. I lived only a few blocks from there.

This would cause hysteria. Pandemonium. Something deep inside stirred at the thought of so many terrified people. I shivered, then thrust aside the part of me

that relished the distinct possibility. My human part was appalled, and since I resided on earth and not, — well, not-on-earth, that would be the emotion I stuck with.

At the time I'd seen this as nothing more than a serial killer, as the news had named him — or her. Yet these murders held a far greater meaning in relation to *me*, and the lives surrounding mine. I just didn't know it then.

Perhaps if I'd been more cautious and aware of my surroundings, the signs of my own demise would have shown themselves to me before it was too late.

But that was wrong.

It had been too late for a long time already.

## CHAPTER ONE

On rare occasions I attempted to go out in public for short jaunts to escape going stir-crazy in my self-imposed loneliness.

Being around other people for short periods of time, and not cooped up in my penthouse, reminded me of the human half of my heritage. But on the other hand, I feared hurting good, innocent people who didn't deserve to live on the same planet with me and what I was capable of.

Because of this factor, I'd never understood why I was the rarest of exceptions to the otherworldly rules that applied to the succubus half of my ancestors. My dad had never taken the time to properly explain it to me.

I thought about this for the millionth time while standing in line at one of the many Starbucks wannabes.

My eyes scanned the small coffee shop. Off in the corner, the TV broadcasted the local news; yet another tidbit on the most recent serial-killer episode hitting Vancouver.

The demon inside of me lurked closer to the surface. The best-selling horror author, which I played at being as a day job—an avenue to siphon out my more sadistic tendencies in a "healthy" way, if there was such a thing—perked up with interest.

When the news ended I went back to staring off into space, not really thinking, when the man in front of me abruptly turned, at the very same moment I stepped up to the counter. I distantly became aware of a burning sensation barely registering on my radar; something I had to watch, because it wasn't normal. I looked down to see darkly brewed coffee dripping off of my arm.

The next thing I knew that same man leapt back from me like *I* had burned *him*, with impressively quick dexterity. He sloshed even more hot coffee onto the floor before he realized what he'd done.

My first thought; what a dumbass.

My second; damn! He's hotter than the coffee.

"Oh, crap!" His eyes widened at the sight, flinching from the accident. I didn't react in the slightest. "I'm so sorry."

I looked up into the brightest set of blue eyes I'd ever seen in my life — in fact they didn't even look like a shade seen anywhere in nature. I felt immediately hypnotized by him. I didn't move, but I had the most insane urge to lean forward and kiss a man I hadn't even, technically, met yet.

I really was going crazy!

"That's... okay."

"No, it's not. I'm not normally this clumsy, really." Mr Hottie grabbed a handful of paper napkins to blot me dry, handling my arm far more gently than strictly necessary. The tenderness and honest remorse caught me off guard. He nodded toward the counter and waiting cashier. "Please, tell me what would you like?"

Now that was totally a loaded question! The man was a god, and I could ask a great many things from someone this primely buff.

"You don't have to do that, really." I shook my head to clear the sudden haze he had me under. I couldn't help but wonder what he tasted like — *all* of him.

Damn, I needed to get laid; not a customary reaction from me, and certainly not this swift and overwhelming.

"I didn't mean to upset you..."

I wasn't in the least upset by some gorgeous model-man wishing to make *anything* up to me. Who would be?

I stepped around him to order my iced white-chocolate mocha and three cookies, pulling out my wallet to pay for it. But he placed his hand, his flesh heated skin, over mine, and with his other, handed the cashier a twenty.

"I feel that I should repay you for being so—good about this," Mr Hottie said and shot me a shy smile that made my libido race even more. "Please, join me."

"Umm, 'kay." I felt tongue-tied. And that wasn't typical of me. Mind you, nothing right then was. I had the feeling that something far more profound went on than what met the eye. But what?

His smile widened, as he received his change.

Mr Hottie had an astounding old-world quality about him, one I didn't see very often, except in my dad, who was older than God — or so I thought. But this man couldn't have surpassed his late twenties.

"My name is Kevlar, Kev, if you prefer. Most people call me that. What's yours, pretty lady?" He asked with that shy smile back in place, one which probably influenced silly decisions from members of the fairer sex more often than not.

"Mine's Pandora." I thought about having such a funny name. "Kevlar?"

"Yeah, I know. My Mother always had a sadistic streak," Kev responded.

I laughed at the sneer on his face as he referenced his parentage, apparently they weren't close. I could relate to this. "Not that Pandora is much better, *trust me*."

"I think I will. And what'd you do to your mom for her to choose that name?" Kev smiled.

That question couldn't be so easily answered, at least honestly. However, I was well versed in having to lie about my life.

"My mom says she opened Pandora's Box when I was born. It serves as a reminder to both of us," I replied, and he chuckled.

Laugh he may, but it was the truth — just not *all* of it. Most of the vital parts had been left out and only the tip of the iceberg remained.

I followed him to a small, intimate table to the side of the café, watching his powerful body move. While he wasn't paying attention, I panted like a dog in heat. And I wasn't the only one. Every female in the place stared at him.

"So what do you do when strange men aren't scalding you with hot liquid?"

I scowled at the reminder of my most recent dilemma. "I'm a writer, or *was* actually." Then winced at the comment, knowing where this conversation would go now. Why had I said anything?

"*Used* to be? Are you not anymore?"

"Well, let's leave it at... I've been having troubles." I laughed to lighten my remark, but with a distinctly fake

edge to it. He heard it, and his eyes darkened to a deep sapphire.

However, he leaned slightly forward, intent on me and the subject at hand.

"Oh. What do you write exactly?" His head cocked to one side when he asked this question. It sounded like he genuinely wanted to know.

"Horror, of all flavours. I enjoy writing things that make my readers check under their beds before they go to sleep at night. To twist tales out of thin air and imagination — there's nothing like it." I didn't get to speak often on the subject of my writing to any extent.

And that was my real undoing.

As I told him about how I started writing, Kev listened to every word, even participating and telling me about his favourite authors — he'd read just about every horror author I had. He'd even dabbled outside the genre. Included in his reading list; Shakespeare, Homer, and even a Jane Austin novel, just to see what it had been about. I doubt I could've had a better audience and conversationalist.

The minutes flew by and before I knew it, an hour had passed. My anger had become nonexistent, as if some



asshole stealing my pet project was an everyday occurrence.

Kevlar turned out to be the best medicine for my intellectual ailment, always carrying the conversation onward, with little effort from me unless I chose to do so, but not talking over me or being generally egotistical. He just made it so easy. Normally, I had no idea what to say to people I knew well, let alone people I'd just met, especially with so much about myself being *very* privileged information. But, with him, it was different.

I bit my lip in indecision. There was just something about him that I didn't want to let escape, an urge that was ass-backward for me.

And he seemed to be thinking along the same line.

"What are you up to now?"

"Don't know yet," I replied. "I didn't plan past caffeine. So much to do, and I don't have the patience for any of it right now."

"Well then, why don't you come to Playland with me? A few of my buddies are already down there waiting for me. I'd like it if you came," Kev asked like he actually expected me to say no.

I wanted to agree very badly, though I had to wonder if it would be a good idea or not. With one look into those baby-blues I thought, why not?

"Sure, I'm down."

## CHAPTER TWO

Standing beside a rather foreign machine, I wasn't sure what to think about motorcycles. I didn't possess much in the way of knowledge about them, nor have I ever had any inclination to ride one.

"What is it?"

"A custom 2006 Ducati 999S," Kev replied, his smile not wilting even a bit at my indifference to the thing that seemed to be his prize possession.

"Sure it is," I agreed. "And if I had any idea what that was..."

"It's a motorcycle," he said, just a little too proudly.

"Duh." His resulting laughter made me roll my eyes.

"It gets you where you want to go. Very, very fast. And I take advantage of it often."

Yet the thought of being on it still got me. *Why did it matter so much? It isn't like I'd die or get hurt beyond repair if he crashes.* An unexpected surge of adrenaline shot through me. Screw it. "All right, let's go then. Just don't kill us." *Or you.*

"Baby, I've *never* bailed my bike. Been riding a very long time," Kev said, just this side of arrogant.

*Oh, I just touched a nerve.* Nice. I suppose. I didn't seem to take away as much enjoyment as I normally did when needling others. Weird.

Prodding people to honest emotion was routine for me. I wanted to know what really made them tick, and it tended to help me widen my spectrum when it came to creating characters for my books. I always looked for ways to make them seem the most realistic in surreal and unbelievable situations. To do that, I did a lot of "people watching."

"And just how long is that youngin'?"

"I'm a lot older than I look. And you're what, twenty-three, if that?" He countered.

"You'd think that, wouldn't you?" I answered. By the look of him, I'd be ten or more years older at a minimum.

*In a couple hundred years, I'll be older than every person I've ever met, so it doesn't really matter. Especially, since I have no choice but to spend eternity alone.*

"Uh huh," he agreed.

I got onto the back of the bike, so tempted by the lure of an excuse to be wrapped around his hard body.

The moment we set off, I wondered at my own rationale. Obviously, from the second he kick-started the

bike, he fancied himself a daredevil. Though to be fair, he had given me enough warning by just owning the thing.

Sharp turns, cramped lanes — none of it held any meaning to Kev. They were all simply obstacles between him and our destination. And in all of my thirty-nine years, I'd never had an experience quite like it.

I stuck to him like glue. Every once in a while I stared at the pavement that got closer and closer at every barrelling turn, and wondered what road-rash felt like. One slip — that'd be all it took.

The bright red and white roller coaster sprouted up to fracture the skyline, signifying that this ride was almost over. I hadn't been to Playland in years. Seeing it now brought back a flood of childhood memories, of a time before my powers had manifested in full and prevented normal, carefree association with the other children.

Massive crowds of people congregated in and around the park as we shot past it. The summer day had dragged so many out for fun and excitement. At the sight, the first trickle of apprehension went through me.

Perhaps this hadn't been a good idea. Yes, I had more control now than when I'd been a child, but that didn't make it perfect, or even satisfactory.

Too late now to begin rethinking stupid choices. We were here.

Parking was non-existent, no matter where I looked, but Kev managed the formidable task just fine. His hand slipped inside his pocket, and he discreetly handed a twenty to the attendant, who stepped back to allow us to pass. We drove by the *lot full* sign, easily finding a minuscule place to park his bike.

When we came to a stop, I pulled my helmet off. His long leg swung over the bike in a fluid motion, and he removed his own helmet. That brilliant smile was immediate, flooring me again with its hard-edged charm.

Without warning, he placed his hands around my waist and lifted me off of the bike like I weighed no more than a feather, despite the fact that my size didn't make the procedure easy.

"Umm," I replied when my feet touched the ground. The pleasing novelty of it wasn't lost on me. Another plus; Kev was a rare man, being taller than me.

"What did I do wrong this time?" Kev's head tilted to one side, his brow rose, and he went back to quietly brooding, while I gathered my normally solid wits.

"Nothing."

"Please, tell me what I did." His eyes twinkled when he said it.

"Ignore me. It's always better that way."

"I believe that would be hard."

I didn't comment, instead pulling my far too long hair from its haphazardly created ponytail and combing it out with my fingers.

Kevlar nodded toward the park, and we began walking. His hand pressed on my lower back in a distracting way while he guided me through the long lines of cars. That single ligament was all I was capable of thinking about.

"So, what's your latest book about?" Kev asked.

His continuous curiosity about my hobby/career surprised me. True, women always wanted to know more about *what* I wrote—at least until they found out what those pages held—but most of the men I knew didn't want to hear anything past my pay check and genre.

It didn't take long to tell him about the stolen book versus the last official release.

"It's about a woman named Clarice, who got stuck in the hell realm filled with psychopathic murderers. I tried to play the whole angle as a deceptively reserved, quiet woman with a hidden steeled-spine who refused to back

down, no matter how bad her chances were," I explained, but I could see he wasn't happy with such a short explanation.

"What did she do?" Kev inquired.

"At first, she was terrified and hid, but in hell there isn't anywhere to hide from the monsters that call it home."

Not for the first time, I wondered if my book had been anywhere close to what the real hell was like. My dad had repeatedly said it was against the rules to divulge that kind of information about the next life, in any form, to people who still roamed this plane.

A rule he stuck to more often than I liked.

"And then," Kev insisted as we crossed Hastings Street to the sidewalk.

"Clarice learned that the rules weren't the same as in her world, and she had to adapt or die. She watched and learned from them, so when they attacked her, she came back at them in turn. No matter what they did, Clarice wouldn't back down, and in the end she was triumphant."

"Interesting. I think I will have to read it."

Kev pulled out two white slips of paper, showing them to the woman at the check-stand. Within seconds, she'd stamped our hands and we were on our way through the gates.



"How much do I owe you?" I asked.

"Nothing. I invited you, so I'll pay for it."

I wanted to argue but something told me I didn't have much say in the matter either way. "Fine, then."

I followed him further into the park, and then saw a man off to the side. He stared at me with a lustful leer on his face, his eyes raking my body with no attempt to hide it. I looked right back at him, wondering about him; there was a flare of red in his eyes, and it wasn't a reflection from the numerous flashing lights around us.

He didn't blink, and I had the distinct impression this man was a predator of some sort. As much as a human could be, I supposed. Waves of chaos came from him, not all that different than Kev, though his did seem more malevolent.

"Hey, Kev?" I nudged him and he looked in the same direction. "Does something seem off to you about that one, or am I going nuts?"

A soft, feral growl came from Kev, making me shiver from excitement. He stared back at the stranger with a perfectly blank face; eyes dead, emotionless.

Seeing him so predatory and cold inspired all kinds of lust I *almost* couldn't control. I'd never seen anything like it in a human before; so much like my own when I

didn't have to pretend to be what I wasn't. And I wanted to see more of it.

My reaction affected him almost as bad as it did me. Kev's head jerked, as he glanced with his nostrils flaring, his facial features changing to hot arousal so dramatically, he startled an honest smile out of me.

"You Cornwalls claim everything, don't you?" The man muttered as he walked past us.

Kevlar neglected to comment until after the other was well out of ear-shot. "Don't worry. It's just someone I know. We don't get along very well."

"Uh huh. It's okay macho-man. The woman is now safe with *you*," I teased, trying not to laugh.

"Wouldn't have it any other way." That charming grin slid back in place. Damn it. I could see him getting his way a lot with it.

With the smell of popcorn and hotdogs heavy in the air, my stomach rumbled. Cotton candy and caramel apples lay in tempting wait for hungry people everywhere. Delighted children raced around me, screaming and chattering while their parents chased after them with hopes of corralling them in some fashion. The innocence of the activities made me smile.

Then a stab of envy went through me at the simplicity of their lives. My mother Lillian had always been confining and strict. She'd only set me loose when my father arrived to keep me *fully* in check. Otherwise she could rarely be bothered with her little "burden", as she'd called me while I was growing up.

It was my father who'd taken me to these sorts of places, though once there, he had no idea what to do. At first, it would always be awkward, but eventually he would watch the other dads and mimic them, becoming comfortable as he began to flourish. Looking back now, I smiled at the strange ingenuousness that presented itself in some of the things he did. No matter what, I just couldn't see the "all bad demon" Lillian had determined was residing within him.

"There they are." Kev pointed toward the first donut sign that came into view, where a small group of rather "dangerous" looking people congregated. "Come on, you'll like them, promise."

He tugged me forward. Three pairs of eyes zeroed in on me the second our skin made contact. I wasn't a self-conscious woman by nature, but something about the way they looked at us made me feel like I was.

The two men and much shorter woman didn't move to welcome us, but allowed us to come to them. The female smiled; tentatively, in welcome and, maybe, a little shyly. I couldn't help but smile back at her childlike appearance.

I noticed how the humans reacted to their leather and chains; like they were criminals. This bothered me, the way people could be labelled just by how they might look or even act.

Damn closed-minded people.

"Hey, weirdoes," Kev greeted them cheerfully.

"I'm *not* weird." The short woman piped up, her blue eyes flashing with indignation. "You, however, are."

Her hair competed with the length of mine, but instead of my warm chestnut curls, she had long inky-black hair with a vibrant violet layer underneath and indigo tips. Personally, I loved it and thought it suited her.

I hadn't really considered Kevlar as being Goth before, but now I could see it, when he was standing next to his friends. I once again took in his black jeans with a chain that hung from his pants and disappeared into the pocket, an outfit completed with a tight black tank top, as he carried his leather jacket. The strange, elaborate black tattoo, which ran over one bicep to his wrist, and the spiked earring in the top of his ear all made sense now.

"Yes, love, you are," the remarkably tall, frosted-haired one replied. He had the most beautiful turquoise eyes I'd ever seen. Contacts, perhaps?

Not that I was one to talk. I had to wear them, to cover the fact that I wasn't as human as I appeared to be. Mine had a distinct metallic quality to them, not seen anywhere else in this world.

"This is Pandora, my new... *friend*." Kev introduced me. I waited patiently for him to get around to doing likewise. Or perhaps, I would just call them no-name one, two, and three. That would work for me.

The youngest male snorted, and then muttered to himself, "Yeah, just a friend. Do you even know that definition when it comes to the opposite sex?" Too bad for him that no matter how low he whispered, I would still always hear him. Another added benefit to my genetic make-up.

"Well, she is *right now*," Kev jabbed.

I choked with laughter. "And what about five minutes from now?"

When his eyes turned back to me, I stupidly hiccupped, of course. Was I losing my fucking mind? Not the first time I'd thought this today.

"That," his eyes raked down my body until I swore my blood boiled again, "Is entirely up to you. I'm perfectly willing to change the relationship anytime you choose. Just let me know."

Well, at least, I didn't blush. That was a slight, very miniscule improvement.

"The one you will learn is the *real* sarcastic one is Marcus." Kev said, pointing at the tall blonde one. "Kelly." The short woman nodded to me. "Matthew." Kev pointed to the remarkably good-looking young man, with longish blonde hair and violent purple eyes, which definitely competed with Kelly's hair.

"Hey," I replied.

"Nice to meet ya." Marcus nodded, breaking into a friendly smile.

"Ditto," Matthew chimed.

My eyes slid to the right, seeing two young women staring at him, with their mouths hanging open in licentious shock. They looked utterly smitten and hypnotized. Their reaction to him was so outrageous it took everything I had not to burst into laughter.

But, taking my own reaction to Kev in consideration, I was no better.

"Now that the gang is all here, what would we like to do first?" Kelly asked.

"I'm game for anything." I shrugged. Whatever they wanted to do, I would be perfectly happy with. "Not picky."

"I do like a girl who is easily pleased," Kev replied.

"Yeah, we know *that*." Marcus had an evil glint in his eyes; his tone thick with implications. His musical accent had a southern twang I found interesting. "Then you don't have to do very much."

Kev rolled his eyes. "Hey, now. Don't offend my new friend here."

I almost let another smartass remark fly, but stopped just in time. I had a mouth on me when I chose to. But I tended to wait until after people got to know me before I let such things slip out at my normal frequency.

Kelly strolled beside me, while the rest walked behind us, trading jabs. I'd learned one thing from this experience; Kevlar had wit and sarcasm rivalling my own. A nice change of pace.

And Kelly ignored them far better than I could.

"So, how'd you meet Kev?" Kelly asked in a way that sent up an immediate red flag.

"He spilled coffee on my arm."

Not two seconds later, Marcus laughed, smacking Kev on the shoulder.

"And you were worried *I* would offend her? I haven't scalded her," Marcus needled. Kev just smirked in my general direction when I turned to look at him.

"He's just clumsy," I defended.

"That's the funny part. Kevlar is the *least* clumsy person I know," Kelly emphasised with her brow furrowed.

Kev gently pulled on my hair, and I turned to see him smiling down at me. Staring at his lips, I speculated again about what he would taste like. I loved the masculine way he smelled.

Massive, colourful stuffed-animals stood like sentry walls on either side of us, a psychedelic, kaleidoscopic tunnel that stretched before us under a long overhang.

"Oh! I love this." Kelly turned abruptly to walk up to a game. With this one, well over a hundred balloons stuck to a sheet of particleboard and you threw darts at them to win. When she paid the man for five darts, the men groaned. It was obviously not a favourite pastime for *them*.

"This is so easy, it's almost unfair." Matthew laughed.

"Yes, it is." Marcus sighed.



"Have you ever played this game?" Kev's hand pressed on my back, as he stood closer.

"Of course, have you?" I countered, trying not to stutter when he leaned into me.

"You have to slow your heart rate down. It's jumping all over the place."

"You can hear that?"

"I have exceptional hearing," Kev said. "So, are you any good at this game? I've played it a lot, which, by the way, means I *always* win."

"Always?" I rolled my eyes at the obvious maleness of this moment.

Marcus snickered behind us. When his hand flicked, he threw a perfect arc that popped the balloon in a sudden burst. He made it look too easy.

"Oh, yes," Kev purred with self-satisfaction. For some obscure reason, I liked the sound of it. The overconfidence that drove me nuts in others intrigued me in him. "Always."

I even felt amused, and possibly, even a tiny bit challenged. Not to outdo him really — oh no, I already knew I could do that. I wasn't a girl who needed to prove *herself*. Just to screw with him.

"Then throw, Kev. Let's watch you win." I stepped well inside of his personal space.

Yet the closer I got, the more pronounced his effect on me became. I'd stopped, inadvertently allowing my breast to brush his arm. But I didn't take much notice of it. My attention was all on him.

"Do you really believe that, Kevlar?" I asked in a breathy voice just as his arm snapped back. His eyes widened dramatically, and I knew before he'd even finished the movement that it would've been a perfect throw. Had I not interfered.

The dart left his finger...

And he missed. It was nice to know the relentless attraction went both ways, and not just on my side.

Marcus stared at the misplaced dart and then back at me, absolutely stupefied. I believed if he continued for long, his face would stay like that permanently.

"I missed," Kev said, appalled with himself.

And it was freakin' awesome!

Kelly laughed again, a light tinkling of sound, pleasant to the ears; a purity not heard often outside of small, not-yet-jaded children.

"It would certainly appear so." Marcus's expression became unreadable. The way he watched me was

indescribable, like he had just realized something huge about me. And I had no idea what it was.

"Oh, big deal," Kelly muttered to him. "So she's hard to read. Some people are just like that."

I had the feeling she was trying to smooth something over. What was their problem? Did the big he-man get upset when he lost?

Too bad.

I laughed out loud, not able to help myself this time. There must be some pretty solid ground to Kev's ego, if his friends' appearances testified to anything.

"Umm, sorry," I replied, sharing a mischievous glance with Kelly. But the men just looked at us like we had lost our minds. Bah! This was just too much fun.

"Okay, maybe we shouldn't play this game anymore." She turned, and I followed her until we burst back out into the sunlight. "Do you drink beer?"

"Yes," I answered, startled by the abrupt change in topic.

"Beer garden, then?"

"Lead the way."

"You really are agreeable." Kelly pursed her lips.

"Habit, I guess. My mother's temperament taught me to be... flexible. Nothing fazes me, never has. Most likely never will, I would imagine."

"Then you'll get along famously with us," Kelly admitted after the uneasy moment started to pass. I normally didn't care enough, but I wanted to ask what really bothered her. "We take some getting used to..."

"Trust me, so do I."

The three men behind us still razzed Kev about missing the shot. I actually started to feel just this side of guilty.

I had no comrades to taunt me in such ways, as most of my relationships stayed strictly professional. I didn't encourage friendships; though over my lifetime, there'd been a few, even if I couldn't trust them with who and what I was.

"Do you like to shop?" Kelly asked me, eyeing a colourful display of clothes and accessories.

"Oh, yeah." I may lack many things, humanity-wise, but the shopping gene hadn't skipped me. We swerved, as one feminine-driven mind, to a covered stand selling colourful summer styles.

"Oh, this is so cute." Kelly led me straight to the back, toward a gorgeous sea-blue dress.

I was surprised when the men followed us into the makeshift boutique. Not a single complaint or a masculine whimper. Impressive.

We both riffled through the stunning selection, which was infused with a certain style and flavour that most local stores lacked. The materials were soft and silky textures that would feel great against the skin on a hot day.

"I really like that one." I pointed to one made of red and black material.

"You're just like my best friend," Kelly chirped.  
"Those are her favourite colours."

"I think you'd look much better in this." Kev held out a barely-there dress; short and low-cut. Men. Go figure. But the selection *was* nice. Of course it would be black, what else could it be?

The look of appreciation in his eyes suggested that he envisioned me in it. I'd spent more than just forty dollars on an outfit before, and liked it half as much as Kev's choice. At least he had good taste.

"Sure," I agreed. Why not? It would go with the dozens upon dozens of other little black dresses in my closet. I had a clothes fetish, and my mother figured I could open my own store. Or perhaps, a chain of them.

Kev took what I already held, adding them to the pile. I looked at him strangely, and he just smiled.

I shrugged and continued on, picking up something here and there. When we'd come full-circle to the cash register, there was a lot more than I'd thought. But this happened to me a lot, especially with my wallet containing more credit than most banks. Plus Kelly was an easy shopping partner, and Kev made a great donkey.

With purchases made, Kev snagged my bag and refused to let me carry it. "Trust me, I'm *so* used to it. You have only met one half of the dynamic duo." He nodded in Kelly's direction. "And I'm the pack-mule."

*Whoa, did he just read my mind?* I stifled my laughter at his goofiness.

"More like jackass," Marcus commented dryly.

Of course, with my overactive imagination and my thoughts never being far from the gutter, I couldn't help where my mind went with that train of thought. It wasn't their fault — it was just me.

Thinking about horses, my eyes skipped to his crotch, and I wondered if he was hung like one. My eyes quickly skipped away, but unfortunately, he'd already caught me.

"Betcha your mind went to the same place mine did," Kev said. "Anytime you want to find out, you just let me know."

I bit my lip and looked away, noting that he walked just a little closer to me now, as if *that* were possible.

"Beer now? Or more shopping?" Kelly asked impishly. "Or perhaps we can degrade Kev's masculinity more, because that is just fun."

I'm glad we amused her.

"We can always do the first two, repeatedly, alternating," I replied, but the guys were already headed toward a fenced-in area, filled with white tables and chairs. "I think I might lay off the third for a while."

Kelly giggled. "I like how you think — in a *different* way than our friend here." She then led us to a table at the midway point.

After we'd sat down, Kev placed my bags by my feet. "What would you like?"

"Seriously, anything. I'm not picky," I repeated. "If it has water and hops, I'm good."

Kev's eyes warmed again, and then he followed Matthew to select our drinks.

"What else would you like to do today?" I asked Kelly.

"We *have* to go into the haunted house. And I really want to go on the Pirate Ship, too, but they don't care for it." She jerked her thumb in Kev and Matthew's direction. "I'm not a huge fan of some of the roller-coasters they prefer, but I like the ones that are more befitting of my size." Kelly grimaced, obviously a sore spot. "I didn't even like them when I was..." Marcus cleared his throat sharply, and Kelly stumbled over her words. "...sick."

"Sick?" I piped up.

"Yeah — weird disease type stuff — you know."

"Oh yeah, of course," I commented. If Kelly had something to hide, that was perfectly fine with me. I let it drop. "I've never been on the Pirate Ship, and if you want to go, we will."

"Cool," Kelly replied with relief.

Kev and Matthew worked their way back through the maze of tables, placing their procurements on the table in front of us.

"So, what did you talk about?" Kev asked with an odd twist to his lips. He sat beside me, turning his chair toward me.

"We're going on the Pirate Ship," I informed him. His frown confirmed the dislike Kelly had spoken of.



"Why? Surely there is something better," Matthew objected.

"If that's what you want to do, then that's what we'll do." Kev glanced warmly at Kelly. Her smile widened.

We babbled randomly while drinking our beer, which tasted remarkably sweet and good. People sat all around us, but unlike those who wandered outside the fenced-in area, the ones inside were far more relaxed. They leaned back in their white chairs with their sunglasses on, just watching the day go by.

When Matthew started in about the rides again, I tipped the glass back and drank down the remains of my beer, deciding on my course of action. Before they caused us girls more hassle regarding our chosen pursuits of enjoyment.

"Let's go." I grinned down at Kelly.

"You're coming with me everywhere. Unless I have my friend with me, they never listen," Kelly complained, forcing a laugh from Marcus. "Sara *makes* them."

"Well, I'm here now," I kidded.

Once we'd walked back, close to where we'd come in, Kelly tugged me to the front of the line, past the crowds and into the waiting ride. No one even glanced at us, not

even to glare. Like they hadn't even seen us cut right past them.

"What..."

"I learned a long time ago not to question, just go with it," Kelly advised.

We squeezed into Kelly's pick of rows within the massive, boatish structure. There were no real thrills or frills to this attraction, but that was what she'd wanted from it. She didn't seem the type to desire going upside down, sideways, and the multitude of other things the contraptions around us could accomplish.

With Kelly on one side of me and Kev on the other, we waited for the other spots to fill up with the waiting people we'd bypassed.

"Woo-fucking-hoo, the excitement is going to kill me," Matthew muttered. "Next, let's go on the little kiddies' ride. No wait, that's what *this* is!"

"Boy, just shut up and like it," Marcus ordered. "Or Kelly will rack you."

"But you were just complaining about it!"

"Yes, but that was before we were on it. Now that has changed. Suck it up. This is *less* five minutes of your life. She socks you in the nuts, and..."

"Yeah, yeah. I get it. You know, she used to be nice until you corrupted her to the dark side of 'Marcus's way'. I'm terrified to think of the children the two of you will produce."

When the huge ship began to swing slowly back, only to shoot forward again, I knew this was it. All there was. It was jarring, of course, but okay. Especially with Kelly and Kev waving their arms in the air and having fun with it. I doubt it would've been with anyone else.

By the end of it, Kelly and I shrieked like it was the best ride out there, and Kev laughed right along with us. Afterward, we made the guys ride it *twice* more before finally relenting to the next activity.

The sense of carefree fun descended further upon us, and as the hours flew by, my guard relaxed little by little until it practically left me for once. I'd never met a group of such laid-back and crazy people before. They were so like me, it was almost self-affirming.

We slurped old-fashioned root beer and ate foot-long hotdogs, trading jokes and funny stories. Eventually, Marcus, Matthew, and Kelly wandered off, leaving Kev and I to mill about alone.

Without the measure of safety the others provided, my heart started to thud again. As the afternoon wore on, I

found myself more and more drawn to him for reasons I still couldn't fathom. I'd stopped even trying to figure it out.

"Having fun?" he asked.

His long fingers occasionally skimmed my arm or back, making me crave for him to touch me again. I found myself looking for excuses to brush against him, as unusual for me as that was.

*You've now surpassed insane.*

"Oh yeah, but probably too much. I have to tell you, with how the day began, I'd never expected it to turn out this well."

He chuckled. I liked the way the corners of his eyes crinkled when he laughed. "I'm glad."

His face came so close to mine, I thought he might kiss me. Or more to the point, hoped.

As it was, I shivered when his hand slid a few inches up my spine. But it didn't happen. When he pulled away, I had to hide my disappointment.

It took me a moment to come up with something to say that wouldn't reveal what I was thinking. "So, Kev, what do you do? Other than drink coffee and go to Playland?"

We wandered into a less crowded area to check out the amazingly built sandcastles at the far side of the park.

The huge structures were so beautiful and detailed, I found myself enthralled by the labour it took to make them.

"I work for a specialty club downtown, which takes up *a lot* of my time."

"What kind of specialty?"

"I'll take you there some time. It's easier to see and believe than to explain it wrong." Kev's lips pulled into smirk with what I assumed were amusement, yet the hard edge to it made me reconsider.

I stopped short at a particular sculpture I found intriguing. Kev rested his chin on my shoulder to look. I couldn't even begin to fathom how aware of him I was, how I noticed every change in the way the front of his body touched me.

"You like this one the most," he commented.

"Why do you say that?"

"You haven't looked away from it. The others you just glanced over, but this one intrigues you."

Surprised that he even found reason to pay attention to such a small, simple matter, I had to wonder what he had noticed about my reaction to *him*.

He was complex, yet appallingly simple, to relate with, to feel comfortable around. Kev could be full of

energy and preferred to think he was funny. That's probably because he was.

"What are you thinking?" Kev asked in a brooding way. It was a question he'd asked often this afternoon.

"I don't think you want to know."

"Yeah, actually, I do." I turned around to face him. He hid something, and as someone who made a life out of concealment, I knew what to look for. The only question; what was it?

He stared down at me and waited for what seemed like an hour. I watched the odd sequence of changes on his face with fascination. I didn't understand him completely, which made it all the more tempting to figure him out. Maybe it was the writer inside of me.

I yawned, and then tried to cover it by blowing my bangs from my face.

"Tired?" Kev asked with concern.

"No, not really. Just very hot."

"Yeah, I know you are," he responded.

I rolled my eyes at his attempt at smoothness, "You'll have to try harder than that."

"You *are*, and I plan to." Kev slipped his finger beneath my chin and tilted my face to an angle that suited him better.

His lips came down in small, maddening increments. I rolled onto the balls of my feet, closing that last ridiculous inch. He went from timid to surging desire in nanoseconds, releasing my own, which felt pent up after a day of caging it. The rush of need became so precise it almost hurt.

I needed to feel more of him and missed the bike that gave me all sorts of leniencies I couldn't easily explain otherwise — like wrapping myself around him in public. Yet even so, the many inhabitants around us no longer existed, fading into the background.

"Ah ha! I knew that's what you were doing when..." Marcus started. Then Kelly rounded the corner and smacked his arm. He stared down at her unrepentantly.

"Shuddup," Kelly said, blending the words into one.

Kev's mouth lifted from mine, looking dazed.

"Haunted house?" Kev murmured so close to my lips I debated if I should chance kissing him again. I didn't even hear what he'd said, didn't much care either.

"Yeah," Kelly replied with a delighted grin.

Kev slid his arm around my waist and turned toward them. Marcus just shook his head, following his wife. We strolled, in no hurry, back to the front of the park.

"Do you scare easily?" Kelly turned her neck to look at me, her gaze filled with curiosity.

"She writes horror books for a living," Kev said in way of an explanation. "I don't think the humans could come up with anything to scare her."

"The *humans*?" I repeated.

Kev bit his lip and flipped Marcus off when he snorted. I would've needled him further but decided against it. They stared at each other, and I had the impression that whole paragraphs had been conveyed in that one look.

"Cool!" Matthew exclaimed. "I love scary human books."

*And there we were with the human bit again.*

Kev and Marcus stiffened, but relaxed when I didn't question it this time.

They could ask the same of me.

"Yeah, you know, blood, death, and gore; the works. My agent—" I snapped the last word, and unfortunately, none of them missed the venom, "—recommended that I use initials for my pen name, so people aren't sure if I am a woman or not. At least until they see me on the book tours."



"Can I read one?" Matthew asked as we came to a stop in front of the building that housed the "haunted" dwelling.

"Sure, I have a bunch of copies at home." I smiled, pleased by his honest enthusiasm.

"I want one, too," Kelly piped up.

"Okay. I'll give them to Kev." I noted the satisfied look in his eyes.

"Oh, I'm sure we'll see you around again." Marcus grinned.

"Uh huh."

Once again, we bypassed the line-up, and not one of them even glanced our way. Marcus spoke quietly with the woman at the door, and we were ushered right in.

The haunted house went pitch black once the door closed, banishing the sunlight. Then the nervousness in the pit of my stomach began. I shook my head, at first writing off the fluttering butterflies in my stomach. But the sinking feeling strengthened, and I had the impression *I* was being watched.

Forced into single file down a darkened hallway, we walked forward. Kev's hand entwined in mine, and I found myself walking slower so I could stay close to him. I'd love

to say it'd been the need to touch him, but I knew the apprehension was the culprit.

"Ooo... scary." Kev waved his free arm in the air.

A black figure jumped out and yelled at us. I just stared at him humorously. Was *that* really supposed to induce fear? Maybe I should take up a job here; show them just how scary I could be when my mass doubled and horns sprouted from my head.

Kelly jumped in front of me as a loud creak rent the air. She laughed nervously. Did she feel *it* too? I would've asked Kev, but something else moved in the shadows. Something *not meant to be there*. I couldn't catch myself in time as I snarled at the malevolence, which filled the too small space.

Another man dressed in all black jumped out of the wall, but it wasn't an employee. He didn't find this light-hearted venture, fun.

For a human in here, sight would be near nonexistent. But I wasn't that, and I saw every minute detail in the shadows.

Kelly hissed at the darkness, a merciless sound that rose in intensity, as the man in black drew closer to her. She reeled back into Marcus, who immediately closed his arms around her.

The man took a step closer and sniffed. His head swivelled to me, but his hand still reached for her.

Marcus ripped Kelly away. His lip curled back over his bared teeth, looking far larger than before. Matthew's now dead purple eyes stared, murmuring under his breath. The weirdest part was how all of their eyes glowed red.

Faster than I would've thought possible, the man shot forward, grabbing my arm. The grip was insanely hard; making me thankful I wasn't normal, lest he break my wrist. I allowed him to pull me forward and out of Kev's arms. If this man thought himself a threat, he was about to learn a lesson he wouldn't soon forget.

My fingers closed around his and pressed down with ruthless intent. I met his blazing eyes while mine bled out black. I distantly wondered if there was a red light somewhere in the hallway I had missed, but my attention was all for him. I refused to look away to find the cause for such an oddity.

"Hey, buddy, I seriously recommend you let go of my woman," Kev said from my side. He had been so silent, I'd forgotten he was there as my deeper instincts took over, wanting, no — needing blood. My muscles coiled, so ready to strike.

"And why would I do that, Kevlar?" The man said in a low tone, filled with too much anger to be considered a whisper, no matter the volume.

The attitude made me want to beat the snot out of the bugger, but I couldn't risk transforming in here. I *had* to calm down. I settled for something a little less noticeable than ripping him to shreds.

I stared at the hem of his shirt, and simply wished for flame. When most people wished for something that was all it was; a wish. But when *I* really wanted it, the object just came into being, like now.

A long second passed before the material ignited, and he leapt back from me with a yelp. He tried to put it out, but that was the thing with hellfire. It couldn't be so easily snuffed. The space quickly filled with the smell of burning flesh, snarls of pain following it like an eerie echo.

"Marcus?" Kev called uncertainly.

"Not me. Matt?"

"Nope."

Marcus instantly appeared on my other side. He moved forward but jerked to a sudden stop and made another sound that had never before left a person's mouth.

*They're not human—they can't be.*

"I'll have Pandora, Kevlar. In fact, it's already too late," the man whispered, fading away back into the shadows. "I have *very* special plans for her."

"I will never let you have her, or Sara and Kelly." Kev snarled into the nothingness, pulling me back against his chest. "I will kill you before you ever get your hands on them again." His entire body tensed around me, as agitated as the others.

And the man was gone.

My companions knew far more about this than I did, but something warned me not to ask. Not yet. I knew better than to question such instincts.

The cryptic comments bothered me, but the tingle of apprehension left. The assailant was a bug; nothing more. Though for my new friends' benefit, I had to act just a little scared, I suppose.

Kelly shifted from terror to anger and back faster than most could process her moods. She couldn't decide which emotion should reign, nor did she look to possess the ability to control them. One moment she looked a monster, the next, a terrified little girl. Her eyes darted around and her body movements never settled.

She *knew* exactly who that man was, and he utterly petrified her.

"Are you okay?" I asked her.

"Probably," Kelly responded in a calm voice that didn't match her exterior. "Too soon to tell."

I noticed Matthew was gone, though he'd been there a second before without a way to get out, except past me. And that, I would've taken note of in the narrow hallway. Kev and Marcus were so still; I suspected if either moved again, they would break.

As one, they turned toward Kelly and I, moving to usher us out backward. I wanted to pursue the man, but I figured my present company would think that a tad odd. Could I get away from them quickly enough and with sufficient reason to do so?

We burst back outside and my mind wandered in so many different directions and levels. Who was that man? What did he want with *me*? And more to the point, *what* was he? How did they know him? What did he want with Sara and Kelly?

Matthew ran from around the corner and stopped short, eyeing Marcus. He shook his head discreetly at Kevlar, like he'd said something aloud, but I knew he hadn't. It really was all too suspicious.

Then I asked the one burning question I *had* to have the answer to.

"How did he know your name, Kev?" I asked. And how had he known mine?

"I'm not sure," Kev said without looking at me.

*Liar!*

"Very weird. Maybe it was a friend trying to freak you out?"

"Yeah... a friend."

Marcus and Kelly stared at each other, with nothing to tell me what they thought now. Marcus's brow rose, and he took a step. Kelly scrambled back, her arms wrapped around her middle. She turned away from them, and when he took another step forward, Matthew stopped him.

Kevlar, in a sudden flurry of movement, snagged my arm and pulled me away from the others. When we were out of earshot, he stopped.

"Are you okay?" he asked worriedly.

Oh, yeah. This would be the moment where human women fell apart. At any other time, I would've tested out my performing skills, but when I saw his honest anxiety on my behalf, I hesitated; a rare case where performing wouldn't do much good.

"Kev, I'm fine, really. I dream this stuff up all the time," I assured him, kissing him on the cheek.

"You're sure?" His hand curled around my waist.

"Yup. It's not like anything happened."

He chuckled. "So brave for a little woman."

"Hey, now, I'm not all that little."

"Well, certain parts of you aren't."

I looked up to see him staring down my shirt and then swatted him. We both knew he only joked to get me off the subject, and I let him. At one point or another, I would find out more about this.

"See, I told you." I stuck my tongue out at him.

Then the others started talking. I listened, tuning everything else out and focusing on Matthew's words when they figured I couldn't hear them.

"I bet he'll mark her now. She'll be next, and end up like the others. But what's the deal? He never announced his conquests before. He just let us find them after he struck."

"I'm wondering if he managed to read her, even while we can't. That could be how he knows her. Max wonders the same thing, and he says to watch her very closely," Marcus muttered.

"He specifically told *Kevlar* to take care of her. Don't you find that a bit off for Max? When it comes to threats like this one, he goes all out," Kelly said with confused concern. "Maximus knows something he isn't



giving up. Not that it's new to any of us. However, I feel like we are leading up to something. Something huge that we're not seeing."

"We'll know soon enough," Matthew said gravely. "Coren won't waste much time. He isn't the type to stay stagnant."

They stopped talking when Kev began to walk me back toward them.

"So, what now?" Kelly stared at her shoes. Her painfully obvious nervousness bothered me. I had a rare motherly moment, wanting to hug and console her.

I looked at my watch and viciously swore. Matthew laughed at my outburst.

"I have to be home in less than twenty minutes. My lawyer's supposed to phone, and I forgot my cell," I replied. I never did that, but then again, I'd been planning on just running to the corner and back.

Then I met Kev.

I hadn't realized how much time had gotten away from me, and this call would be too important to miss; my ticket to permanently castrate Sam for what he did to me. It would also involve beheading—at the *very* least—even if it was the last thing I ever did on this earth.

"That's all right. We can get back to your house in time," Kev replied.

I stared at him blankly.

Was that even possible in downtown traffic?

\* \* \* \*

Within minutes we'd peeled out of the parking lot and swerved back to being daredevils, times *ten*.

As East Hastings turned into West Hastings, we were flying at amazing speeds. But once I'd adapted, it was actually fun. The audacious turns and dips never uprooted us, but even still, I remained determined the next one would.

His back tire squealed, as he turned onto Howe Street and then raced down the one block to my condo.

Kev parked in the one available parallel spot, which seemed impossibly small to sit such a massive tandem. Yet, he managed it in one try. Once again, he picked me up off of the motorcycle, holding me an inch off of the ground for a moment, and then he put me down.

"Would you like to come up?" I asked him, not wanting to leave him just yet. Even the thought of him

walking out of my life made my stomach twist, putting me just this side of sick.

"Sure," he replied, pleased by the offer.

The air conditioning in the foyer was a godsend when we passed the large glass doors. I breathed a sigh of relief and Kev laughed. His fingers trailed over my shoulder and down my arm.

"You're sunburnt," Kev murmured.

Damned *half*-mortal gene. One would think that I wouldn't burn in the sun, but I did. At least in this form. A full-demon's core body temperature went terrifyingly high by human standards, yet that had skipped me, too.

"That sucks."

I could feel it now that he'd said it. Thankfully, it would be gone by tonight. I could heal almost any injury, or so I was told. I hadn't really put it to the test yet. And didn't really want to find out if I could die, no matter what my assumptions on my limitations were.

"Do you have that green gel stuff?" His brow furrowed as he tried to remember the term, but I already knew what he spoke of.

"I can do better than that. I'm an avid believer in the almighty aloe vera plant." I told him, as the elevator took us

up to the top floor. The quiet hum from the machine accentuated the now uncomfortable silence.

"This is a... nice building," Kev commented. Was the daredevil uneasy now we were alone?

I just smiled at the comment and walked off of the elevator to a private entry, the only one on this floor. My dad never did anything half-assed, I had to give him that. The condo he'd bought me was no exception.

I unlocked my door, and Kev whistled.

I watched his reaction with distant interest. It was nothing but a dwelling to me. Yet I saw it through new eyes as I observed this captivating man standing in my living room.

The sprawling penthouse was bisected by a spiral staircase leading up to the loft, which opened to my private "garden" in the sky. The décor I blamed on my mother; neutral colors and lots of knick-knacks I never bothered to keep track of. I didn't have the patience for that kind of crap, but her theory was that it made a home look like a home. To me, it was a place to eat, sleep, and write.

However, my favourite part was the whole east wall; an entire sheet-glass window overlooking Vancouver and the harbour beyond it. Breathtaking at any time of day.

I set my purse and keys on the counter and turned to head upstairs. My lips pulled up into a smile that had seemed unthinkable the last time I'd been here. How things changed in a blink of an eye.

And all too soon I would know exactly how much that cliché would come to mean to me.

"If you're thirsty or hungry, there's a lot here to please both needs. Take your pick of whatever's in the cupboards and fridge. I'm going up to my office to see if my lawyer's phoned yet," I called over my shoulder, as I strode up the staircase.

"Okay." His voice floated to me.

I'd been expecting to miss the call, but as I made my way up, the ringing phone made me wonder at Kev's impeccable timing, and I picked up my pace.

I checked the call display.

"Hey, Dillon," I greeted my entertainment lawyer as cheerfully as I was able.

"Pan, what the hell is going on over there?" He demanded with an edge of supreme stress. "My secretary called me at *home*. She babbled about Sam stealing your latest book. She can't be serious, can she? Sam has *always* been so good to you."

"Used to be. But he's been really weird lately, and I've grown accustomed to not relying on him. He won't answer my phone calls, but one of my friends is an editor at the publisher who he is selling said book to. She said it sounded remarkably like the one I told her I'd been writing. So she contacted me to inquire about the submission."

"How do you know for sure?"

"She asked to see mine, and I sent it to her. She phoned me this morning, once she knew it was the same book." I tried to push back the anger in an attempt to maintain some level of professionalism.

"And?" Dillon demanded.

"She e-mailed me a copy of *his*, and it's an almost exact copy, with the exception that the names of my characters had been changed." I bit my lip when noticing my hand shook. I might've been speaking in a reasonable voice, but that didn't mean this discussion hadn't brought on a whole new round of problems.

And with Kevlar in the house.

A long moment of silence made me wonder if Dillon had been disconnected. Then he grunted. It gave me a minute to pull myself back together.

"I can't believe this!" he thundered, outraged on my behalf. Of course, he would never doubt me even for a minute, not if I believed in the proof I held.

Dillon Sawyers had been my legal representative since the day I'd sold my first book. He'd never failed me, not if success was imminent. But then again, the same could've been said about Sam;

The man who made my name known in the literary industry.

I had always thought *both* of them were trustworthy to a fault. It wasn't like I could read their minds, but normally I was a good judge of character.

What had I done to change any of that? Or on the flipside, what had happened to Sam to change what, at one point, had been a concrete personality trait?

"Send me everything you can think of," Dillon said.  
"Absolutely everything. Do not miss a thing."

"Of course."

"And I'll..."

"Don't make promises you can't keep just yet. Sam was thorough, and he is legally backed for having possession of the book."

"Fuck that. I'll nail his ass to the wall," Dillon promised.

My sentiments exactly. "And that, my friend, is why I pay you the big bucks," I replied, and his bitter laughter deepened.

"I'll phone the moment I have something," Dillon said in way of farewell and then hung up.

I turned around to stare at nothing specific, trying to keep my mind blank and void of anything likely to set me off further. My life had been so perfect, at least for a monster hiding among the legions of the ignorant.

I wondered why the room was darker than it had been a second ago. I hadn't heard anything, with or without my excellent senses. I whirled, seeing Kev standing there, staring at me.

"Hey," I said a little self-consciously, unused to being watched while I remained unaware. No one had ever snuck up on me before.

"Hi." Kev stepped into the room.

"What's up?"

"Funny, I was going to ask you the same thing," he replied. "It's like you could read my *mind*."

"That is not an ability I possess."

"A garden." He sidestepped a proper response, moving past me.



I followed him out of the paneled French doors and onto the grass that stretched to the concrete "fence" around my yard. Kev stared at every inch of the one-hundred-and-eighty degree view.

"This is a really cool place you have." Kev looked over the railing down to the street forty-two floors below.

"Yeah, my dad insisted on it a few years ago." I pulled myself up to sit on the cover of the hot tub.

Kev strode to me with a predatory lope I had to admire. The dying sunlight of the early evening glistened on his dirty blonde hair when he sat beside me. He splayed his hands out behind him and leaned back.

"Nice dad," Kev agreed.

"He can be, when it suits him."

Kevlar stayed silent for a long moment while I stared at the ground, worried that my eyes may not look right until I calmed a little more. They wouldn't be completely black, but the gold would be more metallic than normal, with swirling bits of onyx. Even beneath the contacts.

The silence finally got to Kev. "May I ask what happened? Was it more about your agent?"

"It's nothing."

"You sounded pretty angry when you were on the phone." His hand *tried* to turn my head, but I wouldn't move. I stared at his abs, which I could see the outline of against that sinfully tight shirt.

"My agent is a dick, and now I have to see if I can disembowel him then hang his intestines from my Christmas tree this winter."

"I don't doubt you could." he said with a brooding frustration I didn't understand. "It means a lot to you. It isn't just another novel — perhaps, there's a lot of sentimental value?"

"Yes," I replied softly, but that one word conveyed the *emotional* pain this theft induced within me.

And that was all it took.

"What's his name?" Kev growled.

"Sam Poetize."

Remarkably smooth, he pulled his cell from his pocket, his fingers flying over the keys. "Hey Holly?" Kev greeted. "Mm hmm." He paused. "I need all the information you can find on an agent in..."

"New York," I supplied.

"Yeah, you got that?" Kev listened again. "Sam Poetize. ASAP. 'Kay, thanks." Longer pause. "What are you talking about? Well yeah... that's why I phoned you

instead of—" He frowned. "What did Max say? Alright then, let me know."

"What did you just do?" I asked, amused at the cloak and dagger game.

"Investigating, and attempting to deal with a surprise problem," he replied, staring at me strangely. "Or maybe the reason for it is the surprise."

"You know, I could have provided more information for your friend, had you asked."

"Trust me, Holly doesn't need it."

"Just how much did you overhear?"

"Enough to know you got screwed, and not in a good way. I don't like it when the good guy doesn't win. Call it a fetish." Kev laid back and put his hands under his head.

"Or a super-hero complex?"

Kev grinned and closed his eyes. "Something like that. Maybe I'm making up for some bad karma in a past life."

"What kind of bad karma?"

"If I told you the full of it, you would run from me screaming like a banshee."

"Try me. Always pays to be—" I paused, and his brow rose, "Honest." I cleared my throat.

"Have you been honest with *me*?"

I shook my head.

"That was honest," he commented, but didn't press again. What a strange relationship had developed between us in the course of an afternoon. "As for my past, I grew up in a world much different than this one. Where I come from, we were taught it was better to bite, before they bit you."

"Where was this?"

"Germany. But in another time, with a different set of rules applying to my kind. I'd been trapped there, but my friends who are now my family saved me from that torment and brought me here, to Canada. I knew then just how bad those people were. How much I never wanted to be like them again."

"What were they like?"

"You ask a lot of questions, but don't answer many."

"Comes with the territory of being a writer."

"You're dishonest, but really easy to talk to." He exhaled a long breath, debating his words. "Like I said, they were bad people. They killed and stole, ruled over the rest of us and dictated our lives to benefit only themselves. We were machines, nothing more."

"Like what, the mob?"

"Something like that."

"Uh huh."

He wrapped his wrist in my hair and tugged me backward. My head came down on his bicep and we looked up at the sky together.

"You would make a good character with a back story like that one," I commented. "Especially, considering how you turned out."

"Would I?" His other arm crawled over my stomach like he sought comfort. The conversation seemed to make him anxious, and I didn't much care for his pained reaction to it. I allowed my tirade of questions to end. Perhaps, we could pick it back up another day.

"Of course."

We fell into a quiet relief, warmed by the setting sun and one another. I yawned, snuggling closer to him. Lethargy began to tease the edges of my mind, and before I knew it, the world fell away.

And I escaped my problems for a while.

## CHAPTER THREE

I awoke to the balmy night all around me, smiling, despite everything.

Lying on my side, I opened my eyes upon hearing a soft snoring behind me. I grinned as I remembered this afternoon — well, the good parts of it anyway, the bad got pushed to the back burner for now.

I sat up and rubbed my face. Kev's arm fell into my lap, having been draped over my stomach. His fingers landed in the most interesting of places. My own circled his thick wrist to place it at his side, so I could get up.

When the phone rang again, I realized what had awoken me.

Groggily, I padded into my office through the still open French doors. How many hours had passed? At least a few, since dusk had already descended.

"Hello?" I answered, not bothering to check the display.

"Pan? It's Dillon."

"Hey, sorry. I was having a nap. What's up?"

"Well, you're not going to be happy." Dillon sighed. "Sam has already *sold* the rights to an opposing publisher." I'd already known this. "Apparently the contract is already signed and received by the staff. I don't know how he did it

this fast, or this well, but he did. However, I *will* find a way around this, just not tonight."

My lips parted to speak, but nothing came out. Several things wanted to, but they definitely didn't qualify as something you'd say to a business associate. "What can I do?" I squeezed my eyes shut. Anger coursed through my blood once again, and went straight into my brain. As I watched, the skin on my arm flashed a deep red. If I'd had a mirror, I knew my eyes would be pitch black. The shift to my other form was upon me, so close I could taste it. Damn it! I could kill an innocent man if I lost control — say, like Kev. How many times could I make this mistake in one day?

"I'm trying to find out now. This isn't right."

"I know it isn't," I said in a low, broken voice. Emotional pain I'd trained myself not to feel pierced through me, and I had to grip the corner of the table before I did something really stupid.

Human emotion was something never meant to touch a demon's brain, and it was a contradictory pain in my ass. It was like having two selves constantly fighting each other.

I breathed slowly, desperately struggling in my head to regain control. There were so many years of writing,

then rewriting, only to start almost all over again when it hadn't been good enough for me. I found it hard to swallow. It seemed like such a waste just to throw it all away.

Sam could have stolen *any* of my other books, any of them. It wouldn't have mattered, not like this. *He has what little I know about my father and ancestors... the hidden truth of what I am.*

My fingernails flashed an inky black, trying to lengthen. My spine ached, which signified my body wanting to double in size to become my namesake, but I refused to let that happen.

These were the little joys that made up my life.

"Damn it!" I snarled. Dillon patiently waited for me to say something of use.

Tears stung my eyes, mixing in with my anger. Then something inside of me snapped. The human part surged forth and extinguished the demon. And all that was left was a shell with no clear direction of where to turn.

"Hey, Dillon— I'll phone you back, okay?"

"Yeah, sure. You hang in there. If I can find a way to cut off this sucker's balls, we *will*," Dillon assured vehemently.

"Cost doesn't matter," I said with a hollow ring. "I will spend my entire fortune seeing that man homeless and



bereft." I hung up and pulled my Rolodex toward me to flip through it.

I watched Kev roll over on the hot tub cover, but after that he didn't move again, still asleep, I assumed. I wasn't sure I wanted him to listen to this particular discussion.

I dialled Sam's personal cell phone. *This* time, he answered. For once. Most likely because he knew he already had me under his thumb, or he thought he did. I would bring him to his knees in the fires of hell, literally.

"Hey, girl!" Sam chirped happily. I could hear women laughing in the background, and it sounded like a party.

I paused for a moment. Sam wasn't a happy-go-lucky kind of guy; serious and book-smart more than anything else. Even his subtle accent sounded different, but I knew it was him.

I had so many things I wanted to scream out, but what *could* I say to him? What was the point in useless words if there couldn't be solid action to accompany them?

What had been the point in even phoning him?

I wanted nothing more than to rip his still-beating heart from his chest and feed it to him while he lay dying at

my feet. And that was the *human* part of me. The demon wanted so much more than just that.

"You son of a bitch," I whispered hoarsely, fighting not to yell and wake up Kev.

"Ahh, girly. What's wrong?" Sam asked with a sugary voice that grated on my last nerve; one I had *never* heard from him before.

I grappled with my emotions for a moment before answering him and his audacity.

"Possibly that you're a rip-off hack, or maybe it's the fact you're a useless prick," I snapped. "Sorry, Sam, please excuse my mistake. A prick is actually worth some good."

He actually chuckled. The childlike quality to it was absolutely ridiculous.

"I didn't steal anything. I took what was rightfully mine, I promise you that, Pandora," he spoke very slowly. Almost as if he had trouble keeping it together.

I heard a door open and close, and then the laughing instantly cut off.

"Oh, really?"

"Now listen here, that is *my* novel," Sam said with disgust. "And I would appreciate it if you stop lying. You know nothing about what you write, and never have."

"Lying?" I repeated. "I wrote that book over ten years ago, and have been writing it ever since!"

"Now Pandora, we both know the truth. Well, I do anyway, and *you* will soon enough." Sam sounded strangely feminine now.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

And then the receiver was ripped away from my ear. I was so startled, I let it go.

"Listen here and listen well, leech," Kev snapped into the phone, his vibrant blue eyes so cold, ice could never compete with them. "You fucked up, and now you'll pay dearly for it."

"And just who are you?" Sam laughed, as if he knew exactly who Kev was.

"The man who's going to take pleasure in seeing you ruined." Kev trailed his fingers over my jaw.

"Right." Sam laughed. "You have no idea who you're messing with, Kevlar Brandenburg."

Kev continued on, not commenting on Sam knowing his *full* name. I didn't even know that. How had he?

"Mr Poetize, do you know a man named Mark Summers?" Kev asked casually, the picture of ease now.

I did.

He was the Acquisitions-Editor at the publisher who had been trying to coax me away from the people who signed me first, and I had been with them now for years. And the one...

"Of course, I do. He is the..."

"The one you sold your *first* successful book to, isn't that correct?" Kev finished for us.

"Well yes..."

"Not anymore." Kev grinned down at me. "You see, Mark is a very good friend of mine, one that would do *anything* for me. You know what I mean? You see, Mark and I go back, a *very* long time."

Silence on the other end.

"See, Mr Poetize, you're not the only man who knows people. That publisher won't touch you now with a ten foot pole, as a client or an agent. Once word gets out, no one else will either. And it will. No matter what happens, I promise you *that*."

"You don't know—"

"I know everything I need to know; including the fact that it's over. And soon, so will you." Kev hung up the phone, and pushed the Rolodex back to the exact place I had it before.

"You were lying, right?" I asked.

Kev just smiled silently. He put the phone on speaker, and dialled a New York phone number.

"Mark Summer's office. Liz speaking, how can I help you?" A young, yet professional, voice sang through the phone.

"Hey, Liz, it's Kevlar."

"Hello, Mr Brandenburg, just one sec. I'll put you right through."

I leaned against the desk when another voice greeted Kev.

"Didn't I just talk to you, old man?" Mark laughed delightedly, his accent thick. "Normally, I only talk to you once every couple of decades or so."

A couple? Kevlar couldn't be that old. "You know us Germans have to stick together. And now, I would like to formally introduce you to the *real* author of the book you just bought." Kev smiled down at me. "This is Pandora Cyprus, AKA K L Foster."

My mouth hung open, but I managed to recover from the shock I felt. Had I ever told him my pen name?

"Hi, Mr Summers," I squeaked after a prod from Kev.

"Mark, please. I want to be the first to apologize about this unfortunate mishap. Normally, we're better

informed than this. But Kevlar has ensured everything was set right." Mark sounded sincere, even aggravated on my behalf.

"Did he now?" I glanced at Kev, who smiled broadly.

"You have a very good friend there, Pandora. It's always nice to have a pit-bull on your side, and trust me when I tell you that he is."

Kev chuckled. "I've been told I'm very... bad."

"Uh huh," Mark replied. "I know that better than most."

"I'm only just starting to imagine," I said.

I knew my eyes were a little wide, but for some reason, they wouldn't heed my commands to relax. Just who was this man who had spilled hot liquid on my arm? He certainly kept surprising me.

What a long, strange day this had been, even for someone like me.

"Well, since I assume you're already with a publisher, you wouldn't be interested in selling this book to us anyway?" Mark asked hopefully.

"First off, I'm not sure if the legal part is in my favour yet or not. Regardless, my people always have first

dibs. It's a loyalty thing." I grinned at Kev. "Though, if they give me a red flag, I will certainly consider you."

Mark laughed. "If they say no, I *want* this book. I have no idea what hell would be like, since *none* of us do. But this has to be as good of a description as it gets."

It wasn't the words, just the way he'd said them, which made me think he knew a whole lot more about the subject than he let on. However, I couldn't focus enough to identify what it would be. I just stared dumbly at the phone, while Kev wrapped the conversation up, and then said goodbye.

"Don't worry about any of it. Not one bit," Kev assured. The careful brooding came back.

"I have..."

"Seriously, it's taken care of. I know people."

"I've figured that out."

"You'll see. So, what do you want to do?"

If I really thought about it, there was only one thing I actually wanted.

I kissed him.

He growled under my lips when they parted for him. My hand closed over his biceps, which flexed when he lifted me onto the corner of the desk.

My legs wrapped around his waist without conscious thought. I had no idea what I was doing, but I liked it. Kev tasted like sunshine; happy and bright, gentle and fierce all at the same time.

Yet his body was hard, rock-solid between my thighs and against my chest. There was no give, only pure, hard-won muscle.

My hands ran up his arms, curling around them, feeling the ropes of sinew. My thighs tightened, drawing him closer to me as he gripped my ass, dragging my hips forward to the very edge of the desk.

Kev moaned softly, his mouth insistent on mine. All too suddenly, something touched my tongue that *shouldn't* have been there; needle-point sharp, like a broken front tooth. But I knew he had no such thing.

If I didn't know better, I would've thought it was a fang. Leave it to a woman with one wicked imagination who made horror and terror a profession to come up with something so asinine.

There weren't such things as vampires, were there? My dad had never mentioned the possibility before. But then again, he didn't tell me a great deal, and I knew that.

He wanted me to be *human*, to be Lillian's daughter, far more than Ivor's demon child. But I knew it wouldn't be



feasible to expect I was the only non-human running around on earth. Or I really hoped so, despite my lack of findings.

Yet I pulled back from Kev anyway.

His eyes dramatically dilated, and I swore I saw a flash of red before they turned to the floor.

*That* wasn't normal.

"Open your mouth," I asked softly. He did, in a half goofy grin, revealing a set of perfectly white straight teeth.

There was absolutely nothing pointy at all. Not even a chipped tooth.

"You are a very strange woman, Pandora. You're nothing like the other humans," Kev said softly, a guarded expression shielding so much.

*And here we go again.* But I let it go this time.

"Let's go for a ride," he said.

"To where?"

"Anywhere we want to go."

He turned around and walked out, giving me two options;

Stay here.

Or follow him, to wherever he might lead me.

Guess what, I did the last.

## CHAPTER FOUR

We flew by the Lost Lagoon and a sense of peace settled over me. There weren't many people in this area of Stanley Park, and for that I was thankful.

He turned onto the Causeway, and the city lights fell back. The forest filled the skyline on either side of us. We entered a world that was ours alone.

Kev slowed down at the side of the road and pulled over. We had been riding around for over an hour. Just like he'd said, wherever we wanted to go. When I'd asked to come here, he'd just turned around the other way. No questions or complaints.

"I haven't been here in years." I slid off the bike, all by myself this time.

I heard a rustle in the bushes and a rabbit popped its head out, surveying us. I made sure Kev wasn't watching me, and then I manifested some pellets. I had owned a few smaller animals when I was a kid. The sight of this one reminded me of them.

Lillian had always made me get rid of them shortly after Ivor gave me each one. It didn't matter if I took care of them, she didn't want animals that weren't *hers* in her house, or backyard. It was the "bad enough I have to put up with you" spiel that cut to the quick, and so I gave up

asking for little companions to fill some of the loneliness consuming my childhood.

I knelt on the ground and waited. Its long ears perked up when she saw the food, the rabbit hopped toward me without fear. It froze when Kev moved behind me, but its stomach must have been more important, as it continued on.

I held my palm out, and she snagged a pellet.

"Cute."

"Yeah, she is." I tipped my hand onto the grass to let my new friend's dinner fall to the ground.

I stood and wiped my hands on my pants, noting the strange look in Kev's eyes that almost matched the unsettling thoughts in my head.

"Where'd you get the pellets?"

"Magic."

"Mm hmm."

I walked back to the bike and riffled through my purse in pure distraction. With each step, I felt my panties; damp from being wrapped around him, fantasizing. He'd done nothing per se to instigate it, except just be. Well, other than run around in my head naked and tantalizingly bronzed, buff...

I shook my head, trying to remember why I dug through the bag. For the life of me, I couldn't remember. My hips shifted, needing to get laid, and I had no doubt he could and *would* oblige.

Like any good "fantasy," while I bent over the powerful machine, Kev came up behind me, pushing his pelvis against my backside. I could feel his cock; every last swollen, thick inch I couldn't get off my mind. And I hadn't even had it yet.

I shoved myself against him, hearing his soft moan escape the full lips I needed on my body.

"I really love the look of you like that," he whispered. His fingers tightened on my hips, as if to control my movements, slowly grinding himself, prolonging the sensation.

"Like what?" I teased, knowing damned well what he meant. I craved for him to just rip off my pants right here and now, and thrust himself so deep.

"Mmm. You, over my bike, susceptible to whatever I might do to you. It's too bad you aren't wearing a skirt." Kev's hands ran down my thighs in feather-like strokes that had me shivering and him growling.

Oh, but it would be so easy to do that, *if* he had any idea what I was. Should I push my luck again? Oh, I wanted to.

Why did he have to be so big and tempting? And here we were, all alone in the middle of a park.

My mind shuffled back to a dream I had been having while we slept on the hot tub, and that had continued on in my head during the ride.

I'd never had sex on a bike, or really even thought about it before. But I was damned tempted to experience it now.

"What are you thinking?"

Did he really just ask that *now*? A million questions, requests, demands... and it had to be that?

"I'm not going to tell you." I turned around in his powerfully built arms. His hands slid across to my stomach and rested on my sides. Why not lower?

*Please, go lower...*

"Why not? I would really like to know."

"Just thinking about a dream."

"What about it?"

I really wasn't in the mood for talking. There were a great deal of other things I'd much rather be doing, but being uncharacteristically shy at the moment I couldn't ask

him to comply with most of them. The thought of doing so made me blush a dark scarlet.

"This is just sort of like it— in a way. It just reminded me is all."

"And how did the park remind you?" he persisted. His breath caressed my ear in the most erotic fashion. "Or was it the bike?"

I sighed. Oh course he would hit the nail on the head. "We were on the bike, on a deserted road."

He grumbled under his breath about the lack of information, and I smiled, looking up into those clear blue eyes I'd quickly come to adore.

"And?"

"We were involved in extra-curricular activities. And I was wearing— a skirt, no less."

"Hmm," Kev debated. "And what were these exact activities?"

His hand stroked my cheek then fell to my chest, and he allowed his fingertips to graze my breast before arriving at my waist. My heart shuddered in my chest, my lips parting and wanting him to kiss me so badly, I could taste it.

"We were..." What word should I use?

"Fucking?" His grin turned wicked.

"Yeah."

"From behind?" There was enough primal heat in his eyes to fry both of us.

"No," I replied, and he almost looked disappointed. However, that wouldn't last long. "We were on the bike, and you were driving."

"You, or the bike?"

I burst with laughter, and by the end, it turned breathy, as his heated gaze held me captive. "Both."

He contemplated me, and I really wanted to know what *he* thought. How the tables had turned.

"I've done a great many things, but that's not among them," he said. "You really should've worn a skirt. Would have made life... easier, to say the least. But that's effortlessly fixed."

"How?"

He didn't answer, but he kissed me; raw and deep enough to make my toes curl. My tongue twisted with his, and my arms went around his neck to bring him closer, needing him to be nearer more than anything. Feeling him along the length of my body took my breath away and made me pant like a bitch in heat.

A surge of what felt like scorching air wrapped around my thighs, encasing them, making my nerves tingle.

I pulled back but never fully moved out of his embrace to look down. A paper-thin skirt of black silk had replaced my shorts, making me swear in my head. Had *I* wished for them in my distraction?

But it hadn't felt like my magic; the sensation was very different.

I met Kev's gaze, and he didn't react how I thought he would've. He simply leaned forward and kissed my neck.

"Magic," he whispered. "Now, tell me more about this dream. Your sparse details are not nearly enough to satisfy my... curiosity."

Kev positioned my body, seating me backwards on the bike. His muscular thigh swung over the seat, and he sat in front of me. He really must be psychic, like I'd begun to suspect.

But that didn't distract me from my mistake. It had been *mine*, hadn't it? I just couldn't shake the feeling that I wasn't the one doing it, even though it was the only possibility.

So, of course I couldn't keep from asking, "You're not going to say anything?"

"About?"



"Nothing." I gave up, before I pushed too far. He looked at me expectantly, and I knew what he wanted.

"There isn't much more to tell. I don't remember most of it."

He leaned forward. "Then let's make one you *will* remember."

"And how would you do that?"

"Would you let me fuck you, Pan?"

My womb clenched at the harshness in his voice. There was only one possible answer. "Yes."

His lips lowered toward mine, and I became lost. His tongue swept inside my mouth, his body pinning me against the bars behind me. His feet were planted on either side of us and he took all of the weight with ease.

"So I was driving, right?" he mumbled close to my lips.

I nodded, too impatient to speak.

Need sparked and exploded so fast it completely clouded my awareness of what I did. I reached between us to stroke him through his jeans and shuddered.

Kev's hand closed over mine, pulling his zipper down a bit, but leaving it up to me from there. The act made me see a little bit more about the hidden Kev, a decent man who didn't push too far, only as far as he was

permitted to. Obviously, I should be a bit more outgoing with what I would allow him to do. My head swam with his warm scent around us — more natural and wild than the woods.

I gripped the small piece of metal with my finger and thumb, taking my sweet time while Kev shifted in relentless agitation.

"Are you about done?"

"Nope."

So, I was mischievous. It might kill him, but it amused me, even in my aroused state. His fingers softly encircled my wrist, not making me complete the task but more like he tried to feel me as I opened it that last three-quarters of an inch.

He fell out of his pants, swollen in my hand, thickening further as my fingers constricted around him. My hips rolled forward on the seat, letting my now bare clit rub against the leather beneath me.

"And what are you going to do with it?" he mumbled.

I stroked him, imagining him inside of me like this, impatient now. As if I hadn't been before. I laughed in the safe solitude of my head, where he couldn't hear. "I think you have a pretty good idea."

"Perhaps I do, but there are oh-so-many possibilities."

My legs widened, allowing the skirt to ride up my hips, calves draped over him to display myself, tease him. He leaned back slightly, taking in all of me with lascivious satisfaction.

Kev moved for me, his facial expression hypnotized. I'd never had this sort of effect on a man before and I lapped it up, allowing it to wrap around me and enflame me more.

I had an unstoppable urge, and I meant that in a literal sense. I couldn't help myself, despite the discomfort that may prove to develop from the intended arrangement. I needed him more desperate than he already was. I knew I could make it happen, and I wouldn't stop until I had completed my goal.

I scooted back as far as I could, forced to stop when my ass hit the handlebars. I batted my lashes, and he grinned.

"Could you move, just a bit?"

Kev did as he was told with relish, especially when my head bent over him to engulf the head of his cock. He lifted his body into a half-standing position, pushing into

my mouth a little farther. He moaned throatily as I took more of him, tasting him in the best way possible.

He gathered my long hair in his hands, as if he planned to hold on for dear life. Good, he'd need it. My feet lowered themselves to the ground, taking him inch by succulent inch. My fingers curled on his hips, digging into his taut flesh; not an ounce of fat to be found anywhere on him. No other specimen could come close to this man, and I could take every advantage of him.

When my lips met his base we were both in heaven as his jerking breaths drove me onward, his hands bunching in my hair with pleasure. I knew he liked it just this side of rough and I wanted to push those limits to see where they would take us.

But damn, I was horny. Bad enough that my hips rode his bike like I wanted to ride his body. One of his skilled hands danced down my back to delve between my legs. My body automatically arched to give him access in the compromising position.

"Fuck, you are so wet."

"Mmm," I agreed.

A sole finger slipped inside of me, not nearly enough to come close to placating the raging need growing ever stronger within. With each pass of my lips, his torso

picked up a more frantic rhythm, taking most of the work out of it for me as he plunged over and over again, toying with me from behind.

"Pan, please— stop, before I can't. I need to bury myself inside of you. Please?"

Oh begging, I liked that. When I didn't immediately heed him, his moans turned to growls. Both of us knew he grew closer in my avid interest in sucking him dry. But he would have none of that. I whimpered as his teasing finger left me, pulling me by my hair into the sitting position.

I pouted, and he laughed. "Baby, you can suck me all you like, but right now, I have something else in mind."

He stared, as my soaked mound and my gears shifted faster than the bike's. Oh yeah, I would do whatever the hell he wanted. *Anything*, just to see that particular look in his eyes.

Kev's arm wrapped around my back to pull me forward and he gripped his cock to partially drive his way inside of me. After the first three inches, I moaned, loudly. Then he pushed brutally forward, filling me exquisitely.

"That's it, baby, take all of me."

He reached behind me to start the bike. Kev really would make my dream better, especially when his lips crashed down on mine, filled with starvation. Already a

thrilling experience and he hadn't even started to "move" yet.

"Ride me." He kicked the bike into gear.

"Don't hit anything," I said with artificial concern, making him chuckle. I had no doubt he could control this machine as much as he did my libido.

"Least of my concerns," he called over the gunning motor. The rumbling of it only added to the increasing sensations as my muscles clenched around him.

My legs wrapped around his torso, keeping him flush with me, as the bike started to launch forward. I relished the feeling, and adapted to how the Ducati moved and shifted before beginning a rhythm to complement it.

"And what would be the biggest of your concerns?"

"Getting myself so far inside you, you'll still be feeling me tomorrow." The bike sped up and the momentum drove him deeper. His hand bunched at my back for leverage as I rocked against him.

The front tire left the pavement and the bike tipped backward. I smashed onto him, hips rocking wildly as the ecstasy spread. I shrieked at the wicked penetration, and when the bike came back to the ground with a thud, I orgasmed, hard.

Trees flew by us in a blur and consumed my screams. His fingers caught in my hair again with one hand, and he kissed me brutally, not paying a bit of attention to the road. I could feel his cock throbbing within me as his hips pushed while I bucked.

Kev stopped, right there in the middle of the street. He didn't turn the engine off, but bear hugged me, bringing my body up and down his shaft in long, rough shoves. On the tail end of the first, another quaking orgasm detonated, drawing him closer as my excitement flooded him.

My arms closed around his neck as he thickened, right before he came. I coiled around him like a snake with prey, refusing to let him go as he trembled.

I waited until my breath had settled just enough to speak, "Can we do it again?"

"Oh, yeah, most definitely."

I erupted with a new round of convulsions as I moved off of him, sagging before I could even finish the movement. I felt a vibrating sensation against my inner thigh that was so small and insignificant compared to the motor, and realized it was Kev's cell.

"You even come equipped with a vibrator."

He laughed while taking it from his pocket, flipping the phone open without checking the call display.

"Hey," Kev said softly, picking up my hand.

"What's up?"

"Where the hell are you!" Marcus's voice boomed.

"In Stanley Park, with Pandora."

"What the fuck! You're supposed to be keeping her *at home*. Max is going to kick your ass from here to the other end of the province. The count is up to twenty-fucking-three now. He threatened her, Kev; did you want her to be twenty-four?"

"Twenty-three?" Kev paused. "It's only been two weeks. What is he doing now?"

"Going after your new piece of ass is what he is doing. He's concentrating around her location. *He knows where she lives* and could be following you right now!"

"The building is secure, I even made sure myself."

"None of that matters, since you're not even there! She can't be outside right now."

Kev's eyes stared down into my lap, and I swore I saw another flash of fiery red in his eyes.

"What else?" He idly stroked my hand while I watched the vast array of emotions cross his face, never figuring out that I heard both sides of the conversation.

"There was another note."

"What did it say?"



No answer.

"Marcus, what did it say?"

"Kev, really..."

"What. Did. It. Say." Kev snapped each word. I had taken him for a patient man, but his expression told me that was the farthest thing from the truth; instantly predatory, a harsh monster that looked even less human than I was.

I loved the hardness of him, despite the direness of the moment. It only made me want this wild man more.

*Pandora will die very soon, Kevlar. Even you will have nightmares by the time I am done with her.*

"Happy now, Kev? Did that help you, or tell you anything you didn't already know?"

Kev didn't answer Marcus.

"Now get your asses back to her apartment. Something bigger than Coren is looking after her, Kev. Corrine senses it. That building is airtight against any energy or unwanted vibes, and it has nothing to do with whatever you did to it. Not even Max's house is as well protected. And when you're around her, our senses go right off the charts — in that building, it's like you've left earth entirely. She's an unknown. But until we figure out more

about her and what she is, we *have* to protect her. She has a key-role in this play, and the climax is just around the corner."

Kev seemed stupefied. "The others only had hours, if they were lucky. And that was when we had *warning*. He could be anywhere." He lost his confidence of the moment before, looking at the trees now with suspicion.

And to be honest, so did I.

"Which is why you never should've left! What's with you, man? You don't disobey orders. I like Pandora, I really do, but you have to remember who you are and what we're doing, before she gets killed. You don't want that, do you?"

"Don't ask stupid questions."

"Then don't be an idiot, and I won't have to. You're smitten, dude, and you've known the chick a day."

"Fuck off," Kev muttered, but there was a catch in his voice.

"Fuck on, you get better results. But you know that already, don't you? There is something different about her, Kevlar. She isn't one of us, but she isn't one of *them* either."

Oh, they would never guess what I am.

"I know," Kev whispered. "And he wants her *because* of what sets her apart. I'm sure of this. We have to stop him. He can't..."

"We will, Kev. We don't have another option up for consideration. I'll be damned if I let him touch my woman, Sara, or Pandora. He's already a dead man walking. That, I promise you. It's only a matter of time. But keep her safe until that happens, like Max ordered you to." And Marcus hung up.

So interesting, the things you learn when others aren't aware you're listening.

## CHAPTER FIVE

In my life, and that of my mother and ancestors, I had learned feminine curiosity wasn't a good thing. From childhood I had learned to banish it from my repertoire of "virtues."

Until now.

Kev drove back to my house with me in front of him this time. His arms caged me and I wished I had x-ray vision into the future, and the present for that matter.

The helmets concealed what little I had to discern about what was going on. I burned to ask him about it, but I somehow stopped myself.

Curiosity was a bitch.

But now I knew he experienced the same thing. He wondered about me, just as I did about him.

He parked quickly and hauled me off the bike. After setting me on my feet, I took off my helmet and began walking to the door.

Kev shadowed my every movement. He worried over this Coren, but I didn't. Even as an unknown, I didn't care *much* about him. I knew I should be more enquiring about that aspect than about what these new friends of mine were but...

He didn't speak through the ride up the elevator, or when I let us into the apartment. I headed upstairs to check for messages, but there were none. When I turned around, Kev was right there. His blue eyes were so dark and leery now, the desire gone.

His bit his lip, and I knew the inquisition just begged to begin.

I scrambled for anything to say, as hesitant of this conversation as he was. We simply stared at each other for dragging minutes. He reached for me.

And when his fingers brushed my side, I giggled.

Wait! Did I just *giggle*? What the hell was wrong with me?

"What's so funny?" Kev pulled away with a lazy and fake smile on his lips.

"You tickled me."

"Oh? Are you ticklish?"

I didn't need to be telepathic to know where this was going. I leapt off of the table before he lunged, faster than he ever could. He looked shocked for a second, stumbling for a moment before he took off after me. I jumped over the railing of the stairs and landed on the first floor before he had even taken the corner.

"Now how did you get down there so fast?" Kev asked, staring down from the top landing.

"I'm fast."

I did a little dance to tease him before I shot off into the kitchen. I could hear him thudding down the stairs. Kev was at the doorway to the hall before I'd even gotten there. Physically impossible. This time I stared at *him* in shock, giving him time to catch me up into his arms.

"I'm fast." He shrugged.

"Please, don't tickle me." I hated that little human dysfunction in my makeup. It was my kryptonite.

"Oh, fine." He picked me up and placed me on the counter. He kissed me, tasting so free, but that was too weak for what he was.

When he pulled back, my mouth moved before I could stop it. "How did you get down here so fast?"

"I can do a lot of things, you know. Then again, so can you."

I would've answered, but his lips came back down on mine to silence the conversation. His hands pushed my new skirt up my legs. The counter was cold on my butt, but the heat he inspired more than made up for it.

I felt that "chipped" tooth again, and this time it just added to my little fantasy that Kev was indeed a *thing* like

me. I wanted that, and I needed to outright ask him even more.

I ran through a list of monsters in my head, because I knew he wasn't a demon. None of it made sense; a bunch of circles I tried to shove into a square. Werewolf? Doubted it. Zombie? Not in my lifetime.

Vampire...?

He left my lips, kissing my throat. He peeled my shirt off, baring my breasts, but not bothering to take off the bra, just thrusting it down. Kev bent almost double, grazing my nipple with his teeth and inducing a scalding response from me. My ragged cry made him groan deep in his throat.

"Do you have any idea how hot you are?" he murmured against my neck.

I stroked his cheek. There wasn't any part of me that wasn't aware of his exact placement around my body.

The sharp pain was a distant thought, and melted away into the ocean that was Kevlar. He surrounded me, filling every sense.

Suddenly, everything violently shifted.

Kev jerked back from my neck, and leapt away. His eyes were wide, and he looked scared or possibly angry, but not *at* me.

But with himself.

Something wet trickled down to my breasts and his eyes followed it like he was hypnotized. My fingers touched the wetness, and I looked down to see myself stained in red.

I glanced at Kev's full lips, seeing a small bit of blood. If he hadn't ripped away so abruptly, I wouldn't have noticed anything. And now it was too late.

So, I was right.

My Kev, my *lover*, was a vampire.

His eyes went completely red, no white to speak of. The colour flickered bizarrely, almost like flame. He embodied stillness. Not in a normal way, but in the way my father did sometimes. No breath or even a blink to tell he lived. It was so profound, it was eerie.

"Kev?"

His head jerked to one side at the sound of my voice, and it reminded me of a reptile. He looked nothing like the man I'd just spent the day with. In fact, if I was a lesser woman I would have been afraid of him. Then some sort of barrier dropped, and he *felt* different to me.

It wasn't until then that I fully understood the immensity of what had just occurred. Though there were some key points I wasn't clear on.



He took a step and my heart stopped. There was no transition from one movement to the next, it just happened. He closed half of the substantial distance, just like that. A lethal predator; and he was in *my* kitchen staring at my neck like I'd be dinner.

But then again; too late for past tense.

Then his expression changed so slowly I could track each shift. Only now, he stared at me like I was the enemy.

"It's okay."

"No, it isn't," Kev replied mechanically. "You really aren't human *at all*, are you?"

"I'm half," I answered calmly. "And I don't know why you say that like an accusation. Neither are you."

"I don't have a drop of human blood in me, except of those I..."

"Feed from?"

He nodded stiffly. "If you will."

Kev's tongue darted out and I saw a flash of fang for the first time. It sent a shiver go down my spine to finally *see* the truth, yet I felt he wouldn't be forthcoming. I could tell, but I didn't have any intentions of it either.

"Your taste," he said in a soft, seductive voice that veiled the steel beneath it, "it isn't like anything I've had before."

His obvious hard-won restraint made my blood pump faster, but it still wasn't fear. I wanted him even more now after seeing *this* side of him, one so much closer to the real me I constantly hid from the world.

That, and the concept of vampires had always turned me on. I owned so many books about them, I'd lost count. The fact that one was right here, in my home, and had just finished...

Kevlar seemed to be fulfilling a lot of dreams tonight.

"Your breathing has picked up," he continued in that hushed lazy voice, "and your heart is galloping. Your eyes are dilated. Is it possible I've scared the horror writer?" Though his tone hadn't change, I didn't miss the scorn. He was angry with me now, and not so much with himself.

"It's not that." My eyes slid away to get control of myself. This was *so* not the time to get horny.

"I crave you again," he echoed my thoughts. "Both to fuck you, and your..."

"Blood," I finished for him again.

"If you will," he repeated. "If you're not like.... me, then what are you?"

"What are *you*?" I countered, though I'd already figured that out.

"I can't tell you."

"Then I guess we're in the same boat."

He snarled with impatience, and I ignored him as I hopped off the counter. I righted my clothes, my temper flaring and struggling to manage it.

"You have to tell me," he snapped.

"No, I don't," I replied, refusing to look at him. "I... can't."

After about a minute, he replied, "I'm not allowed to either."

When I finally did look at him, his blue eyes had returned, only mere traces of red flames in their depths.

I pulled a paper towel from the holder and wiped the dripping blood from my neck, pressing against it until the oozing stopped. I didn't say anything more as I walked to the garbage bin, but I felt his eyes on me. Or maybe it was just what I held in my hand.

He still hadn't relaxed when he whispered,  
"Please?"

"I'm sorry."

"What are you apologizing for?"

"You must leave," I said finally. "I can't have you here anymore."

Why did my heart have to clench to say those words? I had known him all of a day. It wasn't like I'd said goodbye to a life-long friend.

So much was going on here and neither of us was able to talk to the other. It made me feel like an idiot. I sincerely hoped he did as well. I was tired of one-sidedness.

"I can't."

"Why not?" I demanded. Then my vivid imagination came up with something inspired from what I *did* know. And it made my blood run cold. "Did you sleep with me only because this Max guy Marcus talked about ordered you to? Because you have to 'protect' me from Coren?"

Every part of him froze. He even stopped breathing.

"How do you know that?"

And that said it all. He hadn't denied it. I turned and planned to walk away, but Kev grabbed my arm.

This time, *I* snarled. My spine almost snapped in an effort to force the shift. The limits of my rule over my own body had been reached, and Kev would find out *exactly* what I was in short order.

My skin deepened into a burnt sienna, and I scrambled to fight it. I tipped my head forward and saw my brown curls turn a black so dark, it was fathomless. I had

no doubt my eyes were as well. I expected Kev to let go of me in shock or to jump away again, but he kept surprising me. He didn't even react.

*Not a drop of human blood.*

"What are you?" He growled in a voice not his own; a new depth to it, like *two* beings spoke from one mouth.

"Not someone you want to fuck with," I answered with no emotion colouring my tone.

"How did you know about Max?"

"I have exceptional hearing, among many other things. Now leave, before I make you regret it."

"I can't leave you, Pan," he whispered, a complete turnabout. "I didn't sleep with you because someone ordered me to. I *want* to be here. I'm sorry if the person who pulls my strings feels the same way, but I'd be here anyway."

"Why?" I thundered. Rage boiled over, whether I wanted it to or not. The threat of transformation got closer and closer by the microsecond.

"Because the person who is after you is someone we already know and need to stop at any and all costs. I know what he is capable of and what lengths he goes to just to amuse himself. I can't leave you to him," Kev said. "I

would never do that. Not even if Max ordered me to come home right now."

"Does this Max control you?" I asked. Despite everything, my heart did a sickening little flip. Did Kev possess confining leashes like I did? For some reason I couldn't stand that possibility.

"Do you have a handler?" He countered, instead of answering what I'd asked.

"In many ways." I nodded.

"Then yes, Max has the capabilities to make my life... hell if I don't obey every direct order. So can his... wife."

Honesty. That hadn't been so hard, if you ignored the fact that we still didn't know very much about each other. And it didn't change a thing.

"I can take care of myself. Trust me." I ripped my arm from his grip, and I could tell he hadn't expected me to be able to. "Tell Max I *ordered* you to."

"Pandora, I can't. I wish I could do what you want of me, so I don't anger you further, but... you're in danger, very real danger," Kev said slowly. I could tell he wasn't entirely sure anymore if that were true or not.

I turned from him again and stormed out of the kitchen. Regardless of my show, I had trouble staying mad at him. If anyone understood his situation, I did.

"Fine, then. Stay. I'm going to take a shower." I started to walk forward, but Kev stopped me, and pushed me up against the wall.

"I *want* to tell you. Despite every reason I shouldn't, I want to." He kissed my forehead, and stepped back like he anticipated me hitting him, with such a sad expression on his face.

Trying not to whimper from this show of emotion I walked to my bedroom in a daze and dropped my clothes as I went. I examined my neck in the mirror. There were two faint marks, but they'd stopped bleeding.

I turned the water on, closing my eyes when I stepped into the spray. I shampooed my hair, trying hard not to think. Yet, it happened anyway. The concept of vampires was no less seductive to me now, than it was then.

A monster, *just like me*...

Absolutely unfathomable.

Even if he wouldn't admit it, that didn't make it any less true.

When I turned to rinse my hair I noticed Kev standing right behind me, gloriously naked. His skin was smooth, darkly tanned. I stared at him dumbly, with my hands still threaded in my hair.

His eyes raked over my slick, wet flesh. The red had escaped his gaze now, but flickers of flame still remained. He was pure hunger, and that made my head begin to pound with instant and devastating lust.

"I really didn't mean to upset you," he said remorsefully. "All I wanted to do was give you pleasure, but then my instincts took over, and I haven't been practicing *this* way of life very long."

"How long have you been 'practicing' it?"

He smiled grimly. "A whole lot less than my previous life."

"Kev, are you a vampire?" I blurted out.

He scowled, but then he seemed to weigh my tone when I asked it, the eagerness and slightly breathy quality to my voice. It wasn't what he'd expected.

"Your eyes are dilated again..." Then it clicked.

"Why would you be *intrigued* by this?" he asked, confused.

Well, he hadn't denied that either.

"Honestly?" I asked, and he nodded eagerly.



A wicked idea entered my head, and I was past rationale. I wanted him, over and over again. I rinsed my hair while he waited, somewhat patiently. I poured liquid soap onto my washcloth and began running it over my body. His eyes shifted back and forth between it and my face.

"I'm obsessed with vampires. The idea of them gets me off. To think of a man taking me in such a way..."

Kev's nostrils flared. "You *desire* this? The prospect of a vampire being here with you, right now in this shower, turns you on?" He stared with a heat-saturated gaze, like this idea appealed to him a great deal, maybe even as much as it did me.

He took a step forward and stopped, seemingly transfixed, watching the water and bubbles run down my skin. The washcloth slid down my stomach, right above my apex and up again.

His hands clenched, and I knew he wanted to touch me.

"Tell me what you find erotic about it," he requested sinfully.

"Well," I paused, and his now startling blue eyes found mine, "what I was thinking just before you came in..."

"What?"

"I couldn't help but fantasize a particular sequence of events." I bit my lip. I'd never shared my private fantasies with anyone. "Some of it was from a book I've read at one point or another, though some of it was from..."

"Another dream." He stepped closer, into the water with me, forcing me to back up to accommodate him. "And what were these events exactly?"

The water glistened on his taut, lickable muscles. I couldn't help but reach out and touch him. One of his arms encircled my back, and I stared up the inch or two that separated us.

"Well, you already accomplished the first part, since you are 'the animal' in question." I told him. His brow rose so high, I laughed. "It always started with a hot guy coming into the shower with me. He would then press me against the tile..."

"Where do you have these... fantasies?" Kev inserted softly.

"Normally, in the shower."

"Oh, really?" Kev turned my body and pressed me against the wall, his entire body trapping mine. He lowered his head to my ear. "Do you touch yourself when you think these wicked thoughts?"

"Sometimes."

"Mmm," he mumbled, "That's the dream *I* will be having tonight."

His lips met my slick skin and his tongue slid up my jugular, over the two marks he had put there.

"Close your eyes, and picture it while you tell me."

"Are you a vampire?" I asked again, and he sighed.

"*If* I were a vampire," he whispered back, "what would you do if I bit you and, for some reason I wouldn't understand, couldn't mask the experience for you like I could with someone else?"

"Could you do that?"

"Hypothetically, if I were one, I would think so," he replied.

"Then what makes me different?" I asked.

"I would imagine it would be whatever you're not allowed to tell me." Kev cupped my breast with his free hand.

"Oh."

"Tell me more about your fantasy. I really want to know. If I were a vampire, I would think I could read your mind. And if I couldn't, it would make everything so much more *difficult*." Kev caressed my ear with his tongue.

I smiled, closing my eyes. "It would always be different. Sometimes, it would just happen, and others, he would take his time about it. But always his teeth would slide through my flesh, and he would get rougher. He would..."

Kev bent his head to take my nipple into his mouth. His hand travelled down my thigh, scattering my thoughts. "And then what?" He licked his way down my body, coming to his knees onto the porcelain.

I had to grip the ledge beside us when Kev's mouth hovered so close over my clit. His tongue flicked out and grazed sensitive nerves. He parted my thighs, staring up at me with longing.

He slipped a wet finger inside of me, and I rolled my hips against his mouth. I took his waterlogged hair between my fingers, the dirty blonde strands soft and warm.

"Well you're doing... just fine on your own," I gasped.

"Hmmm," he agreed, chuckling when my cries turned to screams.

Faster than even I could process, Kev lifted my weight and planted my thighs on his shoulders, his arms

closing over my stomach. My back touched the tiled wall, icy even with the steam.

His mouth devoured me, and in this completely helpless position all I could do was enjoy the ride. With every lick it wasn't only *my* excitement that increased. He growled impatiently every time I cried out, and it seemed to push him forward to the goal of breaking my mind.

When what I knew now to be his fangs grazed me, I orgasmed roughly. He pressed me more firmly against the wall, lifting my body higher so my unstable legs would drop open.

"Kev, please," I begged.

His torture increased, the skill blowing my now fragile mind. One crash of sensation was only met by another, until there was endless, continuous pleasure.

When he finally released me, I thought he would let me down, but that clearly wasn't the case. His shoulders flexed as he came off of his knees, bringing me with him. My back slid up the tiles and the renewed coldness wasn't a relief to the heat.

"Do you want me inside of you?" he whispered, with my legs now draped over his forearms, holding me in place with our groins touching.

"Do you want to?" I rolled my hips over his cock, and his lip curled back. A look of firm determination showed on his face. "Is that what you want to do to me, Kevlar?"

Not answering, he simply impaled me and drove my body back against the wall behind me. I screamed, bucking around him as he corkscrewed himself deeply.

"Harder?"

"Please," I begged, listening to his delectable growl erupting. "The wall behind me shook. He could bring the whole place down, and as long as he never stopped, I didn't care.

And then he smiled.

His sharp canines glistened in the light, and I convulsed around him again in a rush of warmth that bathed him. His smile froze, allowing the desire-filled sneer to curl his mouth.

"You really weren't lying, were you?"

I shook my head, and he looked even more pleased.

"This is just too good." He licked his lips and sent my muscles into spasms again.

Kev shuddered in my arms, starting to pump even deeper as he leaned over my throat. Never had anticipation

ever gotten to me this acutely before. My hips rolled against his, and he panted in my ear.

"Don't stop," he begged with a slight lisp.

This time the pain wasn't as sharp because I'd been expecting it, flowing into the liquid pleasure. When his hand closed on my breast, the moment couldn't have been more perfect. I came hard around him, my muscles so tight he rumbled his ecstasy against my jugular, the scent of blood heavy in the damp air.

I shrieked in his ear, and I wasn't quite able to stop. My body just exploded. I couldn't separate any one sensation from the next. The difference between ignorance and knowledge was bliss.

He lifted his head when he came, and there was blood on the corner of his mouth again. This time I didn't think. I just kissed him.

His reaction was like a firecracker. He slammed me back against the tiles of the shower, grinding his softening cock and continuing the shocks of pleasure that overloaded my nervous system.

"Fuck, do you have any idea how incredibly sexy you are?" he asked me in a ragged voice.

I smiled uncertainly. That wasn't exactly a description I would have applied to myself, but staring into his eyes had me wanting to believe differently.

"Not until you told me," I said, and ran my tongue over his lips.

Then the pain started.

And it wasn't mine.

"What is that?" Kev gripped his head, and closed his eyes.

I pushed his hair out of his eyes, feeling his suddenly feverish skin.

He placed me gently onto the ground, and my breath caught. My mind worked furiously, reliving the past few moments, examining every contingency.

What the hell had I just done?

Had I really just fed a vampire *my* half-demon blood? Wouldn't their diet consist primarily of human blood? I was the only succubus child born to this earth. So how could Kevlar have known what I would do to him?

I should've known better.

*Damn, damn, mother fucking damn it!*

"Baby, tell me what's wrong," I whispered. He put his forehead on my shoulder and winced unbearably.

"Everything is on— fire," he choked.



"It's okay. We'll get you fixed up." I leapt from the shower and grabbed a towel to wrap around him. When he half collapsed, I caught him, as easily as he'd held me before.

"It's okay, baby, I'll make it okay."

Kev tried to help me get him to the bed, but he wasn't much use. I had to haul and drag him anyway. And with each step, the pain multiplied.

Once there, I laid him on the bed. I took the towel to dry him off, but his heated skin had done most of the job for me. He was blistering hot, far more so than anyone should be able to live through. There was no way he could survive this. I had just killed him!

"What's happening to me?"

"I don't know," I said through the glistening tears I tried not to let fall.

Kev turned his head and finally opened his eyes. His brow furrowed when he reached out to cup my cheek.

"It's okay," he murmured, mimicking my words.

"No, it isn't." I blinked, and a sole tear ran down my face, falling onto Kev's fingers. "I didn't mean to."

It seemed such a pathetic excuse.

"I believe you," he said softly. His cell phone rang, and he held his hand out. The phone came by magic, and he flipped it out and croaked out a hello.

"Hey, Max."

It was painful for me to hear him speak with his fading voice. As the seconds passed, he changed before my eyes. I just wished I could identify what had happened.

"What the hell did you just do?"

"What-chu talking about?" Kev slurred. His eyes went hazy, unfocused when he looked at me.

"A second ago even the weak link we'd had severed. Corrine and I just lost *everything* we have with you, even the bond that makes you obey me. Marcus and Holly say they've experienced the same thing. I repeat, what the fuck did you just do?"

My eyes widened. Not all the words made a great deal of sense, but enough had. I didn't understand this bond business, but I could tell whatever I had done to him was vaster than what I'd previously considered.

"I drank Pandora's blood, and now something is happening to me," Kev admitted quickly, and I winced.

*Yea, you're dying...* I thought to myself

"What the hell is she?" A feminine voice demanded in the background.

"She can't tell me that." Kev winced, sweat beading on his brow. He spoke so slowly, pronouncing each word.

I manifested a cold washcloth so it would appear in my hand. Kev looked at me quizzically, and smiled when I began to wipe him down. I made no move to hide it this time.

Rules. Screw 'em.

"Don't you need spells?" He whispered.

"Spells?"

His confusion increased, but he refrained from comment. He caught one of my hands, bringing it to his lips while he talked on the phone with the other.

"Bullshit," Max snapped. "*Make* her tell you."

Kev tried out a weak laugh. "I can't tell her what I am either. But I knew. Technically, he hadn't *told* me what he was. We were still on the hypothetical.

"Is she still with you?"

"Of course. I'm being babied and pampered as we speak."

"Then let me talk to her," Max said, sounding reasonably mollified.

Kev seemed like he wanted to say no, but he didn't argue. He handed me the phone.

I didn't even have the thing in my hand before I began speaking. "Hi... Max was it? I can't tell you anything, until I talk to my *own* handler. Those are the rules, the same as Kev's. I'm not entirely sure what you people are, but rest assured, I will do everything in my power to make Kev whole again."

I had never been one to beat around the bush. Small talk was wasted time I couldn't afford, especially now. Max had absolutely no reason to believe me, but this was the most intelligent avenue in my point of view.

"How long?" Max asked.

"Give me a half an hour, an hour tops. If I find I'm in over my head, I'll call you back."

"Fine. If anything..." Max started in an aggravated tone.

"If you're going to threaten me, think again. It won't help you or Kevlar at all. And I promise you'll regret what you say now. I don't ever forgive, and I never forget. You shouldn't either, Max."

And I hung up.

Kev burst out laughing, and then groaned. "No one, not even our betters, talk to Max like *that*."

I walked to my dresser to get an item I prayed would help us. If praying did any good, for I didn't think

there was anyone listening to a half-demon. But I certainly hoped so. I was pretty sure I wasn't high on the big man's list of people to help.

"Kev, I really hope you don't hate me by the end of this. I honestly mean that," I whispered, and he groaned again. He went sheet white, and I could feel the newfound heat coming off of him, even from here.

"I know this isn't your fault," Kev said raggedly. "If you'd ever suspected this, you wouldn't be this obviously heartsick or repentant now."

I placed my hand on the wall beside the dresser, and a hole appeared under my palm. Kev didn't say anything when I reached in to pull out a heavy length of chain. The pendant held a large garnet, and smaller fire-rubies around it. These utterly perfect gems were only found in one place.

And it wasn't here.

They didn't have cell phones in hell, and Ivor really wasn't supposed to stay in contact with me, but he did so anyway. This talisman would call him, and those like him, depending on how broad I made the call. This jewellery had never been meant to come to earth, mostly because it was so easy for it to fall into the wrong hands, and the powers it held could cause mass and final destruction.

I spoke rapidly in Ivor's native tongue, one he had patiently taught me from childhood. And that was even before he finally told me he wasn't human, and where I came from.

There was always a strange silence before my father appeared, like all sound had been sucked into a vacuum. I knew Kev experienced it, too. He stared at the necklace in my hand, and I wondered if he might know about it.

A searing flash exploded through the room, competing with Kev's temperature. Steam rose in the air, and I rolled my eyes. My dad had always favoured human dramatics. He even thought them funny.

I let him watch far too much television.

Ivor thankfully appeared in human form, though a very large one at almost eight feet. We looked a lot alike in both bodies, so much more than Lillian and I ever did. I only possessed her hair colour in *this* form. He had told me the demon genes always won out, which implied there were more examples than just me, though he'd contradictorily said I was an original, to be *here* in this realm.

Ivor smiled down at me, but when he saw Kevlar, that changed. I waited for him to say something, but he didn't move, just observed.

Then appallingly enough, he laughed.

"You found yourself a good, vampire boyfriend?" Ivor asked with amusement.

"You knew they existed?" I asked. When my dad nodded, I growled. "He drank my blood."

"*Without* your permission?" Ivor demanded. His gold eyes went an endless black as he looked at Kev. A snarl teased his lips, and I knew he was about to lunge. See; melodramatic.

"No, dad, I wanted him to," I said, though that wasn't quite the truth—the first time.

"Oh." Ivor walked to the bed, while Kev watched him curiously.

"He's changing," Ivor said, sniffing the air.

"Into what?" Kev and I asked at the same moment.

Ivor cocked his head as if he hadn't expected him to speak in a language he would understand. Like one would with an animal. I really didn't like that.

"Vampires are like leeches, you see, and they're completely mouldable. When my kind cursed yours to this existence we had no idea what to expect, and you've proven an interesting race, to say the least. Have you heard the term, you are what you eat?"

Dawning comprehension broke over Kev's face, and he looked back at me. His expression became unreadable.

"You're a demon," Kev whispered.

How had he known that? I didn't get what Ivor had said to lead him to the truthful conclusion.

"Daughter, some time ago, his race was no more than just a dream. Because of our keepers, and actions they deemed necessary, we cursed them from bliss to *this* existence. We destroyed their purpose, their reason for being," Ivor told me, but Kev's burning gaze caught his. "He knows exactly what you are. Or what his line has told him of us, though I am sure he doesn't have the exact facts, but one thing is certain; he has every right to despise you and me."

That had me cold.

I waited for the fallen man to respond, but what happened was far worse. Kev stopped breathing. His body went so still, he looked dead. I walked to the bed and climbed up on top of it, shaking him awake with fear in my mind, though there was no need.

His head turned, his eyes opening again but I didn't see any hatred when he looked at me.

A strange sound filled my ears, and I realized it was me, repeatedly whispering; "I'm sorry."

"You know, when we convert a human, they pass out while this happens," Kev murmured.



"Because humans are weak. A born pureblood isn't," Ivor explained. "Your body won't allow you to pass out from the pain. It isn't in your make-up, like it is in theirs."

Kev took possession of my hand, and pulled it onto his chest. He really didn't seem as strong as my father made it sound.

"There isn't anything I can do for him, daughter. Kevlar Brandenburg will become a demon— part so, anyway. There isn't any going back, but it... isn't complete yet. I've never seen this take place, so I do not know what to expect," Ivor explained.

"Not finished?" Kev mumbled.

"My daughter is merely half, as you now will be. The more of her blood you drink, the closer you will become to what she is, though, because of what you are, not the same," Ivor paused as if listening to something. "No, Kevlar Brandenburg. It really is already too late to go back, and you will remain this way now. You can choose not to take her blood again, and remain as you are. But there isn't another option."

Kev didn't react at all, but I felt for him. How could I have been this stupid?

Out of all the questions I thought he would ask next, what he said came as a surprise to me.

"Is that why I can't read her at all?" Kev asked.

"Why my power has no effect on her?"

Ivor nodded. "It is also the reason you're so attracted to her, over and above that you like her personality or looks." Even as he said this, I sensed he left something huge out, I just didn't know what. "That deep, unrelenting craving you have when you're near her. She is the essence of what we cursed you with. It's only right that you crave what is such a big part of you."

Ivor's head swivelled toward the window, and he snorted at something unseen.

"My time here grows short. I am being summoned back. On to this other vampire that seeks you, this Coren something or other. Watch out for him, he wants something *very* vital." Ivor turned to me. "It's imperative to you that when Kevlar Brandenburg heals, you tell Maximus Cornwall all about your *other* heritage."

"Why?"

"Because there's so much I can't tell you," Ivor admitted with agony in his golden eyes. "And you will need all the help they will give you for what is to come."

I stared back at him dumbly, but I was used to it. It was a normal day if Ivor couldn't tell me anything.

"How bad is it, dad?"

"Worse than any of your possible imaginings. And I will do what little my constraints will allow, but now I really must..."

And he was gone, but I knew it wasn't by *his* doing.

That always happened when he got close to telling me something he shouldn't. His visits were always the longest when we talked about nothing more than casual things.

## CHAPTER SIX

"It's okay," Kev said for the tenth time. I hopped off the bike and visually surveyed my new "vampire".

Again.

Other than being a little rough around the edges, he almost looked... normal, though at the same time he was nothing like the Kev I had met.

"No, it's not," I argued. "We don't even know what I just did to you. I really should've known better."

He just kissed me. Again. Anytime I tried to blame this on myself, he shut me up one way or another. He growled against my lips, his arms closing around me. When his fangs grazed my tongue, I shuddered.

"Hmm. After we're done here, can I take you home and pound you into the bed for a while?" He whispered seductively in my ear. He left me breathless, and now I had to tell the hardest story of my life.

"Please," I replied softly. "I need you." But was it normal to need sex this much?

He led me toward the tall hedges that surrounded the house within. The outside of the Cornwall mansion was huge and imposing, but also elegant and lush. Its three stories rose above us and forced me to crane my neck to see all of it.

The door opened of its own accord, and Kev just laughed.

"I guess they are eager for us." He slid his arm around my waist, walking close beside me. "I wish I had the time to pull you into the bathroom. I want you, right now."

"My dad said it would be this way." I smiled at the insistent heat he displayed.

"I don't care why, I just want you. I don't want to wait, yet I have to."

"I know, babe. Ick, I almost feel like I'm meeting your parents," I complained, trying to divert him. I knew it wouldn't take much to convince me to just turn around and leave.

I didn't know if this attraction thing worked the same way for both of us —me, being the demon, and him, the "spawn"— but my fingers itched to touch him, to stroke his entire body. Or maybe it was just my dread of what was to come, and a rare need for comfort.

"In a way, you are," he concurred, momentarily distracted. "Both of my real parents and the rest of my family are dead now. As they should be."

"How?"

"The Cornwalls had visited Germany on the bequest of the Council, our government, to investigate claims of a group of vampires who terrorized the country and adhered to no one's rules but their own. They didn't hide their existence as they were supposed to, and this endangered my entire race."

"Let me guess, these were your parents?"

Kev nodded. "Corrine never suspected just how bad it would be, and she knew they had to be brought to a fast end. Our government gave her permission to do whatever she had to. They ruthlessly battled my Coven for supremacy. The Cornwalls wiped clean through, right to the heart, and destroyed them. Everyone thinks the Canadian vampires are weak because of how we live, but the European Covens never suspect just how hard or viciously we fight for *our* way of life, and how often we are forced to. I see the differences now. I'm the sole survivor of that same German Coven, brought here to North American to see the distinction between slavery and the freedom I'd never known." A hard glint entered his eyes.

"It didn't matter at all that your parents and family were slaughtered? You don't resent Corrine at all?" I asked, curious about this Leader, who ruled him. But mostly I

wanted to know just what his parents had done to him— I sensed it was nothing like what Lillian had done to me.

"No. I am eternally grateful for what she did and continues to do for me, and I will *always* be at her side to do what she needs of me. Corrine has never treated me like they did. I was born and bred to be my parents' bitch. I'd been trained to be an animal, just like all of my brothers. I spent most of my time in a cage by their 'thrones', overlooking their Coven, like the ornaments my Mother preferred to think us."

Huh, interesting. "And as an animal, what did you do?"

"They pointed and I demolished, whether it was a single vampire or overthrowing legions. I spent centuries like that, until they came head-to-head with an entity more devious and powerful than they were. You see, all of my parents' children, save me, had been released to battle that night. To this day, I don't know why, for if it had been different, they would have slaughtered me like they did the rest of my kin. Still caged, a snarling and uncivilized beast, my brother-in-arms, Holly, found me. It was he who saved me in the end. He saw something of value when I saw nothing. Holly bargained for my life, like I would be his pet." Not even a bit of bitterness entered his tone to say

this. "Both he and Corrine are the only reasons I live today. Even after all of these years, I am still not what I would consider tame."

"Just how old are you?"

"Twenty years shy of five hundred," he replied.

"And when did Holly free you?"

"About four or five decades ago."

Wow. He hadn't been kidding when he said he was young to civilization. I knew there were a great many details I didn't know about his past yet, but I knew enough.

"And now, I'm very eager to hear about the *other* half of yours, the human one, no less. You can't even tell me a little bit?" He changed the subject. We both knew it pained him to discuss this.

I stared at him, trying to find the beast he spoke of, the monster before the one I'd just created. Now his eyes were a deep metallic black-blue, which glimmered like the darkest sapphires on earth. They were beautiful to me, unique even. So much like mine now.

After the pain ceased, he had sat up on my bed, looked around, and commented on *the colour of my curtains*. Nothing else, no mention of deceiving or changing him. As infuriating as it had been, at least he



hadn't freaked out, in turn causing me to do the same.

Because I would have.

"I'd rather only have to explain it once. It's pretty out there." I took in the luxurious surroundings of the foyer as we walked through the open door, him a little ahead of me. "Even for us."

Everything about him had become more definable, more pronounced. If Kev hadn't been lethal on the senses before, he was now. Even the way he moved seemed more catlike, and so very sexy.

"What are you thinking?"

"That it's nice to have someone I can be honest with for once," I replied.

"More than just me, Pan, there are many more."

"I was also thinking about how much I want you to throw me against a wall and have crazy sex with me." I relished his chuckle, even as it lightened the mood.

We walked into a plush study, but what we found wasn't what I had expected. The dismal pallor over the crowded room was immediate, like a dense cloud of despair.

So many pairs of eyes met mine. Some glared, but most looked simply curious. Max had promised not to tell

them a thing before I'd gotten there. In hindsight, I wasn't sure that was a good thing.

When their shocked eyes touched Kev, they widened as a whole. Like they didn't recognize him. But concern for something else was there, too.

"What happened now?" Kev said with resignation.

"He killed Samuel," a cool looking blonde woman answered, who, I assumed, was Corrine, mostly because of the violent purple shade of her eyes, which Kev had mentioned. "He hurried this time and didn't finish what he'd started before fleeing. Samuel was still in one piece when we found him."

"We almost caught him, and someone else was with him," Max continued for her, when emotion clogged her throat. He patted his wife's hand. "An unknown woman."

"Well, aren't you going to ask?" The man who stood at Corrine's right inserted into the conversation. His impatience was not met well by any of us.

"Kane, chill." Marcus coughed discreetly.

Looking to me, Max smiled. "Would you care to explain the most recent development to my Coven, before my son blows a gasket? As you requested, we have said nothing."

"I converted Kevlar." I shrugged. Simple, concise. Got the point across.

"Into *what*?" Kane demanded. He waved his hand in Kev's direction. "You're both completely absent from my radar! Even though you're standing right here! Do you know how many laws that breaks?" He snarled at Kev. "And *you*..." He turned on me, and Kev jerked me back with a roar.

"Do not *ever* try to touch her with your magic," Kev said in a deadly voice, one so cold I craved to hear it again. It called to my more sinister and sadistic tendencies. "It won't work, but the intention just pisses me off."

"You bring some sort of freak in here, and you expect me not to say something?" Kane's fists bunched at his sides. I flinched at that, making Kev and Max snarl on my behalf. "At least I am protective of our people, unlike you. My brother is dead, and you're running around doing nothing. What is this thing you bring before us? She shouldn't even be here! How do you even know we can trust her with Coven secrets?"

But when I spoke, it wasn't to inquire about that. "The question is, dipshit; do you *really* want to find out what I am?" I stared at him, knowing my eyes faded to midnight pitch while he watched. I'd figured out by now

that when their eyes turned red, it was actually blood, caused by anger. And now Kane could see the indisputable difference.

Kane stumbled back from his Leader's chair, and Corrine chuckled.

"I like you," she told me.

"Thanks." I smiled grimly. My tongue ran over my teeth, which were *all* sharper. Not just the canines. I got the full meal-deal.

Something about their Leader, Maximus, shifted. Like seeing us changed his decision about having his Coven present for this conversation. He didn't ask that I answer Kane, and spill the beans. Instead, he forced them all to leave with a harsh reprimand, which Kane had inspired.

I watched Matthew, Marcus, and Kelly walk by with the others. They sadly smiled at me. I took in every other face of this gathering, knowing I would remember every one of them.

"You okay there, bud?" A shorter man with oddly coloured hair and several piercings asked.

"Yeah, Holly, just peachy," Kev replied and his friend nodded. So he was the one who had taken pity on Kevlar and liberated him.

He nodded to me with a respect I didn't feel I deserved.

When the door finally shut, Corrine spoke in a language I didn't recognize, not in the least trying to hide it.

"A spell for privacy," Kev supplied.

"Oh!" I said with final understanding. "That's what you meant by spells then?"

"Yes. We use focal points such as words and objects," Max said, and sat back in his chair. "I take it you don't?"

I shook my head. "I picture something, and it happens." I stared at my hand, and a perfect red apple appeared. I tossed it, and he caught the fruit, briefly examining the object.

"Impressive."

"I guess."

"So, what exactly are you now?" Corrine tilted her head to examine her follower with a rueful smile.

"A half-demon, or more to the point, a quarter," Kev said with an odd twist to his lips as he led me to a settee across from them. "My transformation isn't completed yet."

"A demon...?" Corrine echoed. And here I had thought she'd figured it out.

"When he drank my blood, it changed him, but it isn't complete because Kevlar hasn't taken enough," I said. "But that isn't the important part right now. My father believes there is something else I *must* discuss with you."

"Else? What is more important than a vampire-demon running around?" Corrine abolished. "Never in my life have I *ever* heard of such a thing, or a demon living on earth for that matter, at least, one who hasn't escaped. They are always quickly caught, and don't live in million dollar penthouses with high-profile writing careers."

"Because I am the only thing like me allowed to be here. But don't ask the reasons. I don't know them."

Oh, that so didn't go over well. Kev hissed like the words hurt him, Corrine looked like I'd smacked her. Only Maximus didn't react.

"The *only* one? You are completely alone?"

I nodded, uncomfortable at the instant sympathy they felt for me. "I have lived my entire life like this."

"Just how old are you?" Corrine asked.

"Thirty-nine."

"Oh, my, a baby," she responded with grief etched on her face. "But you have us now, to take care of you, little one."

I blinked, not sure how to process such a statement. Little *what* now? I was almost twice her apparent size. The hard woman I had first seen, and this one, were not the same. Her motherly tone made me want to cry, and I think she knew it.

Kevlar pulled me against him for comfort. "Wow. That is some impression you just made, darling. Corrine doesn't even talk to her blood like that."

"If my children could act like adults on occasion, I would consider it. Instead, I have a bunch of power-hungry brats that throw temper-tantrums when they don't immediately get what they want. Case in point; Kane."

"Your son? Ahh, I feel for you, Mrs Cornwall," I answered, and she grinned in a sardonic manner. I didn't know what it was about her, but to me, she was likeable. And to me, that meant a lot.

"Bah!" She waved her hand around. "Corrine, Cor, but none of this Mrs Cornwall crap. Makes me feel old, and that title is only reserved for the Council and people who piss me off. Neither Kevlar nor you have done that. Today, anyway. Check back tomorrow." Her eyes positively sparkled with mischievousness.

"So, my dear," Max inserted, bringing us back to the matter at hand. "What exactly are you supposed to be

talking to us about?" He looked at Kev, who seemed uncomfortable under the scrutiny.

"Hey, now," Kev objected. "I don't know any more about this than you do. I can't read her mind either, and she's remarkably closed lipped."

I rolled my eyes.

Where did I start? They all waited with expectation, even if they didn't look directly at me. I had the impression they knew I'd be uncomfortable with this, even though there was nothing on the exterior to show it.

"There are many rules to my existence," I murmured. "I know you would understand that because from what Kevlar tells me, you have only a little more freedom than I do."

"More?" Kevlar echoed. His hand tightened around mine, sensing what was coming.

"Yes." I turned toward him. "When you lose control of yourself, what happens?"

"You've seen it," he replied. "My eyes fill with blood, and my Curse wants free, sometimes, taking away my will and choices."

"It's a battle to see which entity wins, right— you, or your Curse?"

"Yes, but what does this have to do with anything?"



"I can't hide as easily in the open." I sighed. "I shift to true form, if you will. You just sprout fangs, and from what I gather, you have power over other's minds to hide those little details on the chance that you are caught. I am only half demon, and the power over a human's head isn't within my capabilities. When I change, I *can't* hide it, ever."

"And what form is that?" Max asked idly, but he couldn't quite cover his interest in my answer.

My head swivelled to look at him. "Did you honestly think a demon looked like *this*?" My hands fluttered over my body.

"I know exactly what a full demon looks like." Max sneered. A flash of chaotic hatred flared and Corrine's eyes flashed to her husband's. "Ahh, I see. Well I would look much the same." I didn't forget Ivor's cautions about the vampires hating a succubus's very existence, yet Max seemed to keep me separate from them in his mind. There was only one way to inspire a violent reaction in someone. A very bad experience I couldn't help but wonder at, but wouldn't ask about. I let that one drop, and changed the subject back. "Whatever his reasons may have been, Ivor wants me to tell you about my human ancestors and how *that* affected me."

"He didn't tell you why?" Corrine murmured.

"No. He said I needed help, and you'd be it. He was taken from me before he could tell me anything of much use. I'm not allowed to know—"

"About the worlds beyond ours. Yes, both my mate and I know that all too well," Corrine replied. "We've encountered many such instances where knowledge we couldn't possess was key, and we were unable to attain it."

"I gathered that."

Corrine sighed. "Oh, how I hate the powers that be. They're vague and ridiculous."

"Welcome to my *entire* life," I muttered, gaining my nerve to see how this unbelievable race would accept the even more farfetched. "Do any of you know the legend of Pandora's Box? It would make this so much easier."

"The human woman who doomed mankind by opening an object she had been specifically bade not to touch," Corrine answered.

"Yes, pretty much." I nodded. "Well that same woman was the first of my recorded line, my ancestor. The myth says that Pandora was the first woman to walk the world, made by Zeus himself to impose his vengeance on mankind because another god, Prometheus, took it upon himself to bestow the gift of fire upon them."

"Now while that very well may have happened, the details passed down through our line aren't *that* specific. All we know is that Pandora came into possession of the box, and it was part of a curse an enemy had put upon her. I suppose it could've been Prometheus or another God. I really don't know."

"Part of it?" Kev echoed. "What was the rest?"

"The other part of said curse was that Pandora and her descendants were to bear only females, with one sole purpose they had no choice but continue; to protect the box, and to be the keeper of it," I explained. "It was to serve as a reminder to humanity for all time of what it conceals and a woman's curiosity, something man didn't know until Pandora came."

"And what does the box conceal?"

I smiled grimly. "The box isn't what some legends say it is. Its first form is that of an Urn. It's only a box when it's being transported, I guess for a quick getaway. The one weird thing I've found, is that it doesn't feel completely evil, only what is inside of it is, but not the object itself."

"What is it then?" Max pushed again. I felt uncomfortable telling him, after having to be quiet for so long on the subject. A quality bred into my line, where the

Urn was concerned. It could mean the difference between success and certain death.

Unable to delay any longer, I sighed. "A gateway to the lower realms. I don't know exactly who created it or why, but when Pandora opened the box that was put into her care, she released hell on earth."

"According to the legends and assumptions based on that; this makes sense." Corrine's finger tapped her chin as she thought it over. "It would symbolize when Pandora released misery on a world that had never known any such thing." She paused. "But what was all that talk about the second time she opened it, when she released hope?"

"It signifies the *closing* of the box. The action drags hell back to where it belongs." I laughed bitterly. "And then there are some people who believe that hope was released on earth to torment humanity even more. To make them remember how it *used* to be, before Pandora and her problems arrived. To hope for a change that would never come."

"And that was it? The demons and such were trapped by the box being restored to its previous state?" Max asked.

"Taken back to the lower realms, yes, but not trapped. They can and do escape, and everyone in this room

knows that. For a lot of them, these hellish monsters had their first taste of this world. Since then, those same creatures are fighting to come back *here*. The box is an ideal way for thousands of them to jump realms at the same moment and not in ones and twos when the opportunity presents itself."

"And that's what you're for?" Kev asked quietly. "A guard between us and them?"

"In a way. There are many different kinds, and I protect but one gateway. However, *this* one provides an open rip between worlds, while others are just fissures they find between this realm and the next."

"I see," Max grunted.

"That's not all of it. Now we get to *my* birth and life. About forty years ago, my mother, Lillian, opened the box out of curiosity. But she lost her nerve at the very last second, knowing the legends just as well as I. However, it was one second too many. A single demon escaped."

"Ivor," Kev muttered.

"And here I am."

"How many of your line have opened it?" Kev asked.

"Just the first Pandora and my mother. Everyone else knew better, including me. And out of every generation, I have the most reason to be curious."

"What if you have sisters in the same generation? Do all of you look after it?"

"No, this responsibility goes to the eldest, and once the heir is of age, the old keeper loses any power over it. Though I have to admit, I'm more powerful than any of them were."

"I'd bet," Max concurred.

"Ivor also mentioned that Coren searched for something important to you. Could that be the box?" Kev asked intelligently.

"It would make sense, though I don't know how he'd know about its existence at all. The location, or even the country, isn't exactly broadcasted, unless you're a demon," I explained. "It calls out to their kind, and it is them we must run from on the occasion they find it and force the keeper to open it."

"Coren is a crafty prick," Corrine said thoughtfully. "Leave it to him to bring Armageddon upon earth. Only he would've dared."

"So you really believe that's his plan?" I pressed.

"Why else would he have dared to try and take you while you were protected by four vampires?" Max grunted.

I snorted at the use of the word "protection."

"I will just have to go after him, and end his annoyance to all of us," I replied after a long moment.

Kev's fingers stilled on my flesh, the line of his body hardened. His shimmering eyes clashed with mine.

"Calm down, he-man." I stroked his cheek, loving his anger that was quick to come and hard to put away, like mine was.

"No."

"I promise you, I will find this man. I have extensive... skills. If he wants the box, I say let him have it." I grinned. Kev just stared down at me. "You can even come hold my hand."

Only then did he smile.

There was only one way, one decision that could be made. I was the keeper of the box, and I would do what I had to in order to keep it and Kevlar safe.

"Bait, you mean?" Corrine asked approvingly.

"I can track the Urn once it's in his possession, if he can even touch it. Which is the point I'm not sure on," I said almost gleefully. I became even more so when I saw the

flicker of satisfaction in her eyes. "Call it a gift. And being the only person to be able to open it, I know he can't."

"This just got interesting," Max concurred.

"And it wasn't before?" Corrine replied.

The atmosphere in the room changed to chilling, and I sensed it had little to do with the topic at hand. The vampires were immobile around me. When Max stood, his chair flew back a foot or so behind him from the abrupt movement. "Shit!"

"Not another one." Kev groaned.

"They were human this time, two of them. He left them in pieces at Stadium Skytrain Station, right out in the open, where he knew people would find the corpses right away." Max snorted with disgust. "There was another message for us. Holly and Milindya just called it in."

"I thought Pandora was next," Kev replied thoughtfully. "He hasn't deviated before."

"I think we misinterpreted him, or he was sidetracked. Regardless, he changed his plans," Corrine said softly, and I froze when she stared at me. "Your mother is next."

"Why my mother? What does Lillian have to do with any of this?"



"Does she have anything he would be looking for? She can't open the box, and unless he doesn't know that, it must be something else."

"No. She values normalcy and a quiet life composed of nothing outlandish that would interest him." Should I be disgusted with myself that I didn't feel the normal emotions about this news in regard to a parent? And even worse, if it had been Ivor I knew I would've.

"May I use the phone, please?"

It took a simple, very short call to confirm she was at home, asleep in her bed and rather annoyed I'd awoken her. After some short words, I hung up. Max regarded me with the oddest look of calculation.

"I recommend that Kev stays with you all of the time now. I think that would be best. Do you believe that to be a problem?" Max asked quietly.

"Of course that's no problem."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

I was somewhere between a dead sleep and an insightful wakefulness when my alarm went off.

Rise Against's "Savoir" came through the speakers, one of my favourites out of the new music CFOX had been playing lately.

When the familiar tune ended, the news began. The first story didn't catch my interest, but the details of the second penetrated my sleep-clogged intellect.

One thing became clear. Coren had struck *again*.

"Last night, there were two more murders," Charis continued in a subdued voice. "This double homicide was even more gruesome than the previous ones. The bodies were found on the corner of Thurlow and Melville Streets. The word Pandora was etched on the sidewalk, in two-foot letters, done with red paint. No one knows what this has to do with the murders, but it has been assured that they will know something shortly. "

I sat up in bed and Kev murmured at my hip. I growled softly, a small release of tension.

I knew the exact second that Kev woke up. He kissed my hipbone, apparently not listening. Then he became aware of how tense I was and began searching for the reason.

"Again?" he asked in tired disbelief.

I nodded.

His shadowy, ever-shifting eyes went darker still.

"We have to catch him. The humans didn't do anything to deserve his attentions. It's past overdue," I snapped, and then tuned back in to the radio station.

"The police have decided to enforce a curfew of nine p.m. every night until the murderer is caught. There will be repercussions for those who are caught out and about." Charis went on, distaste dripping from her tone.

Could they do that? Could they actually convince people they were safer in their homes than on the town? From the next comment that came, I knew I wasn't the only one to feel that way.

"I don't see that happening with much success," Scotty said after a moment of silence. Normally, they didn't hesitate to say what was on their minds, but this had never happened before. "How many people are actually going to stay home? It would be human nature to break a law they figure is unjust. They won't appreciate the babysitting."

"Ahh, curfews, aren't they magical?" Jeff said sarcastically. "They better catch him soon."

Yeah, *we* should. Here I was, sitting naked in bed and not doing a damned thing to end a problem the human

police had no chance at dealing with. So much time had been wasted, something I'd always despised.

"He's calling *me* out," I whispered. "Maybe I could end all of this, if I just went to him and gave him what he wants, or let him think he is getting it."

"No," Kev snapped.

"Why not, though? We haven't even left the apartment in two days to give him a chance to find me. If I went out..."

"I said *no*. You're not deliberately going out and letting him get to you. It isn't needed to catch this fleabag." Kev was immovable on this, just as he had been yesterday, and the day before that.

I snorted at his tone, the one that suggested he had a choice in this. He didn't, not if I decided to do something.

Somehow, I refrained from snapping back, or getting outwardly angry. Unlike most similar experiences in the past, Kev actually manipulated my defences enough that I *didn't* want to kill him most of the time. Most people couldn't claim that.

"You should phone Lillian again," Kev suggested, diverting the conversation from the fight that was bound to happen.

Lillian had absolutely refused to go into protective custody, whether it would be mine, or the Cornwall's Coven.

She had also questioned my sanity several times when I told her about the existence of vampires. She believed in demons, yet she couldn't make that final leap to know bloodsuckers were out there sharing this realm with us.

"Yeah, I should..." I reached for the phone, but something in the DJ's voice gave me pause.

"We have an interesting caller," Jeff started. His voice was strained, and a cold pit settled in my stomach. "He says he has something important to say about the murders, and was rather insistent on being on air. Hey, Coren?"

That cold ball turned to lead and then melted in the flash of blood rage.

"Hello," A deep, cultured voice purred; the most horrid sound I had ever heard.

In that one word, a goal had completely solidified. I craved his blood with absolute need; a vampire who'd been condemned by his own people for crimes no being should ever commit.

Oh, I would make him suffer for what he had done. I would tear him limb by bloody, mangled limb. I would just let go and when I was done, he'd be left in a condition that would make this entire mess look like mere paper cuts.

"Hi... Coren," Charis and Scotty said together. I didn't miss the tension. Did they sense that Coren wasn't a good person, or was it something else? What had he said to them off-air, to put them at unease?

After a moment of silence, Jeff cleared his throat. "You had something to say?"

"Charis mentioned a name written in paint," Coren started. "But it was actually in *blood*."

"And how would you know that?" Jeff demanded with disbelief, a laugh thick in his voice. I would've thought Coren a crazy person, too.

"I did it," he replied dispassionately.

"Right..." Scotty replied. "Then *who* is Pandora?"

"A woman who has something I want. And if she comes out of hiding, then I will consider ending my tirade."

"Exactly what tirade are you talking about?" Charis asked.

"Well, for starters, killing off you useless humans," Coren said snidely. Each word just dug his grave deeper.

"*Humans?*" Jeff echoed. I could just see his finger hovering over the disconnect button as he spoke.

"Vampires have mind control, right?" I whispered to Kev

"They're safe, Pan," Kev assured me. "Our magic comes from natural sources; radio waves aren't friendly to it, and it isn't any better over the phone. There isn't much he can do."

Okay. That would make me feel slightly better.

"If Pandora can't find it in her heart to save half of her heritage, then far more than a mere twenty or so will die." Coren laughed, and I froze in horrific revulsion at another mention of my name. "I've just begun. Demon, I *know* you're listening. Lillian is already mine."

Kev reached for me, but I shrugged him off. The radio hosts were silent for a moment, and I had to wonder what they were thinking.

"Who is Lillian?" Jeff asked cautiously.

"Pandora, I know where you are. I know you're in bed with the vampire. I can see both of you right now. I might not be able to get to you..."

"Coren, have you been drinking this morning?" Charis asked with nervous laughter. "Perhaps gasoline or turpentine?"

Did she believe him?

How could she?

Then there was a distinct click, and it hadn't been the hosts.

All of a sudden, Kev wasn't in bed with me, but at the window. He hadn't moved, but transported himself there. His cell phone appeared in his hand, and his fingers flew over the keys.

I flicked the switch, and the radio faded into silence. Rolling out of bed, I picked up my portable phone. I knew my mother was a slave to her routines. It wasn't even eight o'clock in the morning yet. She would be having her morning paper, right by the phone...

"Mom, damn it, pick up!" I practically screamed into the answering machine.

I knew she would be home today, and she never *didn't* pick up the phone. Lillian was way too anal about that. Someone might have an emergency; even though no one ever phoned her with the exception of me, and telemarketers. Lillian and popularity went together like chocolate ice cream and ketchup.

"Yeah, get someone over there *now*," Kev said to Max. "He's on the fucking radio! Yeah, just now, CFOX,



99.3. Then call the station, they will have the clip," he paused and listened.

"What the hell do you mean? And the cops haven't found out about it yet?"

"Found out about what?" I asked while I listened to the phone ring again and again, call after repeated call.

"Coren killed another member of my Coven, but our people found her right before the humans did, so it was never reported," Kev replied. I heard a loud growl from the other end. Max was pissed. Kev sighed at whatever he'd said, and I wasn't listening that close to hear what it had been.

"Yeah, I know. Have them call me when they get to Lillian's."

We both got off the phone at the same time. We exchanged a long, wary look; one filled with worry and hate. My stomach was just one huge knot.

Coren had her. And I knew it.

Yet the question remained, did he already have the Urn? But I should have known better. Only demons and the keeper could open it. He *couldn't* get to it without me, despite my paranoia.

I breathed through the panic, knowing its exact position, even now. Coren hadn't found the location yet, or

didn't know what to do with it when he had gotten there.

That was at least something.

"We have to go," I said quietly.

"We're not supposed to."

"I *have* to."

"No! Max said..."

"Max is your boss, not mine. You can stay here. I'll understand, Kev." And I did. I wouldn't be mad.

I understood the pressure he was under now, so much better than I had two days ago. He had filled in many of the holes of his past and how it shaped his present. As I had suspected, it wasn't pretty or something I wanted him to remember. He had led a life of servitude and cruelty, and his personality sometimes reflected that. Other times, I had to wonder how he became such a well-rounded, caring person.

"But think about this, okay? It's my responsibility to look after the Urn, not my mom's. I have to know where it is, and protect it. I don't have a choice."

"But..."

"No buts, Kev. I've explained it to you." I sighed.

"We can't let Coren have a gateway to hell. I know he can't open it, but he might find a way all the same. It's one of the greatest pieces of that realm on earth, and for whatever

reason, it's bound to *this* plane and can never leave. I can't let it fall into his hands."

"Why can't we just destroy it?" Kev demanded.

I had asked myself that once, but it was impossible for someone who'd lived on earth to destroy something forged in hellfire. Just like the amulet I now wore to summon my father.

"We just don't have that kind of power. No one in this realm does, not even a half-demon," I muttered, but I had to wonder if we could think of a way.

And if we succeeded, what would happen then? Something far worse, of that I had no doubt. Some things just weren't worth the risk.

"You're not going *anywhere* I won't be," Kev said. "I'll be damned if I let you do this alone."

I rolled out of bed, and was dressed before my feet even hit the floor. Just a thought, no more...

"I'm never going to get used to that."

"Get used to what? You're a vampire. You can do the same thing," I replied with confusion.

"Yeah, but when we do it, we draw energy from the earth and have to use focus. We can feel the energy when a spell is used, but not with you. The hair on the back of my neck doesn't even tingle when you use your magic. And I

can't even really call it that," Kev contemplated. "More like intent."

"Maybe *your* powers have changed now," I said thoughtfully. "You're part demon now. Perhaps, it changed the way you can use it."

He stared back me dumbly. Obviously, Kev had never considered it. This surprised me, but we had both been rather tense as of late.

Up until about ten minutes ago, the last forty-eight hours were the best I'd ever spent. Kev made me laugh and nothing ever surprised him; great for me, since I was full of surprises. He loved my cooking, the same shows, the same topics of conversation, and he was up for anything I wanted to do.

He was attentive, but vicious under the surface, something that kept me enthralled. Whenever he was near me I felt the aggressive vibes from him, though I had only recently figured out it was the Curse as well as him. He was very good at hiding his basic instincts that surpassed even normal vampires. They didn't have his upbringing.

"Pandora, it'll be all right," Kev assured.

"No, it won't, but thanks for saying so," I murmured and he grunted.

"Pan..." Kev grabbed my hand, pulling it up to his lips. "I will do what I have to."

"For what end, though?"

"To see you as safe and whole as I am able. With the powers involved here, that's all I can promise. I wish I had more to offer you."

I walked across the room to collect my purse, and Kev followed me. Then a knock on my front door disturbed my preparations.

"Thank you, Kev." I stood on my tip-toes and kissed him, but the knock sounded again and forced Kev to pull back with an indignant chuckle.

"I'll get it. You just get ready," Kev promised, and left my bedroom to walk down the hall.

I picked up my MP3 player from my dresser. If Coren felt the need to contact me via the radio program I listened to, then fine. Right now, I wouldn't discard or deny *any* tool, no matter how odd or slight they may be.

When push came to shove, the little things would be what saved your ass at the end of the day.

I *really* wanted to get this bastard. He begged for me to end his life.

I heard Kev murmur a thank you and close the door. I entered the kitchen the same moment he did, opposite me.

His eyes were turbulent when he stepped forward with a long white box wrapped in blue ribbon.

"Should I be jealous?" Kev asked with uncertain amusement. Was he?

"I don't know. Should you be?" I retorted, and he smiled. "Your guess is as good as mine."

"I wonder..."

"Maybe Sam is trying to suck up," I joked half-heartedly, an unsettled feeling in the pit of my stomach.

"Here's the card." Kev handed me the unopened envelope, not even attempting to read it.

I watched while he peeled off the golden seal of the florist and untied the intricate trimming. His nostrils flared slightly, but he kept his silence, staring down at the crepe-paper hiding the flowers from our view.

I cringed back, though I didn't understand why. Whatever it was, neither of us caught on right away, but we both knew one thing. The scent of flowers were heavily mixed with blood, the sickly sweet combination making the human in me want to hurl, and my demon half want to bathe in it.

"It's too much to hope that they're dyed, right?" Kev muttered.

"What about the smell?"

"Florist pricked herself on the thorns?" Kev sighed hopelessly.

"Then tell me one thing in regard to that theory," I said emotionlessly. My heart didn't clench, tears did not prick at my eyes. My mind remained clear and ready.

"And what would that be?" Kev said.

"How did the florist get a pint or two of my mother's blood? Last time I checked, Lillian wasn't into flower artistry." Of course with Kev never having met my mother, he wouldn't have the slightest clue what she smelled like.

Kev's nostrils flared again, and he fingered a rose in the middle of the stack, one the blood hadn't completely coated. The white petals shone with a sick gleam beneath the red. On a closer look, I could see the splashes over the stems.

"Son of a bitch!" Kev leapt away from the previously unassuming cardboard box.

I stared from him, and then to the box in alarm. Save the blood, I saw nothing amiss.

"He put a spell in the blood." Kev's eyes flashed bright red, and then black. He crouched low to the ground like the flowers would float from their confines and beat him over the head.

"Kev?" When he didn't respond, I had to swallow my broaching panic. "What was the spell?"

"He's older than we thought..." Kev murmured to himself. He shook his head back and forth like something spoke to him. "No. Can't take her." He looked past me. "It's not right..."

"Kevlar?" I stepped away, and he growled. His feral unblinking eyes met mine.

"No!" he shrieked with his muscles convulsing under his skin during some sort of schizophrenic episode. Was he going to shift? Did he have enough of my blood to have developed the secondary form? "He isn't what we think."

Another rippling snarl escaped his lips when he launched, his actions no longer his own.

Without thought, I threw up a sheet of protection around me, and Kev practically bounced off of it. My ears automatically tuned to a sound that didn't fit. But I was caught up with the more menacing problem at hand, needing to know I had that one under control before I moved onto the next. Rage filled his dead eyes and smooth young face. I was the prey he *needed* to get to, but he wasn't strong enough to battle my power.



My gaze sought the box of flowers, and pinpointed the noise. I had to move the barrier with me toward the counter, grabbing the paper-towel on the way to the table.

With the towel, I gripped one of the stems and lifted it up. I might be immune to most magic of this realm, but I wasn't taking any chances.

"What is...?" I stared at the contraption the greenery concealed, never considering people actually did things like this in real life— especially not someone with the powers of a god.

Then the *final* tick rang loud in my ears.

And the buried pipe bomb exploded in my face.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

A sea of blankness stretched out in every direction. I became aware of sharp pain— *pains*, many of them. There had never before been such agony.

Dreaming? Or maybe I was dead. That would be preferable.

"Pan?"

Who was that?

"What happened?"

I'd like to know that too.

"Pan, where are you?"

I didn't know where I was. Who was talking to me? I couldn't remember anything, and confusion reigned. Even my thoughts came in broken jerks and spurts.

"Damn it Pandora, where the fuck are you?"

Then it all came crashing back, no pun intended.

I went to call out to him, but it came out in a strangled whimper. My mouth fell open. My breath erratically lurched from my throat. I couldn't even scream.

"Fuck," Kev swore again.

I heard shuffling, and I opened my eyes. I could see about a two foot space of my ceiling above me. My shoulder involuntarily twitched, and a fresh wave of agony zigzagged through me. This time, I did scream. Jagged

pieces of wood cut into various places on my body, and I realized the bomb's force had thrown me *inside* of the cabinets.

Demon I may be, but I had lived a relatively normal human life until the past few days. Other than learning and harnessing what I could do, my experience didn't quite cover this.

"Ke...ev," My eyes grew hot, and filled with tears.

I wanted more than anything to jerk forward, to escape, but one fundamental thing stopped me.

A one inch pipe protruded from the side of my chest, narrowing missing my heart. However, my difficulty with breathing told me my lung hadn't been so lucky.

Then he found me. Kev threw pieces of wood and debris over his head, uncaring of where it landed.

I didn't think clearly as I counted the broken ribs in anguish, both in my back and chest. One, two— three. I had never abused my body like this before, and I had no idea if I *could* heal it. It wasn't something that had come up with my dad.

I couldn't very well go to a human hospital. So what was I supposed to do?

As my hand fell to my side, I felt the growing puddle of stained-red water coming from the burst pipe. Intelligence came back to me in leaps and bounds.

If I stayed on the pipe, the possibility of death by blood loss could prove evident. And then I just lost my patience.

"Ahh, screw this." I snarled at my own stupidity. In a blinding flash, I threw my power at everything around me, forcing Kev to duck out of the way as the splinters and boards flew off of me.

Almost immediately, my concentration broke. Splinters rained down upon the kitchen as my one lung fought to get enough air into my body.

Demons didn't breathe, but *I* had to. Such are the risks of interbreeding. Just like the way many of my father's and even some of Kev's gifts had skipped me. It was the luck of the draw.

"Pan?"

I could see him through jagged edges and broken cabinets, glass, and pipes. Water still shot over my head and into the kitchen, so I wasn't sure he could even see me yet.

"I'm... here." I shallowly breathed in and out.

A large piece of wood I'd somehow missed flew away, which allowed my visibility to drastically improve. Kev's worried face floated into my view, but everything was terribly blurry. I felt like I'd been sucked into an endless pit of hazy oblivion.

My gaze settled on a large white object that sat just in front of me. An ache that had been lost within many others suddenly screamed out at me, and I zeroed in to figure out what I saw. The fridge lay to the side, on top of my legs.

I didn't even want to count those broken bones in the grand total.

And here I'd thought hell and its creatures must be dangerous. At least my father had never thrown me through a wall. No, that was reserved for an *earth-dweller*.

"Are you hurt?"

"You— think?" I stuttered.

Yes, I was hurt, bad, but I found myself wanting, needing to console *him*. Whatever that spell had been, the explosion had taken care of its effect on him. Kev's eyes were that liquid dark sapphire again; no red or black to tell a story of rage. Only fear.

"Baby, just how human are you?" Kev leapt over the debris to get to my side.

"Human enough," I croaked, "Apparently."

"Damn it, Pan, are you going to die on me if I pull you off the pipe, or not?"

"I'd— love— to— say no." My eyes closed, and he growled in frustration.

"I am going to pull you off. No matter what, you're bleeding all over the place. We need to stop it." Kev crawled into the too tight, small war zone, fitting his large body inside with me. "If it hurts really badly, you need to tell me right away."

Somehow I resisted the urge to laugh hysterically. How much worse could it get than this?

With admirable strength, he pushed the refrigerator from my shattered bones. I gritted my teeth, so I wouldn't cry out. He looked tortured enough without me adding any more to it.

"I'm so sorry," Kev mumbled.

"For?"

"Mostly for being too weak to resist such a low jab. It's an amateur mistake for which I will never live long enough to make it up to you," Kev whispered something further under his breath and the red water of the pipe froze, stopped.

"Don't feel— bad. It— happens," I started. "Not mad— at all— promise."

"I can't believe..."

I grabbed his wrist when he touched the blood sodden pipe and squeezed it reassuringly.

"You know, anyone else would clout me, but you try to make *me* feel better." Kev shook his head, consumed with awe and self-disgust. "Okay, I'm going to pull you off. I don't trust my magic to use it a whole lot right now. Coren did something to me, but what, I don't know," Kev warned. "He tried to get me to kidnap you— I think."

I cringed when his arms slid under my shoulders and knees. The pipe felt so hot and hard, and when he lifted me even one inch, I screamed. I couldn't help it.

Even now, I felt my mind protest Kev's pain far more than my own. It wasn't feasible, but I couldn't deny it.

"One more minute, baby."

I nodded in short jerks of my head but didn't speak. He started again slowly, an inch at a time.

"Get it— over with," I staggered. *Just rip the damned thing out like a band-aid!*

"I can't do..."

"Hurry," I begged. "Please."

He gritted his teeth when he jerked me forward. If he'd had his own way, he would never have done it willingly.

Yet he had done it, because I'd asked.

My body jerked uncontrollably, and I screamed again. No matter how hard and cold I'd thought myself, no matter how indestructible I had been convinced I was at one time, this was reality-inspiring. I really wanted to just...

But, I *didn't* die, I was made of stronger stuff than that. I was quite thoroughly alive when Kev stood with me cradled brokenly in his arms.

"Are you okay?" Kev asked nervously once my sobs had turned to quieter whimpers. And until then he hadn't moved, fearing he would hurt me even further.

"No," I answered, never feeling more vulnerable.

"You're alive, baby, and conscious. This really is a good thing."

"It doesn't feel like it, and I'm bleeding all over you." I breathed, but it felt funny, like something was missing. Like a lung perhaps, that and a hole in my chest. But it was better now, with the pipe on the outside of my body. "I need to lie down, I can bleed all over the couch."

Kev walked to the couch. "What should I do?"



And I was supposed to know that? My mind reeled, while trying to remember what Ivor had said about "mortal" injuries.

"There isn't much you can do," I assured. My voice still shook, but gained momentum as I spoke. "When I'd broken my leg as a kid, I remember my dad telling me if I just stayed still for a while, it would heal by itself. Maybe this will work the same way."

"Seriously?" Kev asked with amazement.

"Yeah." I grunted when he settled me on the couch. Kev adjusted my broken femur in a slightly more comfortable and natural position.

"I don't get it." Kev collapsed to the floor beside me, and put his chin on my forearm. He wiped my wet hair from my face.

Burning agony spread over my chest and legs, but it was a different kind of pain. Not as pronounced, and it was far more bearable. It felt like being stitched back together, piece by broken piece.

"What?"

"Vampires either have to know healing magic, or have someone there to do it. You don't," he whispered, observing every minute change in and on me. "Your body is regenerating automatically. It is truly amazing to me."

"I don't know if it will heal this much."

"I'm *watching* it happen, Pan. You look so much better already, and it's only been a few minutes. Not even spells work this way, or this fast," Kev said speculatively. "You're like a built killing machine."

"Are you calling me a freak, Kev?" I murmured.

"Well, we already knew that." He chuckled when I stuck my tongue out at him. "See, you're already feeling better."

"Not really."

"Babe, I can hear your breathing evening out, and your heart rate is beginning to drop to a more suitable level. There's colour in your face, and you don't look like a corpse anymore, per se."

"Excuse me?" I snorted. "Either I do, or I don't."

"Instead of looking the walking dead yourself, now it's like you just committed a mass murder on other people." Kev smiled charmingly, and I realized he was right.

I could *breathe*, and my heart did beat at a far healthier rate. While I was impressed with my own abilities, I really hoped it never happened again. I definitely preferred it as a one-time experience.

I couldn't bring myself to look away from Kev's compelling, cobalt eyes. The sunlight made them shine in the most endearing, unearthly way.

My hand shook slightly as it traveled from my side, slowly up to my stomach. There wasn't a gap anywhere, and I could almost move my legs without them violently protesting.

"I wish I could tell you how extraordinary this is for me to witness." He watched my trembling fingers touch the area where I still felt the ache.

"The skin must close first," I said in wonder, knowing that my insides weren't as progressed as my external appearance. "So, what was that spell?"

And the haunted look came back.

"It was in the blood. At first I thought it was..."

"What, Kev?" I asked softly. "You explained that older vampires could overtake you, and said it was a worry of yours. Coren got past us, that's all."

"It's *my* fault."

"How?"

"You aren't used to knowing about vampires, what and how we do things. I should've *known* to check it out before I let you near it," he added ruefully.

I cupped his cheek, and he turned to place his lips on my palm.

"I'm not that breakable," I whispered, and he smiled.

"But you didn't know that until now."

"You're stalling."

He sighed. "Like I said, at first I thought it the blood itself was meant to entice me, which it did. Then my thought pattern changed, and it wasn't my own anymore. It's unlike any spell I have ever encountered, and with hunting Rogues, I've had a taste of every flavour of magic out there. I might not know everything or every branch, but this was completely alien." He stared out the window, and I knew whatever he was going to say next would be bad. "I wanted to kill you, but then the spell changed again. Then I was supposed to just catch you, like he had changed his mind. I've heard of spell-casters so powerful that they control the spell in motion, but it is a difficult art to learn, and normally requires a lot of illegal magic."

"I see."

"Feeling better?"

"Why don't we throw you through a wall complete with appliances and pipes to see how you feel? Almost

dying is so overrated," I said sarcastically. "Dying has to be better."

"It isn't so bad."

"Pardon me?"

"Well, I've technically died a little over twenty times," he said nonchalantly. I stared at him in dumb-shock. "Maybe more. One loses count after a while."

"You're kidding right?" I gasped when he shook his head.

"Back in my younger years, I was rebellious to the Council. The rules were far more lax then, and in Europe they still are, if compared to the Canadian standards. My parents didn't care what I did outside of my cage; as long as the assigned job was completed."

"And that did not answer the dying-over-twenty-times question."

"I'm getting to that. The establishment's punishments were quite extensive over trivial matters, let alone something serious. Many of us ended up dying by them, which was fine by the Council. They knew exactly how to get us back from death, so they could do it all over again, if they chose. Or set us free to see if we had learned anything," Kev explained with just a hint of that rebellious

nature, almost like he had taught himself to hide it, but couldn't resist this time.

It showed me that he'd grown more comfortable with me than I had thought.

"The Council killed you *that* many times?" I demanded, and he shook his head.

"No. Hunting Rogues is also a dangerous business. Not every mission is a success, nor does everyone make it out alive. It's a hazard of living under establishment rule. We have procedures that must be met, no matter the cost to one's self."

"That sounds harsh."

"It is, but it's the only way we can live with some peace. To fight the establishment is to die, and to allow the Rogues to win destroys our way of life. We can't escape the Council. They will always find us, and we have nowhere to hide for long. Not if they want us badly enough."

"But Coren has stayed hidden for years."

"Yes, but he ran straight to the last place he knew the Hunters would look for him. He hid in plain sight, taking outsiders and people no one would miss. He made them last for as long as he could before he killed them. And he stayed indoors almost all of the time. Even his neighbours didn't even know he was there," Kev explained.

My thumb ran up and down his cheek while he murmured under his breath. I watched as he manipulated the energy with skill and practice. In slow increments as he tested his magic, the kitchen changed before my eyes. Even the gallons and gallons of water that soaked the floor disappeared. I could've done it far more easily, but it was interesting to see these "spells" and "focal-points."

Yet I knew, at some point, I would remodel the kitchen. I glared at it malevolently, never wanting to be reminded of this close call again.

"And you think what I can do is impressive."

"It is. You will things into being, while I just coax them." He kissed my cheek and laid his head on my shoulder. "Not even our firsts can do what you can. The power you have intrigues, and even scares, the hell out of me."

"Sorry."

He rolled his eyes. "Don't be. How are your insides doing?"

"Actually, other than being a little sore, I feel fine."

"You're sure about that?" He grinned.

Well, I was almost sure. I followed the heat that still blazed through my body, but it had begun to fade. It

shrunk, leaving only weak twinges in its place. When it stopped altogether, I looked over at Kev with clear eyes.

I caught the relief and sadness on his face.

My mind tried to tune to something, an aspect I had forgotten. But the majority focused on the man before me, forgetting everything else. Suddenly, I was in his arms, and he walked into the bedroom with me.

Our clothes disappeared. After Kev mumbled, I heard the distinct hum of water running ahead of us. I'd come to hate the sound and shivered, and he rolled his eyes.

"Do you really think I would let that happen to you again? Woman, you won't *ever* open another box before I look at it first, not in your life."

My heart skipped a beat at his offhanded reference.  
*My life?*

"What are we doing now?" I asked with a yawn, breaking it into two separate sentences.

"First, I'm going to get you clean, and then I'm going to make you scream, but this time, for a much more pleasurable reason." Kev passed the threshold into the bathroom.

"I could make the blood just disappear."

"I like my way much better."

"I figured that." I cuddled against his shoulder.



The bath was filled almost to the brim when he stepped into the slightly steaming tub. He sat down with me in one graceful motion, allowing the water to surround us.

The warmth seeped into me and made me realize I'd been shaking.

My body relaxed into his, and I reached for my cloth, but Kev beat me to it. His far longer arm grabbed the soap when I reached for that as well.

"I like this."

I tipped my head back to look at him. "It's nice and warm, isn't it?"

"I meant the present company." Kev chuckled.

"I like you, too," I replied, and he gave me a mock growl.

"You say that like I'm your friend," Kev countered, but I didn't miss the flash of disappointed hurt.

My brow rose, considering that. What did he want me to say? I felt a deeper connection with him, but to tell him that would most likely sound crazier out loud than it did in my head. I loved touching him, and before I knew it, my hand moved between our bodies, touching his half-erection.

"I like you a lot, Kev." I stroked him and he hardened more in my hand. "More than what's probably good for me."

"And what would be good for you?"

"I don't know."

"You're not being honest with me again. I thought we'd broken all the barriers that prohibited us from telling each other the truth," he said evenly, though there was a wealth of emotion under the surface.

He poured soap onto the cloth, and then crushed it in his large fist, bursting bubbles through his fingers. I watched with a soft smile playing upon my lips.

"I'm not sure what you want me to say." I froze with something which actually barrelled toward terror. I didn't express my feelings to anyone else other than my dad. My life wasn't compiled of such moments and I hadn't expected this conversation to happen. So how did I answer it?

"Like I said; the truth."

"I haven't known you very long." I paused when he turned my head toward his. "It's just strange for me."

"What is?"

"Feeling this comfortable with another person. I've spent my entire life shielding everything real about myself from everyone."

"You had your Mother and Father, at least," Kev replied.

"You say those like they're titles."

"To us, they are. It's not just a label to apply to the people who birthed you. It gives them rights over you, rights no one else can have until you willingly give it to them, or it is forced from you," Kev said with a hard voice.

"What kind of rights?" I asked. I was really leery of his answer.

"They can control us in ways that screw with your head, at least in my experience. I believe most parents don't act as mine did. Corrine and Max have never made me, or their sons, do anything. Not like my parents had in pursuit of absolute control of all the vampires in Germany."

"Every time you speak of them, you turn so cold, ice has nothing on you. They weren't good people, and it saddens me that you had to live that way, and have to remember it now."

Kev chuckled humourlessly. "Baby, vampires in this world aren't all like the Cornwalls and neighbouring Covens. The Council runs rampant more in North America and controls us with a very tight leash. In Europe, it's all about control and power of the Coven, while the establishment sits back in their expensive dwellings and

care only about their own necks. Covens war all of the time, and no one bothers to stop them as long as the secret is kept. I had to murder *families* for my Leaders to gain power. Together, my brothers and I wiped through the Covens, spreading out more and more with every decade that passed. And in the end, it was the international Council who decided to stop the Brandenburgs for the better of the entire vampirekind, because Germany turned a willing, blind eye."

"I wonder, if it had been you fighting, and one of your brothers left behind, if Holly would've still seen reason to save him instead."

"Holly once said that, unlike me, my brothers didn't need quite as much... prodding as I did," Kev admitted. "Even as a mindless beast, I didn't care for what my life was, and Holly knew that upon sighting me. When they brought me here, it took years of solitary confinement to adjust, but eventually, I did take to it."

"Corrine and Max put you *back* into a cage?"

Kev smiled without a touch of malice. "Yes, they had to. Just because I didn't want my old life, didn't mean I knew *how* to live in the civilized world. I spent my life in a box, baby, only to be let out when I was needed. It does weird things to the mind. No matter how it looks, the

Cornwalls did great things for me— and it's why I took a place here and their name. It isn't often I hear my surname, Brandenburg, anymore."

I pondered that for a moment, happy at the endurance and strength Kevlar showed, to be able to adapt to such a one-eighty difference in his life. My dad hadn't adjusted to this realm and the intricacies it entailed until I was about seven. Only then had he been able to leave Lillian's house with me. As I got older, I wondered if a better mother would have thought twice about letting her demon boyfriend run around with her young child alone, trying to act the role of a human parent, a doting and teaching one at that. But most mothers had boyfriends who were *their* race, and lived on earth. And with children they at least wanted in the first place.

"You have me off track," Kev said suspiciously.

"Bah!" I snorted. "You do that to me all of the time."

"Then back to the point I wanted you to explain; why you like me *too* much?" He ran the cloth over my back and shoulder, settling so I could lean on his chest.

"You are persistent."

"I've been told that once or twice."

I took a deep breath to finally tell him what really occupied my mind in conjunction with him. "Fine, then. It feels like we have a bond, as weird as that sounds. It isn't like I haven't been with a man before, but with you it's totally different, like we're always on the same wavelength and I've known you my entire life." *Like we were meant to be together.* "I've noticed that." Kev grinned. "So I affect you that much?"

I shot him a droll stare. "Duh."

His smile widened, and his blessed hands washed my body clean. All I wanted to do was melt into him, the perfect water never cooling.

"You have the same effect on me," he whispered.

And what was I supposed to say to that? So, I said nothing, and he didn't push.

My mind wandered while he finished up, and I began to play the events backward in my head. Right back to what had happened right *before* the bomb ripped my kitchen apart.

I sat up with a start. "Lillian!"

How could I have forgotten my mother's endangerment?

*If the situation was reversed, she wouldn't care in the least,* I reminded myself. But did that make it right?

And I was out of the tub in a flash, with Kev shadowing my every not-so-confident step.

"Weren't they supposed to call?" I demanded.

"I would have thought so." Kev stopped at the phone at my bedside table, while I manifested clothes over my wet body. His fingers flew over the keys, and then he demanded, "Why hasn't anyone phoned me? What do you mean no one has been there yet?" Kev growled after a too long moment, and then hung up. He turned to me with a horribly haunted expression that made me feel ill. "They think Coren played them with several false trails, leading away from the house. Ryder took our team right out to Squamish before they figured out he wasn't there."

I knew beyond doubt Coren had never left Vancouver, and I would've bet my fortune he hadn't gone any farther away from my penthouse than my mother's rancher, but I wasn't about to point that out.

"We have to go, *now*."

## CHAPTER NINE

The moment I'd stepped onto the property, I knew beyond doubt that bastard had been here.

I watched Kev's nostrils flare, and then he darted around the house while I walked to the front door. I tried the door handle, but it was already open.

Kev appeared at my side, crowding me like he expected trouble. Even worse, I knew he felt the need to protect me, even after everything he'd just seen.

I nudged the door open with my toe. Sparks of fire—ready to be thrown—concentrated around my hand, if anything happened. I would only have one shot.

And I would be damned sure it would be a good one.

The television in the living room was set on the news when I moved past. Coincidentally, they discussed the serial killer stalking Vancouver's streets.

How quaint.

Something crashed to the right. My head turned toward Lillian's cat, Domino, which darted out of the kitchen and ran past us.

"Other than the feline, and a bee in the dining room hovering over the table, there isn't anyone or anything here but us," Kev said in a low voice.



"You're sure?"

He shot me a look that said "You're really going to question me," and then said out loud; "Quite."

I didn't have his abilities, and I couldn't help but be impressed by them, like in reverse. Mine might've had more *oomph*, but Kev's were more precise and far less explosive.

I had brute force. He had finesse.

"The Urn is still here." I confirmed.

"It's *here*, like in this house? And how is it she doesn't know this?"

"Once Lillian became free of any obligation, she never asked about it. She was more than just thrilled to pass the responsibility off to me."

Kev followed me to the end of the hall, where a small table inconspicuously sat, with a vase of real-looking, fake flowers on top of it.

But I stopped too suddenly, and Kev ran right into me. His arms closed around me, holding us both upright. But even when I was steady, he didn't let go.

"Let me know the next time you decide to do that. I can't read your mind, babe," Kev joked in my ear. His hot breath on my neck made me shiver.

"Okay."

"Where are we going?"

"Through there." I pointed to the wall directly in front of us.

I'd broken so many rules here, I had lost count; especially taking an outsider to see *the* Urn. I wasn't supposed to show it to anyone. I wondered how my ancestors had managed to keep it a safe secret without my heritage and abilities to back it up. They had all been human before me. Pandora's Box hadn't ever given the bearer anything special to keep it safe.

I just hoped I could handle the repercussions of this decision, if anything went wrong.

"Through where?"

"The wall."

"Of course, now why didn't I think of that?" Kev snorted.

I pulled the fire-ruby and garnet amulet from beneath my t-shirt, the same talisman I used to call my dad, and the one we had decided to make the key to this cell. With my intent clear, it glowed bright red.

It called out to objects that were from the same place as it, kin to kin, blood to blood. It would shortly grow hot, especially when we got closer. Not that it bothered me

any. Plus the searing heat might help keep the worries at bay so I could work and calculate our next move rationally.

Even at the moment, in the very back of my mind, I still thought about it.

I sincerely hoped my mother was okay, despite our relationship. Something heavy settled in my stomach, and I wondered, if I had been here at Coren's appearance, if it would've helped or hindered the situation.

I touched the stone to the wall, in the exact placement needed. Kev's chin rested on my shoulder, watching my every movement, his fingers shifting restlessly over my stomach. His need to touch me had gotten worse by the hour. Since we'd admitted a little about what we already felt for each other, another layer of self-protection was severed between us.

The boil of energy —as he called it— erupted around us, the anticipation of the magic doing its work thick in the air.

"You love to surprise me," he murmured in my ear.

"But it's so easy."

As his canines nipped my ear, a hole appeared on the wall at about chest level, widening until it was the size of an archway. The backlash of power was fierce, and Kev's breath stilled in anticipation.

"Where does this go exactly?"

"Down. A gateway to the gateway," I told him, and he just looked at me quizzically.

"If only something happened that was normal."

"You're a big fan of normal," I said carefully.

His fingers trailed down my jaw line, tipping my head back. His head shifted toward me, close enough that I smelled mint on his breath.

"I was." His eyes flickered to my lips. "However, I've come to find normal isn't what I'd always hoped it would be."

"And what did you hope for?"

He bit his lip, seeming to want to confess something. "I *hate* being a vampire. I always have. When I was younger, I wanted to be human, to embrace their blessed ignorance of the other side of this world we share."

"That's not so bad."

"Why?"

"I wanted the same thing, just as I do now," I admitted, and he smiled, fangs and all.

"Yet, you crave to have me bite you again," Kev stated.

"More than anything."

"That is not normal. Not that my side is much better." He wanted me again, even now, and I could see it in his eyes, like I could feel it in every part of me. "It fills my mind like a buzz, demanding I take you again. I don't understand this relentless desire for you."

"How relentless?"

I thought back to all the times in the past few days when he'd looked like he was in pain. He'd never given me a straight answer on what had happened.

"I can't even explain it adequately. I've never felt this way about anyone else, and every single moment I'm with you makes it drive deeper. Though the flipside..." He stopped, but it felt off. Like he listened to something I couldn't hear.

"Kev?"

"Since I took your blood. I swear I'm hearing voices, but faint, off in the distance almost," he murmured with those eerie, fiery eyes. "Something else is happening to me, and since we got here, it's gotten worse."

I took a deliberate step away from him. The pain and confusion in his eyes doubled, and he grabbed my hand to drag me back.

"No," he said with a barely veiled snarl. "I want you *near* me."

"Okay."

He retained possession of my hand in his iron grip, and I could feel him staring at me. The hair on the back of my neck rose, and I felt an echo of his torment. He took the first step down the roughly cut stone stairway as if he were hypnotized.

The closer we proceeded to my namesake, the more anxious I became. I felt the call of the Urn, like it summoned me home.

The heavy coils of rock in this pocket *between* the realms was dramatically different than the aesthetically pleasing décor of my mother's hallway. The darkness from here on embodied absolute and endless nothingness.

My "pets" who dwelled here preferred it that way. And only when I came was there any light at all.

With less than a thought, the torches ignited with green fire, lighting our way down. One couldn't find the eerie flame anywhere on earth. In fact, it was only found in the pits of hell.

"Stay close to me, Kev," I said protectively, and he laughed. My expression didn't lighten.

"What, is the boogeyman going to get me?" he needed.

"No, just my pets."

"Pets? Do I want to know?"

"Probably not, but you're going to find out," I replied, debating what to tell him, but finally deciding on the truth. "They're hellhounds."

"They're what now?" Kev asked, distracted by the strange unnatural rock formation my father and I had maintained to be the home of all my most dangerous secrets. "You mean they *exist*?"

"You believe in demons, but not dogs from hell?" At my voice, a chorus of bays sounded from the base of the stairway, accentuating my point.

"I didn't completely believe in demons before your father popped into your bedroom, no matter what Maximus goes on about," Kev said wearily, but he looked down into the darkness with a newfound, healthy respect. "Or more accurately, I wasn't sure. I'm not naïve enough to believe I know about everything that is out there."

I nodded. That was what I liked so much about Kev. The man encompassed open-minded, even when being pigheaded.

"Normal dads will just buy you puppies, but no, Ivor gave you hellhounds." Kev laughed, his gestures nervous.

"He thought they could protect me, but I tired of masking what they were from anyone who saw them, so I brought them here. To my knowledge, they're the only hounds who actually have lived on earth, though where we are now isn't really the plane we live in at all. More a space between the worlds."

When we reached the last step loud bays sounded anew from every direction. Heavy pads of paws pounded on the ground, and I focused on more of the torches.

Additional columns of pale green fire sprung up from random parts of the uneven walls, giving the dull, black rock a surreal look.

"This is creepy." Kev chuckled, belittling his words.

"What did you expect from the demon's daughter?"

A huge head peeked from around a large boulder, just at the edge of the body of water that took up a little under half of the space.

My babies loved to play in it; just one of the things that contributed to this being a much better habitat for them. They'd been far happier here in the lonely darkness than they had in my penthouse. That, and my original two had bred repeatedly. I just didn't have the room for them all anymore, and if their numbers got any bigger I would have



to find an even bigger home for them, or create this into one.

"Kujo!" I cried.

"You named your dog after that human movie rabies victim?"

"Well yeah, except my Kujo would kill the other one without contest," I told him while my youngest baby hunkered out. He growled softly at the stranger, but wanted near me too much to care.

I manifested two large bags of meat, the ones I kept in the freezer "upstairs," though Lillian had never figured out why I'd done so. And I never bothered to be any more than vague in my answers to her inquires.

I placed the food at my feet. Within seconds, the blood seeped through the material and called to them. I reached in to pull out a chunk.

"That thing is bigger than a black bear." Kev stuttered as Kujo walked into the green light.

I could hear the others in the gloom, far warier than the younger ones. I wondered what Kev would think when he saw all of them.

Kujo's dense muscles rolled with each push forward. When he shot forward with his front paws on my shoulders, Kev automatically braced my back, even though

most times there'd be no need. My body might feel fine, but I doubted the regeneration was complete, making me weaker than normal.

"He has to weigh at least a couple of tons." Kev cocked his head to one side and studied Kujo, when his large red eyes turned fearlessly to Kev's in curiosity, like any other "house-trained" animal would've.

"Probably more, but I've never weighed him." I petted his large head. "Kujo, down. Sit."

Kujo's paws pushed on me, sitting in front of me. He whined, his hindquarters wiggling, his long thin tail swishing back and forth with enough power to knock someone's feet right out from under them.

I handed Kev the meat, and he took it gingerly from me. Was the big bad vampire scared of my babies? He fed it to Kujo, seeing how docile the huge creature could be—when he wanted to.

Anna, the first female I had obtained, whined shrilly, staring up at Kev with obvious cleverness and clear suspicion. The green fire shone in her intelligent eyes; she was far smarter than any "earth" dog.

Then she turned to me with a silent inquiry, waiting for my reaction. The question in Anna's eyes waited; attack, or not?

"Friend," I told her, and she seemed puzzled by the usualness of him being here. I bent to scratch her ear. "He won't hurt you, puppy."

Anna's lips pulled back over vicious teeth and her tongue lolled out to the side; the vibrant redness looking like she had just finished a fresh kill. She looked comical while smiling.

Kev snorted and then muttered, "That is *not* a puppy."

Anna licked the dripping blood from my hand, her long teeth just barely grazing my outstretched hand.

"You can pet one, they won't bite unless I ask them to," I said casually. For reasons I couldn't help, I thought of my mother and *her* reaction to my pets. Like much else to do with me, she'd hated them. I knew my expression darkened and became despondent.

By the looks of him, Kevlar knew exactly what I thought. "They will find her, Pan. Ryder and Holly are really good at what they do."

"I hope so."

It was time to accept that no matter how cold it was my mother couldn't be my real priority. I'm not sure she ever was. The Urn, however, had to be. The equation amounted to one life against thousands, millions, who

could be affected, slaughtered by the Urn's very existence and what it could do.

And then there was the fact that one life wouldn't give a shit about my own. I had tried to deny this my entire life, but I *still* couldn't bring myself to completely discount the woman who birthed me.

Despite it all, was it too much to ask that your mother at least gave a shit if you lived or died?

"They won't stop until the end, no matter what that proves to be. We will have him. I promise you that." Kev's fingers travelled up my spine, and those compelling eyes held me captive.

They reminded me that I wasn't quite as alone anymore. But I was still different than *everyone* else around me, and for the first time in many years, I wanted to cry from the loneliness of it.

Cornel came up to Kev with his tail wagging, distracting me from my useless emotions. Kev tentatively reached out to touch his head, amazement etched on his face. The dog rubbed against his legs like a cat, his back arching when Kev scratched his coarse fur.

Juno unexpectedly came barrelling from the darkness, and leapt, flying through the air toward me. My body fell back onto the uneven rock with him on top, his

weight crushing me. Juno licked my face, and I helplessly laughed at his deceptive innocence. I sat up with him partially in my lap, even though he was double my size.

"You're such a goof," I told him. While he watched Kev, a soft growl rumbled from his throat. It had been sudden; something off about it. "What is it?"

I looked, too, and though I didn't see anything immediate to set me off, my instincts started *shrieking* at me. The air around us became as thick as honey, progressing until it felt like I was choking to breathe it in.

"Hey, Pan?" Kev called too levelly, misleadingly so. He wasn't calm by any stretch of the imagination. "What's happening?"

*Like I'm supposed to know.*

I couldn't explain it, but something watched us in that cave right then. Not something evil, per se, but it worked toward a pinnacle or a decision that was beyond me. Somehow, I knew it had to do with us.

Just not how, or what.

Short of being close to the Urn *itself*, I'd never even felt anything close to this. Like the power from the hell-bound object extended its reach outward like a mushroom cloud.

So the question had to be; what caused this? Something trying to come through, or even worse, had it already? Kev's skin flashed a vivid brownish-red, like mine could, then paled again to a pallor that made him look almost green.

Far more dramatic than during his transformation back in my bedroom, it worried me in a way the first time couldn't compare with. When his eyes flashed black, the tremors began in his arms.

I pushed Juno off, and he went more than willingly. The dogs' alarm mirrored my own, all falling to silent stillness. They waited in expectation.

For what, I had no idea.

I took a step forward, and Juno moved with me. "What is it, Kev?"

He didn't respond or even acknowledge me. His lips moved as if he spoke, yet nothing reached my ears. What did he say, and to whom?

"Kevlar?" I repeated the same moment Judo grabbed the hem of my shirt with his teeth and tried to pull me back. I'd always trusted my pets' instincts, but this time was the exception to that rule.

Kev whirled in the direction of the Urn, though he couldn't see it from his position. He hadn't even known the space it occupied.

"Why?" He thundered. "I don't understand."

That made two of us.

"Care to fill me in?" I whispered, incapable of much else. Then he remembered my presence. A shred of normalcy appeared, for a too short second.

"Do you remember I told you I heard voices?" He sounded hypnotized, not quite all there. Like being in two places at the same time, though that didn't come close to adequately explaining it.

"Yeah, that isn't something someone forgets."

He smirked at my sarcasm, which showed something of *him* still resided there. "Well, they're back, and much louder. Insistent. I hear them right now."

Despite previous circumstances between us, if anyone else had told me they'd heard voices giving him orders, I would've recommended a shrink and then run, fast. Yet, I had no doubt with him. Plus, I swore I caught the tail-end of them myself, though understanding them was another concept entirely.

"What are they saying to you?"

"They're all talking at once." Kev braced his hand against the nearest column of rock, looking like he might fall. Did I chance getting closer to try and help him, or keep my distance and stay safe? "They aren't happy I don't wish to listen."

What the fuck did people do in these kinds of situations? I wanted to laugh in bitter resentment. Who would even know the answer to such a stupid question?

"Okay. So what will happen if you ignore them, Kev?"

I never got an answer to that, either.

His eyes rolled back into his head and he fell so unexpectedly I had absolutely no time to catch him. His large, powerful body hit the rock with a loud thud that echoed throughout the cavern.

I launched forward, at his side in a millisecond, for all the good it did us. I pulled his head onto my lap, my stomach lurching when I realized he was totally unresponsive.

*Please don't let him be dead.*

A nasty cut on the back of his head gushed with glittering, scarlet blood, both tacky and slick on my hands when I tried to stop it. I started to freak out, while the tears



finally escaped. Lost and confused, I screamed in frustration.

How did I fight something I couldn't see?

The wound slowed to a steady trickle, the regeneration process picking up speed until the only evidence of it were the red stains splashed upon me, proving he was more demon than I'd suspected. He had lost a great deal of blood from the head injury, and I didn't know how this would affect him— if I could get the large man to even wake up.

"Please, open your eyes? I will do anything, anything, I swear."

The air stilled, like the one who watched had waited for those exact words, and still it did not seem content. What else did it want from me?

*"Anything?"*

I gasped at the single word in the intensity of the situation, thinking I had gone crazy. That voice was filled with serenity, yet a maliciousness I couldn't understand. This induced conflicting emotion I simply didn't process.

I didn't answer. Kev broke into seizures that gripped his body, and no matter how I held him down, it would only get worse.

"What do you want from me!"

*"For you to take hold of your destiny, and stop denying what you are."*

"I don't even understand what that means!"

*"You will. Pandora, do you want to save your Kevlar?"*

"Yes," I cried. The demon inside of me echoed behind the word with a roar that swelled to the farthest reaches of the cave.

No answer, no respite. Kev's body shook more violently. I had to fight to ensure he didn't roll over the edge and onto the patch of long jagged rock below.

Now what had I done to him? Somehow, I knew the blame fell squarely on my shoulders.

"Kev, I'm so sorry." I wiped his hair back from his eyes. "I swear to God, if he even listens to one such as me, I will do any task these entities demand of me. You do not deserve this, none of it. If I could give up my life for yours, for what I have done, I would. Please, just open your eyes. I will not fight my 'destiny', if that is what they wish for me to do. I will give up *everything*."

And so, they did.

And those eyes now were black and devoid of any discernable emotion, much like a doll's. He didn't blink,

only stared up at me. Then, in a burst of movement, his arm shot around my waist and he sat up.

"Are you all right?" I stuttered.

"Pan, I feel really weird." A shocking ring in his voice that hadn't been there before vibrated through me.

"What did you do this time?"

The dogs barked and howled, dancing around us, but I couldn't look away from him. That gaze was the exact replicas of my dad's in his natural form. My heart soared to see it, for reasons I couldn't name.

"I don't know."

"I understand what they're saying now," Kevlar muttered distantly. His hand reached up to cup my face in a lover's touch.

"What?"

"They want me to kiss you, and to fulfill their desires."

I just stared at him with incomprehension. Was this supposed to happen when I brought others into my world?

"Would you let me kiss you, Pandora?" Kev leaned forward and didn't wait for my consent, even though he'd asked for it. He pushed me back, crawling over me with slow, sensual movements. His fangs nipped my bottom lip, and then he growled low in his throat when a moan escaped

me. His fingers twisted in my hair, and a savage desperation filled him.

I felt something working over my mind until I filled with the same need for him. I felt like we were being manipulated, but a fine haze had descended upon us until there was only one type of feeling. Yearning that kept everything else at bay.

"What is happening to us?" I whispered.

"We are fulfilling the wishes of the higher beings."

Yeah, that made sense. I would've responded, but Kev's lips took my speech away. His hand stroked my breasts and my back arched. My skin became so hyper-sensitive I cried out from the contact.

"I need to be inside of you, Pan. I can't stand it any longer. It's torture to have you this close to me and not be able to fuck you." Kev kissed his way to my throat. "I'm hungry."

"Hmm," I agreed.

"*Feed him.*" A disembodied voice in my head instructed me. "*Change him.*"

"*I can't, not without him fully understanding what it means.*"

"*If you don't, you will fail. It is the only way to a successful path.*"

*"Who are you?"*

*"Call me hope, and you're salvation",* the voice soothed.

Was I going insane?

*"Feed him Pandora, or all is lost. You must change him to prevent his predestined fate, and through that, yours and the rest of the world as we know it. We are here only to help you in this quest."*

"Pan, I need to be inside of you. They are," Kev grunted, as if in pain, "Insistent."

"Who are *they*, Kev?"

"The good ones. That is all I know."

I sighed, both because his mouth closed over my nipple, right through my shirt, and because of frustration. I wanted him, could barely think past it, but some small part of me was still rational.

Then a new purposeful wave of need washed through me and shattered my thoughts. Kev's gaze moved over my face, and I knew he fought whatever tried to take our will, the same as I did.

I heard Kev's voices now, rising in a chorus of desperation. They shrieked in my head, and I blinked to try and bring the cave back into focus.

"Kevlar, please?" I found myself saying it, though I hadn't thought it first. *Just make this burning ache cease to be.*

He shuddered, his features those of a predator as something harsh and relentless replaced the weariness. His lip vibrated, curling over his fangs. I was trapped beneath him, and he knew it.

He liked it.

Kev's hands bunched in my shirt and ripped it clean open before he attacked the rest of my clothes with as much impatience. I lay there, stunned and uncontrollably horny, susceptible to him and his needs.

"It makes so much more sense now," Kev talked to himself.

"What does?"

"This was *meant* to be." His mouth closed over mine again, tossing my ruined pieces of material away from us. "To finish what I'd started."

His hand closed over my breast again, squeezing ruthlessly.

"And what was that, Kevlar?" I asked breathlessly.

"A full demon," He murmured demonically, "like Ivor, yet very different. A new breed."

"A new breed..." I echoed.

"I would never let them hurt you, or let you be harmed," he swore. "It's why you must change, too. So I can protect you."

"Into what?" I asked breathlessly. His fingers pulled erotically on my nipples.

"Something better. I need to taste you Pandora. Will you let me?" He asked.

"Yes."

There wasn't any other possible answer.

The moment Kev's clothes disappeared I couldn't remember what we'd been talking about. I couldn't even remember where we currently resided, or what we were supposed to be doing, but it didn't matter.

When his lips found mine, my tongue wrapped around one fang. His arms were steel bands across my back, refusing to give me even an inch.

He groaned. I felt his shaft grow thicker between us and press between my thighs. Nerve-endings all over my body became overly aware of him.

"They want you to take *my* blood," Kev conveyed for these "beings" that no longer spoke to me, only to him.

I remembered the legends, what some of them said. About the voices Pandora had heard coming from the box,

begging to be let out. Were these the same that Kev and I heard now?

But only the farthest regions of my mind thought this, not even close to the part ruling my body and actions now. Kev reared up above, so beautiful to me. He kissed and licked his way down my stomach, murmuring all the while.

"A fit sacrifice," Kev said with satisfaction when he reached my apex.

He stroked my clit and I purred for him. My eyes closed as he played with me. I felt his position shift but I was in too much of a daze to open them again. I felt his tongue touch me, and my back arched. His hands spread my legs, settling down as he slipped a finger inside of me. Kev licked and sucked, making me scream, only to hear it echo throughout the rock cavern.

"Are you going to come for me, Pandora?" Kev nibbled my inner thigh.

"Yes," I cried when he rolled my clit with his thumb.

"Will you feed me, Pandora?" He asked again.

"Yes."



"And will you let me feed you?" He whispered, just as the blinding pleasure racked my body, orgasming for him.

"Yes!"

"That's a good girl." He crawled back up my body, but his finger never left me as he wrung the last of the sensations from my body. His hand moved away from me to circle his cock.

He stroked himself, baring his teeth in a savage smile. When I convulsed, he gave a demonic chuckle. My hips shifted as the head of his cock grazed me.

In one hard delicious stroke, he was in.

"You're so snug," he mumbled under his breath. Then his head swivelled to one side, looking into the distance. "They are growing impatient."

My legs wrapped around him to ride him, dragging all of his attention back to me. I shuddered as the pleasure began to build almost instantly. It had been slow at first, different and more acute, but passion and pleasurable devastation built. I needed him; all of him. His hips pounded me into the rock, but it felt too good to care. I would probably have some sort of bruises later, but they too would heal before I even realized they were there.

Kev dragged his fangs across my jugular. Like every time before when I'd received his bite, it still hurt, but only because his magic had no effect on me. He wouldn't ever have allowed it otherwise. I felt his erotic pulls at my neck, his lips coaxing it so well.

A tremor went through him, and his skin rippled strangely under my hands.

When his mouth released me there wasn't a drop of blood to suggest what he had just done. Kev said nothing, but his burning gaze assessed me as he bit into his wrist, blood dripping off both sides.

"Feed and be safe for me," he instructed, his words echoed by a dozen different articulations, all melded into one.

His blood dripped over my lips from his wounded wrist a mere inch above my lips, and I was completely enthralled by it. It tasted sweet and free; I wanted more of it. The moment it passed over my tongue I began to feel different, more centred, and focused on the substance.

The "change" had begun.

It was only fitting. The keeper to the mortal gateway of hell should be a total monster, shouldn't she? The only thing was; what would vampire blood do to a demon, as opposed to what happened within Kevlar?

My hand rose of its own accord to bring his torn wrist more firmly to my greedy mouth. My demon rose within me to call out for more. The normally too tight leash on it broke free and for once reigned and dominated its other half without qualm. It took instant advantage of it.

Kev looked thoroughly satisfied as he realized a shift in me had taken over.

"A new breed," he whispered again. "Never will you be alone again." Kev gently took his wrist away when I'd had enough, kissing my blood slick lips.

Heat flared in my chest again, exploding outward. My brain just stopped sending messages and I stiffened in Kev's arm. He lifted my head and cradled me against his chest.

"All mine now." Kev feathered kisses over my face and neck, as he came and roared the last; "*My woman.*"

And then the real burning began.

## CHAPTER TEN

I screamed.

Kev gathered me in his arms, his softened cock slipping from me. His movements were too slow, like he was hypnotized.

"It's okay," he said with concern beginning to colour his tone and expression. "*They* say it won't last very long, that your demon will speed you through the process. It might compress the experience, but it will be over it in a minute."

Compared to this, I wished for the pipe ripping through my chest. Bones cracked and blood vessels popped. Kev came back to me little by little, his brow furrowing while he took in my withering with horror.

"Ke...ev." I shuttered, my teeth chattering as every last organ tore apart and re-stitched back together until I was sure even my genetic makeup had been altered.

"I'm here, baby. It will be over soon."

"Make it stop... please, please..."

Then his eyes cleared totally and a snarl left his lips. When he spoke next, it was to the nothingness of the cave. "You lied to me," Kev hissed. "You didn't say it would hurt her this much!"

My body curled into the fetus position, like it tried to condense the pain in one area. He coiled around me, like he tried to protect me from the agony.

I could vividly remember Kev's half-transformation, what he'd gone through. No way I'd ever forget that or forgive myself, and if Kev's reaction was any testament, neither would he, for this one.

"It's... 'kay." I tried to assure him, but failed miserably. Comprehensible speech was beyond me.

"You should be able to sleep through this process. It isn't fair, baby. They promised me that it would be quick and not this bad. I never would've done it, I swear. I didn't know," Kev said with self-disgust. The tables had turned yet again.

"You— were— awake."

"Yeah, but it wasn't like *this*."

"Twas," I squeezed out the mashed word between the waves of torture crashing through my body.

*"The pain will stop soon, and never compares to what you will gain."*

Oh good, the voice was back.

"Thank you so much for stopping by," I snapped.

*"Don't be so flippant, half-demon. Trust in us, for you must be stronger for what is to come. To protect the*

*Urn, this must happen. You made the choice, not us, and now both of you have proven your worth."*

*"I never signed on for this."*

*"Yes, you did. You just didn't know it yet. You will always choose Kevlar, and you've already made the choices for that destiny to come to pass. For him to survive this, he had to be like you. For you to survive this, you had to be like him."* The voice sighed in my head, like it was frustrated with a child.

*"You sound a little too guru-ish to me,"* I retorted, and the voice chuckled.

*"I've been told that."*

*"Are you going to get around to telling me who you are, and what is going to happen?"*

*"Not exactly— yet. We are friends, and for now that is all you need to know."* It paused before continuing. *"You know better than anyone the limitations on what you're allowed to know. I'm no different than your father; we just play for the opposite team, in a way. Though we share the same goals."*

*"Oh, that's helpful."*

*"I've been as helpful as I am prepared to be. You do not deserve what has been wrought and what is to come,*

*but my hands are tied. Stay with Kevlar, Pandora. That is my advice to you. It will serve you well."*

And with that, the infuriating yet captivating voice left, melding back into the sea of entities that spoke to me all at once.

"They try to comfort you," Kev said, and then winced. My eyes widened that he knew. "You're not the only one experiencing this."

"No!" I shrieked, seeing it all now that he allowed it; the burning behind his careful façade. And here he was, coddling *me*. He felt just as I did, but I was the one paralysed by it.

Kevlar and pain were close enemies.

"It's okay, baby," he soothed when my arms finally succeeded in curling around his neck, and pulling my aching body around his.

"No," I replied. Kev began to rub my back and I wondered how he could be so nonchalant about this?

"Not... right."

"Yes, it is, promise. I've been through worse than this." He kissed my forehead. But his stressed words and tone told me a different story.

"Sorry."

"I'm not mad at you."

"Why?" I demanded. In his place, I would freak. Or were our positions all that different?

"Because you never meant to ever hurt me, and I know that."

"What did," I breathed past the anguish enough to continue, "they say?"

"Would you tell me what he said to you?" Kev inquired with an amused gleam.

"He?" I hadn't put an actual sex to the entity.

"Yes; a him, as in a man," Kev joked, even now in the midst of all this. "He only told me what I already knew."

"Huh?"

"That my life would be better if I kept you with me," Kev whispered into my ear. "That you are what I have spent most of my life searching for; home, belonging, and true understanding."

"Hmm."

"You're not shaking as bad. It must be finishing."

"You?"

"I'm feeling a little better, although if your arms tighten around my neck any more, you'll force me to assume you're part snake as well."



I loosened my grip. In shockingly quick order, the pain left my limbs, leaving the burning only in my middle, just like the regeneration process, and even that began to fade away.

"Your irises are red," Kev said, pleased by the fact.

"And yours are black," I replied. "Like my father's and mine."

"Now we're the same, baby." He smiled.

I shook my head. "You were never human."

"But now you're a completely immortal demon with vampire blood running in your veins. Whatever human gene was in your system is gone."

"And completely unique. So, what do you think is going to happen now?"

"Don't know, but it will be monumental. If I've learned anything, when the forces of the earth and beyond get involved, it's for a really good reason."

"How many run-ins did you have with the other forces?" I only had my dad, and what happened to him, but so far they had left me alone.

"Personally, this would be a first, but most of my friends haven't been that lucky. We will find out in due time, and only when they are ready to show us." Kev

swiped my sweat-soaked bangs from my forehead. "How are you doing?"

"Much better, thank you. A little sore, but I'm sure it'll pass," I promised. "You?"

"Fine, baby."

His hand ran down from my shoulder to my back. Soft, light material closed around my naked body, and I looked down to see the black dress Kev had picked out from the boutique. It clung to every contour like a second-skin, and even if inappropriate to the occurrences at hand, it was a welcome relief to a heavier selection.

"I really like this dress," he muttered with appreciation. His ran up my thigh to the hem and fingered it.

"I know."

The dogs had gotten into the bags of meat, eating peacefully at the close of events. Both innocent and dangerous at the same time, I loved them; my real family.

They had saved me during the times when I had needed them, my babies I'd run to when Lillian had decided to shove me aside; an object, never a person. If I had persisted on making her see and hear me she would turn to cruelty, never above hurting my feelings, as if she believed me an animal with no emotion to trample on.

But these hellhounds —monsters in their own right— had crowded around me, licked the tears from my face and welcomed me into their puppy-piles of warmth and comfort. Perhaps that'd been the reason Ivor gave them to me— and forbidden Lillian to make any attempt to take them anyway.

Anna padded up next to me, brushing her brindle fur against my legs. Kujo bayed, his big wolfish grin making me smile regardless of the worries that plagued me. The dogs moved with me when I began to walk toward the cave's main attraction, my man at my side, always.

Kev looked up at the long coils of stone hung above our heads, bright diamonds dazzling in the rock, glittering green as we passed underneath them.

"I like this place." Kev took my hand.

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. So much better than the human haunted house. It's too bad we didn't go through to the end. It was a first for me. Matthew and Kelly really wanted to see it, telling me all kinds of things about the ones they'd been in. I was intrigued to see how humans scare each other." He laughed, but there was an edge to it now.

"Compared to our lives, I can see how you find it funny." I lead him over the uneven ground, around the

body of water as two of the youngest pups splashed and frolicked.

"Where're you taking me now?" He squeezed my ass. Then his fingers trailed beneath the skirt to tease me.

"The reason we're here." I swatted his hand. "Didn't you just get some?"

"Doesn't count." He scoffed. "I preferably don't want a chorus line in my head while I take you."

"Uh huh."

Kev whistled when we turned the corner into the stone alcove.

At first glance, the Urn appeared to be black marble, with veins of blood red running through it. The intricately carved vase was made out of obsidian, but not quite the kind found on earth. Whenever I touched the stone, the veins always moved, following my touches.

To be near it was to respect it.

Kev's eyes widened and he came close to stumbling. "It calls to me." I nodded, for it called to me, too. Being part demon would do that. "May I touch it?"

"Of course, it does." I smiled. "And yes. It isn't like you can open it."

He grunted an exasperated laugh.

When Kev's tentative two fingers touched the lustrous surface, the red veins raced toward his pads in welcome. I had no idea at the phenomenon, but it sent a jolt of savage joy through me to see it.

It only did that to the keeper of the Urn.

"What's it doing?" Kev moved his finger to the left, and the veins followed him. He laughed with delight.

"Getting to know you."

"Is it good?"

"I would think so." I replied. "I've always believed that the gate itself and what it leads to are two completely separate entities, from two different sources. The Urn itself has an existence all its own, and it likes you."

"It looks heavy."

"It is, in that form."

He stepped back so I could take his place.

As so many before me had done, I placed my palm on Pandora's Box with vivid intent. This magic had nothing to do with my heritage of the demonic nature and everything to do with the other. All of the keepers had possessed this ability during their reign.

And also typical to the proximity, I heard the ghost-like whispers within; never any words — per se— just incoherent begging, pleas for release. They were nothing

like the ones who had just spoken to Kevlar and me just moments before.

No, these voices were of what would bring true Armageddon upon heeding them. They were always to be ignored.

The intensity of the power coming from the obsidian built as the object's mass condensed in a puff of black, putrid smoke. I coughed the blackness from my lungs. It smelled and tasted strongly of sulphur.

Damn dramatics.

The weight all but disappeared, leaving a much more transportable box in its place.

Anna and Kujo whined shrilly at the disruption. Magic disturbed my hellhounds, who had spent too many years here in captivity versus their natural habitat where it was used often.

"Wow. That's convenient. "

"Yes, it is." I slipped it into my oversized bag, applying a layer of protection around the compartment to mask and keep its more obvious power under wraps.

Kujo whined again, and I petted his huge head. He stared with so much wisdom, making me wish I could communicate with him, to know what he thought.

"I'll be back really soon," I promised. Unlike the dogs which humans kept, I knew this one understood my words, even if he couldn't speak back.

Anna and Kujo followed us back to the entrance. Kev laughed at the happy animals. He was content with them, not in the least bit nervous, as anyone else would be presented with such creatures.

I had an urge to bring them up with me so we could be closer again, but not as long as both me and the Urn still lived in a dense city like Vancouver. I needed a place that had little population and lots of room to roam, for them to be what they were. It wouldn't be fair otherwise.

Once I ensured everything was set back in place I did another walk through the house, looking for clues. There were none. I felt like a washed up freakin' Nancy Drew, but at least, I could say I had done *something*.

I had to force myself to admit there wouldn't be much else I could do from here.

Her bed was made, the dishes from her breakfast still dying in the rack. Even her coffee cup complete with pale pink lipstick, and a half-smoked cigarette lay in the ashtray. I supposed someone else would've thought she'd just gone out.

But they didn't know Lillian.

My mother wasn't in the habit of leaving *anything* undone before she left the house. Every single detail; the cigarette and the dirty coffee cup, would've been dealt with. A clean freak would be a nice, polite way of putting it. Anal retentive just didn't quite cover it either.

Me? A slob. Lillian had never been able to change that, no matter how hard she'd tried.

Coren shouldn't have been able to get in here. Ivor had placed some of the same magic on Lillian's house as he had on mine, though mine was far better protected.

"I can *feel* that he was here." Kev snarled from the living room. "But I can't catch even his scent anywhere in the dwelling."

"And you have no idea how powerful he is?" I called back.

"It doesn't matter."

"But what if he is more powerful than us? What if everything we do proves useless?"

"Don't allow him to undermine you that way." Kev turned the corner looking deadly serious.

Kev's cell rang, and he went onto the porch to update Max on the significant changes that had happened in the last few hours, and why we weren't at my apartment, where we'd been ordered to stay.



Then something new occurred to me, one that filled me with savage pleasure to know my paranoia must be unfounded. Information my dad had given me slowly leaked back into my brain.

Demons had *created* vampires. I was more powerful than the very first vampires, who had created the government who ruled them. Now Kevlar and I were the same. I didn't fall under their jurisdiction, vampire blood or not. Which meant, neither did he.

They couldn't touch him any longer, not unless he allowed them to. These hunts and dangers to his life would become nonexistent—once we'd dealt with the threat at hand.

I had found my silver-lining in this mess; I could protect Kevlar from his own race.

All except Corrine and Maximus; his friends and family. To him, they would always have his loyalty, and with just cause. In the last few days, I had figured out for myself why Kev was so protective of them. Not just the words he'd given me, but I'd seen it firsthand. Even if it was the law to obey their Leaders, with Kev it was so much more than that.

He would *willingly* die for them.

Maximus and Corrine were genuinely nice, caring people, who could be as cold and scary as me when angered. They took their world with a grain of salt, and their flexibility truly inspired me. They strove to work within their binds but fought to make a good life for those under their care.

I respected that, and them. I smiled, hoping one day to have that kind of relationship with them.

"Max wants us to head over to the mansion. He'll send some people here to do some further investigating." Kev slid the glass door shut behind him.

"Do you think Coren believes my mom is a means to the box?" I asked.

Kev took my hand, but he didn't respond until after we were back into the early morning sun.

"I don't ever want to claim to know how Coren thinks. This all used to be about just Sara... his fledging and her convert —whom you've met— Kelly, but every day that passes since his return, his plans keep changing and growing. I don't think it even has to do with them anymore, only his seeking more power," Kev replied. "Not even our powerful psychics have any idea what's happening. Everything is fuzzy and certainly not definite; it means there is far more than meets the eye."

Both Kelly and Sara had my sympathies.

Kev had told me a little about this; some time ago Coren had converted Sara by force, doing horrible things to her. Until one day she'd had enough and tried to kill him — even thinking him dead— but really he hadn't died when she'd buried his "remains." Shortly after, Sara converted her best friend Kelly, and together they ran here to join the Cornwall Coven.

From what I had gathered, Coren's warped mind had convinced him he owned Kelly and Sara because of these events. And now, the Cornwalls were protecting them, "forcing" Coren to exact his revenge for not handing them back to him.

Apparently, part of his vengeful plan was to bring literal hell onto Vancouver.

Part of *my* plan was to give Coren exactly what he wanted. Or make him think he'd get it.

Kev's possessive arm came around my waist, and he walked back to his bike with a confident, long stride. Now that I knew for sure something had happened to my mother, the panic in the back of my mind began to sink in.

I knew we didn't have the best, nor the most stress-free relationship out of mothers and daughters, but that didn't mean I was a completely unfeeling person.

Kev kissed the top of my head, and then picked me up, placing me on the bike.

I watched his body fluidly slide in front of me like graceful water. His slow, languid movements so sure, my heart beat faster to just be this near him.

"Everything will be okay," he assured me.

"Don't make promises you can't keep." I wrapped my arms around his waist, feeling his perfect six-pack beneath his shirt.

Kev's fingers danced over my hands, so soft and light, it tickled. He was so warm and comforting to me in a time when nothing really could be definitive. Where I didn't know nearly enough to see what direction would manufacture the most productive outcome.

The ride to the Cornwall mansion was quiet from there on. I wished I could read the thoughts making his body tense, always coiled as if expecting a vicious attack.

Kev pulled to a smooth stop in front of the thick bushes that ran up the length of the Cornwall's property. Only the third story could be seen above them from where we'd parked.

The neighbourhood the vampires occupied was lush, and very human. Not something I expected of the headquarters to Corrine and Max's personal arsenal of

fanged monsters, especially since they had the power of a god to back them up.

Kev pulled off my helmet, ducking his head to quickly kiss me before I could even blink. My arm crept around his neck to keep him there, the motorcycle still warm and shivering between my thighs. Kev's hand traveled down my back to my ass and pushed my hips forward so I rubbed against it. A soft moan escaped my lips. He growled deeply, his other hand coming up to grip the back of my head.

We practically ate each other right there in the middle of suburbia. Coren could've attacked with us so close to salvation, but I didn't care. I felt the irrational urge to just let all of the emotion and tears escape, but Kev, and he alone, prevented that.

When he raised his head, his eyes were blurred, the same as mine.

"I want to take you home, where I know you're safe," Kev said against my lips.

"We need this to be over more," I reminded him, and pulled back a bit. Red and black fire flickered deep in his cobalt eyes.

"I know, but I need you more." Kev murmured. "If we get out of this alive, we are going somewhere private for a couple of days. Somewhere no one can find us..."

"Private? Are you sure that's possible?"

He wiggled his eyebrows with grim humour. "I lost all of my bonds, Pan. Until I'm forced to be rebound by my laws—if that is even possible at this point—I'm free. I can go anywhere and not be found."

"Okay, hotshot. Where're we going?"

"Anywhere you want. Then you're mine."

I grinned. "I'd like nothing better."

I got off the bike and let him take possession of my hand. We turned toward the house.

I breathed deeply. But just then the wind rose, carrying a peculiar scent with it. It was slightly old, not quite rotten—yet. While I tried to identify the smell, we passed the intricate wrought iron gate and went into the yard.

My eyes saw what was wrong with this picture the moment it came into my view; however, the time to process it was a little slow.

"Hey, Jonas, what are you doing out here? Corrine called a conference," Kev greeted the still figure.

"Kev?" I pulled at his hand cautiously.

Sickness and bile rose in my throat, but Kev didn't figure it out right away. He stared down at his friend, uncomprehending.

"Hey— Jonas?"

I knew he finally saw the thin trail of blood that ran down the side of Jonas's mouth. I was sure his eyes would be dull and glassy once we took off his shades, so meticulously placed.

I hadn't met this man yet, so this casualty meant little to me. The only part that mattered would be Kev's reaction.

How many of the Cornwall members had died now? Four... five? At least.

"Kev." I yanked him back.

"What? The dumbass is probably just drunk. He does stuff like this all of the time," Kev replied, but not nearly so confident now.

Why did Kev ignore the signs? He *had* to know the truth, to smell it. He was so much smarter than what he acted like right then.

I, for one, saw something that made my blood run cold, and was more than enough proof of everything I needed to know. A piece of thick white paper stuck out from his collar. It would be intelligent to assume that it

would be the exact type Coren used to send his notes to the Coven. This would be the first one I'd seen.

Now that I was so close, all I could smell was blood. My new instincts craved it, and there was a strange ache in my mouth. I ran my tongue over my extended canines in diluted shock while I contemplated.

I knew this one was not only about me, but *to* me.

Coincidence wasn't a concept in my world, only in stories. And something about this scene stuck a cord deep within me. It screwed with my mind, and I knew, like Kev, there was something vital I didn't see. But those two things varied.

Jonas's black shirt looked even blacker around his stomach and strangely hollow somehow, like there was something missing beneath it. That damned morbid curiosity got to me until it was all I could think about.

The dread thickened in my throat, and I had to fight to swallow.

I knelt in front of Jonas's frozen form and blocked Kev from seeing what I did.

It was better I do this.

I peeled the soaked material back from Jonas's stomach, and I stared at the horrific mess in denial. My mind shrieked its conclusion at me, and I had no one to



blame but myself for how Jonas had died. How could Coren do *this*?

The last victims had been torn apart at the seams. Jonas?

He was now just an empty shell of a ribcage, and it wasn't that far of a stretch to assume he had been alive when it had happened. How'd I know that?

I had written it that way.

Broken and jagged white bones protruded through the massacred flesh, *most* of which had been removed. I stared at the edges of the wound, which took up most of the front of his torso. It looked as if something had eaten its way through him.

Possibly to leave him whole enough to give the effect I was feeling right now.

I hoped he had indigestion.

Coren had also used sunglasses. Why the detail? Again the sense of nervous familiarity filled me, and I knew why. Though to give it voice, to say it out loud would be to admit the guilt I didn't want to accept.

But I might not have a choice in it.

My mind traveled over the books I'd published, reviewing this scene and where it had taken place. It had

been about a serial killer, who had stalked a small town and wiped through half of it before getting caught.

"Pandora?" Kev implored me to look at him, and I couldn't. I signalled for him to give me a moment.

My gaze flicked back and forth across the body, my mind moving over the timeline and events of that book, and only *just* then seeing the plot-line of the novel unfolding in real life over the past couple of weeks.

The way Coren had killed the humans and Covenant members; left strewn about carelessly, to torment and terrorize. The notes, left with each body, were meant for the Cornwalls to find. The position of Jonas leaning against the column. The taunting and the games;

*All of it was the book.*

Then I returned to the present. Another detail had yet to be confirmed now, hadn't it?

The sunglasses.

I slid them off of his nose, but with the utmost clarity I already knew what I would find. There was all the confirmation I needed; Jonas's eye sockets were nothing more than gaping holes.

Coren had followed the guidelines for the first murder within the pages of one of my latest released books

to perfection. All, but one. Surely even Coren couldn't have been that thorough, could he?

I reached frantically for Jonas's arm and his body slid down to an awkward angle.

"Pan, what are you doing?"

I ignored Kev and pulled at Jonas's sleeve, bypassing the note for now. And there it was; the brand of the devil's personal executioner, the emblem on the cover of the book.

The same one I had Kev read two days ago, and he recognized it on sight. "Is that..."

Yes, it is." I kneeled there, stunned at the quick sequence of these events and my idiocy for not seeing it sooner.

I gritted my teeth and rolled my shoulders. Feeling my muscles coil in that distinctive way, and I knew I was about to shift forms. Not a matter of *if*, but more which minute in the next handful I would finally lose it.

I breathed slowly in and out, desperately fighting to maintain sanity. I had no idea that I'd begun to cry, no idea that human emotion had won out until Kev grabbed me, dragging me away from the dead body.

*If I hadn't written that book, Jonas and the others wouldn't have died that way.*

Kev pressed my head to his chest, whispering softly to me.

"He's... using *my* novels, Kev. He's killing your friends... the same way I killed my characters." I cringed, as the inhabitants of the house came running out at my emotional breakdown.

They didn't notice the body until they practically stumbled over Jonas, knocking his corpse toward me and renewing the horror of his death. His hand fell, his fingers pointing at me. The shirt bunched at his chest, giving all of the viewers a real good dose of my horrific imagination.

How could I give Coren a virtual map on how to hurt me most, not to mention the Coven who now protected me? And how would they ever believe I had no part in this?

I tried not to think of what my mother might be going through, now that I knew what fuelled Coren's choices. As I stared hopelessly at Jonas, I knew there wasn't a chance of getting her back alive.

Every time Coren couldn't get to me, he punished the weaker and more vulnerable. Who would be the next person to die in my place?

It could be any one of these people before me right now.

I broke away from Kev, and darted in front of Corrine. I ripped the note that was more like a letter from Jonas's collar, unfolding it with my shaking hands, just as she reached for it.

It said;

*Yes, Pandora, all of this is your fault.*

*From the very beginning, this has been more about you, despite what those Cornwalls have said. Kelly and Sara mean nothing anymore, not in comparison to what you have and can give me.*

*Then you had the audacity to hide out with Kevlar just when I almost had you. You ran from me, showing your weakness. I despise weakness, and now everyone you love will suffer until I get what I want. Until then, your mother will pay the ultimate price for that mistake.*

I dropped the paper to the ground, staring at the relative safety of the continuous evergreens. *They* didn't stare at me with accusing eyes, and that was the most comforting thing of all.

I walked away from the vampires; my arms wrapped around myself, trying to hold in the human

emotions that still plagued me even now. I wanted to banish it all and bask in severe bloodshed.

"Pan?" Kev stepped forward to pick up the note and read it.

"I'm so sorry," I said, unsure what I was apologizing for. "It's my fault, just like he said."

"How could you think that?" Max demanded. I turned my haunted gaze to his, seeing him cautiously assess me.

"Look what Coren is doing, torturing your people just like *I* wrote it. He is using my career as a manual. He is doing this to you because of *me*. Don't tell that isn't what everyone is thinking!"

"This is not your fault, Pandora. We don't blame you for any of this. That I promise you." Max's expression darkened with malevolence.

I believed him, or at least, I wanted to.

"Thank you, Max." I wiped the tears from my eyes.

"This might not be the right time to ask, but I wish to know. What happened while you were at your mother's?"

"We sort of converted each other," I replied.

"Into what?" Max inquired staring at his wife.

"Wait.... we? What do you mean, and what are *you* now?"

"Vampire-demon?" I said with uncertainty and a bitter smile. "Supposedly, a new breed."

"I see."

"Yeah, it was kind of a last minute decision." Kev inserted, standing a foot or so from me while I tried to sort this out in my head.

Then the hushed voices of the Coven began to reach my ears.

"I cannot believe Corrine and Max are just ignoring the biggest problem of all. This *is* her fault." A masculine voice told another, but I couldn't bring myself to look at who it had been.

"If Kev had never brought her here..."

"Jonas would still be alive..."

Then the first voice spoke again; Kane. "My brother died because of her."

I growled, as I walked to the hedge and tried to get their comments out of my head.

A hazy figure stood in the shadows, another one I hadn't met. This one stood apart from the rest. He stared at me, his face half-concealed. When he smiled, long, thin fangs curled over his lower lip.

"I don't blame you," he assured me, taking a step toward me. "Having been at the hands of that madman, I

know better. You haven't done anything wrong, Pandora. My brethren are just a bunch of pigheaded assholes."

I could agree, in some instances.

"Who are you?" I asked suspiciously.

"Samuel Cornwall." He shook my hand in a rather formal, human gesture. I tried out a small smile, unsure of the situation.

"The one Coren *killed*?"

"Thanks to my Mother, I'm not so dead anymore." His smirk widened, but then he glanced down at Jonas. "Or, rather, I'm more alive than some others."

"Samuel?" Kev called from behind me, and I turned. His blackish blue eyes leapt with threatening black flames, and Samuel gracefully dropped my hand, taking a cautious step back at the obvious reprimand behind his name. "I thought..."

"We kept it from everyone, needing Coren to think we were unable to bring him back— it was safer that way. I will move heaven and earth to protect my children. Unfortunately, I will not have the option of extending that same courtesy to Jonas and the others." Max sighed regretfully.

"Why can you save one, but not all?" I asked.



"Coren never thought of the fact that I have some very powerful magic within my Coven and my contacts at the Council who help me in times of need. But since Samuel's death, Coren has learned how to counteract that power somehow. He has taken new precautions," Max explained directly to me, even though the rest of the Coven stared at Samuel in shock, wondering just as I did. "We have spells that, under the right circumstances, can bring our recently dead back to life, if their soul still resides on this plane. Samuel's never left because the villain was rushed. But Coren took Jonas's soul *with* him."

"How do you know this for sure?" I inquired.

"We have neither felt him nor found him... anywhere. Jonas never would've moved on if there was a chance we could bring him back. Coren stealing his essence is the only viable concept we've thought of," Corrine said from Max's side.

"Then why didn't you bring back Coren's first victim; Cassandra, or the ones in between?" Kev asked.

"My niece specifically decided to move on before we found her body," Max replied, pain evident in his words. His family meant the world to him, and no one there missed that fact. "She never said goodbye, and I will never know why."

Kane pushed his way through the thick of distraught bodies to glare at me with hate in his eyes.

"I don't believe her." he snarled. "She is part of this. A traitor, and Kevlar with her, for bringing her into our inner sanctum."

"Kane, we told you..."

"Don't ever speak about him like that." I growled in warning.

"This is bullshit! She is the *only* being we can't get even a minuscule reading on. How do you know what she's really thinking— perhaps she feeds Coren information. He is using her books. She said so herself! How can we even trust her now?" Kane thundered.

Samuel shot him a sneer, as if his brother bored him.

"It's not your decision." Corrine lashed out with annoyance. "It's *mine*."

"But you can't make the right decisions, *Mother*. You're fucking this up for the rest of us, and it's high time we start doing what is right for our people." Kane stepped forward, his blood-filled gaze directed at me.

Corrine reeled back as if he had physically slapped her, and not just verbally. Kev pulled me back. He'd known what I would do, but it didn't matter.

Kane had already pushed me too far by speaking to his own Mother that way.

My tolerance was merely running on fumes and had been for some time now.

"Did you really think vampires were the baddest thing out there, you little shit?" I snapped from the cage of flesh that stopped me only as long as I allowed it.

"We *are*," Kane argued.

"You are a young-blood, aren't you?"

"Don't you dare call me that. You don't even understand what it means."

"Naïve and stupid; a fit label for you, I think," I replied, and Max laughed.

"Yes," Max consented. "That about sums it up."

Kane took another step, and I turned back toward him with menace in my stance, shedding Kev and giving myself room. "I promise you, Kane, there are people out there who could kill you easily, no matter how pure your line is. I just happen to be one of them."

"Bullshit." Kane looked me up and down like I was no more than a bug.

"Humans eat animals for survival, and you eat humans for much the same reason. That is the food chain, how it works. Am I right?" Kane nodded to my statement.

"Did any of you really think it ended with you? With no one above you?" I asked. "And that's before I became one of you. I haven't fed yet, Kane. Perhaps I should start with you."

"She hasn't?" Corrine admonished. Kev shook his head, and she looked at me with a newfound respect. "Very impressive control, Pandora. I am very proud of you"

Somewhere beneath the sea of anger and agony, a little part of me was immensely pleased by her motherly tone. An even smaller part—that child who'd needed encouragement and love growing up—craved more.

"Years of life devoted to self-control eventually work."

"You will make a very good addition to our numbers, should you chose to join us, dear." Corrine smiled, and I found it to be an honest gesture. She completely ignored her fuming son, paying attention only to me. "You are more than welcome to, despite other opinions on the matter. I am still queen here."

And that only pissed Kane off even more. Yet he remained silent, watching with a new light in his expression; jealousy.

"Let's go into my office to discuss this, shall we?" Max turned back toward the house, knowing we would follow.

The splendour of the mansion was lost on me this time, as we cut across the foyer, headed to the office. So many eyes were still on me. They would not leave this time.

"Not all of us feel the same way as Kane, Pandora. I promise you, we don't think you have anything to do with Coren and sincerely hope your mom comes home safe very soon," a soft feminine voice inserted herself into my thoughts, and I looked over, seeing clear blue, honest eyes.

"Thank you, Kelly," I murmured back. Her hand curled around my forearm in an open show of solidarity, something I'd never expected.

"More than just some," Marcus promised at her side. "We know some messed up shit has happened and we stand behind you. Don't let Kane and his imbeciles get under your skin. They're normally like this. Soon enough, Corrine and Maximus will set them straight. They always do."

Corrine and Max sat in two chairs near the centre of the room, with Kane standing close to them, glaring from beside his four brothers; Samuel, Dante, Ryder, and Holly.

"Well, aren't you going to say anything to explain yourself?" Kane challenged.

And unlike Kane, several vampires stared not at me, but at Kevlar. Animosity and curiosity gawked back from several faces, as they observed the changes in him, and me.

"About what?" Max questioned, though everyone knew exactly what he demanded to know

"That Kevlar *isn't* a vampire anymore? Or the fact that his demon slut..."

Kev leapt toward him. I grabbed his hand and ran my thumb over his jumping pulse, the act freezing him in place. I had enough rage for the both of us. No reason for him to cut any more of his ties with this group, especially since I had none to begin with.

Some suspected me of who knew what, but they certainly didn't have a clue to the true reality of it. Perhaps, it was time they had a valid reason to be leery of me; I just had to debate the best way to do that.

I hissed at Kane as my skin flashed a deep red—and the imbecile's eyes widened at the hint of what I had in store for him. Kev turned to me, his flickering red eyes looking morbidly satisfied.

"Kane, watch your mouth, or I will remove it," Corrine said in a quiet, deadly voice.

"I've thought a lot about this," I spoke directly to her. "Coren should be no more than an annoying fly to m

e—to be swatted and smashed—yet he isn't. He is more, and we're all assuming he is a normal, everyday vampire. But what if he isn't? The facts we know hint that he could be something else, an entity with more power than usual. By every right, I should be able to track him and kill him. Yet I can't, and neither can any of you."

"I see what you're saying. And I agree it's possible. Could he be a demon, do you think?" Max asked.

I shook my head, but then thought about it. "I suppose that could be it, though I highly doubt it. I would like to think I'd know. I have come to believe that there is far more at work here than we've accounted for."

Over and above all of the schizophrenia and related events Kevlar and I had experienced.

"This is bullshit! There is no way in hell that woman is more powerful than I am," Kane snapped, which set my teeth on edge. "She doesn't have as good of a chance of finding him as we do."

"Out of everything I just said, you zero in on *that*?" I snapped, and his violet eyes raked over me distastefully, shrugging me off like I was nothing. "I am getting damned tired of your self-serving arrogance."

So my tolerance snapped, the effect swallowing me whole. My sense of right and wrong began to blur. That was always a dangerous thing.

"What are you doing to do about it, half-breed? You're not even a full demon, or vampire. So don't preach to us about the pecking order. I could eat you for breakfast." Kane sneered.

"Shut the..." Then Kev stopped, just then noticing I'd lost my fragile hold on my sanity. He glanced at me cautiously. The war in his eyes showed he debated whether to attempt calming me, or just say 'fuck it, let Pandora cause all-holy-terror amongst his brethren.'

His more sadistic side won out, and he made a show of taking a half-step back, and mouthed; "Go for it."

"Are you so sure about that, Kane?" I asked, a hollow ring to my demonic tone. "Are you willing to stake your life on it?" I thought about the fact that Kev didn't even know his new potential. Maybe it was time I showed him what he'd be capable of now. And out of respect for Kev's Leaders, I'd ask permission first. Don't get me wrong, I bowed to no one, but I would bend to someone who showed me the same respect and courtesy. "Corrine, Max, would it be alright with you if I *mostly* harmlessly proved my point?"



"Umm— sure?" Corrine looked at Max, but I could hear the intrigue in her voice.

"And just what are *you* going to do?" Kane laughed along with his brother Dante, but the others just watched me with a distant expression. They didn't believe, but they didn't want to be part of the fight either.

"I'm going to show you why even vampires should have nightmares," I told him, but there was only a flicker of apprehension in his eyes. "You fear the Council, but I fear *no one*."

"There isn't a damned thing you can do..."

My eyes never left Kane's, as I stood up straight. I knew my eyes had faded to full ebony. My fingernails soon followed. It had begun, and I would let it finish. It had been a long time since I had allowed such a thing and my body already felt the sense of relief, freedom.

My spine tightened and lengthened at the same moment my skin darkened to a burnt sienna with a blood red undertone. I cracked my neck. The sound echoed throughout the now silent and attentive room. My teeth sharpened, and I smiled to show them to him. "Kane, you should learn a healthy dose of fear."

"I would never fear you." But his flinch testified differently.

Each vertebra individually snapped and disconnected. The pain of the transformation was continuous but manageable. I was long since used to it. My skin turned elastic, accommodating my growing form. I took a step forward, and by the time I'd completed the action my size was doubled, tripled, my muscles screaming from the torture.

Kane staggered back from me, but I kept coming.

Corrine gave a cry of delight and clapped her hands like this was a magic show. "Completely unbelievable!" She stared up at me without even a flicker of fear.

I looked at Max who grinned like a fool. "Impressive, Pandora. I'd wondered if your form would be different due to not being a full-blood, but you are no less formidable."

"Thank you." I grinned back, and it looked morbidly comical. Then I turned back to my "pupil," wondering if he'd learned yet that looks could be deceiving. "And what do you think now, Kane? Or should I give you a real demonstration of what actually makes us different? I could crush your skull, just by looking at you the wrong way and invoking my own brand of power, which yours could never touch. Do you think we should find out?"

Especially since your mother can put you back together again. Just like Humpty Dumpty."

Just when I thought Kane couldn't go any paler, he did.

"Come on Kane. Where's all the self-confidence? The arrogant he-man attitude that will get you killed by a better person than *my* woman?" Kev demanded. He sounded *proud* of me. I blinked, looking down at him. No one had ever spoken about me in such a tone before, except for my dad. If I hadn't been so damned pissed off, I suspect I'd have cried from the love I felt for him at that moment.

"So Kane, have you had enough?" Max glowered.

"She..." his son started.

But Max interrupted him. "Choose your words wisely. She is far more susceptible to chaos while in this form."

Corrine gave another cry of delight, and I turned to see her leap from her seat. The calculation in her eyes was unmistakable.

"This is *perfect*!"

"Killing your son?" I asked evilly, and Kane's eyes slid to his Mother.

"No, no— at least not right now. But I might take you up on that offer yet, my beautiful, ingenious

succubus!" Corrine said with an arrogant expression.

"While I guessed you had the attributes," she waved her hands around like they might disconnect from her body at any moment, "I never anticipated this!"

I cocked a brow, saying nothing. I knew my show was now over, I'd made my point. My anger ebbed to the depths of my mind and I walked back to Kev. My form compacted until I was the misleading humanoid once more; the change was not nearly as painful this way.

"I have an idea," Corrine mused.

"Oh! I like it." Max said, coming to stand at her side.

"What?" I asked suspiciously.

"Just an idea, really. And I need your thoughts, Pandora," Corrine said. "You converted Kev into whatever the two of you are now. Could you do it again?"

I didn't need any further comment to know exactly what she was thinking.

And I *really* did like that idea.

"Theoretically, yes. However, I think we should consult with my dad, if you will allow me to call him here." I hoped for positive feedback.

No matter which way I thought about it, this made sense. Coren was definitely more than he first appeared, or

he had something powerful backing him, especially since he could get so close to the Coven, more than once without detection. Unless he chose it, that is.

I really didn't want to see any more of these good people die because of a monster, whether it be me or Coren. Why not empower them against this unforeseen force any way I could; give them the absolute best chance they had?

"What are you proposing?" Kev asked.

"To convert all those who are willing. They won't be like you really, but how you were *before* the transformation was complete," I explained.

"Is that a good idea? Corrine, think about it. I lost all my ties to you, and I'm probably not even considered a vampire anymore—the Council can't touch me," Kev stared at the floor. "While I'm loyal to you, even now, what if the others are not?"

And here Kev said out loud the one worry I had on my mind, for everyone to hear.

It took one look in Corrine's eyes to know even now this was exactly what she wanted, despite of the possible dilemma.

"Then, *I* will choose those among the willing, the ones I know will extend their faithfulness, even when they

don't have to. It will give us an upper hand, won't it?"

Corrine answered. "The broken ties, while unfortunate, are unavoidable. Such trivial matters do not mean much to me in comparison to the survival of my remaining Coven. Of the survival of the humans we are sworn to protect.

Between us and the humans the body count is too high, and that is only in the past two weeks. How much longer can we let this go on before the International Council steps in and takes over our territory? Manuel Martinez is trying to keep this *our* problem. But if push comes to shove and they invade our land, it will be over for all of us. The life we have established and fought so hard for will be taken away and a new brand of dictatorship will overtake us."

"I agree. And I know we need help to prevent this from befalling you. Corrine, please allow me to call Ivor to consult with us," I requested again, and she nodded.

I slipped the fire-ruby from under my shirt to summon Ivor, while the vampires watched me and wondered. I whispered the incantation, and the power in the room rose in immediate proportion to my voice. Ivor had been listening and was ready for this. I just knew it.

As the words were repeated, my voice levelled out with an absence of emotion.

The others' voices reached my ears;

"What language is she speaking?"

"Never heard it before."

"What is she doing?"

"Calling her father."

"Who, Lucifer? She would bring the prince of darkness *here*?"

I burst into laughter, my words stumbling from their sheer absurdity and ignorance. The devil, *my* dad? Yeah, right. Never met the man and didn't know much about him. He fell into the need to know category, and I didn't need to know. Not that this particular aspect bothered me.

Kane hissed and leapt to one side, but no one else moved.

I didn't know if my dad was perpetrating his usual dramatics or not, but I knew he stood behind me.

When I turned, I saw him in his natural form. If they thought I was scary, they hadn't seen a full-blood yet, despite Corrine and Max's reaction.

"Hey, dad." I craned my neck to take in all fifteen-feet of him, which was slightly bent over so his head didn't touch the ceiling. *This* was the reason my penthouse was so big.

"Daughter," he greeted. I knew he'd read the vampires before continuing, a power he possessed, even if I

didn't. "Are you sure about this, Pandora? Is this what you truly want? It is irreversible."

His tone didn't even hint at what he actually thought, but that didn't bother me. It never did.

"I need to give them the tools to win, and that is what it all boils down to. Whatever happens after that will be dealt with then." I responded. "Do you mind, dad?"

We both knew what I asked for. Not whether he would approve, but what his keeper would think of it. However, the vampires didn't need to know that. I really didn't want to make life any harder for Ivor than it already was.

"Yes, yes. No problem, really. It doesn't technically break any of the rules. Only having too pure a demon living on earth is truly illegal." Something flashed in his eyes that almost approached fear. Why? "Though I have a suggestion."

What did he hide from me now?

"What?" I looked up into his soulless eyes; for I knew, unlike me, he didn't have one.

The only demons who possessed souls were Kev and I.

"I don't like the idea of you draining yourself like this, especially considering your plan to head this fight



while knowing far too little. Let me take care of that, so you can employ your strength for more useful things for the cause. You will have enough problems as it is."

The enormity of what he suggested wasn't lost on me. To give these people, who wanted to fight, *undiluted* demon blood was astonishing.

"Are you sure?"

"What is the difference really? So they will be marginally more powerful than if it had been yours, but all in all, it makes little difference. They still won't compare to you, daughter." Ivor shrugged, and then his form collapsed into the more human-aped rendition.

And far less intimidating to those around us.

"Can I change forms, too?" Kev asked. My dad laughed, claspng his hand on Kev's shoulder.

"Of course, Kevlar Brandenburg," Ivor promised. "You will be different, stronger than your brethren, too. It is you who were *meant* to be this way, they were not," Ivor said. The double meaning lay hidden in his words.

"Meant to be?" I echoed.

"Every generation of your line has a predestined partner, one intended to help you protect your inheritance. Normally, your line is human, as you know," Ivor said.

"But since you are not, obviously, your mate reflects that."

"Mom didn't have one," I argued, but I didn't care for the knowing gleam in Ivor's eyes.

"Yes, she did," Ivor said quietly. "From the moment since birth, she was *meant* to open the gateway, for a reason she wouldn't know for many years— to bear you. But neither Lillian nor I figured this out until long after meeting. Her predestined partner had been *inside* Pandora's Box; creating a strong champion for the gateway, one able to defend it in a way none of your predecessors have been able to."

"*You?*" I asked. "You are Lillian's fated companion?"

And here, in the back of my mind, I had always blamed my mom for being weak by opening the box. Even if it would've meant I'd never been born. None of Pandora's line after herself— except Lillian— had succumbed to the temptation.

"There is a reason for everything that happens on this plane, mine or any other in between. Sometimes, events that don't seem to be connected at all—even ones widely spread apart over time— end up joining with one another, leading to a single goal. Occasionally, something very bad must happen so the good can emerge triumphant because of it. Daughter, I know you do not understand any

of this, any more than I do, but we cannot see the bigger picture like the higher powers can. We are nothing more than disciples for the greater good." Ivor cupped my cheek, the room silent as they listened, some even nodding at the demon's words. "And then, something can happen that *is not* meant to. When important enough, Fate is forced to make decisions based on realigning destinies so the world can continue on as it should."

"This is going to get a whole lot worse before it gets better, isn't it, dad?"

Ivor nodded. "That is a definite. I do not know which parts of this mess were intended to happen and what wasn't. But other circumstances have come into play within this war, something Fate never foresaw until it was too late to prevent it. Destinies have recently changed yet again, and now it is imperative that you stop this menace to the world, no matter how hard it might prove to be."

"Will converting the vampires help?" Hesitance dominated me now. The last thing I wanted to do was screw over Fate any more than was necessary.

"They will be stronger and more able to protect themselves, but in the end, the outcome is for *you* to decide, not them. The only difference is that they will have a better chance of survival."

That decided that. I would change all those Corrine bid me to. "Let's get it done then."

Ivor looked down at the floor, and I knew he wanted to say something else, and I doubted he'd be allowed to, or he already would've said it.

"Pandora, out there somewhere is an unpredictable pawn to this chess game. One that *never* should've existed on this plane, but it does," he added cryptically.

"Occasionally, even destiny and demons screw up. I am breaking at least three dozen rules by telling you this, and surprisingly enough, I haven't been stopped, this time. The others," his hand waved the rest of the vampires, "with the exception of Kev, Corrine, and Max will forget that I was even here, once I'm gone. They will believe you did all of this without contacting me."

"Then why tell me?"

"You are my daughter and my only decent child, the *only* thing that matters to me anymore, besides Lillian herself." He growled my mother's name, making the hair on the back of my neck rise. "I've made a huge mistake, Pandora, and now I'm trying very hard to rectify it."

"Dad, what happens to mom?" I closed my eyes in pain for even asking when I saw agony in his.

"Soon enough, you will know," he spat, ending that line of conversation. I knew better than to question him further.

"Now, my daughter, no matter what you say, I can feel your exhaustion. You need to go upstairs to the room Corrine will shortly have prepared for you, and sleep." Ivor made Corrine smirk at his omniscience. "I will take care of all the volunteers. By first light, they will be ready. Tonight, there is nothing more you can do to stop what *will* happen. It's not time yet." Ivor kissed my cheek and pushed me toward Kev. "But it will be before you know it."

I allowed Corrine to lead Kevlar and me from the room, wondering, come tomorrow, who would stand with us, and who wouldn't. One thing had been accomplished.

I sneered at the sight of Kane. And the unmistakable fear of me in his eyes.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

At exactly five-fifty-nine a.m. I awoke.

I had set the alarm beside the bed, just like at home, to go off in a little over an hour from now. But as I laid there staring at the ceiling, I knew something had happened.

I rubbed my eyes, sitting up in the king-size bed Corrine and Max had so graciously lent to Kev and me for the night. My nightmares had been numerous, and vague enough that I didn't remember them in the face of the coming dawn.

Kev's arms were securely wrapped around my waist. When I tried to move, his grip tightened. I thought he was asleep, but his lips on my skin suggested otherwise.

He nudged my loose shirt up with his nose, nipping me with his fangs. His tongue began a lazy journey up my side until the material got in his way again, and he growled irritably.

"Why do you wear clothes to bed?" he murmured sleepily. "You keep doing it, no matter how much I complain."

He hauled his rather large body into a sitting position beside me, blinking several times to wake up a bit. "What time is it?"

"You don't want to know," I replied.

"Hmm." He pulled me against his chest and leaned back against the huge headboard.

I tipped my head back to look at him, and his lips were instantly on mine. My response flooded my body with desire. I still marvelled at the reaction he induced every time.

His cock hardened at my back, the blood pumping through his body as yearning flickered in his eyes.

"I only do it to piss you off."

"It's working," he grumbled.

I snickered, and then dissolved my shirt for him, feeling his naked flesh all around me. His irritation turned to an appreciative groan, and he kissed my exposed throat.

I had to fight a laugh. "Better?"

"Oh, yes." Kev chuckled.

My breath caught in my throat when he pinched my nipples. He caught my hand in his, and with our fingers intertwined he pressed them over my clit, and then entered me.

"Do you feel how tight you are? How it feels to be inside of you?" The erotic timber in his voice lulled me, while he whispered tempting nothings in my ear.

My head fell back on his shoulder when his feet hooked mine, pulling my legs as wide apart as I could manage. His free hand reached for my breasts and I arched for him. His eyes glittered with need in the barely there sunrise. I leaned back to kiss him, and his lips moved over mine in a gentle, unhurried movement. But I felt the urgency in his body, which belittled his efforts to remain calm.

I wanted nothing more than to roll over and ride him, but he seemed content to play with me for a while longer. However, I'd only last so long.

Kev stroked the fires hotter, demanding more from me as the orgasm teased me, flowing over me until my skin grew hot and sensitive. My muscles coiled as the storm burst over me.

I screamed against his lips. Kev growled low in his throat, drinking down my pleas for more. I dislodged the devices of torment, placed his by his side and rolled over. My eyes never left him as I swung one leg over his body. His cock bounced when my hand reached past his shoulders to grip the headboard for leverage. Grabbing his throbbing erection, I stroked him over my clit before bringing him inside of me. His hips surged up at the right



moment, sending his head over nerves that sizzled from the contact.

My muscles milked him, and his throat rumbled in response as I savoured it. There wasn't anywhere else I'd rather be than right here, with this man. Only a few "perfect" days had passed, but so much had filled up those brief hours— both the good and the bad, showing me that perhaps, for this one person, I didn't have to hide.

This meant the world to me.

Kev's hands settled on my lower back and pushed my hips forward. He rolled beneath me and moved me up and down his length, staring up at me from the pillow as I hung onto the headboard.

Sensing my approaching orgasm, his arm came around my stomach, and with the other at my back, he shifted me to the exact angle that would make me come for him as we picked up speed.

"I love what you do to me, and the fact that you lack and barely comprehend the meaning of inhibition."

"I do so," I cried, not having the focus he did, while he shattered my mind.

"No, you don't. You'll let me take you literally anywhere, anytime. Do you have any idea what that does to

me? To know, I can fuck you in an alley, a bathroom of a restaurant— anywhere."

I whimpered as my senses plummeted, completely taking me over. I jerked and bucked above him, riding the waves of pleasure to the very last one, and even then the sensitivity was so high, any and all movement made sparks flourish. I moaned, coming back to his comment; "Is there any particular place you want to take me?" I asked, breathless in anticipation of his answer. "You never told you have a preference for public sex."

"I've never thought about it before. Now we must try *everything*." Kev rationalized, his strokes delving deep within me then slowing with the conversation while his hips pushed up at every other word.

"Park? Mall? Beach?" I gasped out in ragged breaths.

"All of the above and option D."

"What's option D?"

"Everywhere you left out," he said between gritted teeth when I clenched down on him.

He flipped me onto my back and drove himself in to his balls, throwing me into another spiral. My back arched and his arm slid under my lower back to position me. His

fangs sunk into my breast at the same moment as he came in a hot rush, dragging me along with him.

His feeding was the perfect complement to my shuddering body.

Then the real alarm went off. I blinked. Surprisingly, an hour had passed. But then again, time always flew when engaged in these activities, with this man who put the Energizer Bunny to shame.

Billy Talent's "Devil On My Shoulder" came over the speakers.

I listened to Jeff announce the morning's impossible trivia, and Scotty ducked out of the studio so he wouldn't hear what was being said. In this contest, the caller was asked five questions, which they had to answer correctly in thirty seconds or less on a random, pre-chosen topic.

I laughed as Scotty came back in and outdid the caller by answering one more question right than the caller did.

There wasn't much more time I could lie around in bed before I had to rise and see if Armageddon had hit Vancouver yet. Little did I know, I didn't even have to leave the bed to discover that.

I thought we were safe when the DJs sounded calm. So I assumed nothing bad happened last night. No more horrible deaths that the human police had no answer for.

Perhaps Coren had decided to lay low after gutting Jonas. However, I knew that was just too much of a stretch.

He wouldn't stop until I found a way to do it for him.

Images of Jonas's eyeless, hollowed out corpse destroyed my good mood, no matter how much I tried not to think of it. It wasn't like such things didn't affect me the same way as it would a normal woman, just to a lesser extent.

The tone of the radio program gave my morbid thoughts pause, not quite as carefree as before and bringing my attention back to it like a magnetic.

Kev tensed, and I knew he noticed it too.

"Oh," Charis continued with a nervous laugh. "We have a caller who is rather adamant that he be on air. It's Crazy Coren!" Charis paused, and then muttered under her breath. "Again."

Why did Coren always have to be so theatrical? But I knew.

He didn't have much chance of reaching me, other than resorting to getting a radio station to relay messages to me. I wondered now if that had been a mistake.

"What do you have to say, Crazy Coren?" Jeff asked. I had to wonder what the vampire had said to them off-air this time, to make him sound so leery.

"Another message for Pandora, of course," Coren said with an incredibly smooth, cultured voice that gave me heartburn, among other things.

"Who is this Pandora? Is she the same one the message in blood was about?" Scotty asked, disbelief colouring his tone.

"She is one and the same," Coren answered, a feminine laughter in the background that wasn't Charis.

*An unknown woman was seen with Coren...* But who had it been?

"How do you know so much?" Charis asked.

Coren laughed with her. "Because I *am* the murderer. I've already told you this— even though you discount what I say. It doesn't change the truth of the matter."

"Damn him!" Kev snarled. "There will be hysteria..."

"Shh."

Coren had a purpose for this, and I wouldn't know what it was if Captain Obvious didn't shut up so I could listen.

"Sure there, Coren." Jeff chuckled humourlessly.

"You're actually going to admit to killing all of those people?" Scotty added. "*On air?*"

"Yes, of course. And the body count is up, isn't it, Charis?"

The silence stretched on the radio for a moment so long, I'd begun to suspect it was dead-air. The anticipation built, and I knew the seconds only seemed like hours.

I would kill that sick son-of-a-bitch and rid the world of his putrid existence.

If only I knew how to find him.

"You just watched the morning news," Charis said slowly, carefully. Did they give lessons in radio school on how to handle murderers while on the radio?

"Now why would I waste my time with such human trivialities?" Coren snapped. Apparently, he was quite offended.

"You speak about 'humans' with so much distaste there, Coren," Jeff replied.

"I hold your race in the lowest regard compared to mine. I am not one of you, nor have I ever been." Coren

laughed. "But this isn't why I called. I want to make a more formal announcement *myself*."

"About?" Scotty replied. None of them sounded like they took him seriously, and I didn't know how I should feel about that.

"One minute before six o'clock this morning, I took great pleasure in taking more lives." Coren inserted.

"Taking the count from twenty-four, to twenty-seven."

"Uh huh."

"If the bitch..."

"This is a *family* program," Jeff snapped back.

"Fine then, fair enough," Coren said. "If the *female dog*, Pandora, doesn't show herself and give me what I want, then whatever feeble restraints I have given myself and mine will be shaken loose. For none of you have seen anything yet."

There was a distinct click on the other end, and then more silence.

"Well, that was just one more drop in the crazy bucket," Jeff said with forced nonchalance. I really couldn't blame him. Whether they thought him lying or not, dealing with a psychopath was unstable ground for most people.

I flicked the button to shut the radio off. I breathed past the growing rage inside of me that demanded

immediate action I knew I wasn't ready for. I was tempted to give my demon-self free rein, like Kev could with his Curse. But that would probably hinder more than help.

"Twenty-seven? So many wasted, snuffed-out lives, and for what!?"

A bloodthirsty, realistic image solidified in my mind, and I wanted it, right this second. Coren's face, which I had never seen, superimposed itself *over* Jonas's. His agonized screams completed my need like nothing else.

But no, that wasn't good enough for me. My body shook and I fought myself, the shift— lest I lose all control and rampage.

I would make what he did to Kevlar's people seem like paper-cuts.

"We have to do a headcount," I said with rapidly paced words. "What if he got to someone else while we were sleeping?"

"If any more of ours had died, we would have been told already." Kev rolled out of bed.

"Are you sure about that?" I shot back. "Jonas laid dead by the front door for who knows how long before we found him there. Right there!"

Kev didn't respond.

"What time did Coren say he killed last?"



"Five fifty-nine," Kev replied.

"The same moment I woke up." I began to pace across the bedroom.

"You have to calm down and think this through with a rational mind. We can't afford any mistakes," Kev cautioned. "And your skin is becoming redder as you rant."

"I can't calm down!" I shrieked. "He's escalating so fast now. Three humans in a single night! Almost thirty people in the course of fourteen days. How many more people are going to die before we catch the son of a bitch?"

A knock on our door interrupted my tirade. It opened and admitted Ivor. Had there been problems with the conversions of the volunteers?

"Dallas was found dead last night." He gave the news in an unaffected way, confirming my fears. "Corrine is unable to locate his soul, therefore she can't bring him back."

I clenched my eyes shut, as a fresh wave of agony swept through me, affecting my feeble grip on control.

"Pandora, you have to get a hold of yourself. You do neither yourself nor the Cornwalls any good. Your army is assembled and it's time to hunt." Ivor ruled my emotions without asking, calming me whether I wanted to be or not.

He saw nothing wrong with taking away someone's will, especially not his own daughter's. Where he came from, this was how it was done when someone older and more experienced dealt with a hot-headed youth.

Ivor stepped forward and took my face in his hands.

"I know the time is upon us," he whispered. "You must be ready. I don't want to lose you."

A shiver went through me at that. "But you can't tell me anything more substantial, can you?"

Ivor would not only know the outcome, but who would die. He would know what would happen with Coren, Kevlar, and myself.

"You know I can't. Wanting to more than anything helps nothing." Ivor kissed my forehead. "But Coren shifted destiny *again*."

Something about his tone told me this would get bad; a lot worse than we'd anticipated. In that one short press of lips, I knew Dallas wouldn't be the last to die, not if I didn't figure out how to change the future really soon.

Ivor's eyes shot behind me, most likely thinking I hadn't caught it. But I did. And I knew exactly what it meant.

"No," I murmured, and then a little louder. "Not him."

"There is nothing I can do." Ivor looked so sad, like his heart broke for me.

But it would never compare to how I felt then.

"No!" I shrieked, reeling away from him. "I. Will. Not. Let. This. Happen." I spat each word with terrifying venom.

My spine crackled, and I would've shifted if my dad hadn't been here to force me to stop it. I screamed my frustration and anguish. It built until I doubted there wasn't a single person for several blocks who hadn't heard it.

"Pan, what's wrong?" Kev took a step forward, but Ivor motioned him back.

"This can't happen to *him*!" I screamed, and in that split second I knew that my purely sexual relationship with Kev had turned into something more, an emotion that prevented me from distancing myself when I had to, as I had in the past when knowledge I shouldn't have known touched and affected me.

"You can't stop fate," Ivor replied. "Pandora, you have to go speak with the people who are willing to help you..."

"You told me he was meant to be!" I screamed back.

"Yes, he is— was. This wasn't meant to happen, but Coren's activities last night shifted so much— I couldn't have known this would happen."

Tears spilled over my lids, and I brushed them away. "Then change it back!" I demanded, filled with rationality.

"I can't." He paused, and then muttered, "*My* mistake did this, daughter."

My mind reeled with even the possibility of losing Kev just when I'd found him. I fell apart inside, where my dad had little control. I filled with alien emotions that were too tender for me, never having had a chance to feel them before. I didn't know how to deal with them, and now they tormented me.

"Could one of you tell me what's going on?" Kev demanded.

We both ignored him.

"You have to kill Coren. That is your *only* priority," Ivor said.

I shut my eyes tight, and Ivor turned away.

"Damn it, Ivor, what about *my* mother?"

His head jerked back as if I slapped him. I spoke as if she mattered, and he did not. But the jab was intended to hurt, and I'd succeeded.

"I can't tell you that," he responded, his voice breaking, which told me all I needed to know; I would lose damned near everybody who mattered to me, even a little bit. "You have to kill him, Pandora. His plans— they keep changing. You have to do it before he modifies Fate again. Factors I hadn't accounted for are here in Vancouver. He has help, very powerful help."

"What happened to Lillian?" I repeated, choosing to ignore the last.

"I can't..."

"Don't feed me this bullshit, Ivor."

My dad hated it when I called him by his given name. It meant he was in trouble. He hated me being upset because of him, but what was I supposed to be feeling right now?

"You know I can't." Ivor's breath came out ragged and stressed. "I have to go. I'm being called... home." He spat the last word, disappearing before I could leap forward and stop him.

"Ivor!" I scrambled, turning left and right. "Damn him to hell." And then I laughed bitterly.

I couldn't look Kev in the eye, and I couldn't stay here alone with him, where he could press me about what had just happened.

I dressed and walked out the door without acknowledging him. So, it was destined that he would die now, instead of protecting the gate at my side.

Coren had done this.

It didn't take long before a foolish shred of hope began to tease my mind. Was it *predetermined*? That would make a huge difference. If it were, I was screwed. If I deflected it now, it would only happen another way—attempt after attempt, until the job was done.

A bus would hit him, or he'd be in the wrong place at the wrong time, and I couldn't do a damned thing to stop it. Even protecting him twenty-four-seven wouldn't help.

However, destined was another matter entirely. It could change; a puzzle piece that could fit into multiple holes and not just one. I could stop that. What Coren had done determined Kevlar's sudden death. I could kill Coren first and upset the order. I could intervene with Fate.

But the worst part? Even if I killed Coren, I still wouldn't know for sure. Ivor hadn't said *when* this was supposed to happen.

"Are you going to explain why you're so upset?"  
Kevlar yanked me to a stop at the top of the stairs.

"I would prefer not to."

"Yeah, well, I would prefer that you do. Right now." His expression indicated the same loss of control I felt. "You've been run through with a pipe and undergone a conversion without half the emotion you've just shown. The only time I've seen you cried, was when you thought I died in the cave."

He just had to use that particular word now, didn't he? My swift intake of breath alerted him. My eyes went blank, but it'd been too late, and I knew he'd pegged it.

"Pandora, tell me what is going on," Kev pleaded, softer this time. He captured my hand and brought it to his chest.

"I..."

"Baby, you can tell me." His thumb brushed over the back of my hand, comforting me. He wouldn't stop until I'd admitted what plagued me— and him.

"You're going to die," I whispered. "And I don't know if I can do anything about it."

The moment the words left my mouth, I regretted them. I heard Corrine shriek at the bottom of the stairs. I hadn't noticed her there. I had forgotten that people other than myself had supernatural hearing.

Corrine appeared at my side. "The hell he is! I will not allow it."

A second figure appeared by her side, and my eyes flicked to Maximus.

"Is it predestined?" Max asked. Of course, he'd think along the same lines as me. It wasn't the first time since we'd met that we were on the same sheet of music.

"I don't know." I pulled my arm back from Kev's nearly unbreakable grip. "So, forgive me if I'm not in the best of moods. Don't push me anymore. You won't like to hear anything else I have to say."

"What do you plan to do?" Kev demanded.

That was the question, wasn't it?



## CHAPTER TWELVE

Through hours of trying, I had achieved an emotionless state— but it didn't last long enough for my sanity to stay intact.

I'd fielded Kev's several attempts to talk to me throughout the day. Let nothing touch me. Shut everything out and just pretended everything was fine so I could meet life's hardballs— to the best of my ability.

Understandably, he thought that I was angry with him.

Due to the fact that I had no close friends, especially those with knowledge of what I was, outside of my dad, and possibly my mother— I had no experience with severe stresses involving loved ones, and never one such as this. And with Lillian's disappearance on top of it— I needed to shut down or break.

I didn't talk to anyone about it. I wasn't accustomed to having anyone to discuss my problems. I hadn't ever kept those kinds of friends. I had no one to turn to about it now.

Tears burned behind my eyelids— and I felt like I would indeed fracture, now that emotion began to crowd back in.

"Pan?" Sara drew my attention back to her.

"Sorry," I murmured from beside her. "Distracted."

We sat on the patio alone, while the others who had chosen to help me stayed inside the house, going over every contingency with Corrine and Max. Including Kevlar, who by now may or may not have given up on me.

I looked into Sara's eyes, which now glittered like mine did but were more caramel than gold. She had been one of those to drink Ivor's blood and, more than anyone else, I was glad *she* did.

Coren was Sara's personal nightmare and tormentor and I wanted to give her the chance to end her plight, almost as much as I wanted to kill Coren myself. She deserved this more than anyone else.

And after talking with her this past hour, I'd learned enough to know she was a woman I wanted on my side, both as a fellow and a friend.

"It's okay," she assured me. "This will all work out, you know. That mystic-chick from the Foxworth Coven, Ceanna, said that given how everything is right now, we will win."

That "mystic-chick" stood right inside the study, visible through the windows of the French-doors. While she was a beautiful blonde, Ceanna's personality was arctic—colder than any ice that mimicked her sky-blue eyes. She wasn't that old from what I'd heard, but she had

trained since childhood to be a Council Hunter; a feared and respected one at that, along with her brother, Arcadia Foxworth.

"Yeah, if there isn't any other decisions or major plays made between then and now. Coren keeps giving us new consequences."

"I know. Ceanna explained the possible ripple effect if that happens." Sara nodded. "But I have this gut feeling that today *is* the day. It doesn't give him much time to make Fate change her mind again."

"I sincerely hope both you and Ceanna are right." I balanced my head in both hands.

Sara shifted, antsy— and I was sure for good reason. We all had at least one.

"What was Corrine screaming about?" Sara asked. She was obviously not sure if her question was welcome. Sara would be half-right there. "She stays very upset for you."

I bit back the lie that flew to my lips; my mantra since I'd found out, when anyone else had asked. *This* woman deserved the truth, and I would give it to her. "I have it on good authority that Kevlar won't be with us by the end."

Sara blew out her breath in a long drag, making her black bangs, which were streaked with blood red, fly in every direction. Her combat-boot heel rolled back and forth as she contemplated that.

"And how do you feel about that?" Sara guarded her expression.

Sara was a protective woman when it came to her family, and that included Kevlar. And they were a family, even though most of them weren't related in any way by the standards in which I was raised. Blood nor water could be as thick anywhere else. The Cornwalls stood or fell together, a unit.

How could I put my feelings into words that another rational being would understand? But then again, Sara was far from rational.

"I won't *let* him die," I said with venom.

"Will you have a choice?"

"There has to be."

"You will accept nothing less?"

"No." I stared her in the eyes when I said it, showing her how much this meant to me. "I won't let our life together end this way. I will see him alive, at *any* cost."

Her grin widened. "Welcome to the family."

"Excuse me?"

"Did you think I would just hand over one of my brothers to someone before I knew if the woman was worthy of him?" She patted my leg. "Everything will work out."

"How do you know?"

"Because shit has been happening to this Coven far too much, and eventually something good has to happen. If not, then why the hell are we all even here?" Sara said bitterly. She stared through the paned glass at her boyfriend Gene, who stood laughing with another one of the Foxworth sisters, Josealynn, who had come with Ceanna earlier this afternoon. Their parents; Canya and Gregory, the Surrey Coven Leaders spoke with Maximus and Corrine, off to the side.

"You're having problems with him," I hedged.

"How'd you guess?"

"Every once in a while, you glare at him for no reason," I explained. "He does much the same to you."

"I don't understand him anymore. Since I'm his Maker, I can read him like an open book, but it doesn't make it any easier."

"You don't like what you see."

She shook her head. "Haven't in a long time. I guess I'm having a hard time letting go of him. Sometimes, I want to be more..."

"More what?" I hated the pain in her voice. It wasn't obvious. She knew how to hide it like I did. Sara was in agony.

"Nothing."

"What?"

"Stable— like he wants me to be. I'm not all there, you see. He resents that sometimes I can't handle what has happened in my past, and he doesn't get that I can't do anything about it."

"First off, stable is overrated. I haven't been stable a single day in my life. Secondly, you need to do what makes *you* truly happy, Sara. Whatever that means. If Gene isn't that for you, perhaps it's time you bite the bullet and move on to greener pastures. But that decision is yours and yours alone. No one else can make it for you, even if they try."

Our cavalry came out of the patio door in ones and twos, preventing further discussion. Then the insecurities set in. Whose lives would end because of my inexperienced leadership? Frankly, winning didn't mean everyone survived. Why were they even following me? And how did

Corrine and Maximus make these hard decisions all of the time?

Fortunately, the Council would be willing to help in their own way, *for their own ends*. Like they had for the past two millennia, to protect humanity and their precious ignorance of those of us that crept around in dark corners; monsters looking through the glass— always separate, never accepted. In Corrine's words; whatever furthered them the most.

The best part would be that if everything got out of hand tonight, come tomorrow morning, humanity would never know. Once Coren was dead, the Council deliberated on whether the humans would even remember there had been a "serial-killer" stalking the streets of Vancouver.

But that was none of my concern, and mind control wasn't part of my power. Even if it was; thousands of people would be too big a task for just one person.

"Are we ready?" Marcus asked, his already unusual eyes even more so now. There was no turquoise on earth more faceted or clear.

"Ready as we are ever going to get." I sighed when Kelly walked out behind him; the one person I felt the worst about.

Sara wasn't any older, but most people tended to forget that. Vicious and brutal, Sara would lash out at anyone outside of her circle with very little provocation. I had to wonder if Coren was the only reason for that, or if the world had given her more lessons a young woman never forgot.

Gene and Milindya Cornwall walked out with them. When I had learned about her Primary power I couldn't help but want her as well. Milindya could be a truly terrifying being, making me very *glad* I was on her side. Her odd powers ran in the manipulation of any kind of painful emotion or energy.

The last and the oldest, Holly, weighed in at a "mere" nine or so centuries old.

"I am going, Marcus," Kelly argued, combined with a mask of rage, rivalled only by Marcus's.

I heard exasperated groans from several directions. I guessed this was a repeat performance.

"No, you're not," Sara snapped.

Marcus's gaze flew to her, his face displaying his gratitude for the back-up. From what Kev had told me, Sara fought on Kelly's side more often than not.

"What's your problem, Sara?" Kelly wheeled on her. "You're always arguing my case."



"When we deal with outlaw *vampires* —and neither of us wins that one— let alone something of this magnitude. There is too much we don't know, and Ivor is determined that something bigger than just a measly Rogue is involved here. You're staying with Corrine, just like Marcus *suggested*." Sara looked back at Corrine for support.

"You're right, Sara," Corrine concurred. "Kel, even though you are now part demon, I will not allow it. I only consented to this to keep you safer, just in case. But I still can't bring myself to allow you to tag along. You are going to stay here with me until they return."

"Corrine!" Kelly wheeled on her.

Marcus hauled her back and whispered in what sounded similar to French, but Kelly refused to come completely to heel.

"*No*. I cannot allow it," Corrine said with venom. "You hesitate to kill, and we can't have that. That will end your life, just like that." She snapped her fingers.

"But Sara gets to go," Kelly fumed. "Again. When exactly do I get the chance to prove that I'm not some fragile flower to be locked up away from danger?"

"Sara will kill anything, without question, and possibly think about it later. You don't have her skills, or

her rigid, failsafe mindset. This isn't just a hunt, Kelly.

You're *not* going," Max said quietly in a fatherly way.

"Then Marcus doesn't go," Kelly resigned, but with a new light in her eyes. "There is no way he's going, if I'm not. If it's too dangerous for me, it is for him. I'm really not in the mood to die and not even know why."

In this moment, I was glad Kev had spent so much time holed in my apartment telling me about his closest friends. Kelly and Marcus had a strange predicament, connecting their souls and life-essence— to the point that if one died, so would the other. That would terrify me, too.

But I'd been assured this wasn't normal with vampires. I could barely wrap my mind around the explanations I had received, when I'd asked.

"Why must you play *that* card?" Marcus growled with impatience.

"See, that's the thing when you share a soul, Marcus, it's permanent," Kelly said softly, and Marcus visually softened. "It won't change, no matter how much I complain. You might get tired of it, but I don't stop thinking about it. Every hunt, every sleepless night I spend— all I do is wonder."

His love for her shone so brightly in his eyes. I actually thought he might cave, but I should've known better.

"Love, I'm not going to die," Marcus promised, and kissed the top of her head.

"You don't know that," Kelly replied. She wasn't in the least concerned at the audience.

"Yes, I do. When was the last time I didn't come back to you whole?" He kidded, and Kev smothered a laugh.

"That vampire from Europe. You remember when—" Kev stuttered when Marcus shot him a look so full of malevolence, the hair on the back of my neck rose.

"Don't forget that guy we chased into White Rock and Marcus had to jump into the ocean with the Foxworths," Holly chimed in. "Then he had to swim six miles because the elder wouldn't let him teleport."

"Oh, I remember that," Corrine agreed with a soft smile. "That was fun, really. Watery corpses are such a bitch."

Corrine had one wicked sense of humour.

"You see!" Kelly shrieked, missing what her Leader had said, and *how* she had said it.

"That was the woman who shielded her power from Max, so when he sent in the young-bloods, they had no idea she was over seventeen centuries old!" Milindya chuckled. "But that time you really did die."

Max snorted at that, and shot Milindya a look that had "now, you've done it" written all over it.

"You did what!" Kelly shrieked even louder, and then glowered. Understanding filled her eyes. "You died? As in dead?"

Marcus rubbed the back of his neck nervously. "What did I get myself into..."

"You are so in the vampire dog house, buddy." Kelly snapped.

"Max was the one who changed your memory," Marcus defended himself, but something in Kelly's expression told me that didn't help very much.

Her cold blue eyes turned to Max, who shrugged. "What do you want me to say? That you *both* died that night?"

"Is that what happened?" she asked frigidly.

"Yes," Sara replied from beside me. "You just collapsed while we were waiting for the team to come home. You complained your chest had been burning, and it was over before we knew what had happened."

"You *knew* about this?"

"Of course. They'd asked me if keeping you ignorant of it would be a good idea, and I agreed. But, ultimately, it was Max who made the decision and executed it."

"That was only a few weeks ago, Marcus." Kelly glared at him far more calmly than before. But it was only the serenity before the storm. "Do you really want to have it happen again in a span of seven days?"

And we were back at square one.

"I won't die," Marcus promised.

"You told me a vampire couldn't drown."

"It was a spell that killed him, not the water, Kelly," Sara corrected.

Ryder Cornwall picked that moment to walk out of the patio doors with his mate, Catalym. He headed straight for Kelly, his face filled with worry.

"It's okay, Kel. We'll just put him back together again," Ryder whispered to her. After that he didn't say anything, though with every second that passed, Kelly lost the near hysteria.

"Why can you do that when she gets this bad, but I can't?" Marcus objected when Kelly hugged him, turning to go back into the house.

"I don't literally worship the ground she walks on. It enables me to tell her some things straight and not sugar-coat them," Ryder said snidely. "That, and she trusts me."

"She trusts me," Marcus mumbled.

"He has a way with words that you don't. You're more of an action man," Catalym offered, placing a consoling hand on his arm.

"But..."

"No buts. At the moment, she doesn't believe a single thing you say, Marc. You just lied to her, not about something small, but concerning her *life*. You are her happiness, and in you doing that hunt, she lost both, brief as it may've been. She believed you could never do either to her, and you got off on a technicality because Max decreed it so," Catalym said in a low beautiful voice. "And even this fact won't get you off the hook with her. Right now, she seems to have relented on her point, but she is in there about to cry. Despite what she would have us believe, she *is* fragile, and that is why we all protect her so."

Marcus stared at his feet, guilt riding his face. He said nothing as he walked into the house after his wife.

"Maybe Marcus shouldn't go with us," I whispered to Sara, and she burst out laughing.

"Yeah, that's not going to happen there, Pan. Not even I can stop the hailstorm that is Marcus when he wants something. And he wants *this*. He feels he has a score to settle with Coren, and he won't ever stop until it's met."

"Okay, then." That was settled. "Where is Coren's latest note?"

Kev handed it to me, without even glancing my way.

Pain, inspired by the well-deserved aloofness, pierced my careful façade, but it mattered little. I would do everything in my considerable power to make sure *none* of them died. But I was only a solitary demon. They were six somewhat demon-vampires who planned to come with me.

Couldn't that level the playing field between us all of us, just a little?

I opened the note. The taunting words barely registered when Kev's arm closed around my waist and pulled me away from the gathering. He didn't let go until the others were completely out of sight.

His body trapped me against the emerald bushes, his face a terrifying mask of pent-up anger.

"Why won't you talk to me?" Kev demanded.

"I am out of my element."

In my head, those words had sounded right. When they came out of my mouth, I knew I hadn't explained myself adequately. Kev had no idea what I spoke of, but that was fine. I wasn't entirely sure either.

He looked down at me with such scorn, it actually hurt.

"In regard to what, though? The fight itself or the man you were happy to fuck just *this morning*?" Kev spat, topped off with a sneer so cold, I shivered.

It was no more than the slap in the face it was meant to be.

He didn't let go of my waist, but the rancour in his voice was nothing like what I'd expected from him.

"Well?" Kev demanded again.

"What do you expect me to do, Kevlar?"

"I expect you to treat me like I'm still alive," he answered without any hesitation. "That I haven't died yet."

I closed my eyes against the pain his words inspired.

"I'm sorry." I made the mistake of looking up at him.

I went to say something further, but he leaned forward and captured my mouth with more skill than he had ever displayed before. One of his hands gripped the



back of my neck, keeping me in place. The other landed on my ass, and crushed me to him until I thought I couldn't breathe.

And I didn't care one bit. Desperation leaked through, and the dam I had erected collapsed.

He groaned, and his foot hooked behind mine to offset my balance. He followed me down to the ground, blanketing me.

"If I have to die, can't it be with you at least talking to me?" He asked in a rough, hurt voice.

"I shouldn't have..."

"No, Pan." Kev pressed his lips to mine again, only to pull back. "I don't care about anything before *right now*. All I'm asking for is from now on. I know you're scared, and no matter how it appeared, you were just protecting yourself. After all these years on this earth, that is one thing I do understand. Having said that, I'm too damned selfish and scared to die alone."

"You're not selfish— and I won't let you be alone."  
*No matter how much it hurts me.*

"Please, let me have you, the comfort of your body."

"Your Coven is right there."

"To be honest, I don't really care. But if we're quiet, they'll never know," he whispered back. "Not even the demon blood enables them to read my mind now. Short of them coming to find us, I think we're safe."

I just smiled, trailing my hands down his sides to the rim of his jeans. His biceps bulged on either side of my face as he lifted his body so I could unzip him and tug them down to his knees.

"Impatient?" he whispered.

"Very. I haven't touched you all afternoon."

He chuckled, and then my pants disappeared. I rolled my eyes and grabbed his cock. I ran my thumb over his head, until he trembled. He lowered his body between my legs as I led him, needing to feel him, one last time.

My body was so ready for him, primed and wet. When he slid inside of me, my nerve-endings jolted awake, the sensations bringing immediate devastation. His lips closed over mine, as he surged forward.

For one blessed moment, I could forget everything, even the people who stood just feet from us. But as far as I could tell, they weren't concerned about what we did.

"Even if this is my last night, there isn't anyone else I rather spend my last sane moments with," Kev murmured sincerely in my ear.

"I won't let you die, Kev." I wrapped my legs around. His pace slowed, savouring it. "I can't."

His lips stole my reason; his rhythm robbed my mind of thought. Kev swallowed the small moans that escaped my lips, heard by no one but us.

We both came serenely. No one noticed anything, other than perhaps our absence. I bit my lip now that our too short reprieve had come to a close.

There was nothing to delay us any further.

My arms curled around his neck, not wanting to let him go. Going after Coren didn't sound as good to me anymore. Not at the expense of the first person to have a shot at understanding who I really am.

Call me egocentric for this, with all that was at stake, but it was just how I felt.

"I will probably do something stupid to save you, you know that, don't you?" I felt him smile against my cheek.

"That's nice of you." He kissed my forehead, the earlier anger completely vanished. He shoved his face into my neck and hair as if to hide from the world. His arms closed around me, and I felt the fine tremor in his shoulders. "Every time I go on a mission, intellectually, I know I *could* die," Kev said in a strangely shaky voice. "To

know that I'm predestined to die. I don't think I am meant to come back from the dead this time around, am I?"

I avoided answering that, since I didn't know myself. If my dad had known that, he wouldn't have been so worried. "Ivor didn't say if it was predestined."

"But just like you said, you don't know. I never thought it would undermine me like this, but I can't stop thinking about it," he admitted. "It makes a big difference now."

My hands ran over his back, trying to console him in a way I had never comforted another living being before.

"You're not a vampire anymore, Kevlar, that has to mean something."

"I hope so." Kev moved to get up, but my arms had other ideas.

I was still attached to him when he stood on his feet. He chuckled, but his sadness reigned.

"We have to go," he whispered brokenly.

"No." Tears burned in my eyes, for I didn't know what to say to this man who had come to mean so much to me.

"Baby, please," he begged. "It's hard enough as it is."

The tears spilled over my lashes as I unwrapped myself from him. I turned away, clothing my body in all black; jeans, t-shirt, and even socks. It seemed appropriate.

His hand closed around my arm, and he turned me around. His soulful eyes took in my tear-stained face and his thick fingers tentatively touched my face as he wiped them away.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?" I asked.

"If I can't be there for you." He shut his eyes.

"Promise me you will stay with Max and Corrine if— I'm not here."

"I can take care of myself."

"We both know that isn't really true, baby. You pretend, but you're not happy. I need you to be happy—and I don't want you to be alone anymore. They would be your friends— your family, the people you run to. Max and Corrine will be able to help you, and so will Marcus, Kelly, Sara, Holly, Ryder— all of them will be there for you. I need to know that you will be alright. Please, promise me."

"Fine, I promise." I blinked and another flood of tears were released.

"Don't cry for me, Pan. If it is my destiny to die, so be it. Life does not end with death, we only move on to the next."

*Then why do you say that like it is the end?* But I wasn't quite self-absorbed enough to give voice to those words.

His face changed back to being cold and unfeeling, but I knew it wasn't for my benefit, it was for the rest of them.

"Ivor gave us the general area," Milindya said to Holly when we walked back around the bush. "I think we should check it out."

"It's a place to start. I'm sure he has a better range than we do," Holly replied.

I smiled as they underestimated my dad. Ivor would know exactly where Coren was, and what he was doing. It was only a matter of his being permitted to convey it to us. I knew he had stretched that permission whisper-thin.

I wondered if my dad had changed their memories or not, because it didn't seem like it. He had stayed all day long—escaping only a few short hours ago. I hadn't thought to ask, and to me it didn't really matter anyway.

Not one of them looked scared or even timid about what was to come, even though we knew this wasn't just a

normal, everyday hunt. It wasn't just one or two irate  
vampires who needed to put down.

And one fact wouldn't leave me alone;

Tonight, Vancouver could get its first real taste of  
hell.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The roads were dead silent.

Everywhere, humans holed up in their houses as the hysteria around them grew. The only sign that any life still resided in this area of Vancouver at all was the occasional flutter of a closed curtain while humans stared out into the shrouded night.

I could practically taste the city-wide panic. I had no idea if the Council had done anything in regard to Coren's last radio statement yet, but it definitely didn't feel like it.

Kev found that even though he'd lost his ties to the Cornwalls, he still had long-range telepathy to talk with his brothers and sisters. And so far, my newfound vampire blood hadn't benefited me that way.

He led his bike to the side of the road, and I looked up at the street marker. I almost laughed. Of course we were on Cornwall Avenue. It wasn't anywhere near the actual Cornwall Mansion, but one had to wonder.

"They've found the site," Kev relayed to me.

"Are they sure?"

He nodded.

"It's down to one of two or three houses on Creelman Avenue and Chestnut Street. Close enough to



downtown, but far enough to safely flee to." Kev started up the bike again.

The short trip took no more than two minutes from where we were. He parked his bike again in the alley, right off of Creelman Avenue.

His face resumed an expression that reminded me of a young boy. No matter how he felt —nervous or scared— I had learned he was not the type of person to shirk *anything* that needed to be done.

"I have a good feeling about this," I lied, and he nodded absently. "Kev." I grabbed his hand, and he turned back to me automatically.

"What?"

I bit my lip. "I don't know."

I'd already said everything there was to say, but his eyes softened. He leaned forward to kiss me, then took my hand and led me across the street.

The others stood in the centre of the alley, awaiting us.

"He's either in that house," Holly pointed at a small white dwelling, "or that one." He turned to the brown one beside it. "We haven't been able to narrow it down more than that."

"Does he know we are here yet?" I asked, and Holly shrugged.

"Does it matter?"

"Guess not."

I stared at the two houses, and even without the ability to magically fish Coren out, I knew which house it was. I also knew he was in there with Lillian. And for that, there were two options.

She was dead. Or she was no longer human.

My time for wishful thinking and speculation was over. I just hoped I didn't have to kill my own mother. However, I had to do what I had to do. No two ways about it. Come dawn, I planned to see this city back to its normal ebb and flow of life.

Staring at the peeling brown paint, I marvelled at the calm that had settled around me upon our arrival. I still felt like we'd missed something big, but for once my demon overpowered whatever part of me was still a little human. It held no fear of what was to come.

I knew one thing now. Coren was already a dead man, only the matter of killing him remained.

I looked toward Sara, who also stared at the brown house like she could feel him. There was a tremor in her

body, and her fingers clenched like she needed to launch into action.

Gene stood away from her. They didn't look at each other, didn't touch, nor did they talk. In fact, to my knowledge, they hadn't, whatsoever, all evening. To see them now, I wouldn't have ever guessed they were dating.

"He's your kill," I said in a low voice to her, and her sparkling caramel eyes came alive with vengeance. "I just might beat on him a little— or a lot, first."

She nodded and her lip curled back over her fangs, a faint hissing sound escaping between them. Her Curse rode her hard, and I watched with fascination while she made no move to battle it back. The novelty of such freedom of self made me envious.

I started walking toward the brown house.

"Where are you going?" Kev asked.

"To fight." I answered.

The inconspicuous box still lay in my purse, which I'd slipped over my shoulder and chest. It beat with a power I could feel like a demonic siren. I breathed slowly, trying to convince myself that this was the right path, the right thing to do.

How else could I get close enough to Coren without something that would tempt him to let his guard down? He

might want me, but that was only due to what I could give him, not because of me.

The vampires behind me armed themselves however they saw fit. Some chose human weapons while others would rely on who and what they were, and the power they wielded.

"Don't do anything stupid, Pan." Kev bent to whisper in my ear.

"Like what?" I asked. Hadn't I already admitted to committing to such an action if and when needed?

"Like something to try and save me, which will only hurt you," Kev replied. "There isn't any point."

"You could've asked me anything but that, and I might've agreed. If I have a chance, I'll take it. The same as you will."

He just growled, but we were too close to the house now for this argument.

The coldness wrapped around us when we went through the opening in the fence and onto the property. The overgrown yard, and everything in it, solidified my decision that this was the house. The weeds trailed in every direction. A broken white lawn chair sat in the middle of the yellowed grass.

The air itself grew still, like we'd passed a barrier separating us from the outside world. I assumed it was what the vampires referred to as a barrier-spell, or something like that, even if I hadn't felt the rush of magic.

Holly constantly whispered under his breath, taking care of any energy that would hinder us.

"You feel him, don't you?" I asked Sara, who got more and more agitated.

"I know he's near, but I'm not adept enough with those powers yet. Holly says I'm just a tank, you know? Blow stuff up, run stuff over," Sara explained. "The finer mechanics have been lost on me, and I'm only just beginning to understand what I truly am."

I understood that.

The back door opened and there wasn't a light in the house to show who stood there, not that we needed that.

His scent floated to me for the first time, but I knew it was him. The growls of the men around me testified to that fact.

"You're late," Coren snarled, angry for reasons I could barely fathom.

"You didn't exactly give us a map to follow," I snapped.

The men tried to surge around me, but I motioned them back. I wasn't Sara, and I understood my demon. I didn't need them to protect me from a vampire.

Did I?

"I hadn't known you required such explicit instructions. I figured 'come alone' would've been a given." Coren marginally calmed. "Obviously, you're not as smart as I'd hoped."

"You know us half-mortals are as stupid as monkeys. You have to be *very* specific," I mocked, feeling the others crowd around me. Again.

I fought not to snap at them.

No one but my dad and, possibly, Lillian at very rare times—if it benefited her—felt any reason to protect me.

"I can see that." Coren's eyes slid behind me. Whatever he saw didn't please him much, and I knew exactly where his gaze had gone. Kev snickered when their eyes met. "Except— you're not so mortal anymore, are you, Pandora?"

"Yeah, I know. It sucks when others put kinks in your plans, doesn't it? You must hate it when someone fucks up your day. Trust me, I know the feeling."

His eyes settled on Sara, and she growled beside me. I put my hand on her shoulder to feel her shaking, itching to leap forward.

"Sara..." Coren called. The sick, maniac light angered me.

She growled again, and didn't sound even remotely like herself when Gene jerked her back, his face a mask of hatred.

"Never mind her," I snapped. He ignored me like I hadn't spoken. Coren seemed hypnotized at the sight of her. "She isn't part of the package deal. We're here about Pandora's Box, not your screwed up obsession."

"True, demon, very true."

"Where is my mother?" I demanded.

"Oh, I'm sure she is around... somewhere." Coren smiled with overextended fangs.

To me, he didn't look in the least scary, just comical.

I took that comment with a grain of salt. Sure she was, but what race did she belong to now? I asked myself again, could I kill her?

Something told me she would be more than willing to kill me. I had to be ready for that.

Expect the worst, and if it is better than that, then at least you're prepared.

"We should do this in the house." Coren's mood brightened considerably from whatever his warped pea-brain had come up with now.

His eyes rested beside me again, and I heard both Marcus and Gene growl. The sound so animalistic, it made the hair on the back of my neck rise; the urge to join their small loss of control rose in me.

Kev's hand found mine, and Coren took note of it. I had no idea if it had been a wise move or not, but I couldn't find it in me to deny Kev the contact. Not now with his time almost up.

"Should we?" Marcus asked.

"We don't have much choice," Holly replied.

We moved with cold, stiff movements to follow through the door Coren had disappeared into. For a reason completely unbeknownst to me, I thought of my agent Sam.

Why, I thought of him now, I didn't know. Yet I couldn't escape the feeling of an unsolved puzzle in my mind, which only needed one or two more pieces to reveal the whole picture.

"I feel like we're walking into a trap." I sighed.



"There is a very good reason for that," Holly chimed in. I looked behind me to see his grim smile. "It's probably because we are. But I expected no less."

Of course.

Coren wasn't in the dark kitchen when we entered; the door to the basement had been left open. I hesitated but Kev pulled me through it anyway.

"Welcome to my life," he muttered.

My foot hit a thin wooden stair that led to several more rickety steps I didn't quite trust. The pitch blackness was what worried me the most.

"There is a spell set on the third stair down, but I can't identify it," Holly murmured. "The protection spells he's laid suggest a knowledge and age I can barely compete with, but I know he *can't* be that old."

Can't he?

"I can surprise you," Coren called from the depths. "Come along, quickly now. I don't have all night."

"We don't have a choice, do we?" I repeated.

"Again, welcome to my life," Kev murmured back.

The moment we touched that anticipated third stair, the scene changed around us. The wood shifted to stone, and the dank smell of a cavern hit us.

"Damn it." I said ironically. "How did he get into the cave without the amulet?"

I focused on the torches, and the green flames transformed the nothingness into detail in a flash. This was *my* domain.

"I second that." Kev whispered. "Perhaps he is a demon?"

"I can't see that, not now I've met him."

"Where are we?" Sara murmured. "I think we left Kansas back with Dorothy."

"Coren has teleported us to the cave, which is only accessible in Lillian's house." Kev informed. "Where the Urn was kept."

Kujo barrelled out of the darkness and up the stairs to meet me. He flung his head back and howled his outrage. I reached down to pet his head, but he wouldn't settle.

Fire flickered in Kujo's eyes, and his ears perked up when a feminine snarl echoed from below.

Every vampire, except Kev, leapt back and snarled. Anna and her latest litter lowered their heads and growled, staying further down the steps, their heads moving back and forth between the outsiders.

"Hey, babies." I knelt beside Kujo. "It's okay, we'll fix this."

Kujo stared at me with disbelief.

"I'm so glad to see you surprised, *for once*," Coren sang.

A weird chattering came from the ceiling, but it was so high up and away from the lighted torches, I didn't see what ran around up there. The sound made my blood run cold. Something about it was familiar, and it shouldn't have been.

"Ahh, shit," Holly mumbled, staring at me with a strange mixture of pity and anger on his face.

"Okay, Coren, I'm not one for dramatics. You wanted the box and I want to give it to you," I called.

"That's really all there is. We can end this now."

"Oh! But, this is about *so* much more than just a measly box."

"Then what do you want with me?"

"When you're my age, games destroy the relentless continuity, to pass the time." Coren glanced up at the vaulted ceiling with pleasure as we descended the last bit of the way.

The chattering grew more frantic above us as it came closer. I reached for my amulet to call my dad, only to find that it wasn't there.

"Are you looking for this?" Coren asked, with the long chain holding the fire-ruby, dangling from his fingertips.

"Well, yes, actually."

How could he have gotten that? A mere vampire shouldn't have been able to get it from me, especially me without noticing it.

A figure dropped straight from the ceiling, landing in a defensive crouch beside Coren. I looked at the strangely malformed woman, haggard and very pale, bruised. Her eyes weren't brown anymore, but completely filled with blood.

Her previously warm coffee-coloured hair hung in filthy locks around her head, like she hadn't brushed it for months. Dirt and grime clung to her face and arms. Her clothes were torn to the point I didn't even know why she still wore them.

A high-pitched squawk left her lips, turning into an insane hiss.

"Mom?" I winced.

Expect the worst— and that's what you get, except *this* had never crossed my mind. It surpassed anything I had ever thought of. Did vampires really look like this when they were spawned?

"That's your mom?" Sara's hand went to her throat.  
"What is she?"

"What you would look like if you had been brutally converted and not allowed to feed, whatsoever," Marcus said in disgusted shock. "You know how much you needed blood upon waking. She is starving, and her Curse has robbed her of any and all conscious."

"Oh, no—" Something dawned on Sara. "This is what *I* looked like, what he did it to me. I never had a mirror. It had been weeks before..."

I looked back at her, seeing the deep red and gold flames in her eyes at her outrage.

I'd been silent for so long and now *everyone's* eyes were on me. What was I supposed to say? Hi, crazy, bloodletting mom— who'd up until the other day thought me crazy for believing in vampires and now was one?

Terror shook me to the core, but I couldn't let it get to me this way, and I knew it. I extinguished these "selfish" impulses in the face of everything else I had to contend with. When I finally spoke, I think everyone was surprised at what I had to say.

"No, she isn't my mom anymore. That's Coren's new bitch who has to be exterminated." I shoved back any fuzzy feeling I may have ever had for my mother.

Her life was over.

I had failed her; I couldn't save her, but I would be damned if I left her like that. I knew she never would have wanted this.

Hell, she didn't even want me to be a demon. And I didn't even have to kill or feed to live. She hated to even kill bugs in her house. I knew how she would feel about having to slaughter a human just to continue on even for an hour, let alone eternity. It wouldn't be like she'd want to spend it with me.

Coren threw his head back and laughed. "I think I like you, Pandora. You have fire, like Sara does, but it runs *so* much deeper in your blood. I've already had first-hand experience with just what your power is capable of, when used correctly."

How? I hadn't even given him a taste yet. But I planned to.

I stepped forward alone, how it should've been all along. "You want the damned box, Coren, take the fucking thing." I reached into my purse and pulled it out. Its red veins raced frantically around my fingers, like they pleaded for me not to do this.

The voices in my head returned, and I knew they had in Kev's. They rose to a shriek, each distinct, yet

blending into one. They didn't want this to happen, but they had no advice on an alternative either. They quickly quieted upon this realization.

However, what was inside of the box very much wanted out and seemed to know their opportunity approached, their cries growing louder. Never before had I been given a more definite example that these two separate sides fought each other.

"You have to put it back on the altar. We both know I can't touch it. Even with my Curse, I'm not a demon—or any part thereof." Coren said cautiously. "And no games of your own or you *will* pay for it."

What would happen if I forced him to touch it? While the legends specified that only demons or those of Pandora's line could handle the Urn, it did not mention what would happen if an outsider did. A sadistic fantasy of Coren being sucked into hell and eternal torment teased my mind.

Yet that goal didn't seem to be within my reach right now.

Not seeing another avenue, I walked toward the alcove cut out in the rock. It didn't surprise me that Kev shadowed my every step.

"Are you sure about this?" Kev asked.

"No." I turned back to Coren. "That is *all* you want me to do?" My stomach turned into one huge iron chunk at the anticipation in Coren's eyes, which told me this was far from over.

"I never said that." Coren smiled again. "Do as you're told, or you will regret it."

"Can we sound anymore corny than that?"

I stuck as close to the wall as I could. My dogs stopped following me, growling loudly. Was there something around the corner we couldn't see? The unknown woman, perhaps? Only way to find out was to go there.

"None of us can teleport out of here, Pan," Kev informed. "Coren has done something, and it isn't our kind of magic. We're trapped."

"You couldn't before, either, remember?" I asked.

Kev shook his head. "It feels different now than it did during our last visit."

"Insurance policy," Coren called. His eyes traveled over us, and then back to the others.

I heard Lillian move, and I turned to see the dogs snapping at her when she lunged for us, forcing her to reel back. Hunger had gotten the better of her, but crazed monster or not, she knew enough to be wary of my beasts.



As I turned back to my course of action, Kev helped me over the jagged rocks, whether I needed it or not. I think he was far more scared than he let on.

Fine with me.

I was terrified.

"None of you will move," Coren reprimanded, when one of the others tried to follow us.

I heard a disgruntled grumble, but silence ensued afterward. Why hadn't they taken him down yet? Were they waiting for a cue from me?

Corrine and Max had to have given them orders, and only now did I wonder exactly what those were. I knew how much Sara hated Coren, but she too stood just as frozen as the rest of them.

Kev turned the corner before me and came to an abrupt stop. I crashed into him and then look past him. I saw a figure in the shadows, carefully set away from the green fire that lit the cavern, throwing murky shadows around him.

I breathed a sigh of foolish relief. I had been expecting so many outlandish things, but my literary agent hadn't been among them. Why he would be helping Coren, I had no idea, but it could've been far worse.

Couldn't it?

"Sam?" I called out, but the figure didn't respond, nor did he move.

"That's Sam?" Kev implored.

Apprehension set in at Kev's tone. I nodded, the oddity factor of the situation momentarily stealing my voice. But when I stepped forward, Sam held a hand up to signify he didn't want me to come closer.

"Hello, Pandora Cyprus." The musical note to his voice put me on edge, as it was similar to our last phone conversation, but not nearly so carefree.

"What are you doing here?"

"Like you, I don't have much choice anymore," he responded with a bitterness that sounded *nothing* like him.

My eyes raked over what I could see, trying to figure out what bothered me about this, other than the obvious. His eagle sharp nose and small eyes were all the same. Nothing seemed different about him, at first. The second, closer look, suggested that the man before me and the man I had met years before weren't the same.

I didn't know how I knew that, but I did.

"What's wrong with you, Sam? You're not acting like yourself."

"At last, you show *some* intelligence." Sam laughed, but there was a distinct feminine quality to it now. "I

wondered when the brilliant daughter of Ivor whom I have heard so much about would finally clue in."

"You know my father?"

"A lot better than you do, earth-dweller." The impersonator said the last like a profanity, yet it was laced green with envy.

"I thought I could trust you, Sam," I whispered, appalled with my own stupidity. It took so much for me to put faith in someone, and my agent had worked hard at obtaining that, only to turn on me— with Coren. How had he even gotten mixed up in this mess?

"You are wrong, as you have been most of our entire lives," Sam snapped. His eyes went a dull black, which I recognized on sight.

*Sam is a freakin' demon?*

And then he stepped from the shadows.

"I killed Sam about a year ago," he explained in a flat monotone resembling the voice I had heard my dad use when he wasn't trying to act more human for my benefit.

"Then, who are you?" Kev asked quietly.

"That is something you really want to know, isn't it, Kevlar Brandenburg?"

The air around Sam shimmered and then flowed around him in a hailstorm, echoing through the alcove. His

non-descript clothes faded into a black dress, one I recognized as the one Kev had picked out for me.

Sam's features melted, the cheekbones becoming more delicate. Hair spouted into a brown curling waterfall around what was now, a she.

Or *me*, actually.

Was this supposed to be a joke?

Kev snarled and shoved me behind him.

"You cannot save her, Kevlar Brandenburg, or yourself for that matter," the exact facsimile of me replied.

I peeked around his shoulder.

"Don't bet on it, you'll lose. I repeat; who the fuck are you?"

"My name is Pandora." Her lips parted, revealing jagged teeth.

"That is *her* name."

"I know that. Our father lacks *many* things, creativity being high on that list," she answered with a bitter edge.

"*Our*?" I echoed.

"Yes, Pandora Cyprus. Obviously, I am your twin sister. You really are stupid, just like Coren said. I had hoped he was wrong."

"I don't have a twin, since I'm an only child. Ivor would have told me—"

"Told you what? He isn't allowed to tell you *anything* about hell or anything that doesn't exist on *this* plane." Pandora looked me in the eye; I had the weirdest sense of déjà vu I had ever had; like looking in a living mirror.

"But here you are."

"I am now. And I will never go back. To accomplish that, I've come to give you your fondest wish."

"Which is?"

"To be among your own kind and to know where you come from." A manic gleam entered my twin's eyes. "Isn't that what you've always craved; to know them? Your obsession with hell and what it's like is sad. Like that book I stole from you. Interesting really, but you have it *all wrong*. However, we can fix that for you in short order, Pan-do-ra Cyprus."

"What are you talking about?" I asked. Deep inside, I speculated on what she must be planning, but for the most part, my mind denied the calculation in her gaze.

"I wanted to know what this plane was like. I spent almost four decades rotting away while you stayed up here high on a hog. *You* should get to know exactly how they

treat a half-breed. You think you have it so bad up here—but you don't." She sneered so maliciously, Kev's throat rumbled in warning. "Where I come from, I am shunned and despised because the creatures dwelling in hell have just cause to hate humanity. And I am the constant reminder that some beings have a much better existence than they do, even though most of them never did a thing to deserve being banished there."

I stepped a little past Kev, to see my sister without obstacle, just as she did me. She might look like me, but this Pandora was no more than a feral animal. The difference profound, she was nothing more than a beast trapped in a humanoid body without compassion or conscious. While some could say the same about me, it was not to the same extent.

I could now see that some of the discussions I'd previously had with Ivor had been filled with hints I should've seen before now. As they flew through my mind, more puzzle pieces fell into place.

Specifically, one childhood memory teased me; a story my dad had relayed to me more than any other. How little had I known, it was about my sister—and me.

It was about two little girls that were mirrors of one another, birthed by a woman, who was too ill-equipped to

deal with them. Thirty years later, there were many parts I couldn't remember, but enough came back to me;

One of the girls had been born with beautiful brown hair and golden metallic eyes, pale, creamy skin and a good temperament. But her twin-sister was unlike any other being borne on earth. Her skin had been a pale red, with stubby black horns that sprouted from her head. Her black eyes had been as cold as death as she stared at her terrified mother.

From the moment she had uttered her first cry, the powers that be decreed her unfit to live in this realm. She'd been taken to her rightful place, someplace where the sun never shines and the work was never done, not ever to see her sister again— at least, until now.

I never said it was a happy fairytale.

The silence dragged on, while Kev's gaze shifted between us— and my twin stared with self-satisfaction.

"Have nothing to say, sister dear?"

"You're the exact opposite of me."

Her chin dipped in a jerky nod. "*You* stayed here with mother, while I got sucked into the hellfire because of the luck of the draw. I had to serve, just like Ivor. All the while, you pretended to be just another *human*." Bitterness

filled every single word. "Now mother gets a taste of what her wanton ways condemned me to, just as you will now."

"I'm sorry." I felt those two words were so inadequate, but what else was I supposed to say? "I didn't know you existed." That didn't sound much better.

"And do you think your ignorance excuses you? Do not apologize to me!" Pandora's fists pounded her thighs. "Ivor tried to tell you, and he even made sure I knew that, but you never paid any attention. *You* left me there! You didn't even try to find me."

"But, I didn't know," I repeated.

"And what if you did?" She screamed. "You would never have tried to do anything, and risked endangering your perfect life!"

"You don't know that, or me. You don't have any idea what I would've done," I snapped, preferring to think her wrong, in fact, hoping she was. She was my family, and Lillian had done worse to me than my sister had in her jealous anger— that I understood too well. I would've found a way, somehow. I'd always been there for our mother, despite her constant abuse of me. "Why didn't you find a way to come to me? To *ask* me? You didn't even give me that chance— you just assumed. How very human of you."



Pandora fumed at the last, and then strangely enough, calmed just enough that I worried about what she thought now.

"I've been watching you, dear sister," she said. "You do everything to make sure *your* life is protected. You fight everything that's in you to make sure no one ever finds out, while I embrace it. Why would I think differently?"

"I have to. I don't have a choice."

"That doesn't excuse you. I've felt you all these years, for *I* was allowed to know *you* existed. Didn't you feel me?" She implored, and I swore I saw a flash of real hurt in her eyes.

And it cut me to the quick. But even seeing it, I couldn't insult her intelligence with a lie.

"No Pandora, I didn't. I truly wish I could have."  
And I meant every word.

"No, you don't."

A burst of snarls and yips burst from the outer chamber, followed shortly by Coren's laughter. I refused to turn my head and take the chance of my twin doing something stupid.

"Don't even think of going to help them. I *will* kill both of you. Your use to me is almost up."

"Just like that?" Kev snapped. "She's your family."

"Do not deceive yourself, Kevlar Brandenburg," Pandora taunted. "She's as cold and brutal as I am. She just hides it better than I ever could. But it's why I am the one banished to hell and she gets to stay here to follow her *destiny*."

"Don't you have a destiny?" I asked.

"You have to have a soul, to have the right to destiny." Her expression became guarded.

*She doesn't have a soul, but I do.* My exact opposite.

"How did you end up with Coren?" My voice broke over his name. She wouldn't be treated any better than the rest of us, but she wouldn't know the difference.

What had he done to her in their time together?

"Coren was there for me when I had no one else," she said mechanically, and I felt she had uttered these words many times before.

"Did he get you out of hell, somehow?" I whispered. I had to ask, and I wasn't willing to disregard that Coren could have been tearing through the realms to get his hands on his very own demon, just because he had a mislaid vendetta.

"No. I was released with many conditions, for a contracted time period."

"Let me guess. Your time is up," Kev replied with an absence of emotion, hinting at what he thought about this.

"Yes. There is only one way I can stay here now. And I will have it at any cost." My sister's fingers fondled something around her neck, and my gaze caught it for the first time.

I gasped, stumbling back in horror as I realized what it meant. Kev and Pandora both looked at me like I had lost my mind. Perhaps, I had. It would be better that way, if this could all be a delusion.

"Coren controls you, doesn't he?" I blurted.

Pandora's eyes narrowed on me. "How do you know that?"

"You're wearing a dominion collar."

"And what do you know of them?"

"Ivor told me how rare they are, and that the demons destroyed most of the collars because of the dangers connected with them, but not all. Some even landed on earth, and I'd assume Coren found one," I mused. "I wasn't always like what you've seen, and I needed to be properly leashed. When I reached maturity, Ivor gave Lillian one, just in case."

"You reached your peak of power and couldn't control what you did while it levelled out. I went through the same thing when I was fifteen."

"That is how old I was when it happened."

"Interesting," she murmured to herself more than me. "So our father collared you, to make sure your life here stayed well and good. I didn't have to be. All demon children experience this and in our environment we didn't require such measures."

"It wasn't a good time in my life." I held my breath, with a flare of hope that perhaps I could make her see she didn't need to be on Coren's side. But what could I offer her to entice Pandora to our side, and not his? I didn't have the power to grant her life here on earth, and that appeared to be what she wanted.

"What are you two talking about?" Kev insisted.

"The collars are forged under Lucifer's own hand, rendering a demon defenceless to whoever placed it on them. Ivor used it to make sure I'd adjusted after a few—" I paused to debate the last word, "—mistakes."

"It's okay, Pan. You think I didn't screw up when I was a young-blood? We aren't like humanity and we never will be, but you know that. All we can do is try and minimize the impact of our own existence in theirs." He

cupped my cheek. His eyes conveyed a sincerity that made it so much harder to know I would soon have to say goodbye.

"Because we were never meant to be here," I murmured, and he nodded.

"None of us in this cave were ever meant to exist here. You are not alone, baby. But, we make do with what we are given."

"I was meant to be here," Pandora responded with arrogance.

I turned back to her. "You never answered my question. Who put that on you, sister? Coren or Ivor?"

She still didn't answer my question, but muttered to herself. I suspected she might have lost her mind. "I had full intentions of coming to you, even before Coren. How do you think he knows about the box? I told him. He promised me permanent freedom, success, if I led him to his intended means for vengeance." When her gaze rose to stare at me. "He said I had to wear it— that our cause couldn't be completed otherwise. The rules, he said."

I could see the manic obsession in her eyes. However, could I really blame her for wanting my death, and therefore, my life? I had been given everything she could've ever wanted, just as she'd stated.

"You *allowed* Coren to collar you?" I asked, horrified.

Pandora seemed confused by such a question. "I did what I had to in getting him to aid me in a world I don't understand. There is a difference."

"Oh, Pandora. You should have come to me first. Despite what you think, I swear I would've helped you." I grimaced at the near childlike quality that stared back at me.

But that didn't last long.

"Enough of this! Put the Urn back. My time grows too short to waste any more time with this."

"Why?" I gripped the box more vigilantly in my hand. I would rather give it straight to Coren.

She grinned, and Kev disappeared from my side, appearing at hers. At first, I thought he had done it himself, but when he solidified, his expression told me everything I needed to know.

"You are a fine specimen indeed." She looked him up and down like a farmer would a prized animal. "I see why the higher powers tied your fate to my sister's."

"Excuse me?"

"No talking," she snapped, and his voice just stopped. His anger showed in his next failed attempt to speak.

The way she looked at him suggested she wanted to eat him— and not in a good way.

"You have half a minute to return the Urn back to the altar, or you will watch him die." Pandora didn't look back at me.

Shit! I took a step forward with a snarl on my lips, but not to do as she told me. Her hand flew out to prevent it. While we were a match, her skill surpassed mine, having had a better background to practice it.

The sounds still floated to me from the outer portion. The hair-raising noises sounded like animals ripping each other apart. Coren had stopped laughing. I could hear the exertion of the others, suggesting a fight was going on, one I had no idea who would win.

I was caught, and I had no idea what to do.

*I warned Kev I would do something stupid to save him. What could be more stupid than taking the chance of ending the world?*

"What are you going to do once I put it back?" I asked.

"That should be obvious, sister, dear," she said distractedly, her fixed gaze on Kev's jumping pulse. He tried to launch at her, but she pressed her power around him and stopped him still. "I'm going to unleash hell on your precious earth. I'm going to bring something from home with me."

"You can't..."

"Tick, tock. You value his life, don't you?"

Kev's eyes slid to mine, and he shook his head. I knew what he wanted. We both understood now, how his life would end. I also now comprehended the difference between destined and predestined. That sometimes you have to take a risk on making your own destiny.

For better or worse.

Pandora watched me carefully, manifesting a long sword and I had no doubt of its use. It matched the black obsidian in the Urn and the collar.

"Do you choose the life of one vampire over the fate of your entire realm? Do you love him so much?"

Pandora asked, but only mildly curious.

"Why did you want to come to earth, if you only wanted to destroy it?" I demanded. "I thought you wanted a life here?"



"Who said I wanted to destroy it?" She laughed mechanically. "I am just going to change it a little."

My hand itched to place the box on the altar that lay only a half a foot from me. Kev shook his head more violently now, but I ignored him.

"Time's almost up, sister," Pandora sang.

I had made Kev a promise. And promises, to me, were like gold. And in the end, it would be the last nail in the coffin. For my decision would be the final fate for both of us. I just didn't understand how much yet.

I placed the box down.

Pandora smiled, a second before she impaled Kev with the long, wicked sword.

My resulting scream of anguish filled the cavern.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"No!" I screamed.

Wind came from nowhere, wrecking through the alcove. The noise became deafening. Millions of inhuman shrieks reigned triumphant in the anticipation of freedom.

But nothing else mattered. Only Kevlar.

I launched forward to catch him —sword and all— only a moment before his head would've hit the rock. His body shuddered, the magic-infused obsidian doing its work.

"Why?" I stared at the two feet of hilt and blade that protruded from his heart. The mark perfect, the strike so practiced.

"Because I don't really care about you anymore. I stopped that foolishness a long time ago. The only thing I'd ever wanted was for you to love and accept me. But when you refused to see me, to take the hints Ivor gave you to my existence, I changed. Now, I only want you to suffer as I have. And to think, it has only just begun." Pandora stepped up to the Urn. "It's time for a new reign."

"You know that I'm the keeper, and I can't allow that." I argued, while Kev's life slipped away. Even if I pulled the sword out, it wouldn't do any good. The moment it had passed inside him, it had been too late.

"Actually, you're not any longer. Now I am."

Pandora had complete confidence in her voice, making me mentally stumble.

"Bullshit!"

I knew what she would say, before she'd even said it.

"I'm three minutes *older* than you." She stressed.

"You were the rightful keeper, as long as I resided in hell and didn't come into contact with the Urn. But now that I'm on earth, here in this cavern with our legacy. I'm the *real* keeper of the gate. All I have to do now is to accept my birthright." Pandora stepped up to the altar. "And release my brothers and sisters. They are very anxious for this chance. I did promise it to them before Ivor set me free. They will see that I'm just as strong as they are. That I am worthy of their company."

Blood leaked from Kev's mouth when he choked, and I scrambled.

"Hey, baby. I'm right here," I whispered. "You're not alone."

I was stunned at my impending loss, and couldn't think past it. I didn't make any move to stop her because I couldn't, not if what she said was true. Or perhaps, I used

that as an excuse with Kev dying in my lap. I couldn't find a reason to care anymore.

What did the humans matter to me?

I had never known I wanted a real relationship, not until I had one. Now that was being ripped from me, practically moments after I was destined to meet him.

Kev's mouth opened, but all that came out was more blood. He gave up trying to speak as Pandora walked around the Urn, like she didn't know what to do with it.

Let her figure it out. Let her end the world that would no longer have anything in it for me. My spine ached, and I heard it pop, but I ignored the threat of the shift. My instincts would take over, and my last moment with the first man I had ever loved would be over before it'd be finished.

I was selfish and I knew that. I didn't care.

But then a shred of decency came back, the empathic part of me that separated me from my sister.

She'd stupidly turned away from me. A surge of ultimate hatred clouded my mind. This could be my only chance.

I stared down at Kev with fat tears rolling down my cheeks. "I'm sorry, baby, for everything." I gripped the

handle of the sword, and kissed his cheek. A tear sparkled on his cheek from where it had fallen.

I yanked hard.

Kev slumped as the blood picked up speed, just as I figured it would. I had just killed him faster.

*"It will do no good to try and stop her now. She will only kill you, if you try. Her time hasn't come yet,"* the voice from our past visit to the cave said clearly from the fold that screamed inside of my head.

*"So good of you to pop by. Why don't you sit back, and relax while the world ends. Or don't you care?"*

*"I've told you not to be flippant. This world means more to me than you could ever imagine. Like many things, this must happen, Pandora. Recent events that have unfolded forced this most unfortunate turn."*

*"Couldn't you have come earlier, say before my boyfriend died?"*

*"He isn't dead, and I came when I could."*

*"But I could end it now, before she opens the box."* I watched Pandora continue to circle the Urn slowly, trying to figure it out. If it hadn't been prudent, I would've screamed; "Hey, Dumbass! Just lift the fucking lid."

*"Choose Pandora; your sister's unlikely death now, or your man's definite life."*

*"Do you promise me he will live?"*

*"Well, certainly not forever. He's too close to being suicidal sometimes for such a guarantee. I had hoped you would leash him somehow, but I see you crave that part of him and will no doubt encourage it. However, I promise he will survive this wound, despite how it might look right now. That is the only thing in my control."*

*"You will save him then?"*

Pandora hissed while she contemplated such a simple task. She had assumed magic must be involved, and she was going through an impressive list of it.

*"I will."*

Even with the promise, I couldn't leave well enough alone. *"Who are you?"*

*"Leave it at your guardian— angel. I will see you soon, Pandora."*

And with that he was gone, but his magic wasn't; it was unlike anything I had ever felt before.

Kevlar's oozing wound slowed to a trickle, and he moaned. When he coughed this time, he actually sounded better.

Then his heart stopped.

And Pandora had figured out how to open the Urn.

The whipping winds turned to an archaic shriek. A dark red light filled the alcove, like blood painted the walls.

My twin laughed maniacally, while the screaming within grew closer. I knew an army of malevolent beings were about to escape from their fiery cell. I half expected them to flood the cavern, but as they appeared in barely there forms—like hazy ghosts—they disappeared into thin-air.

I had a really good idea where they went.

The beasts were hungry. There just weren't that many souls to feed on in hell in comparison, but earth would be a banquet. They wouldn't be picky and would just kill whoever they happened upon.

I couldn't even keep track of all the monsters that flew by me, I'd had no idea most of them existed. This was what nightmares were made of—things that no human horror writer could ever conceive— or a half-demon for that matter. So many had features and attributes not even my imagination had ever envisioned.

This is what my now understandably insane sister had grown up with. But that didn't give me grounds to forgive her.

I held onto Kev, bending my body over him as if to protect him, but there wasn't enough of me to cover him. I

couldn't even see Pandora anymore through the rush of escapees, nor was I able to hear her over their noise.

Damn her to hell! Literally.

Suddenly, a thump pounded beneath my chest, and I realized Kev's heart had begun to beat again. He was alive.

"Kev?" I whispered. His head turned, with now demonic eyes, which rested on me.

"I feel like hell, every pun intended." He sat up and stared at all his blood. "Did I die again?"

My arms curled around his body, clutching him to me. My head fell on his shoulder, and I refused to let him go, even with the mayhem around us. Not that they paid us any mind at all, for we were like them.

"You were right," he bit out.

"About what?"

"Saving me."

"I didn't save you, the voices did."

"He wouldn't have bothered if it wasn't for you, baby. He told me so. I was meant to die, but he stopped it. Why would an angel decide to risk so much just to intercede with fate, unless—?"

"An angel? He didn't lie? Are you trying to tell me an *angelic* creature helped a demon's daughter?" Surely that couldn't be true.



"I think that's what he told me." He didn't seem so sure about it now. Kev's cheek rested in my hair, hugging me so tight I couldn't breathe.

"What are we going to do?" I squeaked.

"What we are supposed to do to make everything right again. Stop Coren and put hell back in its place."

"Then why did this 'angel' let it happen in this first place? I don't get it."

"Neither do I. But I rarely understand much when it comes to the higher powers. We can't see the bigger picture, remember?"

True.

"I thought you'd died..."

"Trust me, it didn't compare to what went through my mind when I saw your reaction to it. I'm really glad you couldn't get into my head right then."

I looked away, knowing what I wanted to say, but unsure if I had the nerve. However, on the other hand, what if I didn't get another chance? Today had proved that life was short— even to immortals.

"I think I'm falling in love with you," I blurted in a rush of words before I'd lost the ability to say them. Then I felt like an idiot. "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize. I knew that a while ago, but you weren't ready." He leaned down to kiss my nose.

"You're not all creeped out that a woman you've been dating for a few days feels this way?"

"Nope." He grinned. "Especially since I feel the same way about her." He took my hand and tugged me toward the larger cavern before I could even think to comment on that. "Come on, baby, we have a world to save."

"Yeah—I just wished we knew how to do that."

"We'll figure it out."

Together, we began to leave the cavern. The smell of blood hit us both like a brick wall. I came around the corner and saw the dogs eating large chunks of meat with shards of bone protruding out of them.

"Is Coren dead?" I asked hopefully. Had they succeeded at last?

The vampires stared at the ground, avoiding my gaze.

"No Pan—it isn't Coren," Sara whispered.

Kev tried to tug me back, but it was too late. An image of white roses stained with blood, housed in a long box, superimposed itself on the scene before me.

I knew this smell, and who this person had once been.

Lillian.

Tears that had wanted to spill finally had their chance, even though I didn't have the slightest time to mourn for her. Though she deserved that— didn't she? This made me feel like shit, to not even give her a proper good-bye.

But then again, I couldn't equate the image of the woman who had borne me, and the woman who had been at Coren's side, to what was left.

"Coren disappeared with the rest of them, about a second before Sara reached him," Gene grumbled.

Even though he'd given voice to my apprehension, I couldn't drag my eyes from the nearest part of my mother.

"Pan?" Kev rubbed my arm for comfort, but it barely touched where I currently resided. It was a dark, barren place.

I turned back to the alcove, wondering why I shouldn't just close the gate now, and this could be over.

*"No".*

*"And why not, crazy voice in my head?"*

*"Here we go with the sarcasm again. You weren't the one to open it, nor are you the keeper of the gate. Your*

*twin's rightful hand opened the thing, and now she must close it. All you can do is transport it, as a demon; but you can't manipulate it further than that while she is here. Something you wouldn't have noticed because you were smarter than to try and open it yourself."*

*"How do I talk her into closing it?"*

*"Who says you talk her into it? But I already know you'll figure it out, in due time. Go forth, demon child and wreak havoc over your enemies."*

That was that; a new resolve filled me. For reasons beyond me, my subconscious wanted to trust crazy angel voice man. The way I saw it, we didn't have much choice.

I motioned Kev to stay with the others, and then I walked back into the alcove. I picked up the sword, knowing it had the potential to kill me as easily as it would my twin, or any other beastie that got in my way.

I would take the risk.

I returned to Kev's side. "Let's go."

"Are you okay?" Kev asked.

Oh yeah, of course I was. The worst of all the worst possible events had happened. Sure, just peachy.

Plans tumbled through my mind, steps and directions I could take from this moment forward.

One thing was for sure. I would do anything to cage what I had allowed to be unleashed. I would trade my life for my world, even after wanting to trade that same world for Kev. Life and death situations gave you weird perceptions. I'll be the first to admit that.

"No Kev, I'm not," I finally replied. "Would you be?"

I didn't turn back to him, but just kept walking.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Have you ever walked into a horror movie halfway through, to see nothing but terror and bloodshed?

Buildings on all sides burned up in flames, so hot in the brief liberation of the slaughter. Wails of pain came from every direction, setting the scene as we burst out of Lillian's front door. The sky was smeared a scorched orange, streaked with red and filled with putrid smoke as far as the eye could see.

I had no idea what to expect, but this utter devastation didn't even touch my worst imagination.

"This—" Marcus gestured before him, "—is what *you're* capable of?"

I nodded. Theoretically, I knew that. It was a whole other concept to see it before me.

"Well, damn," he muttered, and then grinned with humour that suggested this didn't touch him like it did me.

"Let's go kick some ass."

"You're not worried at all?"

Why would I be? This will be the most fun I've had in a long time. I've never fought a demon before, let alone the other things that flew by us. But let's give it a shot, shall we?"

"You're part demon now, too, you know," I reminded him.

"Like I would *ever* forget that. It does level the playing field a little." Marcus rolled his shoulders, ready to fight or die, again.

"Over," Holly coughed, "confident."

Marcus whirled. "Are you going to tell me that you aren't looking forward to hunting down Coren? Man, you're crazier than I am."

"I find that hard to imagine. I'm too patient and methodical to be placed in the same league as you." Holly walked by us, shooting a look over his shoulder that said; "Well, what are you waiting for?"

Despite everything, I smiled.

"*Moi?*" Marcus demanded, apparently insulted.

"You ready for this?" I asked Kev.

He shrugged. "Do I have a choice?"

"Do any of us?"

He snickered.

So many people begged, in every direction, you didn't know where to turn first, who to help. Car alarms added to the horrific symphony. The sound was so shrill, it dampened the roars and cries of the merciless creatures;

crawling, flying, and running after their desperately fleeing prey.

"Which way?" Milindya asked.

I walked to the sidewalk, looking ahead of me and seeing nothing to guide us. I emptied my head of every last worry and thought, as I stared straight ahead and pictured my twin's face —*our* face— hoping to track her. But what happened was far from that. It shifted to Coren without my consent, and knowledge filled my head.

I startled out of my trance, never suspecting what had happened. I'd connected with whatever mass source my dad pulled from, for the very first time. The amount of information that funnelled through shocked me.

*"This always has been one of your capabilities. You just never tried to use it because you didn't know it was there."*

*"Listen, crazy angel voice man, I'm trying to work here."*

The voice snorted in my head. *"I'm just trying to help, you know."*

*"Then why don't you fix this?"*

*"It's not my job. It is your duty to take back your power over the gateway. We all have our parts, and both of our roles will all too soon collide."*



*"That helps, really."* No answer met my smartass remark. *"Why do you always take off just when we're finally getting somewhere?"*

"Pan?" Holly asked quietly. "What did you see?"

"Huh?" How had he known?

"You screamed Coren's name."

Hearing that, I paused, searching inwardly for what bothered me now. In one clarified moment, a new turn of events burst to the forefront.

"We have to go. He's attacking the Coven," I ruptured. "Kev can you teleport us to the mansion?"

"You can, too," Holly piped up.

"Too?" I demanded.

"Teleport. I think you always could, you just didn't know how," Holly replied. I didn't ask how he knew that.

"It takes a lot of *skill*," Sara inserted. "And practice. Let's get this done."

Without any more preamble, Kev grabbed me, and we moved through time and space. I shook my head when we came out the other side, into the middle of the Cornwall's yard. What a disorienting experience!

The house seemed to be untouched, but the war continued outside of the tall hedges. Either the monsters

themselves hadn't made it here yet, or they had passed on by.

Neither Coren, nor the rest of the Coven, were anywhere in sight.

Had I gotten the information wrong? Or just the location? All I knew was the fight wasn't here— or I had seen recent events and not the present. Damn all this inexperience with these new capabilities!

"Everything is too quiet in here," Sara said. "Why?"

"That doesn't mean much," Holly reminded. "The walls are soundproof, even to our ears. What if something is happening inside?"

A human ran down the street calling for help, just on the other side of the bushes. I turned, and Kev just looked at me emotionlessly

"Eyes on the prize, baby."

He was right. I couldn't run around saving everyone. I had to eradicate the brains of the operation, before the massacre spread. Topple the center, and the rest would collapse shortly thereafter.

None of them would ever stop. Or tire. They would wipe through the earth until someone strong enough stepped up to harness them and stopped this, or my twin closed the gate.

I couldn't bet on the former.

When I moved to open the door, Kev's dead eyes bored into mine. Unblinking, he peeled my fingers from the edge and placed my hand at my side.

"Not on your life."

"Why? You've seen how I heal, and I've seen how you died— something you still would be, if not for divine intervention."

Holly hissed at my words. Of course, he wouldn't have known that part. "He did *what*?"

We both ignored him.

"I can take it," Kev insisted. Silence reigned around us, but we didn't look away from each other.

"Kev," I pleaded, hesitant to let him out of my sight.

"Again, not on your life. You will stay here, with them."

And with that, he slipped through the door, closing it behind him. I reached for the handle and felt the hot rush of energy on my skin. Was that supposed to actually deter me? Holly leaned against the wall with one hand bracing him, a sure grin on his face that annoyed me to no end.

"He said stay. I recommend you do." His brow cocked in challenge.

"Don't make me kick your ass, vampire."

"Will that help anything?"

I stared back at him, and the full extent of what I was coursed through my fingers and tore through Holly's magic. He satisfyingly stumbled.

"What the fuck was that?" Milindya shivered from the feel of it.

"Our little demon's power," Holly said approvingly, and he shrugged. "I was curious, so I pushed."

"Your curiosity will get you killed one day," Marcus replied.

"He'll be fine," Holly promised me, ignoring his friend.

"Can you read my thoughts?" I asked suspiciously.

"No." He smiled serenely. "But you are too much like him for me not to notice the similar signs."

Now my brow cocked. Similar how?

"Trust me, Pan, you're the female version of him."

"You're nuts."

"What's your favourite movie?" He asked idly, and I knew he sought to distract me. Just because he felt the need for this kind act, made me like him a little more.

"Reservoir Dogs."

"His is the same. He's seen it more times than I can stand. Favourite food?"

"Toss up between chilli dogs and lasagne."

"Interesting combination, that." Holly grinned. "I know he likes chilli, but I'd have to get back to you on the Italian food."

He ran through a couple more questions, and I had no idea whether he lied or not, until the surrounding Coven backed him up. Every answer was the same.

"It's freaky," Sara said. "You two really are cut from the same cloth."

Then Holly's eyes flicked beside me, and I turned to see Kevlar standing there.

"I don't think anyone's here," Kev murmured.

"Where's Kelly then?" Marcus and Sara demanded simultaneously.

"Corrine swore she would have her adequately protected for all possible consequences," Marcus continued alone.

"You're just not paying attention," Holly replied. "Corrine laid intelligence spells at every point around the perimeter. They weren't here when we left. This place is locked up tight against anyone except the Coven. There's even a cloaking spell covering it all, which is why the monsters haven't bothered with it. They know it's here, but I doubt they thought anyone still resided in this place. Plus

Kelly's part demon now, the same as us. They ignore us. They'd do the same to her."

"Makes perfect sense to me," I inserted.

"And all of this helps me find my mate how?"

Marcus snapped.

"Is anybody out there?" Kelly called from above us. Just in time, before Marcus exploded.

I launched past them to the grass and looked up at the second story window.

"Kelly?" Marcus followed me. "What the fuck are you doing up there, alone?"

"Corrine locked me in her room, and Max placed a whole stack spells I have no hope of deciphering. I can't get out."

Marcus blinked, and his painfully obvious rush of relief spread to the other men around me. He disappeared into the house with Holly close on his heels to deal with whatever Corrine and Max had wrought.

While they busied themselves, I walked off the property to survey the street. A black shadowy figure came out from the bushes near me, stopping to see the same view.

I turned to look at the foreign creature. Its incorporeal body was dark grey in some places, and a

swirling black in others, opaque in a strange way, with vivid ruby red eyes that glittered out of its formless face.

And it studied me too.

"What are you?" A strangely high, breathy voice asked. "Not demon— not like the others at all."

My throat went dry at the reminder of my sister who was intimately knowledgeable to these beings. She'd only hinted at how they treated her, but I had a pretty good idea by this thing's distaste of her.

"What are *you*?" I shot back.

A figured appeared at my side, and I knew without looking who it was.

The thing didn't answer, instead turning to Kev. If it had a face, I believed it would have looked perplexed.

"You are even stranger than she is," it contemplated. A smoky "arm" reached up to scratch what I gathered would be the top of its head. He looked back at me. "A demon-vampire-human, and a pureblood vampire-demon. What has this realm come to since the last time I visited?"

"When was the last time?" I asked with curiosity.

"When the first Pandora opened the Urn," it said wistfully. "That was a memorable occasion where I come from, for those of us old enough to remember it."

I cut to the chase, while I had the chance to talk to one of the other side. "What's your purpose here? What are you allowed to do?"

"A mortal hand opened the gate and *invited* us in. Call it a loophole," the mist replied. "Typical rules do not bind us when we are welcomed."

"Then what are your plans?"

"To feed and destroy, despite what I have been told. I do not take any orders from the ignorant half-breed you call sister. None of us would. She is nothing but a means to our ends. And we never let her forget that," it condescended. "Maybe that is why she despises you so much."

"More than likely," I conceded.

"You're really going to destroy this world?" Kev demanded in a rush of words.

"Half-breed, do you have any idea what it is like to live in hell?" it asked, and Kev shook his head. "We are always starving, and we stay that way. We are not meant to live in paradise, but do you think we have a choice? Just like you, we are born to our own tribulations, except to us hardship is all there is."

"We have our own burdens to bear, our own ties and binds that keep us from living as we were *intended* to,"



Kev argued. "If your kind had never interfered with ours—  
"

"You would still be insubstantial beings running around sucking the evil souls of mankind, which is our right, ours alone. You stole from us, and you were punished for it," the mist answered with no inflection. "You speak, but you don't understand your real origins, you just think you do. Ask your firsts about why you are damned, if you dare."

"They won't talk about it."

"Of course, they won't. They like to deny it ever happened. Or perhaps, to forget it." The mist nodded, or so I thought. "They know better than anyone on this plane, the differences between my world and yours."

"So, your solution is to destroy our world, because yours sucks?" I growled, bringing the conversation back to now— and not what made that haunted look enter Kev's face.

"Yes, half-breed— or, at the very least, rule it until this place is sucked dry. Why should you live like *this*, when we must thrive in fire and torture," The mist replied. "You have comforts here, the means to thrive peacefully, respectfully. Yet you don't, nor do the humans or any of the other creatures who live in this paradise. At the very least,

we should be given a chance to *earn* our banishment. We did nothing to deserve it in the first place, except be born."

My sister could say the same thing.

"That gives you the right to wipe us out? To have valid reason to be punished?"

"Could there be a better reason? Since the beginning of man, my kind has watched yours destroy yourselves. Not once, not twice, but so many, many times over. It's a wonder this plane exists at all."

"But we always work it out," I argued.

"And when one of your grand nuclear-bombs blow, what will you do then? In my world, we do not war with each other, ever. We stand together, and do our jobs. We may bicker and snap at each other, but we do not set out to destroy legions just for spite. Even what we do now, is for hunger above anything else." The mist floated away, declaring the conversation over.

I watched him in silence. An explosion across the street barely elicited a reaction from me. I turned to see two humans burst from the house, and run for their lives from a group of chaotic beasts, evil intent etched on their features.

But that wasn't what held my attention. Two non-descript, homeless men stood on the curb opposite us. They, too, stared at the fleeing humans, unaffected by what

went on around them short of their identical sneers of distaste. Nor did the beasts pay them any mind.

"They're not human," Kev said, perplexed. "Nor demon for that matter."

"What are they?"

Then they turned toward us as one. Their bland brown locks and eyes began to change, until their hair became richer and thicker, turning white blonde like Marcus's. Their eyes took on the sparkle of diamonds set in a sea of cerulean. Everything about them that had made them practically unnoticeable, shifted to an unearthly beauty and poise.

Their clothes turned into identical, stylish ivory suits, and their bodies beneath the material glowed against the backdrop of fire. Their first step trembled through us as we shivered.

Whatever these things were, they made the demons in us shudder in fear when nothing else in this scenario had.

"Pandora," the one on the right said, and there was instant recognition.

"Hey, crazy, angel voice man, you're no longer inside my head," I greeted.

He laughed.

Kev shadowed my movements when I met them halfway. With each step, the awe of them amplified.

"Always the sarcastic one, aren't you?" the one on the left mumbled. His voice was pure music. I fell forward into his multi-faceted eyes—they put my own to shame—shaking myself to clear the haze.

"Yup, that's me." I snickered. "And who are you? I always figured psychotic voices wouldn't have a corporal form."

"Normally, they don't. But unlike the others, I have a body to walk around in."

Well, duh. That was obvious—now. But something told me the "others" weren't the hell creatures.

"The others?"

"We are the advocates of the earth-bound angels," the second one said. His bored tone pissed me off. "And no, we are nothing like you think we are."

Angels. Divine beings who sat around and did nothing but confuse me. Great.

"Do not think so prudently. Your culture isn't the only one you know very little about," the first reprimanded. "There is so much to this, about us, that you don't know." He seemed honestly offended by my thoughts. Of course, they could read my mind.

"Of course we can. The same as Ivor and every other abomination running rampant on this plane can."

"Then why don't you do something about it?" I persisted again. It was my turn to be offended; being one of those abominations.

"I've told you, Pandora." The second being turned his face now, it was much softer than the other one. "There isn't much we *are* permitted to do. The rules of this world and ours both prevent us. Our hands are tied."

The first snorted, and Kev growled.

"Let me finally introduce ourselves, so you can stop numbering us. My name is Hasdiel, and this arrogant man is Iaoth."

"I'm not a man. Do not think to insult me this way."

"Calm down." Hasdiel sighed.

"I will not calm down! I have the power to harness these things, and I cannot even lift a finger..."

"That is what?" Hasdiel said, "The twentieth time I've heard that today? Plus the repeated verbal beating Pandora has given me? At least you know better."

"I have some place to be, so can we get on with this and stop the *petty* bickering?" I demanded.

"It isn't time yet, half-breed." Iaoth snapped.

"You know, I'm getting really sick of hearing that label." My skin flashed, my spine cracking immediately with the loss of patience.

And then I got a healthy dose of just how Iaoth harnessed demons. Power zapped through and paralysed me, at least until Hasdiel intercepted. He grabbed his brethren in reprimand, and the power invading me stopped.

Kev caught me right before I would've collapsed.

"Always with the charity," Iaoth snapped, Hasdiel glared at him. "What? It wasn't like I was going to kill her."

"That isn't the point. She's protected, and you know that," he reprimanded. "And you will rob her of much-needed strength to fight this coming war? Do not be so childish, Iaoth."

"Protected from what?" Kev pursued.

"The decisions have been made," Hasdiel began, "and both you and Pandora have a clear purpose that has emerged from the muck the demon-twin and Coren have made. We are here as your guardians and guides, but no more than that. Angels are neither meant or allowed to interfere with the goings on of earth-dwellers. That is standard procedure."

I sputtered in bitter laughter. "You're honestly going to tell me that the two of you were told to watch over a

half-demon and a vampire? Seriously, you're screwing with me. We don't even belong on the same team. Why are you here?"

Iaoth snorted. "You're right. I personally have better things to do than baby-sit you."

Hasdiel cleared his throat, and Iaoth stepped aside with a sullen expression. "Pandora, tell me something. In your lifetime, how many times have you succumbed to your darker self?"

"Many times."

"No, my dear. How many times have you killed to appease your beast?"

"None, though there were many close calls."

"Close only counts in horseshoes and hand-grenades." Hasdiel smiled. "In all of your years here, despite the rough lot you were thrown, you have surpassed all of our expectations. You have proven that you can live here and evolve with the rest of the world."

"And if I'd failed?"

Iaoth shot me a droll look, "You know *exactly* what would've happened. Your sister, even at birth, showed no potential of that whatsoever, giving us justified cause to do what we have done. Keeping her here would've only

resulted in dragging her to hell later— and who knows what she would've accomplished before that happened."

"And Kevlar, we all know about your past and we don't need to drag it back up— with the exception to say, you never wanted what your parents forced on you, and I know beyond doubt, left to your own devices, you would've done everything differently. It's in your character. Since your release, you have redeemed yourself marvellously. You rarely kill a human to feed, and then only if Coven and Council business have kept you from properly taking care of yourself for too long. Surprisingly enough, unlike most, the remorse you feel when your Curse takes that choice away is near crippling. You fight for what you believe is right; you heed your Leaders and do what is right. You deserve this opportunity to prove yourself, to have someone who understands you completely— and a chance at happiness."

"You still let Kevlar die," I accused. "If we are such good little monsters, why did all of this happen to us?"

"You had to decide to give him life, and that was the final piece, solidifying what would happen from that moment forward. It was your decision alone to evolve, and to do so, you needed someone like you. Because of you choosing him, I gave him back his life."



What if I *had* decided to let Kev die?

"The world would have ended," Iaoth answered my thoughts callously.

"Can you be any more dramatic?" I sneered.

"Yes, I can. This is nothing. However, the absolute truth is not dramatic," Iaoth argued. "To beat this, you needed Kevlar at your side. His death would've taken a vital component out of the equation, and allowed this to continue until the world as you know it ended."

"You're telling me the fate of *everything* relied on me?" Oh, that was just too much. And here I thought the choice had been far smaller than that.

"Now you're getting the hang of it!" Hasdiel said snidely, shooting a side-ways glance at his friend. "I told you she was smart."

"I never said she wasn't smart," Iaoth replied. "It also isn't the first time she has heard but not understood the full extent of it. She only believed it once it came from our mouths, in this 'corporal' form."

"Okay, we're just wasting time again. I told you, I have somewhere—" But they interrupted me again.

"In this plane, there is a time for everything. All too soon, it will be here. There isn't anything you can do for

*them*," Hasdiel waved his hands at humanity, "until all of the pieces are in place."

"So, I just get to stand here with you, while *my* people die all around me?"

"They are not your people anymore, Pandora. Your people are beside you, and on the other side of the bushes. *They* are your family now, the only people on earth who can even come close to appreciating you."

"This isn't fair. Just a few days ago, I was human, and now I am not supposed to care?"

"No matter what we say today, you will always care. Life isn't fair, nor has it ever been. No matter what we try to do. We can only attempt to steer you in the right direction, your destinies are controlled by the way you live your lives and the choices you make. Most of the time, fate is just the most probable outcome from the decisions you make in your life. On the grander scale of things, the real Fate only intercedes when it's needed, but free-will will always reign," Hasdiel finished.

"How does she decide when it's needed? My entire life was destined from the get go, and I never really had a choice. Explain to me why this is?" I bit out, riding the quiet edge of hysteria that lived only inside of my head.

"That isn't information I can give you" Hasdiel said with regret.

"The fuck it isn't!" I screamed. "Everybody else has free-will but me."

Kev jumped at my side, and his eyes went wide at the unexpected outburst.

"I'm sorry, Pandora. We all have to follow the laws set out for us, and we don't have a loophole to jump through at this point. There are two options; win or lose. These beasts have been looking for a way out for a long time, and when your sister was taken from this plane and into hell, they all saw their chance. Ivor tried to protect her, but with his obligations to that realm he couldn't be with her all of the time." Iaoth stepped forward, and I was taken aback by his abrupt sympathy. "He tried so hard to do right by both of you, within his limitations. He was punished whenever he stepped out of line, or even came close to it, but he didn't care. Why do you think we allowed him here? You needed your dad, as much as he needed his little girl—the one who loved him unconditionally, even though she didn't have a clue to even half of his self-sacrifice and suffering."

"You have the power to prevent it?" I asked, my voice hoarse.

"My powers run toward thwarting demons, but before you jump on me about the world's trials with the demonic, not even I can be everywhere at once."

I arched a brow at him.

Up a few blocks, a car sped around the corner. A chorus of piercing shrieks made me think of the vehicle's brakes, but a flurry of motion proved that wrong.

A half dozen black blurs flew after the car, which took another hard right. The creatures' wings were lined in bone, thin grey skin stretched over the frames. Beady red eyes glowed from beneath black matted hair as their extended claws reached for the bumper of their prey.

A few of them paused in flight to stare at us. When they noticed the angels, they hissed. Continuing on their way, their mechanical shriek died off, mingling with the sounds of disorder.

"Banshees," Hasdiel replied to my unspoken question.

"We have to stop this." I took an involuntary step forward.

Kev sighed in resignation. The Coven leaked out from the yard. Who knew what they had heard, or what they now thought.

"What exactly are the earth-bound?" Kev's hand curled around my wrist and pulled me toward him. The only reason he asked was to give my mind something to focus on. I gritted my teeth.

"You call them guardian angels, and there is a basis to that myth. Hasdiel and I oversee insubstantial beings who are assigned to tasks, whether they're for protection or another purpose."

"To ensure Fate's will is met. Am I right?" Kev cleared his throat.

"If you will," Iaoth replied.

"They were the *other* voices in our heads over the past few days?"

Hasdiel nodded, his smile grim.

"And you were assigned to us, to ensure what then? It's something other than supervision," I croaked.

"You can't tell them." Hasdiel snarled, but Iaoth just smiled ironically.

"While other forces may've wanted the same for other reasons, we had to make sure you and Kevlar met, and that you changed. We gave you the tools to win on your own merit. It was Coren who made the choices that sealed Kevlar's dying, but there was nothing saying we couldn't bring him back as a full demon."

"You're not telling me much I don't know," I snapped.

"I know. That's the beauty of it," Iaoth replied.

"Wait— did you just say Kevlar is a *full* demon?"

"I told you *not* to tell her that," Hasdiel muttered.

"It wasn't like one of these abominations wouldn't tell her! I thought the mist would say something, but he read their minds and wanted to screw with them," Iaoth sputtered. "Who says the next will feel the same way?"

"Fine." Hasdiel crossed his arms over his chest.

"We couldn't very well bring him back in the form he was in." Iaoth turned to me. "Though we left the canines. We know you— like them."

Kev actually laughed! And I furiously blushed. My closed fist hit Kev's chest with a loud thud, but he didn't even flinch. Oh, I so knew how Kelly felt now.

"Sorry, baby, I'm stronger now."

"Not for long. She will drink your blood, and she will ape you more and more— just like you did with her. Unfortunately, we couldn't play with her fate any more than we can close the gate ourselves," Hasdiel informed us.

"I really hate all these rules," I grunted.

"Welcome to my life," Kev repeated. "Though, I have to admit this sucks much worse than usual."

The mood had lightened just the slightest bit, and the sharpest edge of the pressure melted away, but it wouldn't take much to bring it back. My mind reeled, and all I really wanted was my dad to council me.

"Ivor, why don't you come out and console your daughter?" Iaoth called at that thought.

I started. "What are you talking about?"

"We aren't the only ones following you around unseen. He's been here the whole time, making sure we didn't turn you to the *good side* or anything of the sort."

I spun to see Ivor standing there.

"Hi, dad."

"Hello, daughter. Fine mess this is," he said emotionlessly.

"And with that, it's time for us to go," Hasdiel said.

"Why?"

"When the moment comes, we are not to interfere, remember? There is nothing left for us to do for your preparation. We have stretched our limitations already," Iaoth replied. "Good luck to all of you. It will be needed."

Without drama or anything else in the way of farewell, in the space of a heart-beat they were gone. I stared at the spot for a long moment, and no one said anything.

I turned back to Ivor. "Is there anything you would like to tell me before I go save the world, dad?"

What did I feel right then? What *could* I feel? Numbness had taken over and flushed out every irrational thought.

"That I love both of my daughters, and I want them to be happy."

"But what does that mean, Ivor?"

He stiffened at my aloof tone. "I was having a hard time choosing between them."

"*Was?*"

Who would he choose? Everyone present knew he had to pick one. And everything would ride on *his* decision.

"She promised me she would leave you alone."

"She didn't."

"I know that. But after Coren collared her, I couldn't find her any longer," he admitted. "She had the help of other demons to shield her, ones who sought this very end. And even with her on earth, I still couldn't impart that knowledge to you."

"And why didn't mom know she had two daughters?"

"I had to change Lillian's memories. Not that it took much. The angels took your twin away before your mother



even held her." He bit his lip and looked away. "Your sister has hated both you and Lillian since the day she was old enough to know the difference between your lives and hers. For the past two and a half decades, she begged for a chance to visit this plane, just for a while, to know what the other life was like."

"And you trusted her." Kev snickered. "Fat lot of good that did us."

"She promised me everything I asked. Spent years convincing me that she and the inevitable people she encountered would be fine. I allowed her to escape for one year, with a binding contract. One week from today would've been her recall date," Ivor said. "Shortly after that I lost track of her, but then she killed your agent and took his place. I tend to watch the people who stay near you for any length of time, which aren't many, so the job isn't as complicated as I thought it would be. But your sister didn't know that."

"Why would you do that?" Kev demanded.

"Unlike either of us, she wasn't capable of manipulating their minds. She might've been found out if I hadn't," Ivor said with clear hesitation. "I needed to make sure the masters of the lower realm didn't have reason to decide Pandora wasn't fit for this world. And now that

bastard is involved. Coren was never meant to be embroiled in this."

"What decision brought *that* into being then?" I demanded, and his eyes slid behind me.

I followed his gaze to see Sara staring back at me with comprehension. Without meaning to, my mind tuned to that immense consciousness-like knowledge again, and it made too much sense.

Ivor waited to see what I made of it.

"Pan?" Kev murmured. "What did you see?"

"Nothing."

They didn't need to know that when Sara had decided to kill Coren, the lines of life had held its breath. Obviously, she hadn't succeeded and he had fled. Had he died, I still would've been fated to Kevlar, but it would've been between my twin and me, without Coren in the middle. My sister would've floundered and failed without the vampire's guidance.

Coren's original reason to flee here after Sara's attempted murder was only to plead with the Cornwalls for protection against the Council, believing his original accusations for Roguedom were unfounded.

He was older than them, far older than they'd ever imagined, and therefore, more powerful; a bargaining chip.

He'd hoped they would accept him, but he bided his time, waited and watched.

Then Marcus brought Sara and Kelly home, back into Coren's sight. The obsession with Sara had renewed and he figured that his only hope for protection was ruined. Vengeance became his singular goal.

And then, he stumbled across my sister, and everything went blank; like it had for my dad.

*"Now you know what the knowledge of the world feels like. Once you get the hang of it, all of it will become easier."* Ivor stared me in the eye, and I knew it was his voice.

*"You deal with this all of the time?"*

*"Yes. You and Kevlar Brandenburg both will have to. He just hasn't figured it out yet, but he will."*

*"I thought people on this plane couldn't know about this stuff?"*

*"There are some, but it isn't my decision to make. That is reserved for the keepers of this realm who govern their territory, and they've decided you are worthy to have the blocks removed from your repertoire."*

*"Blocks?"*

"You're a lot more powerful than you think, daughter. To live here with power so limitless, unless

you're an earth deity, just isn't done," Ivor said with a sad smile. "Now that you've proven yourself able and ready, they have removed their influence on how you use your power."

"Dad, how did Coren get the collar? How could he have access to it?" I asked, needing to know how a vampire had learned to control a demon.

"He found a rip between the worlds where the higher vampires keep relics they can't indentify but label dangerous. Coren is old enough to know where some of those are, and knew what the object was when he found it. Their," he nodded at Kev, "Council keeps most of this stuff locked up tight, and goes to great measures to keep it quiet. I recommend that all of you keep your mouths shut. They won't know if you don't tell them. And since they didn't know what it was, they won't know how to use it if they find another. You're all demon now," Ivor said ruefully. Then his head jerked to the right, and I heard an echo from the knowledge swirling in my head, but not quite able to put my finger on it.

"When will all the pieces be in place?" I whispered.

"Within the next few minutes."

"Whose side will you be on when it comes down to it, Ivor?" Kelly demanded, coming to my side.

"Pandora's," Ivor said with amusement. Why had I insisted he develop a sense of humour?

"But which Pandora?" Kelly said with a grimace.

Ivor turned to me. "*You* are the daughter I chose in this. I know I have given her leniencies I will now pay for, and my only defence is that I wanted to make a monster happy for a short time by giving her the impossible. I hoped she might forgive me, just a little. I know better now, seeing what she did with the leash I lent her."

"You're going to be punished when she's caught, aren't you?" I said. My voice and throat were thick with emotion, despite what she had done to me.

"Yes, but I knew that from the beginning, once she came back and it was known for sure what I'd done. As you say to me so often, such is life."

"Why don't you try to escape?"

"Everyone in this universe has a job; sometimes, it's obvious and other times not as much. Occasionally, it's a job no one else would want and you have to do it because you were born to." Ivor paused to survey the damage around him, disgust curling his lip. "Those who turn from it are weak, and I am not one of them. That is our way."

A pack of feral hellhounds howled a street over. The unnatural sound made a woman in the distance squeal

in panic. She tried to avoid them, but they were too close on her trail.

"Though humans whine a lot about all that plagues them, really, out of all the realms they are the luckiest. Upon discovery, they always fear us, until the curiosity and greed sets in. Then they want what makes us different from them, never understanding the price that comes with it," Ivor continued with resignation.

"Ignorance is a heaven none among us will ever know," Kev said softly. "Humans don't have to pay the fees we do for merely existing. And they never understand until it's too late."

"I agree, Kevlar Brandenburg. If they would stop abusing their lands and each other, they would have the paradise my kind mistakes this for," Ivor told him. "This race is capable of peace and harmony, but no one can force it. Humanity must find their way, if they can."

"You are very astute for a demon." Kev smiled.

"Sometimes. Though I blame it on her." Ivor nodded at me, and then his eyes darkened again. "I'm sorry I couldn't save Lillian, daughter. I wanted to try, but I was caught between you and your sister, running around, back and forth. I missed my slim chance."

"It's okay," I replied. "But what will you do if I have to kill Pandora?"

"I have to accept that possibility." Ivor said cautiously.

As one, Kev, Ivor, and I turned to the east—the knowledge tugging at us. Kev's eyes widened at his first experience with it, but said nothing

At the same moment, in the same monotonous tone, we all said, "It's time."

"Ooh, that is way creepy," Sara muttered.

"Where are we going?" Holly asked Kev.

"To the Down Town," Ivor gestured in that general direction.

"It's just downtown, dad." I smiled a little.

He nodded, but I knew he didn't get it.

Without any more hesitation, Kev's arms tightened around me, and we were gone.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

If I'd thought the Cornwall's neighbourhood was bad, I hadn't seen *anything* yet. The monsters had been drawn to the legions of humans who congregated downtown.

There were some creatures I recognized from before, but my dad had to name many of them for us. The vampires hissed and paced around me like caged tigers, waiting for an order to strike— leery about leaving my side now that everyone knew tonight's fate hinged on me.

And I would have restitution soon.

The fires were more pronounced here. So many more people ran. Their screams erupted so much louder as they were stalked by everyone's worst possible nightmares, multiplied many times over.

I caught sight of long blonde hair behind the furry leg of a hideously large spider. When I said big, I meant it. The thing fully standing had to be twelve-to-fifteen feet high.

I could see Corrine fighting it, as she fought alongside her three sons. They battled with no fear, just absolute persistence.



"Both the Foxworth and Jericho Covens are here," Kev said, as he looked around and then pointed. "There's the Council."

Vampires I didn't know blended into the chaos around us, a few trying to prevent a demon from attacking a group of humans trapped in a closed off doorway, another group hissing at a pack of hellhounds.

A blast of milky white energy shot past me, and I turned to see Catalym with an inspiring snarl on her deceptive lips. When I met her, she was quiet, almost shy. But this woman before me now was her complete antithesis; a formidable adversary.

Ryder burst into sorely misplaced laughter from the other side of something that looked like a twenty-foot troll. The monster's singular eye stared down at Catalym, his head cocked a second before her power hit him on her mate's behalf.

His large body flew away from them, and collided with three banshees who didn't have time to react. He sat up, his one eye zeroing in on her with a vicious snarl. Neither Catalym nor Ryder looked the least bit scared of the menacing creature. All in a day's work for a vampire, I supposed.

Then the banshees shook themselves off, crawling from under the troll with vicious intent in their eyes. Oh, this would be bad.

"Help them," I called to Holly and Marcus, who didn't need any more prodding from me.

Milindya shielded Kelly and blasted anything that came too close to them, the look of cold determination chilling to see.

A blast of hot fire shot past, just missing those of us remaining in the eye of the storm. Ivor snarled at the demon that had attacked another faction of the Cornwalls. Taking one look at Ivor it backed away, cowering in fear.

"Thanks!" Corrine called, her candid tone undermining the situation. The woman would've made me laugh, if such an action at this time had been possible for me.

I turned just in time to see a flash of black hair, and I knew I'd found the puppet-master. Now I just had to find the dummy. The others followed when I ran down Nelson Street, never letting my eyes lose Coren.

Ivor threw magic ahead of us, stopping Coren short. He turned, eyeing us.

"Coren, why'd you run?" I called, my voice going cold as I walked. "Do you fear us now?"

"I run from no one." Coren snapped arrogantly, but we both knew it was a lie. "And I fear even less."

"You had no idea what you were doing, did you?" I accused. "No thought as to what would actually be brought into being *after* my sister opened the box. It was all okay, just as long as you got back at the Cornwalls for 'stealing' Sara and Kelly from you, and ruining your chances for survival against the Council."

He couldn't hide it; the way he stared at me suggested his shock that I'd known his true reasons for this paramount catastrophe. "She didn't say it would happen this way. I just wanted what was mine." Coren's gaze shot in every direction at once.

Not that this endeared him to me in any way.

"You did this, Coren. Had you left my sister alone, none of this would've come to pass." Sara growled, and I turned toward her with "fun" thoughts in my head. Her glittering caramel eyes were filled with death and malevolence, mirroring my own. Gene held her by the arms as if he meant to restrain her. Silly man. I wondered how long it would be before she forcibly shed him. Her muscles vibrated with the need to act, telling the story of how much she *needed* this.

"Oh, daddy," I sang. Ivor turned to me with a smirk.  
"I know how you can make *all* of this up to me."

"How?" he asked. I had no doubt he already knew, but for Coren's benefit, he would play along.

"While I may have the power now, I'm not sure about the best approach for what I have in mind."

"Oh, I think I can manage that." Ivor nodded with approval. He didn't move, nothing about him changed. However, a potent spell the vampire had no chance of battling encircled him.

"What are you doing?" Coren assessed it critically, running through his options, but there wouldn't be any that Ivor would extend to him.

And how did I know this? Because in that moment, when I'd been so focused on him, it dawned on me that I could read his mind. While this was an amazing this discovery, Coren wouldn't have been my first choice of a being to realize it with.

"Giving Sara her heart's most fervent desire," I said, and an understanding light entered her eyes.

Sara laughed darkly from behind me. "Oh, I like where this is going."

"Pandora, be realistic. What do you think my fledgling could do to me?" Coren replied, filled with

sarcasm. "Just like with your mother." I growled at the mention of Lillian, and what he had done to her. "She couldn't stop me, and by the end, she'd begged for her life. Did you know, never once did she even care to mention her daughter, or ask that I leave you alone. She was a selfish bitch to her very end. But you knew that already, didn't you?"

"Don't let him do this to you, baby," Kev murmured to me, his hand discreetly rubbing my lower back.

Despite it, my teeth clenched in an effort not to fly off the handle, showing him he had succeeded in hitting just the right soft spot.

"Oh, that did it," Ivor said bitterly.

My eyes clenched shut, and before I knew it, I had teleported for the first time; from my dad's side to Coren's.

"And what are you going to do, little girl?" Coren taunted, but I knew I'd scared him.

My fist snapped back and ploughed through his face with enough force to send him careening backward into the spell. The heavy stench of burnt flesh erupted as he came into contact with the unearthly magic and raw, undiluted power that ran through his body.

The resulting scream made my lips part in a parody of a smile. The two rows of serrated teeth would ruin any effect of amusement.

"And just think, asshole, my sister could've done this to you, if she hadn't been stupid enough to let you put that collar on her." I sneered.

"She'd never..."

"Because she didn't know any better. Her kind is not accustomed to questioning your authority. You took advantage of her ignorance to the ways of this world. So this is for my sister, not only me," I said coldly. "Oh, and guess what? Your tool used you just as much, and you've fulfilled your purpose to her. How does it feel?"

I shoved my hand against his chest, releasing a continuous stream of raw electricity to plough right through him. Having him pinned and riddled with seizures still didn't make me happy.

I wanted —no, needed— him to suffer.

His death wasn't enough. Eternal hell-fires wouldn't cut it. Nothing on this earth I could do to this man would make up for what he'd wrought.

When I let up for a brief moment, he took the chance to ask the most idiotic question I'd heard thus far.

"Are you going to kill me?"

"No." I snapped, and the look of relief was immediate. "But, Sara will when *I'm* done with you. I want her nightmares to stop, and I think gutting you like a pig is a very good remedy for that."

Coren stared up at me disbelievingly, and then glanced at my dad. "You can't do this to me."

"Why do they always say that?" Ivor laughed with delight. "Boy, I can do as I please in regard to *you*. You might be almost seventeen centuries old," gasps galore from the vampires upon hearing that tidbit, "but I've been around since before the *Golden Age*. When Sara is done feasting on the very marrow of your bones and you are no more than a husk, I will drag whatever is left of you to my home."

I let Coren drop to the ground like the garbage he was. Ensuring I had left enough for Sara to take her frustration out on, I moved out of the spell. I knew my dad would never let it harm me.

Coren —idiotically enough— tried to follow me. While I manoeuvred through it just fine, I heard his pain-filled shriek and smelled the new surge of burning flesh and hair. I didn't bother to look back.

Stupid is as stupid does, I supposed.

Something made me look further down the alley. There wasn't any movement, or anything to give me a reason to, but I did. Shrouded in inky darkness was a figure who watched the proceedings with interest.

Then she noticed me watching her and turned tail to run.

"Dad, stay with Sara and make sure Coren stays dead this time around!" I called over my shoulder, already running.

"Right, boss-lady." I looked back long enough to see Ivor do the silliest thing yet. Did my dad just *salute* me? When this was over, if I and the world still lived, his television privileges were up for definite revaluation.

Feet pounded at my side, and I turned to see Kev alongside me. I had foolishly expected to do this alone but I should've known better. My entire life, I had relied on no one, thinking I would be alone forever. But he had changed that. I just hadn't gotten used to it yet.

Kev took my hand, and kept in step with me. "*Can you kill her?*" he inserted into my head.

"*It isn't a matter of if I can, but how fast I can do it,*" I replied. I just hoped that I wasn't being too overconfident.



My twin ran lightning fast down Richards Street, but we had no trouble catching up with her.

Mostly because she stopped.

Her hair flowed around her, lifted by a breeze caused by passing harpies, who went by without a single glance in her direction. Her ink-filled gaze watched them without emotion before she turned toward the sidewalk and calmly strolled into the small park on the corner of Richards and Davie Street.

She had chosen her battleground.

The mercilessness superiority on her face would have been terrifying to a lesser woman. Yet she didn't frighten me; short of my death, she'd already pulled her wildcard.

An explosion to our right charged the air. The surrounding shop windows imploded inward with a rain of glass shards. I stared at a burning figure as it danced out of the building in a ballet of agony, his screams lost in the bedlam.

"Are you happy now?" I called. "Is *this* what you wanted?"

"What? Do you not like my world, little sister? And to think, this is just the beginning." My twin's cold black eyes raked from me to Kev. The sick light that entered her

eyes made me growl. The interest procured from it told me the noise hadn't been a good move on my part.

"No, I much prefer it to stay where it *belongs*," I replied. "I've learned very well what curiosity can inspire."

"But where do *you* belong, Pandora? And what about your new dog? It was so easy to get the two of you together, it was— what's the term Coren used? Pathetic." My twin laughed. "I had thought Coren's plan was weak, but now I see the brilliance of it."

"What are you talking about?" I demanded.

"I have watched you for so long, showing me how predictable you are. I planted the idea of going to the coffee shop in Kevlar Brandenburg's mind and made him teleport there mere seconds before you walked in the door. We needed a way to draw you out for longer than a few short moments." She nodded in his direction. "The two of you sucked at each other like leeches and distracted each other."

I burst out laughing. "Well, good for you. Sorry to tell you, but despite what you may think, higher powers than you drew us together."

"What?"

"The earth-bound angels gave me Kev to destroy you, Pandora. Your brilliant idea was already thought of by

the divinity, which your kind despises. No matter how you thought to manipulate us, all you did was aid the divinity."

"You lie."

"She doesn't. We've just come from their council. Sorry to ruin your day," Kev needled.

She snarled, her fists beating at her thighs in frustration. "Why won't you just be miserable already?"

Oh, I was plenty miserable, but she didn't need to know that. "I don't have the luxury."

"Neither do I." Pandora threw her hand out and magic whipped past me, hitting Kev. His hand ripped from me as he flew backward.

I wanted to turn and help him, but she moved toward me. I stared at her bare neck as she came; the collar was gone.

"You're free," I stated.

"You had Coren killed. Your vampire girl *freed* me. If you had come after me first..." She trailed off evilly.

Well, that sucked. I rolled my eyes as the fount of knowledge gave me that information too late.

Hasdiel entered the mix. "*You have to think about what you want to know. Most times, the powers of the earth only offer when asked, until it decides it wants to give these things to you.*"

*"I thought both you and Iaoth weren't allowed to interfere?"*

*"We aren't. I'm only telling you something you already know."*

Right.

While I watched, her black mini-dress changed to the same ensemble I wore, her hair tying itself at the back of her head, like mine.

And what would be the purpose in that?

Unlike me, Pandora wasn't a stranger to combat. And when she hit, I went down. I reached up for her throat, but her quick hands closed around both of my wrists and ruthlessly beat them against the cement.

The sword I'd managed to cling to clattered away, out of my reach. Damn it!

"I want your life, Pandora. I deserve it after everything I've been through. There is only one way to do that. And you just gave me the last piece I needed to get what I crave most." My twin pulled an amulet out of her pocket, one I had never seen—or had I? "Did you know, it is my body itself that is the reason I am stuck there? One would think it isn't possible to fix that. But to all those willing to search—there is always a solution, if you know where to look."

Something about the aged pendant reminded me of Celtic artwork, done in platinum. It was strung on a braided, black cord that looked burned or singed in some places.

I could see Kev pull himself to his feet. He looked around to see us and called. "Pandora?"

He stumbled forward, holding his head. Blood dripped from between his fingers while he walked.

"Yeah, Kev, just give me a minute to kill this bitch," my twin said, precisely how I would have said it, if I had chosen those words.

Her hand curled tighter around my neck, and her power began to cover me like molten acid.

"I will have him," she whispered to me, so quietly Kev didn't hear her. "Your new friends, condo— your career, will be all mine."

"You're going to pretend to be me?"

"Oh, no, sister dear. I will *be* you."

"How you plan on doing that?"

Pandora didn't answer, but more power spiked through me and I lost my voice. I tried out telepathy again, but short of a subtle flicker in Kev's eyes, he didn't respond either mentally or physically.

"Come here, Kev," she commanded. He knelt at my head, looking resigned "I need to get this around her neck."

"Oh sure, just tell me what to do," Kev replied in a dead voice.

"Here, why don't you put it on her?"

"*How do I get rid of this spell?*" I shrieked at the knowledge.

I waited for some definite answer, like the instances before, but this time nothing happened; only a blank, silent screen behind my eyes. Despite it, I felt the knowledge hovering there. It waited for me, and I had a suspicion it wanted me to figure something out.

A surge of warmth told me I was right. I thought about what it had shown me. The second rush said I'd followed the right path. It wanted me to do *nothing*.

"Oh sure, sure." Kev took it from her. "Whatever you ask— Pandora."

I stared at him, wondering why he referred to her by our full name— after so consistently calling me an endearment, or simply, Pan.

The amulet dangled above my face. "*What does that talisman do?*" I asked the knowledge, hoping it had something to give me.

And it did. It showed me a book from my years as a teenager, one, my dad had brought when teaching me how to cope with my emerging powers, and to know some of our history and origins. Within seconds, the entire contents of that text was my own.

My eyes widened. This talisman was meant to take one consciousness and place it in another's body, while trapping the victim in the spell-caster's form. In my body, she would trick fate.

And I would be dragged back to hell in her place.

We stared into each other's black eyes, and something inexplicable passed between us when Kev's large body flew over mine. He tackled my twin to the ground with a new chorus of animal snarls.

He had her on her back in seconds, and held her down.

"You know, I can smell the difference between the two of you. Did you honestly think people in the real world would fall for such flimsy trickery?" Kev snapped.

Relief surged through me prematurely.

She cocked her head to one side, looking him in the eye. "Yes, I did."

Her concentration broke while focused on the more immediate threat, and I became *reasonably* free of her power. Merely hampered, but not stopped altogether.

I began to crawl toward the sword, sparing them a brief glance just in time to watch my twin rake Kev across the face, creating long gashes with her nails.

"I will have her life, and she will be no more, Kevlar Brandenburg. You cannot stop me."

"Do you think I would let you have her?"

"I know you want to kill me. But you need me to close the gate."

I growled at the reminder, and it made me hesitate. But the knowledge inserted itself. The images it showed confused me at first, but then it all made sense. A sense of irony filled me.

Oh, this would be good.

Everyone would be happy; my Ivor, Kev, myself, and the world. Everyone but Pandora would win.

My fingers were only an inch from the hilt when a loud, enraged sound made me jump. My head turned to see Kev's back arch at an impossible angle. His skin flushed burnt crimson, and then so dark it went so red it was almost black. I watched his spine protrude and grow. Claws burst



from his clenched fingers, and his roar grew in volume and severity.

And with that, Kev finally lost it and shifted for the first time.

Kev pushed up with his huge, thick arms to crouch over his quarry. Muscles rippled beneath his skin, and his shirt ripped until it was no more than shreds as the change completed itself.

Somehow, the baggy jeans stayed in one relative piece.

I smiled, seeing that he would be as big, if not bigger, than my dad. As long as Pandora's rival form also mirrored mine, Kev would significantly dwarf her.

"I hadn't accounted for this at all," she said, filled with agitation. "I didn't know a vampire-demon could be capable of this."

"So you think that's all it is then?" Kev asked. "I'm a *full* demon now, just like your father. You do know what that means?"

"The smell— I thought I got it wrong." Pandora crab-crawled away from him. "How?"

"Call it celestial intervention." Kev replied.

He bent down and closed his fist around the collar of her shirt.

"Kev?" I called. The last of my twin's magic fell from me and I stood.

His head swivelled and the reptilian eyes regarded me with something I'd like to think was affection. "Yes?" He called back in a perfectly rational voice; so drastically different from the last words to leave his mouth.

"It's okay, doll, step away from the mad, evil genius over there," I assured. "I've got this."

Kev didn't question, releasing her. He took a step back the moment Ivor appeared right behind my sister.

*"You don't have to take part in this, dad. Don't make her hate you more than she already does."*

*"Yes, I do".* Ivor's arms clamped around his child and pulled her away from Kev. She turned to see her assailant, and her eyes went wide with shock at his interference.

"You promised!" She shrieked.

"As did you, and you broke every one of them," Ivor responded. "The contract is fulfilled and you're going home early."

Pandora tried to struggle, but failed. She wasn't a match for him, and she never would be.

"Thank you, dad," I said.

Ivor grimaced. "Okay, enough with the..."

"Mushy stuff," I supplied, and he nodded.

"Yes, that. Now it is time for your *chosen* compromise, Pandora," Ivor said.

"What compromise?" my twin asked.

"Not you, my other daughter," Ivor snapped, and then turned to me with a sheepish look. "Now I see why I should've chosen different names. I just never considered the two of you meeting when you were born, and I wanted something—"

Ivor didn't have to say it, I knew. He'd wanted a bit of "home", and that would never be what my sister provided for him. It pained me to know that inside my dad was a good man —demon— who tried to do his best with what he had. And she would never see that like I did.

"What compromise then?" Kev cocked his head.

"Pandora will be leaving something of herself with us," I replied.

"I will not," Pandora hissed, laced with indignation, her forked tongue darting from between her lips.

Well, at least I knew where she got the dramatics from.

Ivor just chuckled at my thoughts and shrugged. "I get bored. As a child, she was greatly amused by the stories

I told her of your television shows, and I would show her what I could. Can't you tell?"

"That's where you got them from?" She shrieked.

"I wanted you to know things about your sister."

"The same way you did with me, when you told *me* stories before you put me to bed," I whispered, and he looked up.

"Yes," he said hoarsely, with more emotion than I'd even seen from him, certainly more than I thought him capable of.

Knowing the "family reunion" was over, I walked the last few steps, and my twin twisted her body until she was out of my father's grasp.

Too bad, it had been deliberate on his part.

She leapt forward, and I sidestepped, swinging the sword down and cutting through. The ruby-red liquid arched from her severed arm. The resulting screech was so inhuman; it pierced my ears, her outrage different from the sounds of glee around the park, as the war continued completely unheeded by us.

When her black eyes found mine, she started to snap at me, but Ivor yanked her back by her good arm. He wasted no time, and they were gone in a black puff of nauseating smoke.

"Dad, cut the bloody dramatics," I called out.

"What just happened?"

I turned back to Kev, who had shifted back.

The sword disappeared from my hands, but it wasn't by my doing. The powers that be decided I was done with it, and it had been recalled— I hoped the collar had, too.

"She's gone, but our job isn't done yet." I gingerly picked up the arm, trying not to let my stomach roll at the thought. This was wrong on as many levels as it was right.

"Umm, okay."

"We have to get back to the cavern."

Where Lillian's remains still lay strewn over the floor.

Kev took hold of my hand, and together, we teleported back to my mother's hallway. My amulet hung in the air in front of us by an unseen hand, but I knew who to thank for that one.

"Thanks, crazy angel voice."

*"No problem. And I have a name you know."*

"I know, Hasdiel, but I prefer your nickname."

*"I've never had one before."* Hasdiel laughed.

*"Good job, you two. You both did better than we ever could've expected, or asked for. Now finish your work."*

We walked into the dark dankness of the cavern. I tried very earnestly not to look at the small pieces of white that littered the floor, or the bigger piece of meat two of the puppies fought over. Even with the entrance opened, none of them had left their cage.

I cut around the body of water and darted around the corner, carrying my bounty. The dogs waited for me to hand it to them, but I didn't.

"What are you going to do with it?" Kev asked.

"Close the gate."

An occasional flash or shadow still escaped the opening of the Urn. They rushed past us, howling out of the cave. I never knew when to expect the next one, and it made me nervous.

With shaky hands, I gripped the severed arm and, simultaneously, picked up our salvation. I sandwiched my sister's hand between mine and the Urn's lid.

It proved difficult to grip both, especially with my fingers slick with a demon's thicker blood, but I managed. Kev watched with morbid fascination, possibly, even satisfaction.

The closer the lid got to the Urn, the harder it became to move it; like unseen, protesting hands pushed and tried to stop me.

I shoved back, putting all of my supernatural strength behind it, refusing to be thwarted.

The air stilled just before the two surfaces made contact.

"Pan?" Kev asked uncertainly, and I turned.

And time as we knew it stopped.

My hair flowed out around me, now frozen in place. Kev reached for me, and we stared at each other. The pressure in the cavern increased, working toward a precipice that would end hell's reign on earth. Three long heartbeats dragged by before time and movement shifted back into gear.

While the silence had been absolute, when sound returned, it became deafeningly loud. The screams of the humans stopped and then they turned mechanical, because the side making the protests had switched.

The monsters had been recalled.

They'd begun to come in by ones and twos, the same as they had escaped. Their claws tried to slash at me, their jaws snapped huge teeth, knowing exactly who I was.

Monsters, I hadn't even seen during the fight rushed past me, and I felt a little bit sicker as each one served as a final reminder of just what my sister dealt with, and whose fury she'd have to deal with now at her failure.

When the last had gone through, the lid shut beneath our hands with a heavy thud. The appendage I held disappeared also, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

I wasn't sorry to see it go.

Kev pulled me into his arms, and placed his cheek on my hair. His breathing was erratic, as if waiting for the final act that would never come.

*"It is done,"* Hasdiel said to us.

*"Thanks,"* I responded.

*"And with that, our job together is finished. I will take my leave now. You have a new family, one that will understand and love you for who you are."*

*"Will I see you again?"*

*"Probably not, though one never knows."*

*"But you do know, don't you?"*

*"Now, now, my sarcastic demon, you know the rules. Not even the earth can tell you everything. Go now, Pandora, go forth and live."*



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

When I awoke, I was amazed that I'd slept this late.

Not that the gorgeous sunshine outside let me think, even for a moment, I could go back to sleep.

Kev's head was shoved under my pillow, snoring up a storm and making me smile. Of course, he would; he always did.

I turned on the clock radio, knowing from the past month that it would never wake him up. I lowered my head to place a soft kiss on his shoulder.

I murmured the words to Goodbye Beatdown's "The Grudge" and when the song ended, the DJ's of the Jeff O'Neil Show joked about one thing or another with a caller. I knew nothing wrong or heinous would come of it.

They didn't even remember the murders.

No human did.

It had taken weeks for the Council to work on the many people involved, and make them forget what had been set loose in Canada, and everywhere else the monsters had strayed to during their brief visit.

"And on today's news, there was a murder!" Charis said, and I paused. "Or at least, there should've been. Disco is dead, people, get over it."

I breathed a sigh of relief at the joke. Scotty snorted at the comment, and I could practically hear Jeff roll his eyes.

Just another relatively normal day in Vancouver.

Kev rolled over. His thick arms wrapped around me and pulled me toward him in his sleep.

"Some— then— err— ing," Kev mumbled.

"Excuse me?" I laughed, and his eyes popped open.

"Huh?" he asked sleepily.

"You talk in your sleep." I laughed again. "And you don't make much sense either."

"Pan!" I heard Holly call from down the hallway.

"Oh! They're here already," I said, and then called back; "Be right there!"

"Grr," Kev replied. "I wanted some." He wiggled his eyebrows.

"Is *that* what you were trying to say?"

"I don't know, woman, I was sleeping." Kev yawned, reluctantly letting me out of bed. "I'm staying here. You come on back now, ya hear?" And he zonked out before I'd even made it out of the bedroom door.

I came around the corner and almost ran into Corrine.

"Have you told him yet?" Corrine asked excitedly.

"No." I grinned. "But then again, I need more concrete information first."

"I'm going to have Cor look at you herself," Holly said graciously. "She is better at this than I am."

Corrine chuckled. "Right. Suck up."

Holly rolled his eyes. "I have no use to suck up to you, *mom*. I'm already family as it is. You." He pointed at me. "Pan. Go sit at the table."

I walked by the restored kitchen, complete with brand-new cupboards. And, as always, I felt a tiny twinge go through my body when I remembered why they'd been renovated. Most everything had in hopes of forgetting, but it hadn't worked.

Once seated, Corrine knelt in front of me and placed her hand on my stomach. Holly crowded close behind her, looking strangely excited. Corrine was silent for so long in a trance-like state that my nerves began to play with me.

But I trusted her. She was a Healer, and a good one at that.

"You were right, Holly." Corrine smiled, and then concentrated more. "Except for one thing."

"What?" Holly asked, mildly insulted.

"Pan, you're going to have twins." Corrine smiled and then looked into my face.

"What?"

"Aren't you happy?" Holly asked with curiosity, but I had the feeling he'd known exactly why my trepidation existed at the news.

*That* was why he had brought Corrine, after he had checked me the other day. He hadn't been wrong. Holly wanted to make sure before telling me this. His eyes narrowed, now mirroring my fears.

Should I tell Kev he was going to be a father with a fifty/fifty chance that neither of our children could stay on earth, and we could never go to hell?

*"Daughter, calm down now. It will be fine. I would never let that happen, not again. We will take care of it, I promise,"* Ivor whispered in my mind. *"We have time to figure it out. People I can talk to, avenues to peruse. And you know I will do all in my power to make you and your new family happy."*

I breathed a sigh of relief. Ivor wouldn't lie to me—not again. If he had thought differently, he wouldn't have promised.

*"You're going to be a grandfather,"* I reminded him.

*"I know. It's way cool, isn't it? Little babies to play with again. I suspect I will be better at it this time around."*

I burst out laughing, with Corrine and Holly staring at me in shock.

"What?" Corrine demanded.

"My dad is excited about the news. He says that problems— like last time, won't be a concern." I breathed, happiness flooding back in. "Twins. Two babies!"

"Yes, that would be the definition of twins, Pan," Holly kidded, and I stuck out my tongue at him.

"I'm going to be a father?" Kev said from the doorway. I jumped, and then turned to him with the biggest smile on my face.

"I thought you were staying in bed?" I laughed.

"Your dad woke me up and demanded I get into the kitchen, *now*." He strode up to me, picking me up off of my chair. "Two babies?"

I nodded, and he kissed me. "That would be the definition of twins."

Kev laughed. "You hang with Holly too much."

Holly blew him a raspberry. "Not enough, in my opinion. But no worries, I'll have lots of time to make my future godchildren as sarcastic as I am."

"Oh, inviting yourself to be the godfather already?" Kev cocked a brow.

"Pandora spilled those beans yesterday." Holly grinned, and Kev returned it.

Kev hugged me closer and I filled with elation.

I looked around me, knowing I had everything I'd ever wanted; our Coven, a new family, and friends who knew what I was and shared some of that with me. I'd found a new agent, and my next book would be out in two months.

Who would've thought a half-demon could do so well for herself?

My life had become better than the normal one I'd always wished for.

But then again, normal was overrated anyway.

The End

## GLOSSARY - A VAMPIRE'S VOCABULARY

### The Curse:

The unfeeling, chaotic part of all vampires that is almost like a second consciousness. It has the ability to take over its host at a moment's notice, defending itself when provoked to action, but most times, it lies dormant, and affects very little of their personality. When a vampire commits evil acts, it is the person and not the entity that does it. But it is a powerful source even still and never to be taken for granted. Most vampires, whether born or made, train their first centuries to strap on as many leashes as possible, preventing mishaps that would have the Council declare Roguedom for exposure.

### Original Cursed One (first, an Original):

Vampire of absolute power, and an entirely different race. They are the firsts, born of hellish fire. Only they fully understand their true origins, sharing this knowledge with very few, and controlling the ones who do know. They hide from the modern-day-vampire, the youth take who and what they are for granted, corrupting everything the firsts had long ago built with a dream for peace with mankind. After two thousand years, their Council had fallen to the worst brand of greedy vampires, who were determined to control their kind, like warped kings among men.

#### Pureblood:

Born vampire of undiluted blood, free of all traces of a human-line. They can trace their bloodline back to the firsts, *and* Possess a Primary power that always skips a convert.

#### Purebred:

Born vampire with miniscule human blood traces, but still can trace back to a first in their bloodline. Most of the time, they possesses a Primary power.

#### Human convert:

Considered, and quite frankly, a far inferior race, possessing no Primary powers as the born do, though they possess the born's secondary power-source; the ability to manipulate energy.

#### Witch:

A human who possesses a miniscule amount of vampire blood. They are not considered vampire in any way, though some retain enough knowledge to know they exist and to stay away from them. Abilities appear in a vast variety of gifts, ranging from ones they don't even notice, to a significant power (s).



Maker:

The vampire who converts a human into their own existence.

Council (the establishment, ruling body):

The vampire government who are "all powerful," having the power of life and death over any and every vampire. It is widespread knowledge that the authority has gone straight to many councilmen's heads. Greed and corruption split the ruling body into the good, and the bad. The war is continuous, affecting all who fall under their rule, yet no one but a councilman can do anything about it. Ironical, isn't it?

Rogue (Roguedom):

An illegal vampire, not registered. Any vampire who does not belong to a registered Coven, or who breaks any law the Council decrees, the ruling body can sanction their Hunters for the immediate kill.

Hunter:

Every Coven has a team of Hunters that are charged with keeping their territory safe, as the Council demands. Though there are times when the grossly untrained vampires cannot catch one (it is up to the Coven, and Leaders to handle its own), and the Council Hunters are

called in.

**Council Hunter:**

Council employee, who is strictly trained to hunt Rogues only. They are greatly feared, almost as much as the Originals themselves, because their training touches every aspect a Rogue can throw at them. They are all well-versed in hand-to-hand combat, every major area of magic and beyond. Even the younger generations are more adequately prepared than a far older Rogue, prepping for a fight.

**Head of the Hunt:**

A member of the Coven's Hunters, put in charge of the missions, making on-the-fly-decisions when the Handler is out of contact, and controlling the other Hunters when on the chase.

**Handler:**

Each mission requires a level-headed Handler, one who is separate from the fight and the blood which might cloud his or her judgment; Leader or Councilman. This is a precaution, in case the Hunters lose control when their Curse/bloodlust takes over, and the Rogue is to be brought in, and not killed.

Leader:

Legal enforcer of Council justice, who oversees a smaller group of vampires, which are their sole responsibility. They can be disciplined for their follower's actions, making many of them harsh and unpredictable.

Coven:

A group of vampires (registered Coven members) headed by the Leaders, and tended by the Council closely.

Energy:

A raw form used to manipulate into magic.

Magic:

Converted energy, used for raw-based spells, or more focused. IE: Healing magic, etc.

Primary Power:

A singular power that manifests in only the pureblood and bred vampires. These gifts of power can be a wide range of things, but it always wins out over any other. Converts never possess this type of ability when transformed from one race to the other.

Young-blood:

This is a derogatory term, used by the elders mostly when

referring to the youth, or any-age convert, who are looked down upon because of their blood-status. The younger generations are known to use it as an insult often, putting more impact behind it than their ancestors, who only intend it to be a label.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paranormal author, Kayden McLeod lives in Vancouver, British Columbia. She has been writing since she was seventeen years old, creating a make-believe world that has taken years to craft. Her family, boyfriend, and writing partners push her to think outside of the box and come up with new ideas to entertain and tantalize.

To date she has published five books; *Deadly Fetishes*, *Carnal Magnetism*, *Jezebel's Article*, *Masquerade* and *Deep Water Legends*. As well, she has in distribution a free paranormal erotica series, *Sara's Story*, and two short story blogs; *The Cornwall Coven* and *Tales Of Erosity*, written with authors Kristin Manter and Cindy Jacks A.K.A. C.J. Elliott.

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ALSO BY KAYDEN MCLEOD

Available at **Silver Publishing:**

*Masquerade*  
*Martyr of the Flaminian Gate* (Feb 12)

THE CORNWALL COVEN  
*Carnal Magnetism*  
*Demonic Pandemonium*

THE FOXWORTH COVEN  
*Death of Innocence* (May 28)

THE JERICHO COVEN  
*Masquerade*

Available at **All Romance Ebooks:**

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*Deep Water Legends* (Introduction into The Foxworth  
Coven  
*Jezebel's Article* (A Jericho Coven Book)

Available at **Mojocastle Press:**

*A Cornwall Christmas* (A Cornwall Coven Book)

**Free Reads** on Kayden McLeod's Website:

SARA'S STORY  
*Suspicious Circumstances*  
*Unknown Worlds*  
*Breaching Loyalty*

*Tales of Erosity: The Demon Queen*

<http://talesoferosity.blogspot.com/2010/05/demon-queen-part-i-by-kayden-mcleod.html>

AWARD WINNING TITLES:

Kayden McLeod  
**Best Paranormal Author 2010**  
*Love Romances and More Café*  
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