



ROSEMARY
Entwined

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Rosemary Entwined

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content, which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-melting*.

ROSEMARY ENTWINED

Bianca Sommerland

Dedication

For Michael and my wonderful editor Andrea Grimm for keeping me sane.

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Chapter One

One battle-weary day, a young woman pricked her finger on a needle while stitching her husband's torn flesh. Three drops of their mingled blood stained the snow beneath them and melted it from the ebony hilt of a dead enemy's dirk. The sight brought on a vision of a beautiful daughter.

With a smile on her crimson lips, the young woman conveyed the image to her husband. And told him that if she ever spawned such a lovely girl child, she would kill her before she took her first breath.

Their third child, a girl, was a homely little thing. Both parents were pleased—the mother because an ugly daughter wasn't a threat, the father because his spell would keep his precious child alive through the most fragile years of her life.

He knew the beauty she'd become.

Lips bitten blood red in ecstasy, hair black as ebony spilling over blue silk sheets, Rosemary reclined on the bed in all her naked glory. The reflection in the mirror on the wall evoked the story of her past; from the tragic beginning, to the happily ever after, but several details spoilt the fairy-tale princess image. Like the blotches on the white flesh of her breasts and thighs, where the dusting of scruff on Alaire's sculpted cheeks and chin had scraped her raw. And the crimson bite marks on her neck and shoulders. In the fading afterglow, nearly every inch of her stung, reminiscent of the feeling of basking in the sun by the beach—luxurious—until the burn set in.

Rosemary shifted to find a comfortable position in the narrow space left to her on the double mattress. No matter which way she turned, her body hit hard flesh. She gave up when Chetan rolled to his side behind her to press his lips to a tender spot on her throat. Butterfly kisses, gentle to soothe her pain, chaste and sweet. But imprudent while the scent of their lovemaking saturated him because he smelled delicious, and even though she'd got dessert, she wouldn't mind another nibble.

Body curved into his, she wiggled a little and felt his flaccid length stir. She let out a soft purr. "Chetan..."

Chetan chuckled into her hair and slid his hand over one puckered nipple, still sensitive from being sucked. "You're insatiable, my love." He kissed her shoulder. "Give me some time to recover and I'll do my best to satisfy you."

"You've had your turn." Wylie squirted some aloe lotion into the palms of his strong, black hands and smoothed it over Rosemary's legs. "If she's still hungry, I can help her. She doesn't have to wait."

"I'm ready." Alaire rolled over to prove it.

A loud grunt from the living room drew their attention to Largo, who shocked them all just by being awake. "You've had your turn too."

The glossy pages of his sports magazine stuck to his cheek when he lifted his head. He stretched one long arm out and fumbled for the table lamp beside the sofa. The light pooled just past the open door and Largo squinted to make her out in the dark room. "Come here Rosemary, I got this."

One of them, even two, she could handle. All four focusing on her at once snuffed the lingering desire, like too many logs piled over barely sparked kindling. She covered her face with her hands and willed the room to stop spinning.

A breathless laugh escaped her as her head cleared. "Someone pinch me. I've got to be dreaming."

"You're not dreaming." Alaire took her hand and brought it to his lips. "If you were, I'm sure you'd do better than us dumb lugs."

Wylie nudged Alaire and squeezed into the space allotted against the headboard. He pulled Rosemary into his lap and cradled her in his arms. "What girl dreams of being taken in a grungy dorm room?"

This girl, Rosemary wanted to say, but she didn't, because he wouldn't understand. They were all well aware of the life she'd left behind, but most had a hard time seeing beyond the big house in Memphis, the fancy clothes, the cars and credit cards.

Only two of her men could fully grasp why a girl raised in a neighbourhood like Belle Meade would be happier here, at Adcock College, living on a 'historical' campus two hours

away from any decent sized city. The one with her now watched from the living room. When she caught his eye, he gave her a tense half-smile.

"You okay?" Largo mouthed.

Rosemary nodded and snuggled up to Wylie, head nestled in the crook of his neck. The scent of a forest of oaks after rainfall that seemed to saturate his flesh took her to a tranquil place—where she could bask in the simple luxury of yet another moment of living, where she didn't have to explain how precious each one was.

It was hard sometimes, convincing herself that this was her life. Throughout her early years, the brutal honesty of her reflection showed her why she'd be condemned to a fatal existence of loneliness.

High school had been hell for very different reasons than most unsightly girls her age. They could look forward to a future where looks meant nothing, become successful because of brains or talent. They could find solace in the fact that one day all that made the popular girls special would fade. For Rosemary, each ugly day was one closer to the end. Without that coveted beauty, she wouldn't live long enough for any of her other qualities to matter.

The day she'd turned from girl to woman, everything changed. The image in the mirror gave her hope. Her skin cleared overnight, became something like living porcelain, perfectly soft and smooth. Her hair, almost matte black, unruly and lanky, gained a thickness and depth of colour, flowing down her back in waves that suited her no matter how it was arranged. Even her body, always awkward, a little plump, too small, changed into a petite, slender form that looked good in any outfit. The loveliness brought tears to her eyes. Maybe, just maybe, she'd get that first kiss. Then that first touch. Then, when the time came, all she needed to survive.

Three years later and she had more than she'd dared hope for. Survival might still be a fragile thing, but it was possible. So many things were possible now.

Including tasting each of the boys she'd claimed, whenever she wanted. They were more than willing, but they'd have to wait.

Rosemary hooked a finger to the starched collar of Wylie's pale blue shirt and pulled him in for a quick kiss. Tugging the sheet out from under Alaire and Chetan to cover herself, she slid to the edge of the bed. "I wish I had more time for you, boys, but I've got to get to class and I need a shower."

"I guess that means my welcome home will have to wait."

The deep tenor of a voice she hadn't heard in much too long quickened her pulse. Breathing became optional. Lips parted, she stared at the broad silhouette standing on the threshold.

"Kurt!" The silk sheets tangled around her legs and she kicked at them and tumbled off the bed.

Kurt caught her in a fierce hug and kissed her forehead. Rosemary latched her arms around his waist under his leather coat, as though doing so could keep him where she wanted him. He actually gave her a full minute before dislodging her and holding her at arm's length to look her over with a dark frown. He turned the frown on Alaire. "Is it too much to ask that you shave?" Before Alaire could answer, Kurt snapped his hard gaze to Largo. "And why aren't you watching the hall?"

"I'm beat." Largo yawned and dropped his large form heavily across the sofa. He slid his baseball cap over his face. "I've busted my ass juggling coaching and babysitting. Now that you're back, I'm taking a nap."

Chetan climbed off the other side of the bed and picked up the black pants Rosemary had ironed for him earlier that morning. "She was safe with the four of us, Kurt." One foot in a pant leg, he stumbled, covered his mouth with his hand and tried to stifle a sneeze. "I just wish—" He sneezed, nose reddening, eyes watering. "She wouldn't bring—" He sneezed again and tried to pull on his pants while walking backwards. "That cat."

Rosemary nibbled at her lip and moved away from Kurt to fetch the scrawny kitten from where it had tried to slip into the slice of space between the wooden box bed frame and the wall. She carried it to the living room, stroking its fur until its pitiful mewling stopped. It cuddled up against her and promptly fell asleep. She smiled at the tiny bundle of patchy, grey fur. "It's still so little, I didn't want to leave it alone."

Chetan pulled a wad of Kleenex from his pocket to wipe his nose. "You know I'm allergic."

"You're allergic to everything." Wylie looked at Chetan over the rim of his glasses. "Take some Benadryl."

"And quit whining." Kurt sighed and took off his leather jacket. He dropped it on the sofa, right over Largo's head.

Largo snorted, but didn't move.

Kurt shook his head, eyes on the kitten. "You'll get fined if they catch you with that. You're not supposed to have anything but fish on campus."

"I know, I won't keep it long." Rosemary caught the scent of burnt fur and looked helplessly at Wylie.

Wylie stepped up and took the kitten from her, holding the small bundle in one hand.

Rosemary clenched her fists and tried to pull back the heat that had wisps of smoke rising from her fingertips. "As soon as he's healthy, I'll find him a home."

Kurt strode across the room, kicking abandoned clothes from his path, and took her wrist. He pried her hand open. "You should have more control. How often have you been feeding?"

"Twice a day." Rosemary flushed when Alaire shook his head and held up three fingers. "Sometimes more."

"Always two at a time?" Kurt put his hand under her chin and forced her to look at him. She gave a small nod. "You have no choice Rosemary, you shouldn't be ashamed."

"I'm not, it's just..." She closed her eyes and fought to hold back threatening tears. "It's never enough. If I don't find a way to manage with what I'm getting, how will I ever finish school? How will they?" She held her hand out towards Wylie, Chetan, and Alaire, thinking also of Shiloh and Felix who had already gone to class, both barely able to keep their eyes open. "And what about you? You've already lost one job because of me."

"That was during exams. You were stressed." Kurt shrugged. "My boss was a jerk anyway. I found a new job."

"Already?" Rosemary was surprised.

Kurt had taken a trip back home to see if there was any news of her father's return. He'd called a couple of times, letting them know it would take longer because her mother's men were keeping a sharp eye out for either him or Largo. He'd finally questioned one of the men alone and got the information he needed. Her father was still in California; Kurt had given them the update just the day before.

How had he had time to find a job since then?

"A garage just off campus needed a mechanic. They were desperate so they hired me on the spot," Kurt said as though he'd read her mind, which he probably had. Kurt was almost

as strong in the powers as her father. "I actually just came to say hi and get my tools. I told them I'd be back in an hour just in case..."

Rosemary gave him a sly smile. "Just in case?" She sauntered past him, hips swaying beneath the velvet mass of her hair. The sultry dance of a walk brought the three boys in the room to heel like she'd clasped collars around their necks and held tight to each of their leashes. Only Kurt hadn't moved. She hooked a finger to his belt to urge him along. "That's good. I was about to take a shower. Care to join me?"

A rare grin graced Kurt's broody features and lightened his dark brown eyes to a warmer colour. He laughed, such a joyful sound it shocked the other boys, waking Largo who dragged himself up and stared.

"The world ending?" Largo grumbled, rubbing his eyes with his fists like an oversized child.

"No." Kurt pulled Rosemary close and wrapped his muscular arms around her. "I'm just about to get something I've been craving for weeks."

Rosemary rose on her tiptoes and kissed his lips, a slow, lingering taste that let her drink in his heat. "I missed you too."

* * * *

The small, blue and white tiled bathroom slowly filled with steam. Kurt stood in front of the door, arms crossed, leaning against it.

Rosemary soaped up her skin with a sea sponge, covering her body with the aroma of sweet melon, washing away the scent of the other boys. Kurt would take her as he found her. He'd shared her with each of the others before, but she enjoyed the purity of melding clean flesh. She wanted her senses filled with nothing but her lover of the moment, and while Kurt was patient with little else, he obliged her in this.

Once the conditioner was rinsed from her hair, she motioned him closer. "I'm ready for you."

"Are you?" Kurt approached the bath, shedding his last piece of clothing, a pair of black boxer briefs.

Rosemary watched the muscles undulate in his thighs, let her eyes move up to the hard plane of his stomach, lingering just over his hard dick, on the glorious carved edge of his pelvis.

She licked her lips. "Definitely."

"Very good." Kurt stepped into the shower, forcing her to step back. "So, what else do I want to hear?" He cleared his throat. "I'm up here."

Rosemary brought her eyes to his face. "I know."

"Do you?" He rested his forehead against hers. "Because sometimes I wonder. Your performance is always perfect, like you can become a cut-out of what each of us wants." He closed the distance between them and kissed her nose. "But what do *you* want?"

"I have everything I want." The water was cooling. Rosemary pulled him with her out of the spray and stretched up to kiss his lips.

He turned his head and her lips slid along his jaw. For all his talk of Alaire shaving, he hadn't done so himself. Besides the neat trim of dark hair that always framed his generous lips, he had a shadow of growth in the hollow of his cheeks. Meeting stubble rather than a cushion of lips pulled her from her passionate assault and made her really look at him.

His stance was so detached he might as well have been waiting for a bus. Only nudity betrayed his aloof demeanour. Waiting for a bus didn't make guys that hard.

She wrapped her hand around his thick length and slid it loosely up and down, enjoying the velvet heat of tight flesh as she peeked up to assess his reaction. His thick, black brows drew together and she sighed. "I didn't invite you in here for conversation."

He shrugged and laced his fingers behind his neck. "Fine. Take what you need."

Rosemary ground her teeth and glared at him. "There was enough lust in that room to chew on, and that's after I sucked it out of Alaire and Chetan. If that's all I wanted..." She spun on her heel and headed out of the bath. "Just forget it. I'm full."

Kurt hooked an arm around her waist and pulled her back. "Not so fast." His warm breath teased her earlobe when he laughed and a little chill skittered down her spine. "Are you mad at me?"

"A little." She relaxed against him, curving her neck towards his lips. "You just got back. And I hoped..."

His tongue played along her pulse, followed by his teeth. She reached between them and palmed his balls. He dropped his head to her shoulder and made a feral sound in his throat, giving her the seconds she needed to finish what she had to say. "I hoped we could forgo the deep stuff for once and have a bit of fun."

"What are you afraid of, Rosemary?" He moved her hand and held her close. "Why do you pull away, or turn to sex, whenever one of us tries to get close to you?"

"I don't."

"Yes, you do."

Rosemary twisted away and retreated to the edge of the bath. She stared at the ceiling, taking slow, deep breaths. Then she looked at him. "This face. This body. They are why you're here. I need you, all of you, so I give you what you want. You're the only one that isn't satisfied."

"Do you think any of them are satisfied with loving a girl who won't love them back?"

"I do love them! All of them! Even you!" A sob caught in her throat and she swallowed it back. "Why do you have to make this so complicated?"

"Because it is complicated! Did you expect a relationship with seven guys to be simple?" Kurt took her by the shoulders, anger flashing in his eyes. He looked ready to shake her. "You said you missed me, well, I missed you. I miss you! I want to know what happened to the girl who was ready to take on the world because she finally had a shot. I want the girl who wasn't afraid to get dirty, who didn't care if she looked sexy. I've watched you bury that girl over the last year and it took being away to see it." He closed his eyes and let his hands fall. "I hoped I was wrong. When I walked in and you were ready to leave them to do your own thing, I was almost convinced."

Rosemary crossed her arms over her chest, wishing she had some clothes on for this talk. Maybe with a few layers on her, he wouldn't be able to burrow so easily into her heart. "Then tell me how to convince you."

"Give me a peek at something more than all that prettiness." He touched her cheek. "And let me do the same."

Despite the rawness of everything, a tremulous smile crept to Rosemary's lips. He tempted her, and now that she thought of it, they had all tried. She remembered Shiloh taking her out to dinner and looking sad when she took his hand and led him to the

bathroom for a quickie. Chetan hadn't spoken to her for two days when she'd left his bed in the middle of the night after he'd asked her to stay. Her smile faded.

"I get it." She moved closer to him, letting him hold her again. "I'll try." She tilted her head back. "But you have to do something for me."

"Name it."

"Show me how much you missed me."

Kurt groaned and bent down, kissing her lips, her cheeks, her eyelids. Rosemary tilted her head, causing wet tendrils of hair to graze the pert, round curve of her butt. She kept her hands at her sides, letting him do all the work.

His hand slicked over the wet curve of her back. "This is different."

"Isn't that what you wanted?" She tugged her lip with her teeth when he lowered his head to take a proud nipple in his mouth. "Beyond all this prettiness is a girl who's getting pretty tired of leading the way with you. All that time you were hunting for others to fill my nest, I dreamed of you finally coming to me, seducing me. I finally got fed up of waiting..."

She was simplifying. Their first time had been before the summer, when stress from her exams had her so hungry she'd nearly drained Shiloh and Felix to death. The others had done their best to accommodate her, but in the end she'd forced Kurt to admit they were unlikely to find another of his strength to take the seventh place before she either killed all the men or – more likely – died herself by refusing to feed.

Having to convince him to sleep with her hadn't done much for her hard won self-esteem.

"I'm sorry I put you through that." He left her breast and went to the other, laving it with his tongue. "If it helps, I regret the wasted time."

"Well then, show me what you would have done with it."

Kurt took a knee and pressed his lips to her belly. "Demanding, aren't we?"

Having Kurt, of all people, in that position, turned her world on its head. Their routine was her on her knees, manipulating him with her lips until he dropped his detached front and begged her to slow down, called for whoever was handy, and moved them to the closest available bed. Not to say he was cold with her, but he held something back. Just like she did.

"I guess I can be." Her hand slapped the tiled wall behind her when he flicked his tongue between her thighs. She braced a foot against his knee and raked her other hand into his hair to hold herself up. "Are you sure you wouldn't prefer me to be accommodating?"

"Positive." He pushed her legs apart and lapped at her.

Cold water dripped from his hair to her thigh and goose bumps formed, but she could only feel the heat of his mouth consuming her. She tugged at his hair and his dark gaze rose to spear her as he caught an ankle and draped her leg over his shoulder. The press of his face between her thighs held her firm against the wall. His tongue hardened and he plunged into her folds, gaining entrance, licking and stroking inside until she writhed and screamed. Her legs gave and he grabbed her just in time to avoid her head cracking the tiles.

"You okay?" he asked, lowering her with her legs parted so her throbbing pussy skidded over his solid chest, slicking the taut muscles with her juices.

She bucked and hissed, driving both hands into his hair and clinging to the roots. "Give me a minute."

He shifted them so her knees settled on either side of his thighs and put an arm around her shoulders to support her. "Take as long as you need. I'm not in a rush."

His composure cooled her blood. Jaw set, she rose up, dragging her pussy over his dick, dropping a hand to position him between her swollen lips. She opened over the head of him and tried to slam down.

His hands smacked into her ass and squeezed. "Wait." He winced and gave a shallow thrust of his hips. "The water..."

All the moisture that would have eased his way covered his chest. Water didn't lubricate well. She smirked and leaned over to flick her tongue over his nipple. "Mmm. That's fine." She nipped along his collarbone. "'Take as long as you need'."

With a husky laugh, he took hold of himself, nudged her hand away, and stroked her with his dick. She wrapped her arms around his neck and held still as he forced his way inside. The stretching of the tight walls within filled her with hot cream and soon he nestled so deep she could feel him pressing against her womb.

He didn't move. "Are you ready?"

She lifted in answer and he latched on to her hips and thrust up. The sounds of flesh slapping flesh filled the room. Kurt lost his restraint and his fierce passion burst into her, all

she'd craved from him but always been too afraid to ask for. She didn't want him to be careful, didn't want to feel like he was fulfilling a duty. But unleashed desire validated his claims. All the talk hadn't dampened what was between them. Instead the revelations had crashed through their walls, left them open to all that could be. All that *would* be.

His hands tightened on her hips and she tensed, enveloping his whole length with every rippling muscle within. He groaned and spilled inside her seconds before she spasmed around him. Another orgasm took her off guard and she cried out, reaching around to dig her nails into his tight ass.

Control slipped and the hunger lunged, claiming her body to devour his. Her core wrapped around Kurt's dick like a fist. He jerked once, took a deep inhale and got comfortable so she could take her fill.

There should have been another person present to balance her, to provide enough fodder for the gaping maw of the void. A full-blooded succubus could siphon the cumulative lust and passion from a room from afar, but cambion descendants needed intimate contact. A succubus would kill a lover. A cambion could choose not to. Once they learnt how. If they were strong enough to stop.

What if she wasn't? What if she couldn't stop?

Energy hit her, like food eaten too fast; only felt once the meal was finished. Kurt's mouth covered hers. He wrapped her hair around his fist and force-fed her a current of power through his kiss and the insistent press of his body. Too much. Rosemary whimpered as the hunger released her and retreated to the pits of her soul.

Kurt stroked her hair and whispered. "Better?"

Rosemary closed her eyes and nodded. "Much." She rolled her tongue around her mouth and the remnants of his lust melted on her tongue like candy. "You haven't had another since you left me."

Kurt buried his face in her wet hair. "No."

"Why? I don't forbid it. I'm not my m—" She couldn't get the word out. She hated using it.

Kurt understood. "I know you're not. I just don't want to. Once I had you, none other tempts me."

That kind of statement made the guilt Rosemary should never feel burn deep within. She didn't want any of her men to feel trapped with her. *She couldn't* be exclusive.

Shifting beneath her, Kurt cupped her face and turned her to him. "I don't feel trapped."

"Then why don't you –"

A feral hiss, followed by a shout, snapped their eyes to the door. Kurt grabbed two towels, threw one to her and wrapped the other around his waist. He didn't check to see if she was covered before throwing the door open.

"What's going on?" He stepped out of the bathroom, crossed his arms and focussed on Chetan who was balancing on the back of the sofa.

Chetan pointed to the kitten, cowering in the corner while Largo swung a broom towards it.

"Don't hurt it!" Rosemary sidled past Kurt and ran for the kitten.

Alaire snatched the broom from Largo's hand.

Rosemary put her hands on her hips and glared up at the big man. "What were you doing?"

"It's possessed!" Chetan did an abrupt, graceless spin when the kitten growled and spat, then snatched the prop sword Felix kept on display over the sofa. He snuffled a sneeze with the back of a hand and took an awkward swordsman pose. "If it attacks..."

Wylie coughed over a laugh. "You'll run it through?"

"It's not possessed." Kurt grabbed the kitten by the scruff of the neck and tossed it to Alaire.

Alaire cursed as the kitten latched on to his bare chest with her tiny claws.

Kurt's eyes swept the room and he pointed at something over Chetan's shoulder. "It got spooked." He glowered at Largo. "You're supposed to be teaching Rosemary how to keep this campus clean."

A faint rasping sounded from the kitchen and Rosemary peered out from behind Largo, jumping when a white mist billowed out, forming into a wispy figure of a woman.

"A ghost?" Rosemary licked her lips and bit back a grin.

Kurt glanced at her, one brow raised. "A ghost. And judging by the solidity of her, she's been here a while. Wanna take care of it?"

"I'm late." Rosemary ducked into Chetan's room, found her clothes and donned them in a rush. She skipped into the living room to give Largo a peck on the cheek, twirled to hug Alaire and blew the others a kiss on her way out. "Be a doll and take care of it for me?" She didn't wait for an answer before shooting an offhand 'Thanks' over her shoulder.

She paused in the hall, giggling when she heard Kurt mumble 'Brat' before raising his voice. "If you guys get this wound up over a ghost, what will you do when the territory is breached? Put down the damn sword, Chetan, and clean this place up! Largo, get dressed. I want to see what else you've let creep in while I was gone."

The stale air of the hall seemed to change around her, becoming fresh, like the first taste of spring. Steps light, Rosemary made her way up the two flights of stairs to her floor, humming under her breath. Kurt was back. Everything was as it should be.

Another shout made her wince. She thought about the cold spots in the lobby and wondered what Kurt's reaction would be to the poltergeist that had taken up residence in the hall. They'd slacked off in his absence, both in her training and in guarding their borders against paranormals that didn't belong.

Kurt's return meant playtime would be cut in half. Rosemary didn't care. Whatever it cost was worth it to have him around.

Chapter Two

Since Kurt's departure two weeks before, Rosemary had been staying with the boys—Wylie taking the couch when Largo wasn't on it and leaving her his room. The arrangement was a security measure, in case her mother's men were watching and had taken note of Kurt's absence.

Now that he was back, she could stay in her own room.

The dorms on this floor were much smaller than the boys' five-room dorm apartment; these were laid out for two students. There was a sitting room with a kitchenette, one bedroom with two double beds, and a miniscule bathroom. The only thing she envied the boys was their bathroom, with its vanity and full sized bath. All she had was a shower cubicle, a toilet and a sink. But she couldn't complain. Sharing one tiny bathroom with one roommate beat sharing one huge bathroom with four.

Rosemary's roommate wasn't there, but she took fresh clothes to the bathroom to dress anyway. Stephanie wasn't comfortable with casual nudity. The last time she'd seen Rosemary leave the bathroom in a towel, she'd turned around and walked right back out. They hadn't spoken since, and Rosemary felt horrible about it. She knew Stephanie had an issue with her body. And there was no way she'd buy into the idea that Rosemary could relate.

Looking herself over in the mirror, Rosemary shelved the problems with her roommate for later and focussed on the matter at hand. In black, cropped pants and a long sleeved white shirt, Rosemary felt like she'd donned armour and was ready for anything. She couldn't hide her sensual nature, but the outfit didn't scream sex or damsel in distress.

How's that for a cut-out, Kurt? She smiled at herself and picked up her toothbrush. The door opened behind her and she jumped.

Alaire grinned and loomed over her, backing her against the sink. He reached around her and plucked a toothbrush out of the holder. "I knew I had a spare here."

Rosemary rolled her eyes and scooted sideways so that she could face the sink. She picked up the toothpaste. "What happened to yours?"

"Felix dropped it in the toilet." Alaire held out his hand for the toothpaste when she'd finished with it.

"On purpose?"

"Yep. He wanted revenge for the BenGay I dipped his razor in." He stuck the toothbrush in his mouth and brought it out just as fast, sticking out his tongue and fanning it with his hand. "Uck, what is this?"

"Cinnamon." Rosemary grinned. "Hot?"

"Slightly." He scraped his tongue with his teeth. "Do you have any normal toothpaste?"

She handed him another tube. "Serves you right. I bet it's not half as bad as what you did to Felix's face." She paused with her toothbrush in her mouth. "He couldn't do better than dropping your toothbrush in the toilet?"

Alaire gave her a foamy grin. "Nope." He spat in the sink. "He even warned me before I used it. He's just not the revenge type."

"You're lucky it wasn't one of the others."

They brushed in silence for a while, Alaire making faces at himself to make sure he'd got all of his perfect teeth, Rosemary watching him through the reflection, trying not to laugh.

"Speaking of the others," Alaire spat one last time, rinsed his toothbrush and put it back in the holder, "I heard you and Kurt."

A blush spread from Rosemary's chest up to the tips of her ears, making her feel as though the temperature in the room had gone up twenty degrees. "Alaire!"

Grabbing some gel from the medicine cabinet, Alaire squeezed a bit in his hand and rubbed it through his dirty blond hair to make his bed-head look a little messier. "What?" He cocked his head, studying himself, gave a satisfied smile and looked at her. "Oh! No, not that—though that sounded fun." He chuckled when she groaned. "The conversation before that."

The temperature dropped. Not metaphorically. Rosemary's control had slipped and plunged the room into subzero temperatures. She didn't notice at first. "Did everyone hear that?"

"Naw, just me." Alaire shivered and tugged her out of the room, his breath misting out of him. "Wanna drop the human air conditioner act?"

"Sorry." Rosemary focussed on tucking away her wayward powers and went to her closet to get him a sweatshirt borrowed from one of the boys during a camping trip that summer. It was huge on him, which meant it was probably Largo's.

"So why would you hear, but not the others?"

"Heightened senses. Malfunctioning changeling, remember?" Alaire was still smiling, but it had dimmed. He'd learned that he was part changeling only months before, the very reason he was fit for the nest. The only problem was that his changeling blood had been so diluted with human that he was trapped in the form he'd been born with. As far as she was concerned it was a fine form, but Alaire's exposure to what he'd lost, his insistence that Kurt take him to see others of his kind, had left the spirited boy with a weight of regret she wished they could take back. She remembered the way his eyes had glowed with wonder when the woods transformed before their eyes. The creatures had spilled from the trees, iridescent beings that shifted into animal forms that couldn't be discerned from the real thing.

Alaire shared some features with the ethereal creatures—his puckish face, the slight point of his ears, his graceful movements. More than once, she'd seen him standing in front of a mirror, eyes glittering faintly with changeling energy. She knew he'd been trying to shift.

It was something none of them spoke of.

"I don't remember any part of you malfunctioning." Rosemary looked him over, letting her eyes linger below his waist.

"As I was saying." Alaire took a seat on the edge of her bed. "Don't ever repeat this, but Kurt's right. I might not know you as well as he does, but I'm not blind or stupid. I see you, hidden away in there somewhere. I wanna know when you're gonna stop hiding."

"If you heard so much, you heard me tell Kurt I'd try." Rosemary sat at his side and put her hand on his knee.

He took her hand and brought it to his lips, kissing her knuckles one at a time. She closed her eyes when he leaned close. He gave her a tender kiss and her eyes shot open. This wasn't what she was used to, not from Alaire.

"I'm happy to hear that, Rosemary." He let her hand slip from his. "So, how 'bout I take you out for lunch?"

Rosemary bit her lip, then nodded. "I've got classes until two, but after that, sure. What have you got in mind?"

“Mickey D’s,” Alaire said, pushing off the bed and heading towards the door. He swung it open and glanced back at her. “I’m gonna get a few Happy Meals—gotta get the last two pieces for my collection.”

The door closed behind him, leaving Rosemary staring at it with a bemused smile glued to her lips. If this was a taste of what the boys had in store for her, she was going to enjoy it. Her only regret was that she’d waited so long.

Chapter Three

Lunch left her light of spirits and the rest of the day breezed by. Before she knew it, she was back in her room getting ready for bed. Her roommate was already asleep and Rosemary moved around the room in silence, stifling the urge to dance and sing. She felt alive, truly alive, for the first time ever. Her life wasn't about just surviving anymore. She'd been given a chance at more.

The chime of her cell phone had her rushing from her room, muffling the sound with her hand. She read the text from Chetan and quickly dressed. He met her in the hall.

"You weren't sleeping, were you?" he asked, holding out a bouquet of roses, head turned so he couldn't smell them.

Rosemary smiled and took them from him. "No, I couldn't." She shook her head and laughed. "This is really sweet of you Chetan, but why roses? They make your allergies act up."

Chetan shrugged. "I've always wanted to give you some." He stifled a sneeze. "Never thought you'd want me to before." He sniffed and rubbed his nose. "Can't say I'll ever do it again, but I had to take advantage of you being open to it."

"Alaire told you." She didn't even consider Kurt having revealed her change of heart. It wasn't his style.

"He might have mentioned something." Chetan dropped his gaze to his shoes, fixated on the polished black gleam. "To be honest none of us would leave him alone until he told us why you and Kurt were arguing."

"So everyone knows?"

"Is that a problem?" Chetan looked at her, concern clear in his olive eyes.

Rosemary held up a finger, slipped into her dorm and laid the roses by the sink to be cared for when she returned. Then she went back to the hall. "What've you got planned for me?"

Blinking as though he was sure he'd heard wrong, Chetan licked his lips and glanced down the hall. "Nothing big. You'll probably think it's lame."

What had she done to them? Rosemary's throat felt tight. In trying so hard to please them all, she'd shut them out and left them feeling unworthy.

She had a lot to make up for. "I won't."

Chetan nodded absently and hooked his thumbs into the pockets of his grey slacks. "It's supposed to be a really clear night. I thought we'd sit in my car and—" He cleared his throat and bowed his head. "Check out the stars."

Warmth filled her, so tender and soft it took her a while to speak. She forced herself to when Chetan went red. "That sounds perfect."

"Really?"

"Really." Rosemary hooked her arm with his and towed him towards the stairs. "You've got a unique view of the universe. I've always been curious about it, but..."

"You're afraid to get that personal." Chetan reached out and took her hand, holding it loosely like he didn't want to impose.

"Not anymore." She squeezed his hand, then pulled him close so she could kiss him. She kept her eyes open and watched his close.

"Good." He opened his eyes, looking a little dazed. He shook his head and started walking faster. "So yeah, about those stars..."

* * * *

The night was black velvet, crisp and clear and a little cold. They drove for an hour to find a quiet spot where they wouldn't be disturbed and stretched out on the hood of Chetan's old Toyota Corolla, staring up at the stars in companionable silence, Rosemary tucked close to Chetan for warmth and the sheer comfort of his presence.

After a while he started talking, telling her about the millions of years that make up the day of Lord Brahma before his sleep, when all is destroyed for his night which lasts several more million years. In his arms, she fell into the tale, absorbing all she could understand, eager for more.

His lips on her flesh stole all need for knowledge.

"Don't stop," she whispered when he pulled away and lifted her from the car to help her inside.

"I can't feed you tonight." Chetan crouched, holding her close, kissing along her jaw as though he didn't want to stop.

But he did stop, so suddenly that only his arms around her kept her from tipping out of the car. Rosemary pushed herself back until she was solidly in her seat. She hugged herself and watched Chetan retreat, torn between irritation and disappointment as the door shut between them.

Chetan took his time walking to the driver's side and she watched his lips move as he muttered something to himself that she couldn't hear. He stopped with his hand on the driver's door and gave an aggravated shout.

When he got behind the wheel, he gave her a wan smile and turned on the radio. "Find a station and turn it up. Please?"

Rosemary nodded, hiding her confounded smile behind the curtain of her hair while she fiddled with the radio. With it on loud, they couldn't talk. Chetan loved talking to her, to anyone with half a brain, and it was never idle chatter. She'd been looking forward to a drive filled with philosophy, each concept carefully worded to imply something sexual. It was a game they sometimes played to pass the time, one they hadn't played in weeks. It usually led to feeding, so maybe that was why Chetan was avoiding it.

She leant forward and shut off the radio. "You know, there are things I can do without feeding. Things you'd enjoy."

"Not tonight." Chetan parked the car—they were already home. He didn't speak again until they were in front of the dorms. "This is our first real date. I want to end it properly. I'm going to kiss you and leave this unfinished. I want to know you're aching for more the next time we're together."

"I already am." Rosemary clung to his arm when he walked her to her door. First date? Damn it, Alaire had implied the same thing earlier. She had a bad feeling they were starting a trend. She hooked her fingers into the collar of his shirt and tugged him down to eye level. "I've never wanted you as much as I do now."

"Good." Chetan kissed her one last time, pried her fingers gently from his collar and backed away with a smile. "Then I know the others won't distract you from me."

* * * *

The others did distract her, but not as Chetan feared. She fed between dates on the schedule they'd held to for months, but the sex didn't stir her like each new experience, like the time she spent getting to know the boys that knew everything about her body but nothing about her as a whole. Getting to know them made every prerequisite quickie a meal gobbled down, hardly tasted, while the feast slow cooked, growing tender in its own juices.

In the end, she knew things between them all would change. They were her friends, but they were becoming her lovers—in every sense of the word.

And she still didn't know how she felt about that. So she focussed on her vow to herself, on treating the boys as they deserved to be treated, like they had hearts and minds beyond the bodies she fed from. It left her vulnerable, open, but she could trust them not to hurt her.

If only she could guarantee that trust could go two ways. She stopped worrying about it after her next date.

Felix took her to a club, a place where his sheer black shirt with its lace-up front and his leather pants fit right in. She was happy she'd let him pick her outfit. In her little black dress, short enough to be stylish but strategically covering any part of her that would invite unwanted attention, she was comfortable enough to dance and feel sexy, but like it was just for him. The sleek, bright pink mini-dress she'd planned to wear would have marked her as a woman on the prowl—and there were plenty of those.

They didn't talk much, other than light banter in the cab, but they laughed and flirted while they danced, acting like they were completely alone despite the throng that spun around them. Felix kept things light, showing off moves he'd learnt in dance classes, followed by a few naughty ones as the drinks they'd downed made him bold. His hips rolled and his body bent in ways she'd only seen in the bedroom. And only with him.

"Where did you learn to do that?" Rosemary asked when she found her tongue.

Felix grinned and pulled her to the bar, ordering them both drinks with lots of ice. They climbed onto the stools and he sat with his back to the bar, his elbows braced behind him. "I've got a part time job, one that makes good use of my dancing skills..." He frowned and ducked his head, letting his hair fall over his eyes. "I should have told you sooner, but I

thought it would bother you. I've been doing it for a few years...all the places I work are clean..."

Rosemary reached out, pressing her hand under his chin until he looked at her. "Are you an erotic dancer, Felix?"

He nodded.

She smiled. "I don't mind. From what I hear, the money's good. If you like doing it I don't see a problem." She turned to accept her drink from the bartender and took a sip, head tilted to one side in thought. "But you're only eighteen. How could you have...?"

Hunching over his drink, Felix rolled the straw along his teeth with his tongue and shrugged. "I've always been tall for my age. At sixteen, with a bit of scruff on my face, I could pass for older. My foster dad knew the right kind of people..."

Rosemary's stomach dropped. She licked her lips and took his hand. "Oh, Felix. I'm sorry about that, I wish I'd known sooner." She turned so she could lean close to him, put a hand on his waist so she was almost hugging him. "We don't need the money that bad. Kurt and Largo have good jobs. Maybe Kurt can find you work at the garage if you need..."

Felix put one finger on her lips and shook his head. "No. I'm happy, Rosy. I've always loved doing it, and that's what used to make it hard. Because of my foster dad, I had to focus on profit, do whatever would bring in the big tips."

Rosemary's mouth went dry. No wonder Kurt had insisted they get the results to all the blood tests and screening before she even kissed him. He sat back and she let him go, bringing her drink to her lips to hide her shock.

It was a little too late, but Felix didn't look insulted, merely amused. He played his straw around his glass with his tongue, wiggling his eyebrows at her until she flushed and looked away.

"This is me, Rosy. You might not know everything about my past, but you know me. Do I look miserable? Like I feel used?" He held still as she studied his face. He looked exactly like he always did, full of life and loving every minute. He grinned when she shook her head. "Well, you're wrong. I do feel used, by you..." He crossed his hands over his chest and gave a dramatic little sigh. "And Sophia, and Mary, and..."

Rosemary laughed and smacked his arm. "You're a pain. I don't know why I ever worried about you, you're never alone long enough to feel neglected."

"Were you worried?" He rolled his eyes when she nodded. "Silly girl. As long as we find a way to keep you from being a slave to the hunger, I'll be fine. I don't need any big proclamations." He stood and picked her up, sliding her down his body as he swayed to the music. "I know how you feel about me."

One hand gliding over his leather-covered ass, Rosemary peered up at him hopefully. "Does that mean we can...?"

"Not tonight." He tapped her nose with a finger and spun away from her. He caught her hand and twirled her to the dance floor. "But I'm on the menu for lunch tomorrow."

* * * *

Her next two dates were torture. Oh, she enjoyed herself. The boys took her to places they were passionate about, and the passion was contagious. Wylie took her to a bar hosting a blues legend. Shiloh took her to an art show. Each gave her their undivided attention.

But she didn't get so much as a kiss.

When Largo came with an awkward invitation to a victory celebration he'd arranged for the team he coached, Rosemary groaned. Largo frowned, looking a little confused.

Rosemary explained her disappointment before he had a chance to take it personally. "This is the third date I'm going on where there will be too many people around for intimacy. Actually, this is going to be the worst yet. We can't let people see us together—most of them think we're related."

Largo laughed. "No one thinks we're related, Rosemary, not with the way you look at me."

Rosemary wrinkled her nose and covered her cheek with a cool hand. She wondered if the boys wanted her permanently blushing. They seemed to be working very hard at it lately.

Largo put his arm around her as they walked to the fraternity house where the party was being held. "But you're right about one thing, we can't let them think we're sleeping together—you're supposed to be dating Chetan."

Hair blew across her face when she stopped and faced him. She tossed it over her shoulder. "Why did you want me to come, then?"

"I wanted to see you doing the normal college thing. You never socialise." He eyed the house just coming into sight around a grouping of small trees. He backed her onto the grass so they couldn't be seen from the house and bent down as though to kiss her, speaking with his lips brushing hers. "We'll hang out for a bit, then I'll take you to the boys' locker room."

"The boys' locker room?" Rosemary's brow furrowed. "Why there?"

Largo let out a throaty, masculine laugh. "Because I've been having dirty thoughts about taking you in the showers. I caught one of my boys in there with his girlfriend and I haven't stopped thinking about it since."

Rosemary grinned, picturing it. Then she laughed. "That must have been embarrassing. Did you kick him out?"

"Nope. I gave him ten minutes to finish up." Largo smirked. "But I'm warning you now. We're gonna need more than ten minutes."

They parted when they got to the house and Rosemary spent the next few hours simply mingling. Some of the boys flirted with her, but it was always respectful since everyone knew she was a friend of their coach. What kind of friend exactly no one knew, but they all seemed to have come to the conclusion that he was a family friend, just looking out for her.

While their wet bodies moved together under the beat of the shower, the thought made her giggle. His hands covering her breasts and a fierce thrust turned the giggle to a moan.

When they went to the locker room to dress, he started laughing.

"What's so funny?" she asked as she untangled her bra from her shirt.

Largo buckled his belt, cutting off the laugh with a grin. "I just figured out why you were giggling." His head cocked in thought. "Maybe that's one of the reasons your dad never let you call me uncle when you were young. Actually, he didn't let me spend much time with you until you were well into your teens."

"I had the biggest crush on you." Rosemary could remember the first time she'd really noticed the big man, how shy she'd got around him when his friendly regard had turned to badly hidden interest. Her father had encouraged them to spend time together after that, but Largo had made sure they were never alone. "I was afraid you'd always think I was too young for you."

"You're way too young for me, but your father asked me to take care of you. I probably could have done it without becoming part of your nest, if we'd found enough men to fill it

sooner." He pulled on his T-shirt and took her hand to bring her to him. "But I wasn't going to let you fade because of our age gap."

Rosemary let herself sink into his chest, loving that in his relaxed state it wasn't hard. Largo had a nice amount of cushion over his muscles. She traced her fingers along his arm, wrapped loosely around her waist. "I'm glad you made the choice for me. I don't think I could have done it."

"I think we both know your father made that choice before either of us considered it." Largo smoothed her hair away from her face and bent down to kiss her. "Just like he did with Kurt."

They left the locker room, both lost in thought as Largo walked her to her dorm. She didn't know what had Largo looking so serious. She wanted to ask, but her thoughts kept straying to Kurt.

Their date was planned for the next night and it was no coincidence that he was taking his turn last. All the other dates had ranged from pure fun to deep and meaningful. Other than the frustration of the first date rules most of them had implemented, she'd enjoyed herself. Maybe she should give Kurt the chance she'd given the others.

Only, she couldn't quite shake the dread. Being close to Kurt was different.

It would help if she could figure out why.

Chapter Four

Dressed in jeans and a T-shirt as Kurt had requested, Rosemary waited by the parking lot with Largo keeping watch. Largo spotted Kurt first and left her with a kiss on the cheek and a suggestion that she lose the deer-in-headlights expression.

Rosemary attempted a relaxed and slightly eager smile.

Kurt stepped off his dirt bike and leaned against it, looking her over with such intensity that her smile slipped.

He grinned. "I thought so. Nice try, though."

Arms crossed in automatic defensiveness, Rosemary dropped the act and simply scowled at him. "I knew it. This isn't going to be a simple date—you're going to make me do some kind of soul searching."

"Just get on." Kurt didn't wait for her to comply. He picked her up, put her on the bike and set a helmet on her head. "And stop sulking."

"I'm not sulking, I want to get this over with."

Kurt chuckled. "We'll see." He mounted and revved the engine. "Hold on tight!"

Rosemary wrapped her arms around his waist and pressed her face against the soft leather of his jacket, the scent of him rising above the weak bitterness she let herself feel. It was just so masculine, cars and leather and aftershave. She smiled at the last. Kurt had shaved for their date.

* * * *

The darkness of the trees was speared by the headlight, reflecting on the damp leaves in a way that made them sparkle like they'd sprouted tiny crystals. A cool breeze swirled around them, teasing the fine hairs on her flesh and making her shiver.

Kurt played the gentleman and hung his jacket over her shoulders before helping her off the bike.

"Thank you." Rosemary said, slipping her arms through the sleeves as he did up the zip.

With an absent nod, Kurt turned to survey the trees. Rosemary moved up to his side and let her eyes adjust to the darkness. He wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her close.

“Can you still climb?”

Rosemary glanced up at him, brow arched. “Climb?”

“Yeah.” He pointed at the closest tree. “The best apples are up there. I’m not keen on eating them off the ground.”

Squinting at the trees, Rosemary could just make out the fruit that hung from the limbs, high overhead. Speechless, she watched him step away from her and reach up to pluck one from one of the lower branches.

He went to the bike and pulled a sturdy sack from the saddlebag.

“You brought me to pick apples?” Rosemary took the bag and watched him approach a tree, grab hold of a sturdy branch and haul himself up.

He sat close to the trunk and leaned down, arm extended. “I remembered that your dad used to bring you. I guarded you while you swung around like a monkey.”

Rosemary walked to the tree slowly, thinking of the last time she’d gone apple picking with her father. Her mother never went with them, she hated anything that involved dirt and fresh air, but she’d always send at least two guards to watch over her prince—and her daughter, but that was an afterthought. The guards were usually Kurt and Largo.

No one dared say it out loud, but everyone knew they were dispensable. Her mother found a solid nest stifling and tended to trade in her men for younger ones when she got bored of them. She’d been thrilled when her sons—Rosemary’s older brothers—came of age to be exchanged for the sons of allied nests in other states. New blood always put her mother in a good mood, but neither Kurt nor Largo could be bargained off. Rosemary’s father wouldn’t stand against her mother in much, but he fought for years to keep the two around. Rosemary suspected it was because they were kind to her.

Looking up at Kurt, she could almost picture him as the nineteen-year-old boy he’d been, with her mother for two years and already too dominant for her mother’s tastes. Having a master vard-lokkur as a prince made her mother arrogant—no other cambion alive had ever tempted one of the powerful guardians of the gates of knowledge. Taking his student as well was par for the course, but she hadn’t expected her agreeable husband to

have trained such a headstrong boy. She did her best to beat it out of him—Rosemary woke many nights to the snap of the whip and her mother urging him to scream—but the cruel treatment served only to making Kurt into a quiet, surly young man. He'd become closed off when anyone spoke to him, snapping at the slightest provocation, but Rosemary had never been afraid of him. On outings like this she'd seek him out, point at a tree and tell him to lift her up.

The last time she'd done it was at fourteen. Kurt had grumbled and hooked his hands around her waist. Then he'd stopped and eyed the tree.

"You can manage," he'd said, stepping back.

Rosemary had pouted. "It's too high."

For the first time ever, Kurt had smiled at her. He crouched down and looked her in the eye. "I've seen you climb down the tree by your window to go hang out with your friends when your mother's punished you for not being the perfect lady. You can do it."

"You never told." Rosemary had peered up at him, lips parted.

"You are your father's daughter," Kurt replied, the closest he'd ever come to admitting where his loyalties lay. He'd kissed her on the cheek when her lips trembled, knowing he'd hit a sore spot. Her mother made no secret that she held no affection for her youngest child. "You should be proud. None of his sons are as close to him as you are. None are even worthy of being prince of a nest. You will be a queen one day, a good one at that."

"Look at me." Rosemary's eyes watered as she gestured at her face, her eyes too big, her nose too small, her skin plagued with unsightly bumps that no washing could clear. "I'll never be a queen."

"Have faith, little one." Kurt folded his hands behind his back and jutted his chin towards the tree. "Your father does."

Rosemary had bloodied her palms and scraped her knees, but she'd made it up the tree. The slight incline of Kurt's head had done more for her than any words of encouragement could have. This beautiful, wonderful young man thought she was worth something. She'd picked the apples, tossing them down for him to fill her bag, bursting with pride when her father had joined them, patting Kurt on the shoulder and shouting up to her that she was a natural.

Now at the base of the tree, Rosemary latched onto a limb just below where Kurt sat, leaning against the trunk, legs dangling. She strained long dormant muscles, but managed to pull herself up enough to hook her leg around the branch.

The limb seemed narrow and Rosemary felt unbalanced on it, but she hugged the trunk and grinned up at Kurt. "Guess I've still got it."

"Get up here." Kurt grabbed her hand and lifted her up to sit beside him on the sturdier bough. "I knew you did."

Rosemary rested her head on his shoulder, feeling secure with his arms around her. She cocked her head when he reached up and picked an apple. "I've got to admit, this was a good idea."

"I thought you'd say that." He handed her the apple.

It was perfect, round and red and tempting. She took it and bit through the crisp flesh. The meat of it fairly melted on her tongue.

"Nothing's better than September apples," Rosemary said as she chewed, closing her eyes to turn all her senses to the sharp, sweet taste.

"Nothing?" Kurt took the apple from her and took a big bite. The juice of the apple dribbled past his lips. "Mmm. You might be right."

"Really?" Rosemary took hold of his chin and flicked her tongue at the edge of his lip. "I can think of something better."

"Yeah?" Kurt wrapped an arm around her waist and lifted her up until she was facing him. Her knees bumped his and she hooked her ankles under the branch, bark digging into her jeans as she clenched her thighs.

He bent down and caught her bottom lip with his teeth, gently massaging it with his tongue. When her own tongue came into play he trapped it with a gentle press of his lips and sucked at it until she moaned. "So young and yet so wise. You're right. Drinking the fruit from your lips is sweeter than anything I've ever tasted."

Rosemary kept her eyes closed, overwhelmed by his arms around her, his lips on hers, feeling so much more than could ever be described in his embrace. She rose when his hands curved around her ribs, sure he'd move them up, her nipples hard and crying for his touch.

He backed away and held up the bag he'd brought with him. "I thought we'd get enough for a big pie. Me and the others have a movie night planned for Friday."

"That's Friday." Rosemary hooked her hand around his neck and pulled him in for another kiss. He obliged, but ended it much too soon.

"Are you hungry?" Kurt held her off and gave her a cool once over. "I thought you'd be all right with the regular rotation—especially since Largo cheated."

Cheeks red, Rosemary tried to justify Largo's dereliction of the unspoken rule the boys had placed on their dates. "Largo doesn't have another girl."

"Neither does Shiloh." Kurt waited until she met his level gaze and sighed. "And neither do I. That's a problem for you."

"Not with Largo, he's had others. And Shiloh is different, you know that." Rosemary dropped her eyes to the rough wood beneath them. "You've never been with anyone else. My mother got you when you were seventeen. I saw you looking at other girls. I heard you punished for it."

"Would it make you feel better if I dated someone else?"

The thought of him with another girl did something strange to her stomach. She answered with what her head believed to be true. "Yes."

"Fine." Kurt rested his head against the tree for a moment then nodded and stood so fast Rosemary was sure he'd fall. Instead he walked along the limb as though it was a broad plank and began filling his bag.

Rosemary stood and took careful, delicate steps towards him, using a branch above her to keep her balance. She put her hand on his shoulder when she reached him. "But tonight is ours."

"Yes, it is," Kurt said, dropping a few apples in his bag. He turned to her and gave her a toothy grin, teeth clenched tight. "So when we leave here, I want you to spend the night with me."

"I'd love to." Rosemary smiled, her blood pumping hot as she imagined all he'd do to her when they were alone in his bed. She moved to another branch and quickly filled her bag with perfect red apples, going over the ingredients she'd need for the pie in her head. A movie night, that ought to be interesting. None of the boys liked the same kind of movie.

Actually, she didn't think Kurt liked watching movies at all.

"So what movie are we watching Friday?" She lowered herself to the ground and squinted to make out Kurt through the darkness.

Kurt landed a few feet away from her and took her bag. "We took a vote and agreed on some new horror. I don't remember what it's called. Largo's picking it up."

"We're watching it at your place?"

"Uh, huh." Kurt stuffed the apples in the bike's saddlebags and motioned for her to climb on. "There's more room." He arched a brow when Rosemary bit her lip, knowing exactly where her thoughts had gone. "It's kind of a mass date, so the rules apply." He kicked up the stand and waited for her to get a firm grip on his waist.

Instead, Rosemary sat back and groaned. "Kurt!"

Shaking his head and letting out a gruff laugh, Kurt took her by the wrists and tugged her close. "Relax. We both know no one will be able to resist you when you're snuggling close and writhing in..." He gave her a heavy lidded look over his shoulder. "Fear."

Chapter Five

"Technically, the date isn't over." Kurt hung his jacket on a hook by the door and approached the bed, arms crossed.

Rosemary pulled the blanket up to her chin, eyes down, brow furrowed. She glanced up at Kurt, obscured in the darkness, his black jeans and black shirt doing little to define him against the steel grey of his walls. Only a sliver of light came into the room from beneath the door and all she could see was his face, etched in shadow, so still it could have been a hovering mask.

He didn't want her to know how he felt, didn't want it affecting her decisions. That she was naked, waiting for him, wasn't enough.

"I'm doing everything you asked, Kurt." Rosemary patted the bed at her side. "Now come here."

"Yes ma'am." Kurt crossed the room in two big steps and sat. He turned to her. "What do you wish of me, my lady?"

"Don't call me that." Rosemary's eyes snapped and she pushed off the opposite side of the bed, a dark grey sheet wrapped tight around her.

Kurt caught her wrist and pulled until she fell into his arms. "I'm sorry, that was uncalled for." He nuzzled her neck, tracing the lines of the sheet with his fingers, causing an echo of his touch to pass through to her flesh. "Tell me what you want."

Rosemary watched his fingers passing just above her breasts, drawing out her frustration. "I could use a snack."

"Liar." Kurt whispered the word in her ear, his soft tone making the accusation sound sexual. "Alaire and Largo fed you well this morning and Felix met you after class to give you a 'snack'. You're sated, I can feel it."

"Is it so horrible that I just want to be with you?" Rosemary shifted until she was facing him, then tugged at his shirt, gritting her teeth. "You've teased me all night. I want you naked, I want you to make love to me."

"That has got to be the most wonderful thing you've ever said to me." Kurt took her face between his hands and assaulted her lips in a rush that left her breathless, tugging at them with his teeth and conquering her mouth with his tongue. He wrapped his hands around her ribs, grazing his thumbs over her nipples without moving the sheet. She latched on to the sheet to pull it loose, hissing in a sharp breath when he pushed her hands aside and lay her down. He tore the blanket off her and his eyes feasted on her, his hands following the burning path of his gaze. His touch felt hot, like he was fire ready to consume her. Rosemary cried out when he pushed her legs apart and attacked her simmering depths with his mouth.

He rose on his elbows, lips glistening with her juices. "Can you feed like this?"

"Kurt I want you to..." She arched against the mattress when he slipped two fingers inside her. "Kurt..."

"Can you?"

"Yes!" Rosemary whimpered when he bowed his head and nipped her clit gently, his tongue soothing the intense sensations before he continued, driving her to the edge, then over with the rapid thrusting of his fingers. She closed her legs when he wouldn't stop, feeling too much, too deep, hardly coming down from one violent orgasm before he gave her another. Then another.

When he finally pulled away she slumped on the bed, exhausted, so sensitive she couldn't imagine enduring another touch. She'd managed to feed in the midst of it all, but the hunger being filled to the brink hardly registered with her body still lost in the aftershock.

"You got nothing out of that," Rosemary said when she could take in a full breath again.

On his side, tucking her tight against him, Kurt gave her a tired smile and a quick kiss, leaving her with a light taste of her own sweet passion. "You'd be surprised." He closed his eyes and sank into the pillows behind them. "It doesn't always have to be a trade off. There's pleasure to be had in just giving sometimes."

For a long time after Kurt had fallen asleep, Rosemary rested in his arms, tired but still wide awake. She thought of what he'd said and all he hadn't. Companionable as they all were, she'd been treating their lives together as a business arrangement. It was easier with some of the others, they managed a deeper level with the girls they dated and didn't miss it

as much. For Kurt, Largo and Shiloh, all they had was her. She'd short-changed them and it wasn't fair. She had to find a way to fill that emptiness in at least two of her men's lives.

But not Kurt. Kurt would get what he needed from someone else soon. He might not know it yet, but he'd thank her for it in the end.

* * * *

The scent of fresh coffee eased her awake. She rolled to her side, opened her eyes and smiled sleepily at Kurt as he put the mug on the night table and leaned over to kiss her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and tried to pull him down, but he shook his head and slipped away.

"I've got to get you back on campus. You don't have a change of clothes here and class starts in an hour."

Rosemary blinked and sat up fast. She narrowed her eyes at the clock. "Oh, God, I slept in! I can't be late!"

"You won't be." Kurt gathered her clothes from the floor and handed them to her. "Drink your coffee, I'll give you a lift."

"You'll be late for work." Rosemary dressed in a hurry and gulped the coffee in three swallows, burning her lips and tongue. She ignored the pain and went on a hunt for her shoes. "I can take the bus."

"I already called in." Kurt held out her shoes and shrugged on his jacket when she took them. "I'm doing twice the work of any of the other guys. My boss is fine with it."

Rosemary slipped into her shoes and followed him out of the apartment and down to his car. The pressure lifted when they made it to the school in twenty minutes, giving her plenty of time to shower and dress. Kurt waited for her in the hall, insisting on walking her to class.

Despite her conviction that he'd be better off giving his attention to someone else, Rosemary was happy that he was as reluctant to end their time together as she was.

On the way to the main building, they were halted by a call. Rosemary turned to watch the approach of the school nurse.

"Hey, sweetie. How you feeling today?" the nurse said, stopping in front of them and putting her hand to her chest. "I've been trying to get a hold of you."

"What's wrong?" Kurt asked, putting his hand on Rosemary's arm as though he was already certain of bad news.

Nurse Thompson glanced at him, uncertainty shadowing her eyes. "It's a private matter."

"It's okay. He's..." Rosemary racked her brain for a way to describe Kurt. "A close family friend."

"If you're sure?" When Rosemary nodded, nurse Thompson shrugged. "Your doctor sent your test results to me like you asked. Your health is perfect, but he said stress may have caused your...irregularity."

"That's good to know." Rosemary felt another weight lift, one she'd been carrying alone for weeks. She knew Kurt would demand an explanation, but that didn't bother her. She hadn't planned to keep it from him, or from any of them. She'd just wanted to have all the facts straight before she worried anyone.

"I know your doctor probably spoke to you about it, but I thought I should mention..." The nurse's brow creased and she glanced at Kurt again. Then she took a deep breath. "If you don't want scares like that, you should use protection."

Rosemary nodded solemnly. She couldn't very well tell the nurse that she shouldn't become fertile until well into her twenties—which had been the original cause for concern when she'd been late—or that Kurt and Largo had insisted on all the boys getting tested before they'd touched her. The boys that had other lovers used protection with them and took the tests again every few months. She couldn't be more safe.

"I always use protection, Nurse Thompson, even though me and Chetan have been together for a while." Rosemary ducked her head and gave a nervous laugh. "We just had a bit of a—"

"I understand." Nurse Thompson cut her off and tugged at her collar. "Well, I'm sorry for keeping you." Her gaze shifted to Kurt as though his presence created a magnetic field that drew her. She had to force her eyes back to Rosemary. "I'll let you and your...friend..."

"How rude of me." Rosemary fought to keep a knowing smile off her lips. "I should introduce you. Nurse Thompson, this is Kurt, my father sent him to check on me." She turned to Kurt whose gaze had gone dark. "Kurt, this is Nurse Thompson."

"Call me Karen." The young nurse held out her hand, her cheeks glowing bright pink under Kurt's steady regard.

"A pleasure." Kurt took her hand in his, holding it just long enough for Karen's breath to catch. He gave her his most charming smile. "Actually, if it's not too presumptuous of me, I'd like to take you out to lunch." He took a calculated pause. "To discuss Rosemary of course. I'd be grateful of some assurance that she's really doing as well as she says. You seem to know her well."

That wasn't quite true, but Rosemary could see Karen wasn't going to pass on the opportunity. She took her hand back and pressed it to her side as though to preserve Kurt's touch. "I'd like that." She bit her lip. "I mean..."

"Is your office in the main building?" Kurt asked.

Karen nodded.

"Good. I'll pick you up tomorrow at noon."

Karen nodded again, mumbled a quick goodbye and hurried off. Rosemary watched her go, feeling like she'd finally done something right.

Kurt grabbed her hand and pulled her to a space between the buildings. "I hope you're happy."

Rosemary's chin jutted up. "I am."

Without warning, Kurt took her by the shoulders and pressed her against the wall, his lips slamming on hers in a punishing kiss. He stepped away, leaving her cold. "Fabulous." His eyes narrowed as he watched her, looking for any sign that she was lying. When he found nothing, he spun on his heel and walked away.

The temperature changed, dropping unnaturally and causing the slight breeze to bite at the skin of her bare arms. Clouds gathered and a light rain began to fall. Rosemary hugged herself, closing her eyes to turn her senses inward, trying to find where her control had slipped. She shivered when she found nothing, not even the slight draining that was usually present when her powers went wild.

It wasn't her control that had slipped.

Chapter Six

Rosemary shut the last cage, resting her hands on the metal grate so the puppy could lick her fingers. His cold nose brushed over her knuckles once before he gave a wet snort and padded over to his fresh blanket. He circled a few times, sniffed at the blanket then curled up in a ball to sleep.

The smile that hadn't faded once in the two hours since she'd arrived wilted when she checked the clock. It was time to go home. She couldn't put it off any longer.

Still, she couldn't help dragging her feet as she left the cages and went to the office to sign out. This was the one place where things were simple, and she was always loath to leave. All the animals required was a bit of love and tender care and they were happy. They never asked for more than she could give and she wasn't afraid of trapping them, or hurting them...well, not usually anyway.

As her control became more and more precarious, she volunteered for fewer and fewer hours. After singeing the fur on her kitten a second time, with her full nest around her and her body recently fed, she didn't trust herself around other animals for very long.

And if things didn't change, she'd have to consider a different profession—one that didn't involve living things.

Sighing, Rosemary found a pen and flipped open the logbook to sign out. Maybe she could be a mortician. Or a gravedigger. She tapped the pen on her bottom lip and couldn't help grinning as her ideas got more ridiculous. She knew very well she'd never do anything else. She just had to find a balance.

She brought the pen to paper to sign and blinked when the pen was snatched out of her hand. She turned and a lab coat filled her vision. Sliding her eyes up, she was met with a broad smile flashing very white teeth framed by soft, black lips.

She couldn't help but smile back. "What are you doing here, Wylie?"

He shrugged and used her pen to sign in. "I decided to volunteer."

"You're pre-med. Why would you volunteer at an animal shelter?" Rosemary reached for the pen, but Wylie dropped it into a drawer as if he didn't notice.

"I heard you cut back on your hours." Wylie's eyes shifted to the bare wall behind her as he fiddled with his perfectly straight collar. "I figured I'd see if they needed anyone..."

Rosemary arched a brow and moved around him to check the schedule pinned to the board on the wall. She ran her finger over her name, marked for two hours every week. Wylie's name was right after, and he'd taken over the other two shifts she'd bowed out of.

"How do you have time for this? Did you stop volunteering at the hospital?" Rosemary frowned when he shook his head. "Then how...?"

"I'm good at managing my time, Rosemary. It's not a big deal." Wylie sidestepped her, going to a large, white cabinet at the other end of the small office. He took out a neutering kit and she frowned. He didn't notice. "So did you get all the cages? Is there anything I should know before you take off?" He went very still. "Unless you want to stay."

"I guess I can stay for a bit." Rosemary felt the tension that had built as she'd prepared to leave melt away. She watched Wylie unlock the small fridge under the desk. "Hey, how did you get the key?"

"I came in yesterday." Wylie added a small vial to the supplies he'd gathered. "I'd already been accepted to do minor surgeries and vaccinations because of the year I'd spent working with VIDA in Nicaragua, but I had to prove myself to the vet on staff. Marcel?"

Rosemary nodded, she knew Marcel. He had a reputation for showing disdain to anything with less than four legs. Apparently, Wylie was an exception.

"He was impressed with my referrals, said he's never seen anyone pay such close attention to procedure." Wylie sounded quite proud to have gained the vet's approval. He stood a little taller when Rosemary smiled. "I was given the key before I left and asked if I'd consider mentoring. I told them I'd think about it."

Rosemary shook her head, not sure what to say. She ended up repeating her original point. "You want to be a doctor. Why waste your time here?"

Wylie frowned and turned away from her, shoulders stiff as he arranged his tools on a tray. "I don't consider it a waste, any more than I considered going to Nicaragua a waste. I might have changed my mind about becoming a vet, but I did some good."

"I didn't mean it like that." Rosemary grazed her teeth over her bottom lip. "I love working with animals. I'll be a vet because I could never safely be a doctor." She put her hand on his arm and looked up at him. "But you're going to be an amazing doctor. You're so

dedicated, you give so much of your time to the hospital already, you'll get into any school you want next year." She paused, trying to think over her wording before she upset him again. "Six hours a week, Wylie. That's got to be cutting into something."

Wylie sighed and leaned his hip on the desk. "You want to be a vet. You need the experience of working here."

"I know that." Rosemary sat on the desk, tired of craning her neck. The desk brought her closer to eyelevel. "What does that have to do with you?"

"You cut back on your hours because you don't trust your control." Wylie put his hand on her knee, gave it a little squeeze and walked out. The office door took its time closing. Rosemary watched it and everything became very clear.

She hopped off the desk and pulled the door shut behind her as she joined Wylie in the operating room. "You volunteered so I would get back on my old shift. You're going to offer to mentor me."

Wylie put the tray on a rolling, metal table and went to the counter along the wall to get a pair of gloves. He spoke without looking at her. "Do you want a mentor?"

Joy bubbled up inside and she took two quick steps across the room to hug him from behind. "Yes!" She giggled and rubbed her face against his lab coat. "Yes, Wylie. Thank you." She loosened her grip so he could turn and tipped her head back to look at him. "You have no idea how much I appreciate this."

Some of the warmth left Wylie's eyes. "I didn't do this to get your...*appreciation*."

Rosemary smacked his chest and rolled her eyes. "I know that." She took a few steps back to give him space. "So, who are we starting with?"

"The tabby. Marcel thinks he'll be adopted quick because he's still quite young."

"Okay, I'll get him." Rosemary span on her heel, then span back, blowing her bangs out of her face with a little huff. "And just so you know, I wouldn't show you my 'appreciation' here. Removing an animal's reproductive organs doesn't turn me on."

Wylie grinned, calling out as she left the room, "Well, that's good to know."

* * * *

Under the lab coat, Wylie's muscles were still, neither bulging nor shifting as he finished the tiny stitches. He looked large bent over the young cat that lay limp and helpless on the table, but his big hands moved with precision. When he took the cat to its cage so it could sleep off the drugs, he carried it like it was an infant. His tender care of the animal stirred something inside Rosemary that she rarely let herself feel. Something not easy to shake.

She took her time washing her hands while he went to the office. When he didn't return, she took the cat's chart to give her the excuse of wanting to file it and went to the office.

He looked up from where he was sitting at the desk and smiled at her. "I was wondering when you'd come."

"You were waiting for me?" Rosemary put the chart on top of the metal filing cabinet and leaned against it.

"I borrowed Chetan's car. I figured I'd give you a lift." A frown creased his brow. "You didn't expect me to leave you here?"

"No." She tapped the chart. "I thought you'd come back for this."

He swivelled the chair and parted his lab coat over his thighs, rubbing the top of one as his dark cheeks shaded red. "I couldn't. It felt weird walking around with this in there."

Rosemary blinked, staring at the pronounced bulge in his pants. "Surgery turns you on?"

Laughing, he shook his head. "No, but you playing nurse does. You have no idea how hot you look in a lab coat."

Now Rosemary was blushing. "You look pretty good yourself."

Wylie's smile widened until it took over his whole face. He moved to stand. She crossed the room in three long strides and put her hand to his chest to stop him. "Stay there. I want you right where you are."

Letting out a little groan, Wylie shifted his hips forward as she unzipped his pants. She dropped to her knees between his spread thighs and his hand delved into her hair as she bent to take him in her mouth. "You're making a lie of me not wanting your gratitude."

Rosemary lapped up his dick, enjoying the smooth texture of his skin. She grinned up at him. "This isn't gratitude. This is me wanting you. Simple, for once."

Wylie didn't look like he wanted to argue with her. Rosemary went back to teasing him with her tongue, grazing him lightly with her teeth when he thrust up, hinting he wanted more. Wylie was one of the biggest of her men, so taking him in all the way took careful manoeuvring. She rose up on her knees and scooted back a little so she could straighten her neck. Then she eased down, gulping, breathing through her nose, and pressing forwards until the black curls of his balls tickled her chin. She drew up and went down faster, ever faster, until he was pulsing hard between her lips. She was ready to bring him over the edge with her mouth, but he jerked away and stood, tugging her to her feet and tearing at her clothes before she could object.

He undid her jeans and worked his hand into their tight confines, slamming his mouth onto her as he dipped his fingers into the small space and rubbed her clit. With a desperate urgency, he turned her away from him and pressed her facedown on the desk.

Rosemary braced her hands on the wood, feeling the heat within rising as he peeled her jeans down to mid-thigh. It felt like part of her was melting as he positioned himself behind her, and she was so wet he slipped out of place the first time he tried to breach her. Her thighs held together by her jeans made her tighter than usual and when he pushed against her, she could feel the whole head of him, straining to get in. She stretched around him and pressed back when the pleasure of being almost full became torturous. He grabbed her hips and lifted her off her feet, driving in with one final, hard thrust.

"Does it hurt?" he whispered when she whimpered. He didn't move. He didn't seem to understand that she needed him to keep going.

She wasn't sure she could get the words out. Her entire body was fixated on the solidness that held her open, throbbing, begging to be possessed by that massive presence.

She finally managed to draw in enough air to speak. "You're killing me, Wylie. Don't stop."

He nodded, shifted a little and pulled away, hammering back in, obeying her little cries for more. His arms circled her and his hand found its way into her shirt, tugging her breast free of her bra and clutching it as he jammed in. The desk hit the wall like the beat of a heavy drum, its feet screeching against the floor. Sweat mixed with heated cologne and her perfume scented the air and she gulped it all in, surrendering all her senses. Usually the need to feed

dampened the sensations, but for once, she wasn't hungry. For once she could just enjoy the ecstasy being given to her.

For as long as she could, she denied the calling for release. She wanted to cling to the moment for as long as she could, but Wylie suddenly quickened his pace and threw her off her perch of pleasure into a boiling, screaming orgasm. Her core undulated around him and sucked out a hot burst. He shuddered and smacked his hands on the desk to avoid falling on her.

Rosemary laid her cheek on the cool wood, wincing when Wylie pulled out, sending a shiver of too much sensation along her tender nerves. He fell into the chair and picked her up, sitting her in his lap. She curled in his arms and rested for a span to let her body calm.

"You didn't feed." Wylie kissed the back of her neck, shaky little kisses that sent a warm rush down her spine. "You've never not fed with me."

Pressing her sweaty forehead to his damp collar, she nodded. "You have no idea how much I needed that. The hunger is always in charge. For some reason, it didn't get a hold on me this time."

Wylie hugged her, turning her to steal a deep, burning kiss. When he backed away, his gaze was thoughtful. "You fed twice today. You were completely relaxed when I showed up. We already know stress affects the hunger. Maybe you just have to find ways to let it go."

"Easy to say." Rosemary put her feet on the floor and stood, taking his hand when her legs shook. The hunger popped up its head like it had been called and her veins seemed to shrink, sending a dull, pulsing pain into her skull. She slumped against the desk. "All it takes is a reminder of the real world." Bitterness crept into her tight smile. "It was fun while it lasted."

"We'll figure something out," Wylie said, fixing his clothes, taking off his lab coat and sitting her on the desk. He eased her coat off her and left it on the desk, straightened her pants and picked her up. "You seem to forget, Rosemary. This isn't something you have to deal with alone."

Rosemary nodded, her weakness leaving her no strength to argue, even though she would eventually have to delude him of the noble notion.

The hunger ruled her. She wouldn't give it the power to rule anyone else.

Chapter Seven

Alone in the library, a large, musky-smelling old book open on the table, Rosemary tried to focus on the words. She blinked when they blurred and swiped her hand across her face to clear the burning tears. She looked at the clock. It was ten past twelve; Kurt was still on his date.

No matter how much she needed him, she wouldn't bother him now. She pulled her cell from her pocket and opened the directory. Seven names appeared. She scanned down then back up. Any of them would come to her if she asked, but she couldn't decide who to burden with her pain.

She set the phone beside the book and swallowed.

More than anything, she wanted her father, but there'd been no answer when she'd tried to call him. Not that it surprised her. Her father tended to leave his phone in his suitcase when he went on trips. She didn't blame him. Her mother would call incessantly over trivial matters and that was the only way he'd get any peace.

"It's a good thing my ability to read you is better than Shiloh's. I managed to head him off. He couldn't have helped you deal with this." Largo pulled out a chair across from her and sat. He leaned over the table and took her hands. "I wish you'd called."

Rosemary bowed her head so her hair hid her face. "I was thinking about calling."

"Thinking about it?" Largo closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "In other words, you weren't sure who to call." His head cocked to one side. "Kurt would have been your first choice, but you finally got him to go out with another girl."

"Please don't think I would have chosen him over you. To be honest, I wasn't even sure about him. He might not understand why it would bother me..."

"Damn it, Rosemary." Largo's grip tightened on her hands. "First of all, don't apologise. I know more than you think. More than you'll admit." His dark green eyes bore into hers. "Second, Amon was your brother. No one will fault you for mourning him."

Rosemary wrenched her hands free and covered her face. No one would fault her, but she would. She'd never been close to her brother—fate had seen to it. Amon was her

mother's favourite, her first born son, coddled because one day he could be traded for a strong male from another nest and her mother wanted him to be an example of the quality of her brood to strengthen any further negotiations.

They all knew the risk, but it was never spoken of. It was rare that a man was lost in a nest, rare that a queen would become so enamoured that she'd call any but her prince to her bed before time had been given to recover from the last feeding. Amon might have been a worthy specimen, but he wasn't prince material.

Apparently his performance had gained him his queen's highest regard. Kurt had divulged this long ago when she'd asked about her brother. Amon tried to make up for all he lacked by being his queen's best lover. He'd succeeded. And for that he was dead, drained to an unsalvageable husk.

She could picture him, his beautiful face, his golden skin, his perfect smile.

The horror of his end painted another picture, one that took all the beauty and crushed it to ash. Her heart felt like it had been skewered, like it was being turned slowly over merciless heat and basted with acid. She imagined herself choking on the noxious fumes.

"He used to call me duckling, when I was little, before he moved away." Rosemary put a finger to her lips and started chewing on the flesh along her nail. "Unlike Buer, he left out the 'ugly'. He used to have girlfriends over all the time, normal girls that were nice to me. He never really noticed me until he had one of them around, but he never told me to go away."

"Buer was in competition for your mother's attention from the day he was born. He hated you to please her. Amon never had to win her approval. It was a given so long as he understood his place as a male." Largo pulled her hand from her mouth and pressed his thumb on the broken skin to stop the bleeding.

Rosemary frowned at her finger. Her skin had gone numb—she hadn't felt a thing. She shook her head. "This must be hard on Buer. They were always close. He was like Amon's shadow for as long as I can remember."

"Forget Buer! He's a heartless young man who learnt to play whatever part would please your mother from the day he was spat from her womb." Largo's vehemence had her staring at him. She'd never seen him so worked up. He stood and leaned over the table. "How do *you* feel, Rosemary?"

Rosemary laughed, shot back and tripped over her chair when she tried for her feet. Her knee scraped against the carpet, stripping a layer of flesh, when she skirted back to evade Largo's touch. He'd got around the table so fast she hadn't seen him move.

"Don't!" She crawled to a bookcase and crouched against it. "I can't do this anymore! Amon was so powerful, a third generation cambion, bred to be part of a nest. Look at what happened to him!"

"Is that what's bothering you?" Largo bent down and held out his hand. "Because you don't have to worry about me. I am the great times five grandson of the demigod Setenta."

"Kurt says you're just another cambion."

Largo rolled his eyes. "Kurt just wants everyone to think he's the biggest dog on the block."

Rosemary nodded without much conviction. Not that she didn't believe Largo was Setenta's descendant, but she didn't agree with his assessment of Kurt. Kurt was just jaded by nature. He didn't believe in gods. Nothing personal.

Her eyes shifted to the ceiling, dimly lit with screened fluorescent bulbs. She managed a shallow breath. "It was weird, being called to the office to be told about Amon. They must think I'm a freak. I just nodded and walked away..." She bit her lip and blinked fast. "No, that's not true. I asked who sent the message, first. They told me it was my father." Something with the consistency of a large coin seemed to lodge in her throat. "I decided to come here and study—but I couldn't read—the words went all funny." Her bottom lip trembled, so she bit it harder. "I have no right to pretend I care that he's dead."

"He was your blood."

"He was nothing to me!" Rosemary was suddenly on her feet, looking down at Largo, her emotions thrashing so wildly they rivalled a raging sea. "And I was nothing to him!"

Largo straightened, slow, careful, as though approaching an animal gone mad with pain. "You know that's not true. You both played the roles you were given, but there were precious times when you found your way around that. Now that he's gone, it's natural for you to focus on those times. We all make saints of the dead."

"He wasn't a saint, but he was my brother." The solid form in her throat shattered, the raging died and all the energy in her left like a breaker had been blown. "If not for her, we would have been closer."

Largo caught her when gravity seemed to press down all at once, making her limbs useless things. He scooped her up and cradled her like a child, like only her father had ever done until she'd found her nest. "I'm sure you would have. Amon had a kind heart that would have had a place for you if it had been nurtured. Your father tried, but Amon had the instincts of a cambion. He knew the approval he needed to survive was that of his queen mother."

"I hate her, but I have to say, she was careful choosing his mistress." Rosemary pressed her eyes shut and felt the tears trail from her cheeks and drip to her neck. "She had many offers, but she said she chose a queen who would appreciate her son's worth."

"She told him that, but she lied." Largo held her tight, let her press her wet cheek into his shirt, let her drink in his aroma of crisp soap and breakfast pizza. "Blame her if you want to, Rosemary, she deserves it as much as the queen that killed him. She let Amon replace a victim of a fatal feeding because the queen had three full grown sons to choose from and was a daughter of Lilith."

"A daughter of Lilith?" Hope became a sparkler in her mind, burning fast and beautiful. "With that kind of power, maybe she can..."

"Lilith killed most of her daughters. I don't see this one asking her for any favours." Largo freed one hand and stroked her loose hair. "Your brother is gone, Rosemary. There's no way to bring him back."

Rosemary pushed her hands against his chest, struggling until he set her down. "Then you—"

"I can't do that."

"Kurt..."

"Can't do it either." Largo reached out, then let his hands fall to his side when she moved away. "He's not coming back."

"And you expect me to keep this going? My own brother is dead because of a creature like me! My kind should be exterminated, not permitted to claim cities and kill men with our insatiable hunger!" When Largo reached for her again she struck out, hitting his chest with a weak fist, pain lashing up her wrist like her bone was a hot poker. She hit him again but he anticipated it and turned slightly, not to avoid pain himself, but to avoid her damaging

herself further. "I won't let the next body be yours, or Shiloh's, or any of the others! I'd rather die!"

"What's going on here?"

Rosemary stared at the librarian, surprised it had taken her so long to object to the noise they were making. She knew Largo could blur their words and make it so that no one would understand what was being said, but he couldn't mask the raised voices.

Largo put a protective arm around her and faced the irate old woman. "She's just learnt of the death of a close family member. I'll take her home so she won't disturb anyone."

The librarian's hand fluttered to her chest. "I'm so sorry, my dear." She reached out and touched Largo's arm. "Please forgive me. You don't have to leave."

"It's all right." Largo's expression softened. "You didn't know. It would be better for her to be around friends anyway."

"Of course." The librarian leaned close. "It's Rosemary, right?" Her wrinkled face grew tight with worry. She glanced at the book on the table behind her. "I understand how you feel the need to continue with your life, I felt the same way when my husband died, but you should really take the time to come to terms with your loss." She straightened, lips in a thin line. "I'll notify her teachers, make sure she is given time to deal with this."

"Thank you," Largo said.

The door came to Rosemary—she didn't feel herself moving. He took her home and they paused at the door when her roommate noticed them and rushed out.

"She hates me," Rosemary said, not really caring, just wanting to give an answer to Largo's questioning gaze.

Largo shook his head. "I doubt that, but don't worry about it now." He brought her to her room and eased her onto the bed. "This whole thing has you empty."

Rosemary sat up and held out her hands to ward him off. "No. Not now Largo. I can't."

"Do you remember our first time?" Largo took off his shirt and tossed it aside. "Me and Kurt were still looking for men for you." He gave an empty laugh. "I hinted around the idea of you and me, but you didn't catch on. You were so overwhelmed by the whole process it got to the point where I knew you'd never take the first step—with me or anyone else." He shed his pants and crawled onto the bed, hands braced on either side of her hips. "You were fading. I remember coming back to the apartment Kurt found, nasty little place, but a place

your mother wouldn't consider because of the quality you'd grown up with. Kurt was sitting on the floor by the bed, hands clenched in his hair like he wanted to rip it out."

"I don't remember that." Rosemary blinked away her tears, clearing her vision and her mind enough to really see him. His broad chest heaved over her, as though he was breathing too fast. "I can't picture Kurt—"

"Your mother broke him Rosemary, he didn't believe he had the strength to save you. He felt helpless." Largo raked his fingers into her hair, his grip gentle but firm. "I knew I had to do something. I didn't care if you killed me, I just wanted you to live. Kurt would have given his life, too, if he'd thought it would be enough." He bowed his head and started working on the buttons of her shirt. "You were so weak, but still you told me no. It made me pause." He let the material of her shirt fall open and pressed a soft kiss between her bound breasts. "Then I pictured my life without you."

"That first touch, I can remember that." Rosemary let her eyes drift shut as he caressed the sensitive skin of her side. "It was like you thought you'd break me."

"You were such a tiny thing—you still are." Largo's thumb traced the sharp bone of her hip, back and forth, waking a part of her she'd fought to shut down. The delicate touch delved deep, as though he touched somewhere much more intimate. "I undressed you, whispering that it would be all right. At first you didn't move. I thought you had given up."

"You were kissing me. I felt your life on my tongue. I was sure with one swallow I could take it all in." She let herself fall into the tender memory of her first time. Of the embrace of the man that had saved her life. "But you wouldn't stop and in the end, I didn't want you to."

"In the end." Largo breathed against her flesh, so hot, like he was burning with a need far greater than hers. "After I had Kurt hold you so I could taste you, use my tongue to draw you away from all your objections."

She could see herself, on the small bed Kurt had bought with the last of their savings. Kurt suddenly at her side, stroking her hair and holding her wrists, telling her they wouldn't let her go while Largo did his best to prepare her. His head between her legs, his tongue dipping into her, the moment that she'd broken free and held him against her. Her body had writhed under him and she'd damned him to hell when she'd hit that first climax and taken tiny sips of his essence.

He'd risen above her, telling her he wouldn't force himself on her. She'd cried and said he already had. She could still see the pain her words had caused, could see the grim determination in Kurt's eyes when he'd told Largo to do it again. While Largo sucked at her, Kurt had clasped her face between his hands and told her to let herself feel what was being done to her.

Largo rolled her panties down her hips and delved between her thighs with his hand, spreading the wetness that made her feel like a piece of sodden silk. "You were so wet." He dipped a finger into her. "When I did this, you opened wide, but you were so tight. I was afraid to hurt you."

"I told you not to stop." Rosemary lifted her hips to encourage him, as mindless as she'd been once she'd abandoned her reservations that first time. "Kurt kissed me while you stretched my body with your fingers, thrusting..." She bucked when he added another finger and started pushing, curving, stirring her passions to life. "Making me ready."

"Your body's always a pace ahead of your mind." He moved his hand and she lifted her hips to let him take off her skirt. Then he stretched out, in no hurry now that she'd given up the futile fight.

"It's a good thing you figured that out." She slid closer until their bodies were aligned, her breasts pressed against his massive chest, one thigh resting on his. He reached between them and guided himself into her in time with his soft kiss. She fitted around him like a snug leather sheath, containing all his warmth, enhancing it until it became her own, chasing away the cold that she hadn't felt taking hold of her.

Times like this were dangerous. Her control was shaky, hard to hold on to while she struggled against the clash of emotions his touch brought in the wake of overwhelming sadness. She tried to rein it all in, stuff it down, but managed only to numb herself to everything, including the man that held her.

"Look at me." Largo tightened his grip and went still. She inhaled and looked at him. "There are two ways we can do this. Either quickly, focussing only on feeding, or..." He faltered, as though he wasn't sure he should say more. Then he barrelled on. "Or it can be something sweeter, for comfort." His lips twisted a little in self-mocking. "Maybe it's just me, but I find sex comforting."

Very dangerous, but the danger had changed. The intimacy of the dates didn't compare to what he offered her now.

And she was in no condition to refuse.

"I don't want a quickie." She flushed, the words more abrupt than she'd intended. "I mean..."

"I know what you mean."

The motions were slow, his embrace a cocoon of soft pleasure and safety. He brought her to the peak with tender care, eased her down and lifted her back up in a rhythm that reminded her of a slow dance. She could imagine turning slowly to a tune that had no name, sliding down his body after being held high. No rush, more savouring, passion melting on her senses like rich, dark chocolate. He went still and her body reacted to his pulsing within her as though within the chocolate was something new to relish, a sweet, caramel filling that lingered long after he'd drawn out and cradled her in the crook of his arm to cuddle close.

"Promise me something, Rosemary," Largo whispered, his tone strained with fear he couldn't hide.

Rosemary moved her head to his chest and listened to his heart race, ready to promise him anything. "I promise."

"You don't know what I..."

"I do." Rosemary laid her hand on his stomach and closed her eyes. "No matter how bad things get, I'll never give up. You've worked too hard to keep me alive and I won't waste what you've given me."

It was the truth and it reassured him enough that he was able to sleep. He didn't know there were conditions on her promise, making it a lie. She *would* do everything in her power to survive – after she'd made sure all her men were safe and happy. With her or not.

Knowing nothing short of gunfire would wake him, Rosemary left the bed and crept across the room to find her phone. She called the one person who would do as she asked without question, no matter how strange her request.

Her hands shook when she shut the phone, but she felt a strange sense of peace. While the night she'd given to the boys approached with the speed gravity gives to a body dropped off a cliff, her preparations were a parachute, set up to snap her up seconds before collision. The final salvation would hurt at very least, but it wouldn't be fatal.

Chapter Eight

Candles cast an eerie light over the scantily furnished room, glowing off the black silken pillows piled haphazardly on the gleaming wood floor. The leather sofa was pushed against the wall and the coffee table had been moved to Kurt's room, leaving plenty of space for lounging and play. When Rosemary arrived, most of the boys were already sprawled around the room, drinking beer or wine, speaking low as though afraid to spoil the atmosphere.

No one noticed her when she crossed the threshold and closed the door quietly behind her. She took advantage of temporary obscurity and studied them, feeling like she'd stepped into a high-end candy shop with wares so exquisite they warranted displays on silk and velvet.

At the far end of the room, Wylie reclined on a huge, red silk cushion, polishing his glasses and explaining something to Shiloh who was hugging his knees and nodding solemnly, looking like a very intent student. The image was spoilt by the fact that Wylie was wearing a pair of black boxer briefs so close to his skin colour he looked naked. Shiloh wore only a pair of jeans, faded and worn and looking ready to fall apart at the seams. His hair, the colour of dark polished wood, hid most of his face, making Rosemary wonder if he was uncomfortable with the whole display because it was clear the layout had been intentional.

Across from them lay Chetan, Felix and Alaire, on black velvet pillows that seemed to accentuate the golden tans of Felix and Alaire and bring out Chetan's exotic bronze. All three boys were lying on their stomachs, laughing in a low, sultry way that made Rosemary's mouth water. She wondered what they were looking at.

Largo, not surprisingly, was fast asleep on a big, red beanbag chair just a few steps away. His tight, white boxer briefs brought her eyes directly to the large bulge between his legs. The light cotton of her white dress seemed to float away, making her feel nude, ready to wake him up and call the others to her. She closed her eyes and could imagine the press of them, hands everywhere, lips, tongues...

"That didn't take long."

Rosemary jumped, eyes shooting to where Kurt had come up to her side with the silence of a massive cat. He chuckled and bent over, pressing his teeth to her throat, making the image that much more real.

"One look at them and you're ready to melt." He grazed his teeth up to her ear and nibbled on the fragile lobe until she shivered and grabbed his arm. "I have a feeling we're going to have to carry you home."

"You made me get the damn movie, we're going to watch it." Largo opened his eyes, rubbed them and reached out to wrap his hand around Rosemary's ankle. "Come here. Get comfortable."

Kurt nudged Largo away with his foot. "Let's not be greedy." He put his hand on the small of Rosemary's back and led her to the middle of the room, taking her hand and gesturing for her to sit on the big red pillow. He scooped up a small black cushion and handed it to her. "You might need this."

Curled up on the pillow, Rosemary watched Largo as he bent down to slip the DVD into the player, his boxers outlining his ass to perfection. He pressed play on the remote as he took his place. Kurt brought her a beer and sat on the floor behind her, leaning against the sofa. The movie started, darkness and ghostly music that filled the room and pulled them all in. The first scene gave her goose bumps, but she managed to hide her fear until the white face of a child flashed behind a woman searching for the source of a strange sound. She hid her face and an arm wrapped around her shoulders.

"No one's even dead yet," Felix whispered, grinning through the tousled blond hair that had fallen over his face. "You're scared already?"

"I'm not scared." Rosemary said into the pillow, peeking past it and biting her lip when the woman turned to look around the now empty room.

"Give her another beer." Alaire reached for a case by the sofa and pulled out a beer. "She'll start finding it funny."

"I don't know if we should let her drink too much," Kurt said from behind her, tone dry. "She might get ideas."

"And that's a problem for you?" Alaire twisted the cap and jumped at a blood-curdling scream. The beer slipped from his hand and spilled into his lap. He made a face. "Pause the movie, I gotta clean this up."

Largo pressed pause. "Hurry up."

For three minutes they waited, listening to the shower, Wylie taking the initiative to mop up the mess on the floor. Alaire came out of the bathroom in nothing but a towel, running his hands through his close-cropped hair, and plopped onto the cushion at Rosemary's side.

Rosemary watched the droplets of water trail down his chest to be soaked into the worn, white towel.

"Go ahead," Alaire said, grinning at her as he got comfortable.

"Cheater," Felix mumbled from her other side.

Largo pressed play.

While the movie continued, Rosemary tried to focus but couldn't help be distracted by the tempting, damp morsel, so close little drops hit her knee every time he shifted. She glanced around to make sure everyone was watching the movie and let her hand drift to Alaire's stomach. He moved closer, resting his head against her side, the dampness of his hair soaking right through her dress. A hand settled on her knee and she gave Felix a covert look, her lips curving at the way he fixed his eyes on the screen and slid his hand slowly up her thigh. Alaire's hand rested on her other knee and she bit her lip as his touch mirrored the path Felix was taking.

"Are you watching the movie?" Kurt whispered in her ear as he knelt behind her and lifted her hair off her neck and laid it over one shoulder.

"Uh, huh." Rosemary swallowed as he pulled the strap of her dress off her shoulder and distracted her with soft kisses while his hand curved under her breast and his thumb grazed her nipple through the fine cloth.

"Try to focus on what's happening, keep your eyes open, even during the scary parts." Kurt's words were like another touch, one that played on all her nerves, from the sensitive curve of her ear to the nipple he teased, and down to where Felix and Alaire's hands met at the juncture of her thighs. She tried to follow Kurt's instructions, but the unspoken agreement of the other boys made it difficult not to cry out and writhe, never mind watch the movie.

Whose hand was where she couldn't tell, but suddenly her panties had been shifted and two fingers had breached her, moving in harmony with the pair that circled her clit, playing her to a blind crescent of pleasure.

"Slow it down, boys," Kurt said, sliding the other strap down and baring her breasts. He covered them both with his hands and massaged gently. "She's having a hard time getting into the movie."

"Do we really have to keep pretending that's even the point?" Alaire grumbled, his aggravation matching a deep thrust so well she knew it was his fingers inside her.

"That is the point." Wylie took a place on his belly near her feet and took one in his hand. He removed her shoe and began rubbing in a calculated way only he seemed to know. His manipulations awakened every nerve that hadn't already been brought into play. "We all know why we chose a horror."

"Too bad me and Shiloh fed her this morning," Chetan said from where he remained on his pillow, close to Shiloh. "That looks like fun."

"Doesn't it." Kurt laughed and sucked on the side of her neck. He pressed a hand to the side of her face and made her look at Largo. He was watching them, his dick freed and in his hand.

He scowled at Kurt as he continued lazily stroking himself. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

"Sorry, buddy, but there had to be consequences to you cheating." Kurt tugged her nipple with his thumb and forefinger. "Besides, there's not room for anyone else."

"I'd make room." Largo's grumbling stole her away from the all-encompassing pleasure and she tried to free herself from the boys. Largo noticed and shook his head. "Enjoy the..." He grinned. "Movie. I'm enjoying the show. I'll join in next time."

Next time. Rosemary's eyes went back to the movie, but she couldn't really watch, and not only because of the gentle torture of the men touching her. She glanced at Shiloh who gave a slight nod. If their plan worked, there probably wouldn't be a next time.

"The movie, Rosemary." Kurt braced a knee behind her and leaned her back just enough so that he could reach her breast with his mouth.

Rosemary fought to obey and found herself drawn into the movie, watching as a girl hid from her pursuer in a closet only to have the ghostly apparition appear beside her. Alaire

made a croaking sound in his throat, mocking the noise the ghost made before it attacked. She clenched around him and gasped when Kurt nipped her.

A phone rang and they all started at the abrupt sound. Rosemary stifled a scream with her hand and looked down at Kurt who had drawn away and was glaring at his jacket, abandoned on the arm of the sofa.

"It could be important," Rosemary said, pressing her thighs together to still Felix and Alaire.

"I doubt it," Kurt said, but he stood and crossed the room to answer.

Another phone rang, this one a different tone. Chetan frowned at his pile of clothes and crawled over to fish out his phone. A buzz indicated another phone sounding on vibrate. Wylie's brow lifted and he gave Rosemary a suspicious look before going to find his own cell.

"What a coincidence." Largo spun his phone in his hand after going over his missed calls. "Three guys from my team have tried calling me, but my ringer was off."

"There's a party tonight." Wylie slipped his phone into a pocket in his slacks and dressed quickly. "Jane's pissed. She said she asked me to bring her last week."

"Mel's been waiting for me." Chetan looked confused. "I don't remember anything about a party."

"I know for a fact that I cleared my schedule for tonight." Kurt shook his head as he dressed. "But I guess I have to go." He gave Rosemary a level look. "We had a deal, didn't we?"

"That's right." Rosemary took a deep breath to steady herself as Felix and Alaire discretely removed their hands and let her adjust her panties. She kept her legs pressed together tightly to stifle the dull ache of her body's protest at being denied satisfaction. "We can do this some other night."

"Sure." Kurt pulled on his shirt and tugged so hard she heard it rip. He shoved his feet in his shoes and walked out of the door, slamming it behind him.

The other boys dressed in silence, leaving one at a time until only Felix, Shiloh and Alaire remained.

"What are you two up to?" Alaire asked, taking another beer and sipping at it while he eyed Shiloh and Rosemary.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Rosemary straightened her dress and held her arm out to Shiloh. "Will you walk me home?"

"Yeah." Shiloh shuffled up to her, eyes on the floor.

"Whatever." Alaire shook his head and finished his beer in a long gulp. "But just to let you know, Mel is Chetan's cousin and Largo isn't into guys."

"There will be girls at the party." Rosemary covered her mouth, too late to cover the slip.

"You set them up?" Felix laughed, then frowned abruptly at Shiloh. "And you helped her? What the hell!"

"What about me and Felix? Couldn't find anyone to drag us off?" Alaire approached Shiloh, slow and threatening. Shiloh stood his ground but tightened his grip on Rosemary's arm.

"The spell only works if the person already wanted to see you." Shiloh scuffed one shoe against the toe of the other. "None of your exes want anything to do with you, Alaire." Shiloh's gaze went to Felix before it dropped again. "And your girls only wanted each other tonight."

Alaire grinned at Felix. "That's hot."

Felix smiled back. "You don't know the half of it."

"Well, now that that's settled." Rosemary tugged Shiloh towards the door.

"It's not." Alaire stepped sideways to block the door. "Why didn't you want to spend time with us tonight?"

"I did, it's just..." Rosemary bit her lip and shrugged, dropping her head. "This was supposed to make us all closer. I want you all to have options."

"You planning on getting rid of us?" Felix reached out for her, then let his arms drop.

"She's afraid of getting too attached. She always was." Shiloh put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close, an uncharacteristic show of possession that made Rosemary a little nervous. Maybe she shouldn't have taken him into her confidence. She was putting him in the very position she was trying to avoid with the others. He gave her a little squeeze as though he knew her thoughts and wanted to reassure her. "After what happened to her brother..."

"We should have cancelled the date," Alaire said grimly, taking Rosemary's hand and circling her palm with his thumb. "We should have figured something was up when you still wanted to go ahead with it."

"Don't feel bad. I did want to go ahead with it, which is why I planned things out with Shiloh in advance. I knew Kurt would arrange things perfectly, make the night intimate and sensual. If the phones hadn't started ringing, he would have gotten exactly what he wanted." Rosemary clenched her teeth, blocking the part of her that wished things could be different. "I still want to be with all of you, but I want to know that one day you'll all be able to move on. It's only been a few months with some of you, but what's going to happen a year from now? If I let myself get too comfortable, I'll make a mistake. Maybe the way my mother does it is wrong, but she has the right idea, bringing in new blood once in a while."

"Some of the strongest nests never split," Felix pointed out, obviously parroting either Largo or Kurt.

"Unless someone dies," Rosemary said, taking her hand from Alaire and ducking away from Shiloh. "I'll be happier knowing your lives will go on after me, that you'll have more than I can give you."

"What if we don't want more?" They all backed away from the door when Kurt stepped inside. His eyes flashed and he grabbed Shiloh by the collar, pulling him close. "You ever use magic against me again—"

"I told him to!" Rosemary pushed between them and faced Kurt. "If you want to blame anyone, blame me!"

"You need to understand something, Rosemary," Kurt said, teeth gnashing together between each sharp word. "I can deal with you being scared. I can even deal with you trying to find a way to save us all from your oh so evil little self." He took hold of her shoulders and bent low. "But you have no right to make decisions for us. I won't be played like a goddamn puppet."

"I'm sorry." Rosemary stared at him, her mouth dry, the rage she saw making her afraid of him for the first time in her life. "That's not what I was trying to do."

Suddenly she was in Kurt's arms, held tight, a sense of security seeping into her pores as though he'd willed it, which he probably had. "Me and Largo chose each and every one of

your men with care. Each one is stronger than your brother was. You do not have to keep fighting to keep us safe."

"Shiloh and Chetan..."

"Almost died because of *me*. Not you." Kurt gestured at Shiloh. "Look at how much stronger he is now. We are a complete unit."

"What if one of them wants a life? Wants children?" Rosemary wished she could do as he said, stop carrying the burden alone, stop letting guilt rule her life. But deep within was a warning that they were all overlooking an important fact.

"*If* that happens, we'll deal with it. Together." He pressed his lips to her forehead and led her out of the door. "You guys might want to clear out. Largo will shake the spell soon if he hasn't already and he'll be just as pissed as I am."

They didn't have to be told twice. Within seconds she was alone with Kurt, almost wishing she could have abandoned her pride and asked one of the boys to stay.

"Come on, I'll drive you home." Kurt led the way, walking more like an armed escort than a lover and a friend. Rosemary knew her plan had more than pissed him off. It had hurt him by undermining all he'd done for her.

She caught his wrist before he got in his car and waited for him to look at her. She had to settle on him glaring at the top of her head. "I really am sorry."

"Don't worry about it." The muscle along Kurt's jaw went hard. "I didn't realise your brother's death would mess you up and I should have. I'm a little disappointed that we're back at square one, but I'll deal."

Rosemary grabbed his chin and forced him to look at her. "We're not. Your plan worked perfectly. One date with each of the boys and we're already closer. I can't imagine letting go of a single one of them, but I know I'll have to."

"We'll make this work. I need you to trust me." He reached out and took a firm hold of her hair, using it to hold her still while he bent down to give her a kiss so gentle it didn't seem to fit his fierce demeanour. "Let me take some of the burden."

"Why?" Rosemary clenched her fingers in his shirt, beating down a rash urge to strike out at him. "Aren't I supposed to be in charge?"

Despite himself, Kurt grinned. "I guess you are. So what are your orders?"

The very idea of giving Kurt orders made her laugh. The tension between them deflated and she leaned against him. There was one order she could give before she drew out the white flag and just let him have his way. "Don't let me hurt them anymore."

"Then let them in." He pressed his hand to her chest, over her heart. "Give them everything they give you and let the future take care of itself."

"They're already in." Rosemary sighed. "But I guess you're right. I'm just messing things up by looking ahead and not appreciating what I have now."

"There's no doubt that you appreciate it Rosemary." He let go of her hair and wrapped his arms around her. "You just need to accept that you deserve it."

Kurt took her home, tucked her in and left her to her thoughts. A nagging fear lingered, but she managed to bury it deep and open herself to the possibility that she might just be able to have it all. The impossible happy ending just might be hers to have and hold.

Chapter Nine

The class sat silent, waiting. The teacher was late, not for the first time. Professor Rhodes was almost always late, a lesson on patience he said. Rosemary stroked her knee under her desk, feeling the hunger rise, wishing she could skip the class and go and meet with Shiloh or Felix in the closest closet or empty classroom. Her third class and she was starved already. The boy next to her was looking tasty. Too bad she needed top marks in microbiology to get her credits. She'd failed an exam last semester because of the hunger. She couldn't afford her grades slipping any further.

The classroom door swept open. A sigh went over the room, the other students as tired of waiting as she was. Professor Rhodes strode into the room and dropped his bag on the large desk at the front of the room and turned to the blackboard.

Rosemary picked up her pencil and tried to focus on the diagram he drew, tried to focus on his words. Instead her gaze followed the tight curve of his ass, locked on his crotch when he turned to face them. She'd hardly noticed before, but today, with the need so fierce, she couldn't help it. Professor Brendan Rhodes was the wet dream of every female Adcock College student. The mere mention of his name made most girls shiver. His dark olive skin, his brown hair slicked back, his chiselled features. He was every schoolgirl's fantasy come to life.

Professor Rhodes loosened his tie and made a gruff sound in his throat to gather their attention. "So that's your assignment. I'll let you go early since it's such a nice day and I'm feeling generous."

Rosemary stared at him. She'd been so focussed on his luscious form, she'd missed the entire lesson. She hadn't heard the assignment. And he hadn't written it down.

The students stood and filed out. Rosemary didn't move.

"Is there a problem...?" Professor Rhodes approached her, fishing for a name.

"Rosemary." Her voice was breathy. She needed to stand, run out, find one of the boys. Her skin fairly itched with need.

"Rosemary." Her name was honey on his lips. She watched his mouth, not moving. "Are you confused about the assignment?"

Rosemary ducked her head. "No. Actually I missed it."

Professor Rhodes grabbed his bag off his desk and waved her towards the door. "Well then, I hope one of your classmates will enlighten you."

Rosemary stood and smoothed the folds of her crisp grey skirt. "Can't you just tell me...?"

"No." He looked her over and fairly sneered. "I have no pity for slackers."

A hot breeze, not matching the cool air that seeped into the classroom from the open window, swirled around them. It built in strength, snatching papers from the desk and tossing them to the floor. The door slammed shut. One of the smaller desks at the back of the room toppled over with a bang.

Rosemary pressed her eyes shut and tried to leash the wild power that had slipped from her grasp, guided by instinct, knowing nothing but the need for sustenance. As far as her body was concerned, she had a meal ready; all she had to do was take it.

"What the hell?" Professor Rhodes bent over to pick up his papers. His tie tightened around his neck and he tugged at it, a wave of panic rising with his musky scent, alluring, like just the right dash of spice on steak.

Rosemary took a knee and moved his hands, undoing the knot of his tie herself. She let the dark blue length of material fall and leaned closer so she could work on the buttons of his pale blue shirt.

"Stop." The word left his lips, but Rosemary was sure she'd heard wrong. He couldn't have said that. The natural lure her body sent out, hooking into his very core, forced his body to play out every sensual moment he'd ever experienced. There was no way he could resist.

She was floored when he repeated the word, set her away from him and stood. She could do nothing but sit there, on the floor, gapping up at him.

"Get out." He pointed at the door, his hand shaking. "And don't ever try that again."

Reason returned to Rosemary and she mumbled an apology and sprinted out, crashing into several students in the hall, not looking up until someone grabbed her and refused to let go. She struggled.

And was pulled into a warm embrace. "Rosy, baby, what's wrong?"

The first thing she saw was the golden gleam of his shoulder length hair, the silky strands brushing her cheek while he held her close. She tilted her head and shut her eyes. "Felix."

He gave her a little squeeze. "That's right. Come with me, I'll take care of you."

"No." Rosemary pressed her face into the soft cotton of his white T-shirt, breathing in the faint tinge of liquor that told her he hadn't changed it since his last night of partying. A thought hit her. Alcohol, that would help. Maybe if she got drunk she could forget what she'd almost done. "I want a drink."

"Really?" He seemed to consider it, but not for long. Drinking was something he understood. "All right. Let's go to the room, I'll mix you up something."

"Not the room." She tried to keep the panic from her tone. She couldn't let him know she wasn't ready to face the others. Fine, Kurt was at work by now, and Largo wouldn't notice, but Wylie and Shiloh would. Neither had class scheduled. "Is there anywhere else we can go?"

Felix guided her off to the side of the hall, through a door that led outside. Only then did he let her go. "I've got the perfect place..." He paused and plucked a small cluster of goldenrods from where they grew off the path and stuck it behind her ear. "The only problem is that it's one of the on campus apartments, the place of these girls I hang with..." He trailed off and shuffled his feet. "I'll understand if you're not comfortable—"

"That would be perfect." Rosemary managed a smile and his eyes lit up. She knew Felix loved the openness of their relationship, he'd had less trouble than the others adjusting, but there were still times when he seemed to find it hard to believe that she didn't get jealous.

But he'd take her on her word. "Great." He took her hand. "Let's get started then. I love partying early on Wednesdays."

"You love partying early any day." Rosemary quickened her pace to keep up with him as he cut through the grounds.

Felix laughed. "Very true." He glanced back at her, his wavy blond hair bouncing with every light step. "But having you with makes it special."

Rosemary groaned and stopped, jerking her hand from his. "Don't start."

Spinning on his heels, Felix swept her up into his arms and twirled around until she was dizzy. He kissed her and set her on her feet. "Start what? I just want to have fun."

Clinging to his arm to steady herself, Rosemary considered what he'd said. It was probably true. Felix, like Chetan, was of Marid decent, a type of djinn that dwelled in the seas and were known for their power and arrogance, as well as their use of granting wishes to humans to lead them to damnation. While Felix could be cocky, his humanity had dampened the more dangerous aspects of his blood. The wishes he granted were playful and didn't involve magic or manipulation. He lived for little else than the next rush, caring little if it was big or small. She decided to leave her fears behind her and follow his lead.

She let him go and took a runner's stance. "East Village or Spann Place?"

"East Village," Felix said, mimicking her stance.

"Race you." Rosemary started running, hoping to get a decent head start.

Felix whooped and outdistanced her in a few paces. "If I win, I get a prize."

"Deal!" Rosemary felt her thigh muscles burning already, her body protesting her pushing it when it hadn't been fed. She ignored it. She'd feed it when she was good and ready. For now it needed to remember who was in charge.

* * * *

The elegant stone structures of the East Village apartments sat in a nest of trees, looking better suited to quaint country living than the housing of college students. But that was only because it was still daylight. During the night the grounds spilled over with life. East Village was the only on campus dwelling that allowed drinking on the patio. Most of the students took advantage of that when the weather permitted.

Felix held the door open for her and led her into the quiet, brightly lit hall. He walked to the second door on the left and tapped three times, paused and tapped twice.

"Felix!" A horde of girls screeched when the door opened. They pulled him inside and he was lost in eager embraces and sloppy, drunken kisses that covered his face in a rainbow of lipstick smears.

A voluptuous redhead noticed Rosemary and lunged forwards, pulling her in as well before closing the door. "He's brought a friend!" she announced.

The girls squealed and turned their attention to Rosemary. Soon she was just as colourful as Felix. One of the girls played with her hair when they sat Rosemary on the sofa, seeming entranced.

"It's so pretty."

"My God, give her some room to breathe!" A blonde tripped and fell onto the sofa beside her. "My name's Sue. What's yours?"

"Rosemary."

"Well, Rosemary, I hope you don't mind them. Felix never said he had a girlfriend."

"I'm not his girlfriend," Rosemary said, wanting to make sure her presence didn't ruin anything for Felix.

"Oh. Well good." Sue reached out, grabbed Felix by the back of his long, blue surfer shorts and pulled him into her lap. Her hand disappeared into his pocket. "Someone get her a drink. I didn't get my turn with Felix last time."

Felix shot Rosemary an uncertain look. Rosemary smiled at him and rested back on the sofa, getting comfortable.

One of the bedroom doors opened. A man came out, rubbing his hair with a small black towel. "Let me." He went to the open kitchen at the end of the room and fetched a bottle from the fridge. He turned and snapped the cap off the beer with a flick of his thumb.

Rosemary's blood ran cold. She licked her lips and dragged her eyes up to his face as he approached her with the slow steps of a predator. His long hair, the same shade as hers, spilled over his face, leaving only one blue eye visible. He raked his hair back and smirked, holding out the beer.

"I don't want it." Rosemary scrambled sideways, around Felix and the blonde girl, trying to reach the door.

The man cut her off with one side step. "You don't like beer, Rosemary? I can get you something else. I make a mean apple martini."

Felix stood behind her, the comment letting him know exactly who the man was. He put a supportive hand on Rosemary's shoulder, but she shook him off. He couldn't protect her. Not from this.

Sue joined them, looking disgruntled and confused. "You two know each other?"

"You could say that," Felix said. Rosemary could hear him dialling behind her, probably trying to call Kurt or Largo. Then she heard the static. He cursed and snapped the phone shut.

"He won't let you call for help." Rosemary's chin jutted up and she struggled not to let her lips tremble as she faced her cousin. "Will you Gunner?"

"Why would you need help? We're family, we should be able to talk." Gunner took a sip from the beer she'd refused. "Haven't you told your..." he paused and looked Felix over, his smirk changing to a sneer, "friends, how close we all are?"

"They all know exactly how close you are to my mother."

"Yes." Gunner closed his eyes and wet his lips as though he could taste her. "She's quite a woman. I hate to be away from her for long."

"Then go back to her," Felix said, stepping between Gunner and Rosemary, pretending he didn't notice Rosemary trying to tug him back.

"Oh, I will." Gunner swung his meaty fist and hit Felix in the jaw.

Felix slammed into a wall and slid to the floor, where he lay motionless. The girls in the room, paralysed by shock for so long, finally rushed to him, trying to wake him.

Gunner grabbed Rosemary. She didn't fight him while she kept her eyes on Felix, willing him to move. Gunner dragged her to a bedroom and pushed her inside.

Rosemary retreated around the bed. "How are you going to do it, Gunner? Are you going to poison me again, or will you be more direct and just slit my throat?"

"Neither." Gunner stepped past her and went to the dresser. He picked up a black box tied with a blood red ribbon. "If your lover boy hadn't interrupted, we could have avoided the drama. I'm simply here to bring you a present from your mother."

"A present?" Rosemary eyed the box as though it contained a venomous snake, which it just might. "Why...?"

"Your mother wants you to know she bears you no ill will. You're no longer a threat so far away from her nest. She lost only the two men she had no use for anymore and you won't tempt the others out here." He thrust the box at her and she took it. "It's a dress. Put it on and I'll leave. Felix will be fine and I'll let your mother know you've accepted her gesture of peace."

"Why wouldn't Felix be fine?" Rosemary undid the bow and set the ribbon on the bed.

"You need to ask?" Gunner laughed. "There was more than force in that hit, Rosemary. I take after your father in more than my abilities in the bedroom."

Which meant he'd bespelled Felix, with a spell that would mean death if she didn't do what he wanted. Rosemary opened the box and took out the dress. It was beautiful and old-fashioned – black and red velvet, in her mother's taste.

"You swear if I put it on, he'll be okay?"

"On my vows to your mother." Gunner put a hand on his chest.

"Then get out and I'll do it."

Gunner shook his head and crossed his arms. "I promised your mother I'd watch you."

Rosemary glared at him, hating the lust in his eyes, as different from the lust in her lovers' eyes as vinegar from sweet wine. The way he watched her lay the dress on the bed and unbutton her white shirt proved all her mother had said about her. No matter how loyal the men were, one look at Rosemary made them forget all their pledges. More than one had whispered Rosemary's name while beneath her mother.

Rosemary wondered if Gunner was one of them. Her mother couldn't have him killed like she'd done the others – her father wouldn't approve.

But she might have sent him with the gift to punish him, or to test him.

Either way, Rosemary wanted him gone. She slipped out of her skirt and pulled the dress over her head.

"Let me help you with that." Gunner circled her, his eyes showing appreciation at how well the dress fit. He took the ties at the back from her fumbling fingers and did them up tight. Then he curved his hands over her shoulders, massaging them before passing his hands down her sides to smooth the dress. "Perfect."

"You swore." Rosemary reminded him to hurry things up.

"I did." He opened the door. Rosemary could hear the girls chattering in relief and Felix asking them to get out of his way. He glanced back once. "Such a shame, Rosemary." He gave her a sad smile. "You really are the fairest of them all."

The door closed behind him and Rosemary let out a sigh, turning to the mirror above the dresser to assess her composure. She didn't want Felix to see how shaken she was by the encounter. She didn't want him to worry.

There was a twinge of pain at the base of her ribs. She brought her hand up to rub it away and felt how the ties dug the material into her flesh. Gunner had done them up too tight.

Now that he was gone, there was no reason to keep the dress on. Rosemary tugged at the end of one of the ties. It wouldn't come loose. Gunner had knotted it. She opened her mouth to call Felix. The dress constricted, cutting off her air. She cried out as it crushed her ribs.

"Rosemary!" Felix was on the other side of the door, turning the knob futilely, banging, kicking.

Rosemary's lips moved, but not a sound came out. Blood spilled from her mouth and dripped from her chin to splatter on the floor as she collapsed on her side, hand extended towards the door.

A gift from her mother. She should have known. Her mother hadn't given her a gift since she'd turned from an ugly duckling into a graceful swan.

No one had ever rivalled her mother in face or form. Her mother wouldn't stop until the same could be said again.

For the first time, it looked like she might succeed.

Chapter Ten

The white light sparkled, like she was seeing it through water. It brought to mind the pool on the roof of her father's private penthouse in Memphis. She remembered visiting him, floating on an inflatable duck, all of eight years old. Leaning over the side, she'd trailed her fingers in the water, watching the lights ripple. One time her father had tipped her over and she felt like that now, like she'd awoken to a shock of cold water. Only this time she didn't come up laughing and splashing. She came up gasping.

"You're okay." Shiloh filled her vision, his soft features tight with concern. He brushed her hair away from her face and kissed her, once, twice, then took her hand and held it.

Rosemary blinked at him. Shiloh rarely instigated contact. He must have been worried.

"I'm fine." She didn't feel fine, but she didn't want him to freak out. To Kurt, Wylie or Chetan she'd have admitted that she felt like she'd been hit by an avalanche and was still digging her way out. Shiloh needed reassurance. "How did I get here?"

Here was a hospital room, she could tell by the heart monitor beeping beside her, by the tubes in her arms and the sterile white walls. Shiloh's soft, natural scent of sweet basil and sage filtered through the bite of antiseptic as he leaned over her.

"I brought you. I found you."

"You got through the door?" That was impressive. Shiloh had definition, but much less bulk than the others and he never used brute strength. He was an artist. He loathed anything that required any kind of exertion—out of the bedroom, that is.

"Felix tried breaking down the door. He couldn't break the spell. I could." Shiloh looked down at his hands, letting his overgrown brown hair hide his face. "Felix cut the dress off you though. He saved your life."

"You both did." Rosemary combed his hair away from his face with her fingers and made him look up with a slight tug. "Thank you."

The door opened. Felix poked his head in. "She's awake?" He came in without waiting for an answer. "How you feeling—?"

One look at his face and Rosemary cut him off. "What happened to you?"

Felix grinned sheepishly. "Kurt. He flipped his lid when I told him what happened. Don't worry, the girls weren't too happy with him either. Security's still sorting it out."

Rosemary shook her head and tried to sit up. She reached for Felix, eyes on the ugly black bruise that covered half of his face. She might not be able to heal herself without feeding, but she could heal those in her nest.

Felix brushed her hand away and sat on the bed. "No. Leave it, you don't have the strength and I deserved it."

"No, you didn't." Rosemary let Shiloh help her sit up, wincing as pain seared across her ribs like a flash of fire. "Let me..."

"He did deserve it. He knows better than to bring you anywhere without making sure it's safe first. He admitted one of the girls had a new boyfriend he'd never met," Kurt said, joining them. He swiped his hand over a deep set of scratches on his face, smearing blood. "But I'll take care of him. Let Shiloh take care of you."

"But..." Rosemary stopped herself when Shiloh hunched his shoulders.

"I'll get Largo if you want," he said.

"No, it's not that." Rosemary sighed. Kurt nodded at her and shoved Felix out. He closed the door and left her alone with Shiloh. She tried to think of a way to make Shiloh feel better. "I really need your help Shiloh. I'm not strong enough to..."

Shiloh stood, bent over her and helped her lie on the bed. "Tell me what I have to do."

"Make love to me."

"Alone?" Shiloh glanced around the room, as though he thought one of the others would appear and take the lead.

"I've fed from Kurt today and Felix is hurt."

"Yes, but..."

"Please." She squirmed as the hunger strung out her veins, making them feel like they would snap. "I can taste you, Shiloh. Your fae blood is potent, it won't take much."

Shiloh nodded. He turned and pulled off his shirt, his gaze flicking to the door.

"No one will come. Kurt will keep them away," Rosemary said, eyes roaming over his slender form, eager to have him close, so eager she was already wet. She took his hand and guided it between her legs. "You feel that?"

Eyes closed, Shiloh nodded. He slipped one finger inside her, his other hand braced on the bed. "All that for just me?"

"Yes." Rosemary let her legs open wide and he added another finger, dipping deep. She felt him move, hesitant, spreading her slickness so slowly it was a sweet kind of torture. She made a soft sound of pleasure and he glanced up at her.

Then he pushed her hospital gown up and lowered his mouth, lapping up her juices with gentle strokes of his tongue. His fingers continued at a steady pace, slow in, slow out, curving when they were in deep to hit the core of her pleasure, a place he always seemed to find by instinct alone. He sucked at her clit, drinking at her as though she was a cup filled with the fluid he needed to survive.

The soft touch built up the sparks within like a fan, caressing them to a small flame, growing so slowly, so steadily it consumed her before she knew how close she was. She clenched down and fed into it, shuddering, struggling to keep her legs open wide as he mounted her. He glided in without resistance and rested within her until the shuddering stopped. Then he began to move, never quickening his pace, so she could feel every inch of him, smooth and hard, his silken flesh wet with her, stroking back and forth.

Rosemary slid her hands into his hair and pulled his head up so she could look into his smoky grey eyes. His eyes widened at what he saw and she drowned him in the wave of her pleasure. His body shook and he plunged in, holding still as he came, careful to keep his weight off her.

Legs wrapped around his waist, Rosemary lifted her hips and held him close, letting him fill her up in every way, but careful not to take too much. She'd never do that to him again.

Still, what she took was more than enough. Her body mended, and when she climaxed, the pain was gone. She pushed up, still wrapped around him, and claimed his lips. When she let him go and slid off, he was watching her with a dazed expression.

"I didn't think I could do that," he admitted in response to the question in her eyes. "We've only been alone once and I couldn't..." He bit his bottom lip and ducked his head. "I mean I think you enjoyed it, but not like this."

"You were so scared." Rosemary petted his hair, wishing she could make him understand how precious he was to her. "I wanted you so bad, I was afraid to scare you away."

"Largo was the one that scared me. He came into my studio and told me I'd get into a good school if I did exactly what he said. It didn't sound like it could be anything good." He bowed his head and mumbled something. It sounded like, 'Or something wonderful'. Rosemary wouldn't make him repeat it. She knew how hard it was for him to admit as much as he had.

"Well, I'm glad you decided the course was worth it." She was teasing, but she wanted to take it back when a blush spread over his cheeks.

He spoke before she could. "You were worth it."

Rosemary smiled and hugged him. Out of all her boys, Shiloh was the only one she'd never regret taking. No one could take care of him like she would. She'd just have to keep being careful, but now that Kurt had taken his place with them, the danger was minimal. She'd do her best to eliminate it if she could.

As though her thoughts had called him, Kurt stepped into the room. "I've figured it out." He frowned when Shiloh skittered away from the bed to put space between them. Then he continued, "If the nest was complete, we would share powers. Felix would have been able to break the spell using either my talents or Shiloh's. I thought having seven would be enough, but I hadn't considered an essential part might be missing."

"An essential part." Rosemary's brow furrowed. She tried to think of all she knew of nests. *What could be missing?*

"You need a prince, Rosemary. You haven't chosen one, which means the one you need is still out there somewhere." He ran his hand over his hair, expression dark. "You'll have to find him and let one of us go."

"No." Rosemary looked at Shiloh who had wilted as though she'd chosen to abandon him already. "It's not happening."

"You don't have a choice." Kurt stepped up to the bed and rested his hands on the edge. She could see him fighting to hold the shards of his control together. Everything he'd been pushing her towards made what she had to do that much harder and he took full

responsibility. Whatever accusations she wanted to throw at him were held back by the knowledge that nothing she could say would be worse than what he was saying to himself.

But she couldn't help a last ditch effort to deny him. "I have a choice. I'm the queen and I've chosen my nest as it stands."

"Fighting this will kill you." He dropped his eyes when she gave him a closed off look. "If you won't think of yourself, think of the others. We are bound to you. If you die, so do we all."

Chapter Eleven

Without Kurt, leaving the hospital would have been difficult. Rosemary's skills revolved around seduction and Shiloh didn't have the experience, or the stomach, for any more manipulation. Kurt had no problem compelling the doctor to change her diagnosis to something less severe, give her one last quick exam and sign her out. They were back on campus within the hour, in the boys' shared room, waiting for Alaire.

Largo grumbled over the coffee Chetan forced on him, sipping and making a face before setting it on the coffee table and dropping his La-Z-Boy into recline. "I don't get it. We're seven, why can't she just settle for one of us? Why all this hassle to find 'the one'?"

Kurt stood by the window, forehead pressed against the cool glass. "Because it doesn't work that way. I did some reading." He scowled when Wylie gave him a wide-eyed look over the medical textbook he was studying. "*I can* read, you know."

"I know." Wylie set the book on the sofa beside him and rested his chin on his fist. "But you usually ask me or Rosemary..." He dropped his eyes back to the open book beside him and gave a little shiver.

It reminded Rosemary of Gunner's reaction to even thinking of her mother while he was away from her. Men of a nest reacted that way when separated from their queen for any length of time. Wylie shouldn't be reacting that way, not when they spent so much time together. Granted they hadn't made love in days, but in a nest all benefited from each consumption of the queen.

Their nest not working that way meant Kurt was right. It wasn't complete. And she wasn't the only one suffering because of it.

Rosemary lowered from the arm of the chair where she was sitting and curled into Wylie's lap, letting the contact soothe him. The lamplight that passed between them accented the golden undertone of his black skin and she stroked her fingers down his neck, the texture of his flesh bringing a touch memory to life, not enough for her to feed from, but enough to put him at ease. She remembered his body without the suit, remembered all the moves he'd

guided her and Felix in the last time the three of them were together. Her feet hadn't touched the floor for nearly an hour.

Across the room Felix choked on his beer and sat hard on a chair, half blind with the remote impression of the shared memory. His beer slipped from his hand and hit the carpet, spilling amber liquid and foam and filling the air with its rich scent.

Wylie shifted uncomfortably under her, one arm around her waist pulling her closer so that she could feel the hard press of him against her ass. She'd poured her lust over him, heating his blood, making him ready to serve. He used two fingers to loosen his collar.

Felix knocked over his chair and stood, stumbling towards her. Rosemary released the power that would throw them into ecstasy and bring them back down to reality. As one they threw their heads back. The feeling was gone as quickly as it had come.

"Looks like you two took yourselves out of the running for tonight." Largo grinned and finished the rest of the coffee without complaint. He licked his lips and winked at Rosemary. "I'll be here when you're ready. Unlike these little boys, I know how to deal with the metaphysical stuff."

"Sleep. Your solution to everything," Chetan muttered from the other side of the room where he stood with Shiloh, careful to avoid the sphere of Rosemary's power. He made a face and sneezed, which made Rosemary think his displeasure was just allergies, but his eyes narrowed when he caught his breath. "I hate seeing her with you, you always make her do all the work."

"She needs Doms and subs, Chetan." Largo stretched and bared his teeth. "Which do you think I am?"

"You can't categorise us all like that." Wylie breathed into Rosemary's hair, then sat back and sighed. "Shiloh might be a definite sub, but what about the rest of us?"

"Doesn't matter." Kurt hit the window frame lightly with his fist and turned to face them. "Her prince will be the dominant of all but she. As I was saying, I did some reading about the prince of a cambion nest, to see how he can be found for the queen. Most of the legends are obscure, referring only to the powers a nest gains once the queen is securely mated, but only one spoke of the actual identification of a potential prince."

And they were back on that. Rosemary wanted to tell Kurt to shut up, to drop it. She didn't. She wouldn't risk the lives of them all on what her heart wanted. She'd let him take the lead.

"I thought we were waiting for Alaire," Shiloh said quietly. He didn't want Kurt to go on any more than she did. Nothing she said would convince him that he wasn't first in line for the chopping block.

"I'm tired of waiting. Let's get this over with. If he can't be on time, he misses out." Kurt paced the room and they all sat, Rosemary moving away from Wylie and closer to Shiloh, Felix taking a seat at her feet, Chetan taking a seat across from Largo. "The prince will be a man who can resist her, a man who won't be caged by the nest, but will choose to be there..."

"We all choose to be here." Felix grinned up at her. "It's a nice place to be."

"Your place in the nest strengthens that urge. The prince doesn't serve from beneath the queen, he rules at her side." Kurt passed his gaze over them all, all except Rosemary. "He can rule over the men in her stead, can direct them, even send them to other lovers to keep them alive during her absence."

"Like my father," Rosemary said, thinking of how her father had kept Largo alive by bringing women home for him when he'd been rejected by her mother. He couldn't free Largo or Kurt before her mother was done with them, but he'd done all he could.

Kurt nodded and focussed on something over her head. "Like your father." He cleared his throat. "Anyway, the prince is the only one who can resist the queen. That is part of how he can be identified. He will not be affected by the powers of the queen..." His brow lifted at Rosemary's change in expression. "What?"

"Nothing." Rosemary didn't want to tell him what she suspected. It might make the difficult choices that she had to make come that much sooner.

Before Kurt could question her, the door burst open then slammed shut behind Alaire. He rested against it and burst out laughing. "Sorry about being late. I was in the dean's office."

"The cheese?" Felix grinned and leant forward, eager for the story of Alaire's latest ill thought out prank.

Alaire nodded. "They tried to get me to admit to putting it behind the dean's air-conditioner. I can't believe they accused me."

"You're lucky they never found out it was you that changed all the secretaries home pages to porn sites." Felix chuckled. "That was a favourite of mine. Pure genius."

Alaire puffed his chest out and strutted across the room. "Why, thank you. I thought so too."

"If you're done?" Kurt said.

Alaire nodded and sat on Wylie's lap, leaning over him to kiss Rosemary. Wylie dumped him on the floor.

"Rosemary was about to tell us who the prince might be, weren't you?" Kurt folded his arms over his broad chest, making it clear he wouldn't be sidetracked again.

Rosemary bit her lip. "I could be wrong, I mean my powers worked a bit..."

"Who?" Kurt said.

"My microbiology teacher."

"Professor Rhodes?" Wylie asked. He'd taken the same course the year before. When Rosemary nodded, he grimaced. "Yikes. He's a tight ass. All the girls like him, but he's a stickler for rules."

"What do you mean, your powers worked a bit?" Kurt cut in.

"I almost strangled him with his tie." She hid her face between Wylie's arm and the sofa, muffling her words. "It was an accident. I was starving."

"Your powers will only attack when all else fails."

"He's a jerk," Wylie said.

"Doesn't matter. If he's the one, Rosemary needs him." Kurt walked around the coffee table and crouched in front of Rosemary, coaxing her out by nudging her shoulder. "You have to try to get close to him. It won't be easy – from what I hear, your father couldn't stand your mother when they met. He's the only man she ever had to work for." He smoothed his hand over her hair. "Charm him, seduce him. It'll be worth it in the end."

With the meeting over, Rosemary returned to her own room, two floors down. Her roommate was asleep, so she moved around the room quietly, showering and changing into a long T-shirt, an old one that she'd stolen from Kurt.

In her bed, curled up under her covers, she hugged a stuffed leopard she'd made with Felix at build-a-bear on her eighteenth birthday. All around the room were mementos of each of her boys, ways to keep them close. On her desk was the lamp Wylie had got her, a kitten with a bandaged paw to symbolise her goal to become a vet. Over her bed was an oil painting Shiloh had painted of her reaching out to gather woodland creatures. One of Largo's footballs sat on her dresser and beside that a brass statue of the Hindu god, the 'dancing Shiva' that Chetan had given her. The most recent addition was a singing bass Alaire had hung on her wall without letting her know. The stupid thing had her heart lodged in her throat the first time she opened the door to a dark empty room to be greeted by 'don't worry, be happy', but with it switched off, it brought pleasant memories of the prankster.

Each and every one of the boys was an integral part of her life. Fine, at first it had been all about having the nest she needed to survive, but Kurt had made it so much more. They were the family she'd always wanted. How could she let a single one go?

Suddenly, she knew. She'd stop being unforgivably selfish and do what she must. And she'd save them all.

Chapter Twelve

By morning, Rosemary regretted not feeding the night before. Her skin felt tight and dry, there were dark circles under her eyes and the steaming mug of coffee her roommate, Stephanie, brought her could neither pull her awake nor warm her.

Her pallor had Stephanie in a panic. Stephanie knew she'd been to the hospital the day before and fretted about a possible relapse of whatever had happened. "Maybe we should call an ambulance."

"I'll be fine." Rosemary gave her a tired smile. "I'm just happy you're talking to me again."

Stephanie's cheeks went red. "I just didn't know what to say to you after...I mean I thought you and Alaire—"

"We're just friends." Rosemary patted the bed at her side and Stephanie sat. "If I'd known you were interested I would have told you..."

Stephanie shook her head. "It's not like that." She bit her lip. "Actually he's not my type, or more, I'm not his. Guys like that don't usually pay attention to me. I was flattered when he came on to me, but I honestly thought he was joking." She flushed. "Nothing like that has ever happened to me before."

Rosemary had a thought. "So you and Alaire had fun. Have you gone out since?"

"No. But I've been wanting to tell you..." Stephanie drew in a deep breath and let the words burst out. "I met someone. He's in my accounting class. He's nothing like Alaire, but he's sweet and he really seems interested. We're going out again tonight."

"That's great!" Rosemary did her best to show enthusiasm, but some disappointment slipped out.

Stephanie frowned. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Rosemary shrugged. "I just kinda thought you'd be the one to get Alaire to settle down." It was close to the truth.

"Honestly, I think Alaire's got his sights set on someone else." Stephanie patted the back of Rosemary's hand. "Don't tell me you didn't know."

"Oh, I knew." Rosemary groaned and dropped onto her pillows. She covered her face with her hands. Somewhere inside there was a poisonous taste of relief. With Alaire as attached to her as he was, he couldn't be the one she let go.

So that meant Shiloh *and* Alaire stayed with her. Which left her with five others to consider.

And one teacher she'd already made a bad impression with to seduce.

* * * *

"How do I look?"

Largo took her in, from her daringly short plaid skirt to the matching tie that hung low on her snug black shirt. He nodded. "Hot. Now come here."

Rosemary shook her head and laughed. "I can't. I'll be late."

"Skip your first class." When he sat up and leaned his elbows on his knees, she bit back her objection. "I think we have to have a chat."

"Okay." Rosemary sat on the coffee table, jumping when he took her hands in his. "Largo, what is it?"

"I want to volunteer," he said, running his thumb in circles around her palm. "I don't think it's fair to force you to choose between us, so I'll bow out."

"Really?" She tried to imagine Largo gone, no longer lifting his feet when she, Wylie or Felix vacuumed, no longer leaving beer bottles everywhere, no longer coming up behind her after she'd cooked a meal and kissing her neck and telling her how much he'd enjoyed it. She tried to picture Friday nights without going to watch him coach football. No more kisses stolen under the bleachers with him lifting her up and holding her like he wanted to absorb her.

Something twisted painfully in her gut. She cleared her throat. "I'm sure you'll find someone else."

"I'm sure I will. What girl doesn't want a jock like me?" He grinned, but it was a grin like the ones he gave his boys after a bitter loss. "I make a good trophy."

"Largo..."

"No, Rosemary. My mind's made up. Actually, I'm having lunch with a cheerleader and she's coming to the game Friday."

"That's good." Rosemary wanted to leave. Her initial plan to ask Largo's advice on her outfit had been a big mistake. She'd have a hard time coming on to Professor Rhodes with Largo's loss on her mind.

"Don't look so sad. It's all going to work out." Largo cuffed her cheek gently with a fist. "Now, go take one for the team."

Rosemary fumbled with the button of her shirt. "I think I'll skip class."

Largo pulled her hands away from her shirt. "You need to work on your grades. Let's make this a clean break."

"Largo..."

He stood, ambled over to the sofa and plopped face down. "I'm gonna take a nap. All this talk has worn me out."

When he started snoring, Rosemary stood and tiptoed across the room, gathering empty bottles and putting Largo and Alaire's abandoned clothes in the hamper. She crept out and closed the door behind her. Then she stood in the hall and took a few deep breaths, winning the battle with the urge to cry.

* * * *

While the class filed out of the room, Rosemary gathered her books and her nerve and walked up to Professor Rhodes' desk.

"Can I help you?" he asked, not looking up.

"Yes. I had a question about the assignment."

He leant back and steepled his fingers. "I take it you managed to weasel the particulars from one of the other students."

"Yes, and –"

"Then maybe they can help you." He slammed his book shut and stood. Then he blinked and his gaze swept over her, as though seeing her for the first time. "And for future reference, I expect my students to be dressed appropriately for my class."

In the hall, a twittering of laughter drew her attention. She noticed Largo first, he was a head above the tallest girl – his cheerleader, with all her friends.

“Miss Waldeck, if you won’t pay attention when I speak, perhaps you’d be so kind as to stop wasting my time.”

“I’m sorry.” Rosemary tried to focus on Professor Rhodes, but the girls’ shrill voices made it impossible.

“Isn’t he beefy?” The tall cheerleader giggled. She patted Largo’s hard gut. “He’s got a nice six pack, but I think he could afford to lose a few pounds.”

“Maybe he should spend more time in the gym.” One of the other girls suggested. “My boyfriend is in there all the time. He’s actually your quarterback.”

“Coach Largo must go to the gym,” a petite brunette said.

Largo shook his head. “No. I only work out with the team.”

“Miss Waldeck!”

“One minute.” Rosemary turned away from the fuming teacher and focussed on Largo. He looked like he desperately wanted to escape.

His new girlfriend didn’t notice. “Did you see everything he ate at lunch? I think we’ve got to cut his diet in half.”

“Hey, Largo!” Rosemary walked out of the classroom and joined the group in the hall. She put her hand on the arm the cheerleader wasn’t clinging to. “I wanted to know if you were still coming by Chetan’s place tonight. We’re making spaghetti with smoked meat, your favourite.”

“Garlic bread?” Largo turned away from the girls and grinned at Rosemary.

She grinned back and nodded. “Of course.”

“I’ll do the dishes after,” he said, moving away from the group and pulling her with him. “And pick up my socks.”

“Deal.” Rosemary hugged his arms as they walked.

Around the corner, Largo slumped against the wall and inhaled as though he’d just finished a marathon. “You shouldn’t have done that, but thank you. What those girls were talking about should be considered ‘menocide’.”

“I’ll let you go if you really want to go, Largo.” Rosemary brought her hand up to his smooth face and ran her thumb over his bottom lip. “But I won’t let you starve.”

Largo picked her up like she weighed nothing and hugged her tight. "I don't want to go."

"I know you don't." She kissed him and wiggled until he put her down. "So. Hungry?"

"Famished. You?"

Rosemary nodded. His hands passed over her back and he cupped her ass. She laughed and slipped away from him. "Not here. If anyone catches me with you, they'll start asking awkward questions."

"Like what happened with you and Chetan."

Chetan was currently her boyfriend in public. It kept other boys from hitting on her, which could be dangerous. She'd dated Wylie openly for a while, but he'd got interested in a fellow pre-med student.

Now that she thought of it, that might be the solution to all their problems. Wylie liked the girl enough to 'break up' with Rosemary for her. Maybe he wanted to be free to pursue a serious relationship. It couldn't hurt to ask.

"Let's go back to the room," Largo said, cutting through the silence. "I'll cook."

"Largo," Rosemary said, looping her arm with his. "You're starting to scare me."

Chapter Thirteen

Bottles covered the coffee table. Wylie covered the sofa. Rosemary and Largo stood in the doorway and stared at him.

"I asked her to marry me." Wylie laughed and tipped a whisky bottle to his mouth, spilling most of the liquid on his bare chest. "I thought it would help."

Rosemary crossed the room and knelt beside him. "What did she say?"

He shrugged and tried to put the bottle on the table. Largo grabbed it before it fell. Something crunched under his foot. Wylie's glasses.

"I'll replace them," Largo said. He took a gulp from the bottle as though he couldn't think of what else to do.

"Don't worry about it." Wylie rubbed his face with his hands. He squinted at Rosemary. "What did she say? Well, let me think. It was something like, 'why do you think I never let anyone see us together? I can't let people know I'm with someone like you'."

"Because you're black?" Rosemary's nails cut into her palm, quelling a wash of outrage.

"No. Because I'm not from the right...background. I've never belonged to a club and I made it here on a half scholarship and had to 'borrow' money to pay for the rest. Everyone expects her to have a boyfriend that can spoil her. She doesn't mind that I can't, but she won't advertise it."

"So what did you do?" Rosemary asked.

"Nothing. She broke it off, said it was better to do it before I got too attached."

Rosemary nibbled at her lip. "Were you?"

"No." Wylie fumbled around for the bottle. Largo handed it to him. He took a big gulp and gave it to Rosemary. "I just figured if I could have a normal life I wouldn't miss..."

"Oh, boy." Largo shook his head and fished his cell from his pocket. "I'm ordering out. Anyone want anything?"

"No, thanks," Rosemary said while Wylie mumbled a negative.

Once Largo was finished on the phone, he hung up and walked over to Wylie, dragging him to a sitting position and dropping beside him. He pulled off his shirt and tossed it towards the bathroom.

Rosemary didn't move. She'd been so sure the decision was only tearing her apart. Now that she saw how badly it was affecting the others, she wanted to end it more than ever. She couldn't even begin to think of the three that were left to choose between.

"Stop stressing," Largo said to Rosemary. He looked at Wylie. "I'm going to feed Rosemary. You can either join in or go take a walk. This isn't good for her."

"This isn't his fault —"

Wylie put up his hand to stop her defence of him. "Largo's right. This whole thing upset you so bad last night that you didn't feed at all. You take care of us; we're supposed to take care of you. That's the deal."

"Glad we've got that worked out." Largo held up a hand and curved his fingers inwards, beckoning Rosemary to him. "Get on your knees."

Rosemary inhaled, exhaled, and shook her head at Wylie when he looked ready to argue. Few of her boys understood how much she needed to play the submissive with Largo. She spent so much time being treated like a fragile princess; the change was welcome. Only one other among them could play the role, and he refused to.

Thinking about Kurt made her hesitate. She could almost see him, covered in grease, under the hood of a car, his coveralls tied around his waist.

"That's earned you a punishment, Rosemary," Largo said, bringing her back to the present. "If I have to ask again, I'll take off my belt."

Rosemary shivered and played innocent. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

Largo growled and stood. He undid his belt and slid it out of his jeans. Then he kicked the bottles off the table and put his foot on it. "You wanna play, Wylie?"

For a second, Wylie looked like he'd say no. Then he grinned. "Sure. Why not."

"Oh, this will be fun." Largo folded the belt and smacked it on his palm. "Grab her by the wrist and pull her over my knee."

Wylie reached for her. Rosemary skipped away, taunting him. He threw himself into the game and ran after her, catching her behind the sofa and dragging her to Largo. He put her on Largo's knee and lifted her skirt to bare her ass.

The first strike of the belt made both Rosemary and Wylie jump. Rosemary whimpered and Wylie stiffened.

"Do you have to do it so hard?" He let go of Rosemary's wrists.

Largo barred an arm over Rosemary's back to keep her still. "Do you want me to stop?"

"Yes, please." She wiggled her butt provocatively and he hit her again. The sound of the belt echoed through the room. Rosemary sipped at the pain and pleasure like a syrupy liquor that had to be savoured. The thrill Largo experienced from giving it to her went down much easier.

"She asked you to stop," Wylie said, putting his hand over Rosemary's bottom as though to protect her from more abuse.

"We have a safe word," Largo said, pushing Wylie's hand away and giving Rosemary another good smack.

"What is it?"

"Pickle." Rosemary gasped.

Largo helped her stand, concern in his eyes. "You okay?"

"Please, you need to stop talking." Rosemary felt damp already, but she wanted the game to continue. "I don't want to come too soon."

"I didn't say you could come, so don't worry." Largo dropped the belt and took a seat on the sofa. "You still want us to stop talking?"

"Yes." Rosemary lowered to her knees and crawled to him.

"Give us a good reason."

Rosemary unzipped his jeans. He wasn't wearing any boxers, which meant she was immediately gifted with his hard, proud dick, straining towards her of its own accord. She took it in her hand.

"What about Wylie?" Largo said, trying to steady his tone while she got a firm grip on him.

"You tell him what to do." Rosemary covered the head of his dick with her lips, teasing the little slit with the tip of her tongue.

"Spank her, Wylie, let's see if you have a taste for it." Largo slouched and thrust his hips forward, pushing himself past Rosemary's lips.

Wylie knelt behind her and covered her tight ass with his hands. His hands left her and he slapped one cheek. Not hard enough, but close. Rosemary's thighs shook as she took Largo in all the way, tasting the salt of him, lifting her ass to encourage Wylie to continue.

He did, slapping the other cheek, then both, a little harder each time. Then he covered her pussy with his hand and moaned. "She's so wet."

"She loves it." Largo latched onto her hair and slammed her down on him.

Rosemary swallowed to stall her gag reflex, sucking upwards slowly, hissing when Wylie shoved his fingers inside her. His hands were big, filled her so nicely, but with her mouth full of Largo she could only picture something bigger coming into her, driving in until it felt like their bodies would touch inside her.

Wylie's thumb passed over her clit and he fucked her with his fingers so hard his palm was slapping between her cheeks, teasing her asshole. She had a naughty thought and slid off Largo, releasing him with a plop.

"Since we're experimenting, do you think you guys could try something the others won't?"

Largo grinned, reading her well. "I was hoping you'd ask eventually. I've been eyeing that ass."

"Are you serious?" Wylie pulled her up against him, his dick rubbing her between her cheeks through his pants, arms around her, undoing her shirt. She looked down as he unhooked her front clasped bra and moulded his hands over her breasts, flattening her nipples against his soft palms.

"This will be better in a bedroom." Largo stood and stepped out of his jeans. He led the way past Wylie's room and walked straight into Felix's.

Rosemary undressed Wylie as they followed, sucking at his plump lips, licking down his chest. He knocked her onto the bed and fell on her, dipping in once before Largo laughed and rolled them over. Wylie slipped out of her and made a sound like a growl.

"Relax, it'll just take a second." Largo took some lube from the top drawer of Felix's dresser.

Rosemary's eyes went wide. "Felix?"

"What do you think he does with those girls? They're kinky." Largo lay on the bed behind her. "Don't worry, this is a fresh tube." Then he stuck the tip in her ass and squeezed.

Rosemary's butt cheeks tightened against the strange sensation. He pulled out the tube and glided one finger up the crease of her ass, then down. She shook.

"Is it going to hurt?"

"Maybe a little," Largo said. He leaned over and put his chin on her shoulder. "Forget the safe word. If you want to stop, just say so."

"Okay." She looked at Wylie. "I want you inside me while he does it. It'll distract me."

Wylie spread her thighs and guided himself inside. Fear had taken some of the moisture from her, but the pressure built it up again. He kissed her neck and fondled her breast while he entered her with long strokes.

Largo eased a finger into her ass.

"Oh, fuck." Rosemary curved against Wylie, bucking a little when Largo added another finger and started fingering her ass. There was some pain as her unbreached hole stretched, but it melded well with the pleasure of Wylie thrusting inside her.

Largo used one hand to spread her ass cheeks and she felt the head of him prod her. He found resistance and pressed in harder. She bit her lip and dug her nails into Wylie's back. Largo drove in with one hard shove.

This, this is what she'd been craving. Her body lurched between them, wide open, sensations coming from everywhere at once. When she relaxed, Largo slammed into her, gripping hard to her shoulders and making lovely sounds of pleasure between his teeth.

Wylie was tugging on her breast, his gentle treatment set aside and replaced with pure, raw passion. This was something new, something forbidden. He hadn't known he wanted it, and now that he had it, he'd thrown himself in headfirst. In more than one way.

They dived into her and she seeped into them, eating their energy in tiny mouthfuls, plenty for her to have and share. She gave as she took, a little more strength, a little more endurance. If the nest had been complete, she could have reached out and portioned some off to the others, but until then, this was enough. For once when the boys pulled away from her, they didn't seem drained. Actually, they looked ready for more.

Wylie was hard again in seconds. Rosemary was ready to offer another round when the door opened. Chetan stepped inside. Then turned and walked out.

"Chetan!" Rosemary stood and ran after him, grabbing Felix's robe from the back of the door and pulling it on as she went.

Chetan was waiting for her, leaning on the back of the sofa. "I'm sorry, I just wanted to tell you." He closed his eyes. "Felix is gone. He went back home."

Rosemary covered her mouth with her hand. "What! Why?"

"Because he was sure you'd choose him, figure he'd be fine with the girls. He says they're good for some fun, but he feels safest with you." Chetan's eyes watered. It was hard to tell if he was trying not to cry or reacting to the kitten that had curled around his feet. "I should have gone with him, but I'm a coward. I got away from them, I can't go back."

Chetan and Felix were from the same foster home. Kurt had found them and offered them the out they'd needed. Only desperation could have Felix going back. He was too old for foster care, but his foster father would have a job waiting for him. And if he were willing to take the drunken beatings, he'd have a place to stay.

"He can't have gotten far." Largo joined them, already dressed. "He'll be at the train station. We'll head him off."

Rosemary dressed in a hurry, borrowing Shiloh's clothes, the only ones even close to fitting her. She joined the three boys in the hall and they rushed out to Largo's pickup.

They made it to the train station in record time. Too late. Felix was already gone.

Chapter Fourteen

The rain poured down like the sky needed revenge for all her failures. By not making a choice, by letting the boys wonder who would face the axe, she'd put one in harm's way. Largo and Wylie had gone to bring Felix back, which meant on top of it all Wylie would miss class. Largo wouldn't hear of her doing the same. He reminded her that she still had a mission. And not one she could shirk any longer.

She went to meet with Professor Rhodes, but couldn't bring herself to talk to him. At the door of his classroom, she waited while he conferred with another teacher, each tick of the clock over their heads speeding her pulse. The time that passed with her here, safe, while Felix was stuck in his own personal hell, made it harder to breathe. She couldn't do this now. One wrong move and she'd destroy whatever chance they had. Professor Rhodes had to be approached carefully, with a steel will that wouldn't waver under his cool regard.

Without a word she spun on her dainty heels, concentrating on even steps, wishing she could run. He caught up with her when she walked out the front door.

"Will you wait a minute?" He put his hand on her arm to stop her.

Rosemary looked up at him and burst into tears. "Please, I can't talk, not now."

"Hey." Professor Rhodes patted her shoulder and looked around. "Hey, don't cry. I know I was hard on you in class..."

"It's not that, it's just..." Rosemary scrubbed her tears away with her fist, feeling silly. "I've made such a mess of things."

"Like what? Your grades aren't that bad."

"Not that. Everything else."

Professor Rhodes nodded, as though he understood, though that wasn't likely. There was no way he had a clue. Still, he tried. "Look, why don't we go for a coffee off campus. We'll have to meet there, I don't want anyone to get the wrong impression."

"I..." Rosemary knew what she should do. What she must. But she couldn't. "Maybe some other time."

She turned on her heel and started walking, blindly, aimlessly. Someone caught her arm. She was sure it was Rhodes. She stopped and turned to face him.

It wasn't the professor.

"Has anyone ever told you what pretty hair you have?" The man tightened his grip and pulled her close. It was Guy, from her mother's nest. He held something up and Rosemary struggled. She recognised it the second the silver of it flashed before her eyes. It was her mother's comb, one she wore whenever she went to rid herself of a trespasser on her territory.

He moved to comb it into her hair. Rosemary swung her arm up to stop him. The sharp edge stabbed into her arm.

Everything washed in black, then returned, then faded. She heard Professor Rhodes shouting. Then she heard nothing. The poison of the comb passed into her veins and she felt her heart stop. That was not death in itself; her heart hadn't started beating until she was seven.

But death would follow when the poison finished its work. All Rosemary could do was try to cut herself from the boys before she dragged them down with her. If it wasn't too late, too late because she'd waited too long to do as she should have in the first place.

Free them all and die as her mother wished.

* * * *

"There is no prince?"

"Not yet." Kurt. Rosemary heard him and fought to open her eyes. She could see the faint outline of him though the blur of her vision, standing across the unfamiliar room from where she lay. He stood in the doorway, looking ready to leave. And he was speaking to Professor Rhodes. "You thought she planned to take you as prey."

"Either that or as one of her concubines." The teacher's lip curled in disgust. "I've transferred twice to avoid that fate."

"Well, you don't have to worry about that." Kurt inhaled and regarded the other man with an intensity only he could manage. "So you are willing?"

"If she'll have me."

"She'll have you." Kurt approached him with slow, measured steps, menace in his gaze. "But I swear to god, if you ever hurt her..."

Professor Rhodes returned Kurt's gaze unflinchingly. "I take care of what's mine."

Kurt's fist clenched at his side as though he might hit the other man. He opened it and gave a curt nod. "Good." He backed towards the door. "Good." He gave a tight smile. "Tell her I said —"

"Are you sure you want me to tell her you said any kind of goodbye?" Professor Rhodes stepped up to the door and pulled it open. "I was under the impression you didn't want to leave anything lingering between you."

"I don't." Kurt squared his shoulders. "Well then, I guess that's that."

Professor Rhodes inclined his head. Kurt walked out. The door closed.

Rosemary wanted to scream, call him back, curse at the professor for being what she needed, curse the heavens for ever putting him in her path. Instead she remained perfectly still as he came to the bed and lifted a strand of her hair.

"Beautiful." He muttered under his breath. He closed his eyes and shook his head. "I know all your kind are, but you've been gifted with more than is natural." He trailed his tongue over his lips. "I suppose I'm lucky you didn't try harder." He turned away and headed to an adjoining room. The sound of a shower filtered through the closed door.

Rosemary sat up. She rubbed her eyes to clear away the dampness clinging to her lashes. This wasn't the time for tears; it was time for action. She threw her legs over the side of the bed and stood. Looking down, she noticed her burnt orange jersey dress was splattered in blood. She touched her arm, bound tight with bandages. Pain throbbed in response and she knew she hadn't been healed yet. Which meant she wasn't bound to her new 'prince'. There was still time.

Pulling off the dress, she went to the mahogany dresser across from the bed and fished out a large T-shirt and a pair of jogging pants. She dressed in a hurry and crept from the room. Once the door was closed she took the hall at a run. She burst out of the front door and looked around in dismay. She wasn't on campus. Actually, she wasn't sure where she was.

"Need a lift, honey?"

Rosemary glanced at the cab that had pulled up in front of her. She nodded. "Yes."

She climbed in, not thinking twice about the fact that she had no money. She gave the driver directions to the apartment Largo and Kurt shared off campus. Hopefully Largo would still be there, or Kurt would be back. She'd get the cash from one of them, then force them to come up with another solution.

They'd have to try. She was their queen. They had to do as she commanded, and even though she'd never tried to use that power before, this time she would. Her first ordinance was that her nest not be torn apart. Her orders would be that her heart be spared, that none that she loved be stolen from her.

* * * *

Largo went down to pay the cab. Felix joined her on the sofa, drying her tears with a gentle brush of his fingers.

"I'm okay," he whispered, pulling her into his lap and hugging her tight. "God, Rosy, I'm sorry. I didn't know..."

"Didn't know seeing you beaten would bother me? Or didn't know losing you would break something inside me." She wrapped her arms around his neck and clung to him. She wasn't taking the chance of him getting away again.

Felix winced and shifted to take the weight of her off his ribs. "Both. Neither." He cocked his head and tried to grin. It was shaky at best. "What was the question again?"

Rosemary turned so she could straddle him. She smoothed her hands carefully up his chest. "Let me heal you."

"No. You're not healed yet yourself." He pushed her hands down. "When Brandon gets here, we'll both be better."

"Brandon? He's coming here?" She tried to stand.

Felix held her in place. "Yes."

"Felix, let me go." When he shook his head, she grabbed a handful of his hair and tugged. "Now."

His hands fell to his side. He'd never admit it, but he was almost as submissive as Shiloh. Probably why all his girls had so much fun with him.

She stood and backed away. The door opened. She swivelled and Largo stepped forward. She tried to dodge him but he caught her wrist and picked her up.

"Let me go!" She thrashed, kicking at him, not caring when he grunted in pain. She reached for the power to make him obey and felt herself cut off. It was so abrupt, like running full speed and stopping short before reaching the edge of a sharp drop. She teetered over the edge and went still.

"Bring her in the back room," the Professor said in a grim tone from behind them.

Largo carried her to his room and put her on the bed. He opened his mouth.

"Leave us." Professor Rhodes cleared the door, arms crossed, looking down at her. His gaze never shifted as Largo walked out. He regarded her with the same disapproval he had when she'd admitted to missing his assignment. "I hadn't been told you could be this childish."

"I'm not childish! I just want to go!" She pushed away from the bed, stomping her foot hard on the wood floor when he blocked the door. "Move!"

"I will, if you're sure that's what you want." His eyes went over her. "But I was under the impression that you needed a prince."

Rosemary wanted to smack him for reminding her. Her palm itched and she dug her nails into it to stall the urge. "I do."

"But now that you have him, you want nothing to do with him?"

"I don't want to let them go!"

"Childish. Very unappealing." He circled her, paused at her side and frowned at her. "You'd kill them to keep them?"

Her shoulders drooped and she hugged herself. "No."

"Good, then we're agreed." He took a seat on the bed and crossed his legs, one ankle on his knee. "You don't want to leave and you want me to stay."

"No. Yes." She shook her head in frustration and clenched her hands in her hair. "I don't know!"

"Then let me make the decision easier for you." He braced his hands on the bed behind him. "Felix had three broken ribs and a fractured jaw. He's in a great deal of pain. We can fix that."

For how little he knew of her, he'd played the right hand to get her to comply. Mentioning her own injuries would have got him nowhere. She wondered if Kurt had given him a few tips on how to deal with her.

"What's in it for you?" She cocked a hip and looked him over. "Rumour has it you're not into school girls. We wouldn't want to soil your reputation." She smirked. "Think about it, you could lose your job."

"No one has to know." He shrugged. "And to be honest, the idea of the position draws me. Not only little girls dream of becoming royalty."

"Ha, ha." Rosemary sighed. There was no use. Much as she hated it, she had to go through with it. "Fine. Let's get it over with."

"Not so fast," he said when she stepped towards him. "We're doing this my way."

"Professor Rhodes—"

"Brandon." He tilted his head to one side in thought. "Actually, no. How about Sir until we're on better terms."

Rosemary licked her lips uncertainly. This was not promising. "Fine. Sir." She swallowed the bitterness that followed the address. "Like you said, Felix is hurt."

"Guess you better start playing nice." Brandon—she refused to call him professor in her head if she had to call him Sir out loud—gave her a cold smile. "Take your clothes off. I want to see what I'm getting into."

She bit her tongue, but did as he said. Without preamble she discarded his T-shirt and jogging pants and stood before him in her panties and bra.

"Everything." He tapped his fingers on the dark blue coverlet and checked his watch. "And hurry. I have a meeting scheduled."

"You've got some nerve," she muttered even as she unhooked her bra.

He gave her an offhand shrug. "Largo confided that you need another dominant. You have too many submissives and you are submissive yourself by nature. I fit the role and it will bring some balance to the nest."

Despite herself, Rosemary shivered, her body feeling anticipation that her mind wouldn't admit to. The moisture gathering between her thighs wouldn't let her fool herself into believing she didn't want him. Only her battered heart clung to the useless notion and its grasp was slipping.

"I'm waiting."

Rosemary slid her panties off and straightened.

"Better." His eyes trailed over her. "Well, that's going to have to go." He motioned her forward. She took a few hesitant steps. "Lie down and spread your legs."

Her face burning, Rosemary complied, turning her head to the side so she didn't have to look at him. She felt the weight of him leave the bed.

The bedroom door opened and she heard him speaking low with Largo. The door slammed shut and heavy footsteps crossed the room. A drawer by the bed slid open. Something buzzed and she glanced down in alarm when the buzzing passed between her thighs.

"I like my woman clean shaven," he said as he relieved her of the soft, neatly trimmed curls that covered her pussy. Once he was finished, he petted her bare mound. "Much better."

She hissed in a breath and tried to close her legs. He held them open and pulled something from his pocket. She arched her neck to see what it was.

He pressed his hand to the centre of her chest and shoved her back. "Don't move." Something hard prodded at her opening, something cold. "I think Largo was toying with the idea of teaching you the role of a true submissive, but never got up the nerve." The object twisted into her and her body fought it, trying to push it out. He forced it inside and held it there with the palm of his hand flat against her. "Considering you've been introduced to every other kind of sexual act by your boys, I believe it's only appropriate that I take this."

"They took all the other steps first." She closed her eyes and felt hot tears slide down her cheeks. "They kissed me and made love to me before they tried anything more."

"They have their roles and I have mine." He pushed up with one hand and looked down at her. "Do you want me to stop?"

Something inside screamed, 'Yes!' She shook her head so she wouldn't voice it.

"Good girl." He backed away. "Now make sure that stays inside you." He took something out of his pocket. A remote. "Sit up."

She sat up and the hardness drove deep. He pushed the button of the remote. The thing inside her began to vibrate, jolting her with a shock of pleasure.

"We'll start with the basics because I don't have much time." He pointed to the floor. "Crawl to me."

Rosemary lowered to her knees, clenching all the muscles within to keep the vibrating object in place. As she crawled, it shifted. She stopped and groaned, the slickness of her, causing it to slip. She held herself up with one hand and reached between her legs to keep it from sliding out.

"No, use your muscles." He smiled, baring clenched teeth. "Largo tells me you're still quite tight, even after much use. I'm sure you can manage."

Her entire being focussed on clenching, Rosemary continued crawling until she was at his feet. Wetness oozed from her, slicking her thighs, held close together as she rose. She felt pressure building and gave herself over to the rising climax.

The vibrating stopped abruptly. The edge of orgasm melted to a dull throb.

Brandon latched on to her hair and tugged her head back. "Not yet." He knelt in front of her. "Not until I give you permission."

"Permission?" she sputtered in outrage. How dare he!

"Yes." He unzipped his pants with his free hand and took hold of his dick. He pressed the tip of it against her lips. She opened her mouth, willing to suck him off if it would end things quickly. He shifted. "Did I tell you to do that?"

"No," she whimpered when he pulled harder at her hair.

"No, what?"

"No, Sir." She sighed when he released her hair and the buzzing started again.

"Very good. You learn quick." He thrust towards her. "Now suck, make sure I'm nice and wet."

She enveloped him in her mouth without question, letting her saliva dribble from her mouth, dipping her head forward until he hit the back of her throat.

"Skilled too." He withdrew suddenly and strode around her. "This may turn out to be an agreeable arrangement after all." He pressed a hand on her back and she dropped to her hands. Then he spread her ass cheeks and prodded a finger into her tiny hole. "This will be the fastest way." He pushed his finger in to mid-knuckle. "I won't be distracted by how many have used it before me. Largo admitted he only introduced you to anal recently."

Rosemary wondered when Largo had had the time to tell Brandon so much.

"Tell me you want your prince to fuck you in the ass."

Bristling, Rosemary clamped her lips shut. She wanted to tell him to go to hell, wanted to say he'd never be her prince.

A throb in her arm tore her from the useless fancy and reminded her of the pain Felix was still in.

"Please." She curved like a cat and stuck her ass up. "I want you to fuck me in the ass — my prince."

The head of his dick replaced his finger. He strained forward, not wet enough for easy passage. She heard him spit and felt him move just long enough to smear the spit over his erection and try again. This time he managed to breach her, but not very far.

"Damn it, you're too tight." He shoved hard and she choked on a cry.

The door opened. Brandon stood and grabbed a sheet off the bed to conceal himself.

Largo looked at Rosemary, then snapped his eyes to Brandon. "Is everything all right?"

"No." Brandon glared at him. "You told me she'd done this before."

Largo frowned. "Done what?"

"Did you or did you not fuck her in the ass?" Brandon's eyes snapped with anger and the air crackled around them.

"I did." Largo didn't look fazed. Rosemary was relieved and had to remind herself that he'd dealt with hot-tempered 'royals' before. "Have *you* ever done this before?"

Brandon's jaw ticked. "No."

Going to his end table, Largo pulled open a drawer and took out a small tube. He tossed it to Brandon. "Use lube. It'll help."

Brandon caught the tube and stared at it, his expression unreadable. He lifted his head and focussed on Largo. "Come here."

Largo's brows drew together. He glanced at Rosemary, then stepped up to Brandon. His stance of attention proved how deeply habit was ingrained in him. Brandon was taking the role of prince and Largo responded to his superiority by instinct.

When Brandon punched him, he staggered, then straightened, not even bothering to wipe away the blood.

Rosemary's eyes narrowed. He might be used to this, but she wasn't. She pushed to her feet, pulled the vibrator out of her and threw it across the room. "That's enough."

"Get back on your knees," Brandon said, not looking at her.

Rosemary stepped in front of him and slapped him. Her palm stung, bringing her back to her senses. She gaped at her hand.

The blotchy red of his cheek brought out the rage in his eyes. Brandon hit Largo again, hard enough to knock the bigger man to his knees. "I won't hit you, Rosemary," Brandon said, kicking Largo in the ribs.

Largo grunted and moved to stand.

Brandon punched him again. "But I will use them to punish you." He pointed at the floor. "I suggest you do as I say and quickly. Both need healing now and time is running out. If this continues, they'll suffer until I finish my meeting—that is if I feel like coming back right after."

Rosemary knelt beside Largo, putting her hand on his arm and giving it a little squeeze, hoping he knew how sorry she was for making him pay for her disobedience. The word felt odd in her mind, like it didn't belong. Disobedience, how could a queen be disobedient? The prince was supposed to be a consort, not a ruler, not over her.

She had to admit, this situation was different. The nest needed Brandon, not the other way around. That gave him more power than he should ever have.

The tube of lube was smacked into her palm. Brandon stood before her. "Decide now. Do you want to get this over with, or do you want to wait until later?"

"I want to get it over with."

"Good, then get me nice and slicked up." He looked at Largo while she spread the lube over his dick with her hands. "You can hold her in the right position for me."

Largo nodded, and when Rosemary was finished, he pulled her to face him, gave her a quick kiss and manoeuvred her into a bowed posture. Arms snug against her sides, he clasped her hands at the base of her spine and let her rest her forehead on his hard stomach. The scent of him, all sweat and faded cologne, lingered on her every inhale. Just beyond the reach of her mouth he strained long and hard against his shorts. She wiggled down and played her lips over him, pressing through the rough material with her teeth.

Brandon took to his knees between her thighs and directed his hard dick between her cheeks. He latched onto her hair and tugged her away from Largo even as he drove fast and

hard into her ass. He filled her easily with the lube smoothing his passage. She clenched down and he groaned.

"Better, much better." He wrapped one arm around her waist and lifted her up so he could go deeper. "I'm not sharing right now, Rosemary. Largo is here as a prop, nothing more."

Rosemary inhaled softly and met Largo's eyes. He gave a subtle nod. He was okay. He was telling her she should make nice with their prince.

She had a better idea.

Like a black orb, the core of her power gathered within, rolling and growing, barely restrained. She guided it into Brandon with care, knowing he had the strength to block it if he sensed what she was doing. He grunted and rammed in. She took the opening to expand the orb. Tendrils extended from it, latching on to the source of his power. She drained him, covering the action with a thrust of pleasure. He gasped and came hard. The orb exploded, sparks of it escaping his flesh and entering Largo, more spiriting through the walls to find Felix.

Both were healed in seconds. She felt Brandon slacken and fall away from her. Satisfied, she stood and smirked at him.

His eyes promised revenge as he dragged himself to his feet, panting. He stumbled to the bathroom and she heard him curse as he slammed into something.

That's what you get for messing with my nest you cocky bastard, she moved around the room, humming to herself as she put it to order. She looked up at the groan of the mattress.

Largo laughed and stretched languorously as the excess energy filled him with a drunken sensation. "That was...wow." He rolled to his side and studied her. "But you didn't enjoy it."

"No." Brandon came out of the bathroom, combing his hair with wet fingers. He looked worn and a little haggard. "And she won't until I see fit to let her." He stepped up to Rosemary, challenge in his gaze. "I'm sure you're quite pleased with yourself now, but that will change." He grabbed her arm and put some pressure on her wound. "You didn't save any for yourself, and you didn't feed." He smirked. "Short-sighted of you."

Rosemary smiled, unconcerned. "Why? I have six others to work with."

"No, you don't." He looked at Largo. "You are all forbidden to touch her until I say otherwise. I expect you to notify the others."

"You can't do that!" Rosemary blinked at Largo when he hunched his shoulders. "Largo, you don't have to listen to him!"

Largo sat up slowly, his hard gaze fixed on Brandon. "You'll kill her."

"It will make her sick, but it will take a while to kill her." Brandon corrected with a smirk of his own. "I guess you'd better hope she makes this up to me quick."

"You arrogant son of a bitch." Rosemary watched Brandon dress and thought about fetching one of Kurt's knives. It would be perfect for cutting out her 'prince's' black heart. That was if Kurt hadn't taken them all. "I won't let you do this."

"I'd like to see how you're going to stop me, my dear." He did his tie up tight. "You obviously need to learn that I—unlike the others of *our* nest—won't be kissing that sweet, little ass. I will be respected and obeyed or I will make your life a living hell."

He walked out of the room and the front door slammed shut soon after.

Felix appeared in the doorway, his mouth opening and closing a few times before he managed to get a word out. "Is this for real?"

Rosemary looked at Largo. He nodded.

Felix scowled. "No way." He reached out and pulled Rosemary to him. Then shot away from her, hissing in pain as though he'd embraced a flame.

"Professor Rhodes isn't your average teacher. There's a reason he can resist you, the same reason he's evaded being drawn into a nest until now," Largo said, rubbing his face with his hands the way he did when he was getting sleepy. "I got a phone call from—" He stopped and dropped his eyes to the carpet. Then he cleared his throat. "I was told everything I need to know about him. He's got all the qualities to make a strong prince, but even in a lesser position he would have been useful. Tapping into that power would make any queen unbeatable, but she's got to be able to master him."

Feeling a sliver of hope, Rosemary sat at his side on the bed, careful not to sit too close. "Can I?"

Largo shook his head. "You're too young. Your best bet is to make him happy, try to come to some kind of truce."

"There's got to be another way."

“You find one, let me know.” Largo collapsed on the bed and draped one arm over his face. “Just do it soon.” He put a hand on his crotch and winced. “I might be healed, but I’ve got a serious case of blue balls. Could be fatal.”

Rosemary scowled. “If I don’t figure this out, it just might be.”

Chapter Fifteen

The white gown flowed around her like a curtain, tangling around her legs, clinging like something alive when the mist soaked into it. Gravel dug into her feet but she could feel nothing. Naturally. It was only a dream.

Set apart from herself, observing from afar, she could see her flesh stretched over her face, creating a frightening mask. She had the appearance of one who'd been starved.

The worst thing was, the dream was a fair reflection of reality. She hadn't fed in over a week and it was starting to show. Not to the extent the dream portrayed, but close.

For the first few days after being claimed by her prince, Rosemary had stubbornly refused to speak to him, or to any of the others in her nest. Brandon no doubt felt the hunger that was spreading over them all. He'd come to her eventually and they'd reach an understanding. Maybe compromise.

That's what she told Alaire, then Felix, then Largo, each in turn when they'd called. It hadn't happened. Brandon's patience was indomitable. Hers...not so much.

Awake, she'd considered going to him. Asleep, she'd made the decision. She'd find him and beg him to lift the restrictions, do whatever he asked to save her nest. Much as she hated him this had gone too far. Her pride wasn't worth the pain she was causing those that relied on her.

The only problem was that it was only a dream. She had to wake up and act out her convictions in truth.

But she couldn't. Her eyes wouldn't open. She could only continue on her aimless path, searching for a way to end her fast.

"Hey, pretty girl." A flick of light, an exhalation of smoke and a figure stepped into her path. She watched him set the cigarette between his lips and drink her in with his hot gaze. "What are you doing out here? Looking for something?"

Rosemary shivered. The dream air had grown cold. Goosebumps rose on her flesh. She squinted at the boy through the smoke. "Yes. I must find my prince." She cocked her head and her hair fell over one shoulder, brushing against one hard nipple. "Have you seen him?"

He laughed and grabbed her arm. "I've got your prince right here, baby."

She stared at her arm. It felt bruised. Impossible. There was no pain in a dream.

"It's been a long time since I've had one of you sweet, drunk school girls." He pulled her close and sniffed. "Funny, you don't smell like you've been drinking."

"I haven't been. I'm sleeping." She was, wasn't she?

"Whatever." He tugged at her nightgown until it ripped. The cool air caressed her breasts and he groaned, covering one with his hand. "You've got to have the nicest tits I've ever seen."

"Do I?" Rosemary smiled at him. "Why don't you taste them?"

"Don't have to tell me twice." He lowered his head and flicked her nipple with his tongue, then sucked as much of her breast as he could manage into his mouth. His teeth grazed her, sending a shock of pain along her nerves. Deep in her gut, the hunger that had been denied latched onto him, rolling him in his own desire. He made a gruff sound in his throat and picked her up.

Rosemary felt light, like she was flying. Then she felt herself falling and the earth hit her. Twigs and rocks ground into her flesh and something wrenched into her body, feeling like it was ripping her open. She opened her eyes wide and saw him, bucking above her, jabbing his dick into her dry body.

"Stop." She shifted when he went still. "Not on the ground. Take me from behind, against that tree."

He stared at her, blinking as though sure he'd heard wrong. Then he pulled out and tugged her to her feet, shoving her towards the tree. "Bend over then, you crazy bitch."

When he came to her again, moisture eased his way. He slammed into her, humping like a dog.

Still apart from her body, Rosemary smiled and licked her lips. "That's right. Give it to me. Every last drop."

* * * *

A cold spray of water hit her face. Rosemary sputtered awake and held her hand in front of her face to shield herself from the assault. Wylie turned the showerhead off and Alaire handed her a towel to dry her face.

She was sitting in a bath full of bubbles, bubbles that had gone grey over lukewarm water that was nearly black. Her body felt sated but sore.

And she had a very bad feeling she hadn't been dreaming at all.

"What happened?" She reached out for Wylie and he moved away. Felix shuffled back and looked at his hands. She stood fast, causing water to slop over the edge of the bath. "Will someone talk to me!"

Largo stepped into the doorway. "You were attacked."

"By who?"

"Some random guy. We didn't bother to get his name before we got rid of the remains."

Rosemary stepped out of the bath and braced herself on the sink. "Remains? I *killed* him?"

"He *attacked* you," Wylie pointed out, taking a step towards her as though to offer comfort. His hand hovered over hers then dropped to his side. "Shiloh said you weren't the first girl he's done this to, but thankfully, you're the last."

"Shiloh?" Rosemary's thoughts raced. She'd killed someone. It didn't matter that he'd attacked her. Not really. It could have just as easily been anyone.

"Yeah. He's the one that found you and called the rest of us." Felix shoved his hands in his jean pockets. "By the time we got there, all that was left of the guy was a pile of ash. We thought you'd done it, but it turns out our quiet boy packs quite a punch when he's pissed."

"Shiloh carried you here," Largo said, glancing back into the room behind him. "He's in pretty bad shape."

Rosemary grabbed a towel and wrapped it around her. She headed out of the bathroom, biting her lip when Largo jumped away from her. She tripped over the carpet and fell to her knees when she saw Shiloh. He looked like he'd been lit on fire. His skin was still smoking.

"What have I done?" she whispered, digging her nails into the carpet. "How could I be so selfish?"

"That doesn't matter now." Wylie sat on the arm of the sofa and bent over her, as close as he could without contact. "What matters is that you stop this little battle of wills you've got going on with Brandon. I know you can't stand him, hell, I don't blame you, but there's no choice anymore."

"You're right." Rosemary closed her eyes and leant back, drawing her knees to her chest. "I've killed someone, I'm putting all of you at risk." She tilted her head to look up at him, then over at Felix who stood by Alaire. Last, she faced Largo. "I'd already made the decision, but it was too late. I'm obviously not fit to lead this nest." She inhaled and stood. "I guess this will be the first nest ever to have a king."

Largo smiled grimly. "Looks like." He went to the other end of the room and picked up a schoolbag. Hers. "Chetan went to talk to Brandon. He said he'd speak to you after class. He said you've skipped twice and if you do so again we'll all regret it." He frowned. "So don't, okay?"

Chapter Sixteen

Caught in the flow of students all locked in silence when they saw the teacher was already at his desk, Rosemary was able to numb herself to all that had and would happen. She took her seat and faced front, dropping her eyes when Brandon looked her way. He went to the blackboard and wrote the pages he wanted them to read with harsh strokes of the chalk, looking like he was carving the numbers with a knife. When he sat, he slapped open a book and held his pen in a white knuckled fist.

Not a single student moved. When the quiet drew out to the point that it seemed to steal all the oxygen in the room he glanced up, his eyes hard and cold.

"You may begin."

A rustle of papers and the entire class devoted themselves to reading, tension hovering over them like thick smoke, none understanding the danger, but every one wary of it. Finally the bell rang and with it came an audible sigh of relief. The students hustled out, heads down, shoulders bent as though they were afraid the blow would come before they managed to escape.

Rosemary didn't move until the door slammed shut. The sound hit her and she cringed, hugging her books to her chest and hiding her face behind her hair.

"Someone had to die for you to come to me?" Brandon stalked up to her desk and abruptly smacked the palms of his hands against it. "Or maybe even that wasn't enough. You only came because one of your precious boys was wounded saving you from the repercussions of what you'd done. Not very flattering."

"Does it matter why I came?" Rosemary hunched over her desk, careful not to touch him. "I'm sorry. I was wrong. We need you and I should have appreciated that you were willing to help us."

"Do you even care that a life was lost to your stubbornness?" Brandon grabbed her wrist and held her hands in front of her face. "You are no better than any of your kind. You're a killer. Are you proud of that?"

"No!" Rosemary wrenched away and stood, knocking back her chair. "Do you know how much easier it would have been to become a demonic thing that preys at random? I wouldn't have to care about who I fed from, wouldn't be forced to deal with someone like you!"

"Then go ahead! Why make your life difficult? Take the easy way out!" He turned his back on her and went to his desk, stuffing his books in his bag and making it clear he was done with her.

"I won't take the easy way out because I love them! I took them because I refused to become a monster and I will do anything to protect them!" Tossing her self-respect aside she ran to him and dropped to her knees. "Tell me what to do to make this right."

Brandon stared down at her, his lips curled in disgust. "You still haven't answered me. All I hear is you pleading for them. You took a life and it means nothing."

"That's not true." She covered her face with her hands, feeling the truth of his words ripping through her like a force that knew no mercy, a force that would turn her inside out and leave her a bloody mess on the floor. "I know I don't deserve to live after what I've done. I can't take it back and dying will only bring more death. If I knew how to release them, I would, but I can't. Some might survive, some are strong enough, but I won't risk the others."

"He wasn't lying." Brandon stepped away from her and dropped his briefcase on his desk. "He said you were a selfless queen, but I didn't believe him. I didn't think such a thing was possible." He returned and drew her to her feet. She didn't ask who 'he' was. She already knew, just as she knew why Brandon wouldn't say his name. They both knew he wasn't up to the competition, even if it was with the one she'd lost and cherished in memory.

Brandon wisely stuck with the ground he'd gained. "I won't have you question me, Rosemary."

"I won't." Rosemary chanced a glance at him and was relieved to see that he'd relaxed and was looking at her with calm consideration. "Just don't punish them anymore."

"Fine." Brandon stepped up to his desk and patted it. "Come here."

Rosemary went to his side. He studied her for a moment, making her feel self-conscious. She'd dressed with care to meet with him in a knee-length grey skirt and a black cardigan over a grey and white diamond print shirt. She looked demure, perfect for her role with her new prince.

"Very nice. For once you don't look like a slut." He paced behind her, running his hand over the back of her skirt and letting out a short laugh. "But we both know you are. No more games. Bend over the desk."

Her eyes burned with a threat of tears, but she did as he said, lying over the desk in a crude posture that undermined the modest attire. He flipped up her skirt and cupped her ass.

"And under it all a sexy black thong. Why am I not surprised?" He chuckled and ran his finger along the lacy material that barely covered her. "Next time..." He slid his finger to the strap of material at her hip and tugged it down. "Don't bother wearing anything under your skirt when you come to my class. Might as well be ready."

"But..." Rosemary chewed at her lip, hating the idea of sitting through an entire class knowing she was already prepared to submit to him. She'd gone out with Largo once without wearing panties at his request, but Largo's dominance was done with an undertone of respect. With Brandon it would be demeaning, as it was meant to be.

"Are you questioning me?"

"No."

"Good." He dug his fingers into the tight flesh of her ass. Then he pushed her legs apart and knelt behind her. "Well, at least you've kept yourself clean."

Rosemary gnashed her teeth together. She knew he meant that she'd continued shaving herself bare, but the implication stung. She took pride in her hygiene, in keeping her body in good condition and never going to any of the boys at less than her best. Her mother would force her men to take her as they found her, make them go down on her after an orgy with strangers.

"The boy you killed was the first stranger you've ever been with," Brandon said as he covered her with his hand, leaning close so he could see her face. She kept her eyes down. "You can't even remember most of it, can you?"

"No." Rosemary turned as much as she could with him holding her. "I thought I was dreaming. Most of what happened is a blur."

"If it makes you feel better, security's been looking for the guy for a while. A few girls reported attacks, but he was never found." His cold reassurance only made her feel worse.

Exposed to him as she was, it came as another accusation. Wylie had told her pretty much the same thing, but to comfort her. Brandon didn't care how she felt.

So she gave him the answer she knew he wanted. "It doesn't make me feel better. In the condition I was in, it could have been anyone."

"That's right." Her reward was another touch, one that stirred the passions that bore no prejudice to where it came from. His fingers dove inside her and he humped against her even as his fingers mimicked the motion. "And we're going to make sure you never get that desperate again."

"You'll let the boys touch me again?" Rosemary asked, instantly questioning the wisdom of her words.

"Make me happy and I'll give you twenty-four hours to enjoy them. I'm sure that will be plenty."

Making him happy in mind, Rosemary lifted her ass to give him easier access. Already she was thinking of going to Shiloh with one or two of the others and using the energy to heal him if her time with Brandon wasn't enough. Brandon jabbed his fingers in deep, bringing her back to the present.

"Don't move. Don't forget who's in control." He twisted his hand before she could answer and prodded her tiny asshole with his thumb. When he got it in all the way, he continued his manipulations, teasing, toying with her, bringing her to the brink before withdrawing his hand. "No matter what I do, I want you to keep one thing in mind." She heard the metallic rip of a zipper and felt the thick head of him prodding at her. "Your body is mine. You don't come until I say so."

He slammed into her in one vicious thrust, groaning as he leant back a little and worked his hand between them, twisting one, then two fingers into her tight ass. Filled so completely, Rosemary couldn't even think to move. All she could do was keep his command in mind and fight her body's natural urges. When he drew out and slammed back in, she forced her mind to painful memories to stall climax. She thought of her brother, of her father and of Kurt, who she might never see again.

Her hips hit the desk and the pain fed into the urge to release. She pictured Shiloh, in pain, burnt because he'd held her, and the pleasure died. Her body ached with the tiny tendrils of power that struggled for freedom to feed, but she leashed it with all her strength

and waited, knowing that letting it loose would anger Brandon, knowing his anger would come with consequences that would make them all suffer.

He fucked her harder and harder, reaching around to stimulate her clit with his free hand. Climax thrashed at her, begging for release. She could feel him getting closer to his own release. She clenched to drive him over the edge.

"Now," he grunted, holding back. "Do it now."

She bit her tongue to keep from screaming when it hit her. He bit her shoulder through her shirt to muffle his own cries as her power stabbed into him. She came. He came. The power roared and burst into her. She gathered as much as she could and tossed it out with Shiloh in mind, hoping it would reach him.

Suddenly, she was empty. Her skirt dropped, covering her.

She closed her legs and turned to look down at Brandon, collapsed on the floor and holding himself as though in great pain.

"Go on. You got what you wanted." He pulled up his pants to cover himself and glared at her when she didn't move. "I said get out!"

Rosemary ran. She didn't stop until she'd gotten to her room, past Stephanie who looked up from her books with a gasp. Her tears flooded out like they were yet another part of her that refused to be denied and she collapsed, steps away from her bed.

Stephanie sat at her side and held her, pulling out her phone while she whispered empty, comforting words.

Alaire came and took her to the boys' room, leaving her to Largo when nothing he said could reach her.

Largo just held her. Only he knew nothing he said could make things right. He did the best he could in letting her drink in his presence and knowing all that she'd surrendered herself for. He latched onto the others and let her sense them, alive and well, because of her.

Her physical death wouldn't keep them that way, but the sacrifice of all else just might.

Chapter Seventeen

Cool silk covered her, wrapping around her legs in a soft caress, flowing over her body with the comfort of gently lapping water warmed in the sun. Rosemary stretched and turned her face into the pillow. The scent hit her with its painful familiarity. She was in Kurt's bed.

At her soft cry someone across the room stirred, rising with a groan. Rosemary watched Largo step towards her and turned her face to hide the dewy tears that clung to her lashes.

"I'm sorry." He closed the rest of the distance between them in three long strides. "I didn't think. I only wanted to get you out of reach of *him*."

"He knows where you live." She gestured vaguely towards his room. "My first time with my prince was on your floor."

Largo winced. "I know. If there was any other way..."

The door opened and Shiloh came in, holding a glass of wine and glancing at them as though uncertain whether he was welcome. He bit his lip and approached the bed, holding out the glass like a peace offering.

"*He* won't come here, not today." Shiloh sat on the edge of the bed when she took the glass and laid his hand on her thigh. "He's sticking around campus and flirting with the faculty. There are rumours floating around about him keeping you after class."

The wine sloshed over the rim of the glass and spilled over Rosemary's chest. Largo handed her one of his black T-shirts to wipe it up. She was relieved that the silk nightgown she'd been dressed in was black as well. The stain wouldn't show.

"The rumours will make it worse." She dropped the damp T-shirt on the bed and drained the last of the wine in a gulp. "He'll be harder to handle."

"He can't be handled at all," Largo said bitterly, dropping onto the foot of the bed and making it groan.

"We have twenty-four hours," Shiloh said, taking the glass from her hand. "Let's not waste it."

His firm tone forced Rosemary to really look at him. Something in her shy boy had changed. He'd healed, she'd succeeded in that at least, but he was harder somehow, more assertive than she'd ever seen him.

"Rosemary, I hate the idea of you dealing with that man for us. I know we can't change it, but we can give you something to hold on to when you're with him." Shiloh slid his hand up her knee and leaned close. "Strength, passion." He cupped her face in his hand. "Love."

His lips pressed over hers in a gentle massage, his tongue gliding over her lips until she opened her mouth. Her tears wet their lips, the salt of them making it something sweet and sharp all at once. His arms wrapped around her and she rose up on her knees. His hands drifted down the silk to the base of her spine. Warmth pressed from behind and she felt Largo's strong form against her back, felt his arms holding them both. Shiloh shook and his tears joined her own. She slid her arms around his neck.

"Please tell me we're not being left out," Alaire said from the doorway.

Rosemary shook her head and waved him over even as she held Shiloh to her chest, passing her hand over his back and letting him dry his tears on her gown before the others could see them. Largo gave them one last firm hug, patted Shiloh's shoulder and sat back against the bed frame.

"Come on in, boys. There's plenty of room," Largo said.

Alaire came to her first, squeezing Shiloh's arm as he passed and lifting her off the bed as he kissed her. He sat with her in his lap and suddenly Wylie was drawing her to her feet, pressing his lips all over her face and wrapping her hair around his hands. He moved to her throat as Chetan joined them, whispering sweet nothings against her lips before giving her the softest of kisses. Felix came last, smiling even as he claimed her mouth.

"I don't know how this is going to work." He wrapped his hands around her hips and set her on the bed in the small bit of space not occupied by the others. "None of us wants to let you go."

He was right. Already she felt their hands, resting on her thighs, on her shoulders and sides. Felix took hold of her one free hand and she brought it to her lips.

"We have all night and I will cherish every second." Her eyes drifted down to the nightgown. "All I ask is that this isn't ruined. It's new, isn't it?"

Largo traced the hearts that made up the neckline. "I stayed with Felix and Chetan to guard you while the others went out to buy you something pretty. We thought you needed it." He looked at Wylie, then to Shiloh and Alaire. "They made a good choice."

"Yes, they did." Rosemary didn't know how to express her gratitude. Brandon made her feel so cheap that waking in something of quality made her feel like gold. She rested against Largo's broad form. "And thank you for staying with me. I couldn't do this without you. All of you."

"You wouldn't have to." Chetan turned on his knees and faced her, ignoring the others protest. "They won't say it, but I will. Forget the nest. We'll stay with you and do our best to keep you sated, and if we can't..."

"Do you know what I'll become?" Rosemary curved her hand on his cheek when he bowed his head. "Thank you, Chetan, but I can't do that."

"You wouldn't be a monster! You're different!" Chetan looked at the others. "Tell her!"

"She can't change what she is." Wylie squeezed her thigh and reached out to take hold of Chetan's shoulder. "I understand where you're coming from. It's hard for me to look at Rosemary and imagine her as a demon, killing to feed, leaving a trail of bodies and not caring, but only the nest will save her from that."

"Maybe she can find another prince?" Felix said quietly.

Largo shook his head. "If she was a pure succubus, maybe, but as a cambion there's only one."

"We're wasting time. Rosemary doesn't need to hear all this, she needs us." Alaire lifted the skirt of the gown and rested his head on her thigh. "She's alive. She's doing all this to keep us alive. The prince can't be replaced, but we can. Anyone who can't support her, say so now. It'll take time to find others that will stand by her against such a hateful prince."

"None of us are going anywhere." Wylie took hold of the other end of her gown and eased it up.

Rosemary lifted her arms, ready to be relieved of the cloth that stood as a barrier between her and those she needed to hold close. The gown fell from Wylie's hands and formed a black glossy puddle of silk on the floor. She hooked her fingers between the buttons of his pale blue dress shirt and tugged him to her, undoing them in a rush and spreading her

hands over his firm, black chest. He shrugged off the shirt and groaned when her fingers found his belt.

Largo moved over to the other end of the bed and rested on his side to watch them. Two sets of hands travelled over her back, one gentle, using slight pressure to relax her muscles, the other light and teasing all her nerves to life. She turned her head to see Chetan and Alaire. She kissed Alaire over her shoulder, hissing in pleasure at the play of his teeth on her bottom lip.

"Shiloh, take your clothes off," Rosemary said in a strangled voice as Chetan palmed a breast and circled a nipple with his finger. "I want to start with you."

"I don't mind waiting," Shiloh said, even as he pulled his shirt over his head.

"She's right, buddy. You might be healed, but you're weak." Largo dragged a few pillows to the head of the bed and plumped them up. "Count yourself lucky and do what the lady says."

Shiloh wiggled out of his jeans and lay on the pillows. His lips curved as Rosemary drew away from the others and crawled towards him. "Believe me, I know I'm lucky."

His smile warmed Rosemary deep inside, like he was the sun and his tender love sent rays right through her. She covered him with her body, feeling him hard against her belly and bent her head to suck on his tiny nipples. Her hands moulded into the muscles of his chest then travelled down over the slight ripple of his stomach to take him firmly in her hand.

"Just give us a few minutes, Wylie." Striking an arched pose, she tossed her hair over one shoulder and wiggled her butt so he knew what she meant. "Then you can join us."

She pressed her breasts against Shiloh's chest and hooked her free hand around the back of his neck to draw him to her, kissing him as she lifted her hips and took him inside. Her body wrapped tight around him, holding him deep, and she felt him shudder as she moved her inner muscles over him.

"Since when do you do that?" Alaire asked, close enough that she could feel his breath stir the hairs at the nape of her neck.

"Only recently. Why, are you interested?" Rosemary gave him a sultry smile as she rose, watching him watch Shiloh glide out and back in.

"I don't know." Alaire licked his lips. "You're so small."

Chetan stroked her hair, looking thoughtful. "Could hurt." He tugged at the collar of his shirt when Rosemary shimmied up and dropped down hard. "Yeah. Not happening."

"I'm game." Felix jumped onto the other side of the bed, jolting her body and making both her and Shiloh groan at the sudden movement. He leaned over and dipped his head so he could reach Rosemary's nipple with his lips. He sucked until she squirmed and grinned up at her. "I've got some experience."

"We know," Largo said with a lazy smile. "Thanks for the lube by the way."

Felix's brow rose and he shook his head. "Should have guessed it. Four bottles, Largo, you owe me."

"Oh, shut up." Largo reached into his pocket and pulled out one of the aforementioned bottles. "You'll be using it tonight anyway." He smacked the tube into Felix's hand. "Give this to Wylie."

Rosemary shook her head and let her hair fall around her and Shiloh, hiding them from the others. She could feel Shiloh swelling inside her, close to coming, much too soon. She wanted to take her time with him, share with him what Wylie would give her when he joined them.

"Hold on, Shiloh. Not yet," Rosemary whispered, wishing she could keep the others from hearing. Most were distracted by Largo's revelation, but Alaire was too close and could probably have heard them from across the room in any case. She bent over to trace Shiloh's lips with her tongue and went still to avoid pushing him over the edge. "I want to do this with you. I know you're not big on experimenting but..."

Shiloh inhaled raggedly. "I'm with you. I'll do anything you want."

"*Anything?*" Alaire said, leaning on his elbow and brushing Rosemary's hair aside so he could look at Shiloh. "Are you sure about that?"

"She wouldn't make me do..."

"Alaire, you're ruining the mood." Rosemary arched a brow at him and sat up. Just the implication of Alaire's words had slackened Shiloh inside her. He'd heard some of the horror stories of what her mother did to her men. Granted, some were bisexual, but she didn't do it for their pleasure, she did it to torture the men who were not so inclined.

"That was the point." Alaire shifted closer and kissed her belly. "It'll give Wylie some time to prep."

"Rosemary doesn't need to wait." Felix dropped to the side of the bed on his knees and gave them both an impish smile. "Wanna see something the girls taught me?"

Rosemary frowned. "I'm not sure."

"Trust me?" Felix asked.

She nodded.

He gestured to Alaire. "Help her lean back as much as possible without getting off Shiloh."

Alaire moved so he could brace his arm behind Rosemary's back. Rosemary arched, tensing her thighs to keep Shiloh inside her. Felix lowered his head and she felt his tongue, just above where Shiloh filled her, flicking up to her clit before he closed his lips around it.

Even without movement, Shiloh's presence, with the play of Felix's mouth, took her to the edge of a fierce climax. She shook, unsure whether to give in or hold out to intensify the sensation that was simmering luxuriously in the pit of her belly. Felix took the choice from her when he put his hand on her upper thigh and prodded a finger just beyond where his tongue tormented her. She felt it slick past her opening and Shiloh stiffened.

"Shh. Feel her, Shiloh." Felix stirred her wetness and shoved his finger in all the way, twisting it and hooking it to the dime-sized button of pleasure that reacted like a detonation.

Rosemary clenched and shuddered and fought not to scream as her climax ripped through her. Something slipped into her ass and she fell forward, caught by Felix who had freed his hand.

"She's so tight, but she didn't even feel it," Wylie said, amazed.

Rosemary realised he was lodged deep in her ass, on his knees behind her, holding still as though he thought the pain was imminent. When she wiggled, he took hold of her hips and thrust forward.

"Wait." Shiloh pushed Wylie's hands away and grabbed Rosemary tight to keep her from moving. "God, I've never felt you come so hard."

As Rosemary's senses returned, she could feel that Shiloh was once again rod stiff and dangerously close to tumbling over the edge.

Felix laughed. "Damn, I'm so good, I almost got you both off at the same time."

"Okay." Shiloh gritted his teeth and pushed his hips up. "Go ahead."

Wylie thrust into her with smooth strokes. Shiloh continued driving up and Rosemary turned to find Felix's lips, licking the taste of herself from him. Alaire's hands were on her breasts and soon the power that had been ignored lashed out its demands. She guided it carefully to Wylie and fed what she could to Shiloh before it was absorbed. Wylie's pace quickened and her control slipped. The power whipped at him and he jabbed forward. Rosemary cried out in pleasure and pain and a hot spurt filled her as Shiloh bucked up. Wylie tried to stop himself, but her writhing dragged him down with them. They collapsed on the bed in a pile.

"Wow." Alaire stroked her side and shook his head. "That was amazing. I almost feel like..."

"Like you were a part of it?" Largo nudged Wylie aside and pulled Rosemary into his arms. "As a complete nest, that's natural. Only..."

"Only what?" Rosemary felt drained. Not in the way she did when she hadn't fed, but in the comfortable way that comes after a vigorous work out.

"Were you holding back, trying to block the rest of us?"

"No." She tipped her head back to look at him. "Why?"

Largo hunched his shoulders for a moment, then shook his head and shrugged. "It's probably nothing, you are new at this." He settled comfortably into the pillow behind him. "With all of us so close, we should have been bowled over by the intensity of what you just did. I remember—" He cut himself off abruptly and stroked her hair. "It doesn't matter. Get some rest, I want you fresh when I attack you."

Laughing softly, Rosemary curled into him and tried to close her eyes. The warmth of the boys squeezing onto the bed around her made her sleepy, but something nagged. Largo didn't waste energy worrying for nothing. She knew what he'd remembered had to do with her mother, and he never brought her up if he could avoid it.

Sleep stubbornly evaded her, so she left the bed, careful not to wake the puppy pile of boys. In the bathroom, the shower adjusted to as much heat as she could stand, she stepped under the water to let the harsh heat and rhythmic beat wash away her worries. She tapped into her stores of energy and let it flow through her like an injection of caffeine, waking her because really, she didn't want to spare a moment to sleep.

What she really wanted was to surround herself with her boys and forget that when her time was up, they'd be out of reach again and she'd have to return to Brandon.

The door opened and she smiled. Apparently, at least one other had followed her train of thought.

"Hope we aren't bothering you," Alaire said, letting Felix clear the door before pushing it shut.

"And if you are?" Rosemary whipped her hair over one shoulder and soaped up her breasts in slow, tantalising circles.

"Then we'll leave," Felix said with a smirk, reaching for the door handle.

Rosemary stepped under the spray to rinse off the soap. "Get over here."

"Yes, ma'am." Felix crossed the room and she held out her arms, their tongues mingling, her wet body soaking his clothes.

Alaire chuckled as he shed his own. "Short sighted, Felix." He stepped into the bath and his hands stroked over Rosemary's slick sides. "We'll be halfway done by the time you get your clothes off."

"Alaire," Rosemary started, losing the will to speak when he sucked at her neck and covered her ass with his hands.

"Yes?" He slicked his lips down her spine, then turned her when Felix backed away to shed his T-shirt and boxers.

All she could do was brace her hands on the wall as he spread her thighs and tested her readiness with a finger. The single digit stirred in her as his tongue lapped away any conscious thought. She turned her head at Felix's approach and surprised him by wrapping her hand around the base of his shaft and drawing him to her mouth. He stood half in, half out of the bath and raked his fingers into the heavy weight of her hair. Alaire sucked at her and she sped up, letting a coat of saliva ease the rapid motion, Felix's dick hitting the back of her throat hard when Alaire added a few more fingers and started fucking her with them.

"Please," Rosemary gasped as she lifted her head and stuffed down an orgasm before it could take her. "I don't want to come until you're both inside me."

"We don't have lube," Alaire said as he straightened, pulling her close to kiss her, knowing how she loved to taste herself on them.

Felix reached around them and grabbed a bottle of conditioner from the edge of the bath. "We can improvise."

"You make me feel like an amateur," Alaire grumbled, bowing his head back when Rosemary grazed his throat with her teeth.

"You all have your talents. Felix just happens to bring the experience of half a dozen girls with him." She bit down hard enough to leave a mark, tasted the sharp tang of blood, knowing what rough play did to Alaire. She smiled when his shoulder hit the wall and he grunted.

Alaire was one of the hardest to get off balance, but when it happened, the result was invigorating. He wasn't passive, and took each small attack like a challenge. When she threw down the gauntlet, he took it up with relish and they came to a level playing field that she couldn't reach with the others.

He grabbed her by the arms and held her against the wall. "You wanna play that way?"

"You're not up to playing on my level, Alaire." Rosemary undulated her body against him, digging her nails into his sides when he wouldn't let her go. "The pain I can dish out is more than you can take."

"Try me." Alaire released one arm and pried her legs apart, opening her wide and nudging at her entrance with the swollen head of his dick. He bit her neck and hooked his hands around the back of her knees. He lifted her and plunged into her in one smooth motion, his teeth still locked painfully into her flesh.

Rosemary grated her nails up his back and raked them deep into the flesh just under his shoulder blades, causing the muscles to tense and his spine to stiffen in defence. He pulled out and slammed in, lending some of her weight to the wall to ease his violent thrusts. Each pounding of her body sent her blood rushing, ever faster, ever more eager for where this could go. His teeth broke her skin and an errant thought came to her. Changelings fed on blood, like her kind fed on lust. Alaire had never shown any need for it, but there was a first time for everything.

When Alaire seemed to focus more on the wound he'd made in her throat than the rhythm of their bodies, Rosemary started to worry. She tried to convey her fear to Felix with her eyes.

"Feed on him or he'll feed on you." Felix spread her ass cheeks and rubbed the conditioner warmed in his hands between them. He probed her tight hole with a finger and gave a little shudder. "I can only do as my lady wishes and that isn't for me to stop him."

A thrill of danger joined the violent wave of pleasure that poured into her. As his lady wishes. Felix had fallen into the habit of his djinn ancestors, granting wishes in his own twisted way. She wasn't between two boys she loved anymore. Somehow they'd both drifted over the limits of their humanity and latched onto more. She knew that Kurt's powers had doubled when he'd been pushed from her mother's nest. Largo's suspicions had some basis after all. Her nest was falling apart and she wasn't the only one becoming a savage thing.

Felix stabbed into her. Alaire moved faster, but not to give pleasure, to distract her. He growled against her neck and she felt the sticky spill of blood running down her chest with the water.

Her only defence was to do as Felix said. To feed. She stirred the sated power within, tempting it with the energy of the boys, pushing the stores into the only source close that might be able to take it. She could feel Largo wake as though she lay next to him. He reached out to her, making the transfer easier. Her body tensed, suddenly starved. It tore into the boys and forced them to live out every desire they'd known in seconds, enough to drive a mortal mad, but at that moment, neither was truly mortal. Instead of losing sanity, their focus turned to her and they attacked her with renewed fervour.

For a moment she thought she'd be split between them, the way they plunged into her body enough to make her fear they'd meet within. She drank from them as though gulping water after a long stretch in the desert. Thick liquid burst into her and Felix's legs gave, toppling them all into the bath.

"I'm sorry, Rosemary." Felix moaned and bowed his head against her shoulder. "I don't know what happened."

"I do." Rosemary moved away from the boys in a cautious way, as though she'd been beaten and was afraid to get more. "Just go to bed."

She left the bathroom and stumbled into the hall, clinging to the towel she'd managed to grab.

A hand caught her elbow. She looked up into Largo's face. "Go to my room. I'll be there in a minute."

Chapter Eighteen

The blankets became a fortress—all that stood between her and six boys she could no longer trust. She'd dressed in one of Largo's huge shirts and a pair of his boxers, but part of her still thought she'd be safer if she went home.

When the door opened, she feigned sleep.

"It's just me."

'Just', Rosemary didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Out of all the boys, none was more capable of hurting her physically than Largo, and if he was right about who he was descended from, physical danger was the least of her worries.

"Talk to me." Largo came to her side slowly, moving cautiously, as though he sensed her fear.

Rosemary couldn't hide it, and saying it out loud couldn't very well make things worse. "I'm scared."

"I know." Largo sighed and lay beside her, leaving a foot of space between them. "So am I."

"What more do I have to do? I've accepted Brandon. I do whatever he says. Why is the nest still weak?"

"Maybe because the two of you haven't really connected. If you aren't putting up a wall between us, maybe he is. Maybe he doesn't even know he's doing it." Largo's hand crept towards her, flat on the bed. She reached out and took it, pulling him closer. She could feel him relax and the tension between them eased. "I hate to have to tell you this, but..."

"Just tell me what I have to do. I'm fumbling here and I'm tired of it. I want things back to normal." Rosemary held his hand to her chest, then let it go and scooted back. Much as she needed to hold and be held, she wasn't doing either of them any favours by tempting fate. Largo would never forgive himself if he hurt her.

He grabbed her hands in both of his. "I've told you before, I have more control than the others. Just this is fine. I won't go any further, just in case, but I can hold you."

"Can you?" Rosemary heard the desperation in her own tone and it made her stomach clench miserably. She ached for a pair of arms to wrap around her, for a soft voice to tell her everything would be okay. The comforting presence she craved wasn't Largo's, but he would be more than enough.

"I can. And I think I can tell you how to fix this." He turned on his back and pulled her up so she could rest her head on his shoulder. "Give your prince a bit of your sweet self. Get to know him, give him a chance to be the man you need."

"Is tomorrow soon enough?"

Largo's smile shone in his tone. "Tomorrow will be fine."

"Good." Rosemary laid her hand on Largo's chest and closed her eyes to steer all her senses to the steady beat of his heart. "Because tonight, the man I need is you."

* * * *

Chetan met her between classes, sent by Largo to ease her hunger before their time was done. They stole into a supply closet and came together in a swift, efficient way that left her cold. Her body was satisfied, but her heart ached. Chetan opened the door to the harshly lit hall and she wanted to run.

Brandon blocked her way. He looked her over with a disdain that was becoming painfully familiar. "Every time I think I know just how pathetic you are, you sink to a whole new low. Does it please you to have your boys ready to pant over you at a moment's notice?" He glanced at his watch. "He's late for class, but I don't suppose you care."

"My drafting prof's pretty easy going." Chetan gave her a weak smile, kissed her on the cheek and started down the hall. "I'll see you later."

"Like dogs after a bitch in heat. You've got them trained well." Brandon turned on his heel.

Rosemary stared after him, wondering how the hell she could do what Largo suggested when her 'prince' insisted on being an ass.

She covered her mouth when Chetan shot past her and grabbed Brandon, hauling off and planting him with a well aimed fist.

"You don't talk to her like that." Chetan was breathing hard, his body rigid, like it took all his will not to beat the other man to a bloody pulp.

Brandon smeared the blood on his lip with his hand and glared at Chetan. "That was a mistake."

"So was what you said to her. If Kurt was here..." Chetan took a step forward.

Rosemary slammed her hands against his shoulders and held him back. "Chetan that's enough." She jabbed a finger towards the hall. "Go."

Chetan shuffled off, head down.

Rosemary turned to help Brandon to his feet. "I'm sorry about that..."

Brandon jerked away. "I'm supposed to believe that?" His chest heaved. "You love the attention."

"Brandon." She stopped herself, sensing the perfect cue. "Look, you're right. I should be able to go the day without calling one of them to me or having one of them seek me out. I can't and it's my own fault. I need you, I need your help to make this nest work."

"Nice of you to finally admit it." Brandon straightened his shirt with a sharp tug. "What do you suggest?"

"Peace." Rosemary took a deep breath. "Would it help if I came to you when I didn't need to feed? I know you feel used and I want to change that. You're my prince and I want you to know how important you are to me."

For a moment, Brandon seemed to consider her words. He studied her face to gauge her sincerity, then nodded. "It might." He burrowed into his pocket and held out a set of keys. "Go to my place. It's just off campus." He slipped a pen from his pocket and wrote the address. "I'll meet you there. We'll see if we can fix this."

Rosemary took the keys and the paper. Then she took his hand. "Thank you."

"If you're grateful then show me." Brandon freed his hand and looked down at her. "Words mean nothing."

* * * *

The first night at Brandon's apartment went well. Rosemary opened herself to Brandon in every way possible, submitting to him, using her determination to heal her nest as inspiration, showing Brandon love and devotion that he didn't deserve.

Gradually he softened to her, pleased when she revealed that she fed only from him, that she'd disciplined herself to manage on the little that she took from him, satisfied with the knowledge that she no longer snuck away with the boys between classes to keep the hunger at bay. He seemed to enjoy coming home to find her cooking supper or folding his clothes. She did her best to be an asset to him. He did his best to be pleasant.

The only thing he didn't know was that she'd found a new way to feed, a way that Felix had inadvertently taught her.

Her body had throbbed with need, crying out for relief. Without conscious thought she'd reached out to the boys, all the while straining to keep them from coming to her. Her need had transferred to them and most had retreated to their rooms, unable to cope with the strain. Felix had gone to his girls.

Three of them had been in the girls' locker room when he'd found them. They'd sensed his desperation and taken him into their embrace. Feeling like a voyeur, Rosemary had watched them. Felix felt her and drew her in, letting her experience the pleasure through him.

"Felix, baby, we've missed you," Vanessa, a small, faux blonde said. She worked down his pants and fell to her knees. Felix was already hard and her mouth was a balm as it closed around him.

The redheaded Susan shed her shirt and leaned close so he could bury his face between her tits. "I think our boy needs some relief."

Brenda, the dark beauty who had been teasing him for the longest time, undressed in a slow, sensual way. "I think we can help him."

She put a foot on the bench and bared her pussy, dropping her head back when Felix dived forward and jabbed his tongue into her hungry cunt. Alone on Brandon's bed, Rosemary rolled her panties down her thighs and touched herself.

Felix sensed the timid touch and groaned.

"Fill that pussy with your fingers," he whispered.

Susan thought he was talking to her. She dipped her hand between Brenda's thighs and drove her fingers into the dripping folds of her friend. "Keep sucking, Felix. You're going to have to fuck her soon. She's so wet."

Felix sucked, stabbing his tongue between Susan's fingers. Rosemary thrust two fingers into her hot hole, tasting Brenda's steamy juices in her own mouth. A hot spill of Felix's pleasure ran down her throat like cider heated just a little too much.

"More," Felix growled, standing and bending Brenda over the bench. Rosemary added two more fingers. Felix aimed his dick and jabbed into Brenda. Rosemary felt as though he'd jabbed into her.

"Oh, God. Harder." Brenda lifted her ass to receive each brutal thrust.

Rosemary stabbed her fingers into herself in time with Felix's hard fucking. She drank in deeper, throwing her orgasm to Felix. He grunted but held back. There were two other girls for him to take.

Rosemary screamed as one after another the girls' climaxes slammed into her. Felix finally came, his hot cum shot into the mouths of all three girls as he jerked himself off.

Rosemary's cries echoed into the empty room and a wave of blackness took her when the combined pleasure became too much. When she woke, another wave hit her from Largo who had been driven to fuck his cheerleaders in their shared room. By the time Alaire threw another wave at her while he fucked a random classmate who had been crushing on him behind the cafeteria, Rosemary was sure she'd go mad with the onslaught. She cut herself off from the boys and stumbled into the shower, hoping the cold water would bring her back to reality. By the time Brandon returned she'd gotten a grip on her body and finished remaking the bed, the evidence of her self-pleasure washed clean from the sheets.

The scent of a rich spaghetti sauce filled the apartment.

"That smells delicious." Brandon's heat pressed into her as he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her neck. It took everything she had not to wrench away from him.

"It should be ready in a bit." Rosemary checked the noodles and turned in his arms. "So how was your day?"

"Great." Brandon smiled, something dark shadowing his eyes. "The board reviewed my complaint against Chetan and he's been expelled. They asked me to press charges, but I declined. I should have, but I thought that would be a bit much. I hope you appreciate it."

Rosemary had a very strong urge to slap him. Instead she forced a smile. "I do. It's my fault Chetan's in this mess anyway. I just wish I'd figured that out before he was punished."

"Chetan's a big boy. He knew what he was doing." Brandon hooked his fingers under her skirt and folded it over her ass. He made a gruff sound of pleasure in his throat and he covered her bare ass with his hands. "You know how much I enjoy how obedient you've become? I'm always hard by the time I hit the door just picturing you ready for me under some classy outfit."

Rosemary hated it, but she had to admit, his command to forgo wearing panties and to dress decently excited her too. She'd taken to watching the clock and anticipating his arrival, his tendency to take her at his leisure a naughty little thrill. Her emotions were left untouched, but her body couldn't adopt the same indifference. He gave her what she needed and her body had learned to react on call.

Her heart remained securely locked away.

"Can you feel what it does to me?" Rosemary rose to his prodding fingers and sighed with relief when he filled her with them.

"You're so wet." He squeezed in all his fingers and pressed deep, straining to force them in to the end. "God, how are you still so tight?"

"Brandon." Rosemary spread her thighs and groaned when a hard shove smacked his hand against her ass. "Don't tease me."

"I won't." He freed himself from his pants and the engorged head of him took the place of his fingers. "But you might want to get the noodles before you overcook them."

Rosemary picked up the pot and moved it to a cold burner. Brandon followed her, holding her hips to keep their bodies connected. She took the wooden spoon she'd left on the stove and used it to stir the sauce. The spicy and sweet scent of the sauce came to her in a cloud of flavoured heat, basil and garlic and ripe tomatoes.

Brandon slid out and held himself to circle his dick around her clenching crevice. "Drain the noodles. We don't want them getting sticky."

Tongue held tight between her teeth, Rosemary brought the pot to the sink where the strainer was waiting. She dumped the noodles, sloshing scalding water on her wrist when Brandon entered her again.

"Oops." Brandon laughed and turned her roughly to face him, his dick slapping her thigh before he lifted her to sit on the edge of the sink. The steam from the noodles hit her bare ass and she shifted forward as he plunged in. She wrapped her legs around his waist for balance and let herself drift to another time, another place where she'd been taken in similar circumstances, with more care.

Kurt had helped her with dinner the first night Felix and Chetan spent with them. She'd burned her wrist on the stove rack taking out the garlic bread. Kurt came to her and soothed the pain with a gentle brush of magic. Their eyes met.

He'd bent close, his eyes closed, and his lips brushed hers. Then he'd turned and walked away. The tension between them had mounted for months, but he still couldn't cross the invisible boundary he'd erected between them.

Lost and confused, she'd done her best to occupy herself with the task at hand. She wanted the two new boys' introduction to the nest to be perfect.

Chetan had wandered into the kitchen, sniffing with exaggerated appreciation. "You're quite a cook."

"You haven't even tasted it yet." She kept her back to him, determined not to burden him with her problems.

"Don't have to. If it smells right, it tastes even better." He'd approached her slowly, as though uncertain of how he'd be received. "You and Kurt—I mean, it's none of my business, but..." He put a hand on her shoulder. "He doesn't know how you feel about him."

"You're right. It's none of your business." Rosemary lost her steel resolve and jerked away. The boy was too new to delve so deep. She regretted her harsh words the second she met his downcast eyes. "I'm sorry. It's a touchy subject."

"I shouldn't have pried."

"No, it's not that." Rosemary sighed. "To be honest, I don't know how to do this. We've dragged you in and you know next to nothing. You were offered a way out of a horrible situation and dropped into something you can't even begin to understand."

"I want to." Chetan extended his hand and she let him take hers. "You are beautiful, Rosemary. I won't lie and say that didn't have something to do with me signing up for the...nest." He blushed and ducked his head. "But I've had beautiful women before. I didn't say yes just to have a shot at that hot body."

His words drew Rosemary away from the dark hole she'd fallen into. "Then why did you?"

"I watched you when Kurt told me and Felix about how you'd almost starved to death hunting out the right men for your nest. You watched him the whole time and I could see how bad you wanted to reach out to him. You were willing to die to have someone you cared for deeply and all I could think was—I want someone to want me like that. I wanted a shot of being that man for you, or at least one of them." He looked deep into her eyes. "That you were capable of that kind of depth hooked me. Even a taste of it is worth more than everything I was offered."

"I grew up knowing that if I survived, I couldn't give that love to one man." Rosemary tightened her grip and let loose all the desperation she couldn't reveal in words. "Please don't tell me you are holding out for that kind of devotion, because I can't give it."

"You can, not to only one, but the potential to share it is there." He shook his head and gave her a shy smile. "A little piece. That's all I ask."

"Without knowing you better, all I can promise to share is my body." She'd hugged herself as the imagery hit her. She could see herself in a nest surrounded by men she loved, that loved her, and the moment she became a heartless monster like her mother and broke them like toys, easy to replace. "Don't ask me for more. Please."

"How about friendship? Can you give me that?"

The way he asked, so hesitant and vulnerable, made Rosemary smile. This she'd expected and come to terms with. "That was kinda the plan. Friends with benefits. It's almost impossible to control feeding without some kind of connection, which is why sex with strangers is so dangerous. Expect either Largo or Kurt to be nearby the first few times just in case."

Chetan nodded solemnly and caught her hip before she could turn away, pulling her to him, his words hot and breathy in her ear. "Are they close enough now?"

Rosemary swallowed and gave a barely perceptible nod. Chetan pressed a light kiss on her cheek, then another and another until he'd worked his way to her lips. His mouth was burning against hers, all her own heat having retreated in an icy wave of uncertainty.

The soft manipulation of his lips cleared away her doubt and allowed her to focus on feeling. He carefully spilled out his desire, fierce and hungry and needing nothing more than

the spark of chemistry between them to keep it going. She didn't know how he did it, but as he stripped her down he made her forget how he'd asked for more than she thought she could give. There was nothing cold about the way he lifted her onto the counter by the sink, still kissing and touching everywhere at once, but there were no demands either. He'd found a perfect balance of lust and compassion and she was able to follow the flow without fear of losing herself. He filled her, dropping all his barriers and urged her to feed while he coaxed her to ecstasy.

In that moment he proved that Largo and Kurt had chosen well. Chetan fit perfectly into his role, perfectly into her body. At a time when intimacy scared her, but she was still young and untried enough to need a tender approach, he'd found a way to put her at ease.

A grunt and a deep thrust brought her to the present. For a moment she opened her eyes to see Chetan, then Kurt who had been watching from the doorway on that precious night, smiling softly, happy that she'd finally gained comfort in necessity.

Brandon clenched a fist in her hair and she saw him. In the shock of pain, her pretence flew and she couldn't keep the hatred from her eyes.

He blinked and stepped away. "Find somewhere better to be?" The harsh metallic sound of his zipper cleared her mind and she sifted through her thoughts for a way to fix the slip. Brandon turned his back to her and pressed his hands on the table. "I've been a fool. It's a good act, but you're still using me."

"No!" Rosemary approached him, hands out then let them fall to her sides. "Please Brandon, don't be like that. Things are getting better between us. I'm trying to prove myself..."

"You didn't feed." He squared his shoulders and stared at something on the wall.

"I wasn't hungry."

"Well, I am." He turned to face her and braced his hands on the table behind him. "A nest shares power, doesn't it?" At her hesitant nod, he straightened. "Well, I want my share."

"How...?" Rosemary gasped when he pulled her against him.

"I've figured it out. You can feed from the boys without being with them. You can draw on the pleasure they get from others." He gave her a cold smile. "Reach out and find some. They're a lusty lot. I'm sure one of them is having some fun."

Rosemary closed her eyes and nodded. She felt them out and found Felix, exhausted but performing with a ritualistic devotion with two of his girls. It had become a habit of his, going to them as often as possible, as though he wanted to make sure Rosemary had someone to reach out to when she'd been denied for too long. She gathered from him and poured the energy into Brandon.

He inhaled and fumbled around for a chair. "More." He grabbed her arm and jerked her into his lap. "I want more."

Something in him tugged at her, demanding, lending its desperation to her, making her famished. Her powers whipped out and latched onto Felix. She drained him as Brandon drained her. She could almost feel Felix's pulse between her teeth, ready to give. His pulse weakened and he collapsed. She cut Brandon off.

"Oh, I liked that." Brandon rose from the chair, nudging her aside and stumbling like he was drunk. "We've got to do that again."

Rosemary watched him leave the room, heard his unsteady gait as he ambled out of sight down the hall. She heard him fall into bed and rushed to her phone.

It rang in her hand. She answered, hands shaking. "Hello?"

"He's all right, Rosemary. You'll have to stop feeding from him for a while, but he'll be all right." Largo sighed and the sound of a bed creaking muffled his words. "If you're still hungry, I can probably find someone."

"I'm fine. Just get some sleep."

"If you're sure?" Largo grunted and the line went quiet. "Rosemary?"

"I'm sure." Rosemary twirled some hair around her finger. "Do you think it would be safe for me to see you tomorrow?"

"I don't care if it isn't." He paused. "No, that's not true. But I think it will be okay so long as Brandon doesn't find out."

"I miss you." Rosemary gritted her teeth when her voice cracked. It wasn't fair. She shouldn't make this harder on him. She just couldn't help it.

"I miss you too." Largo whispered to someone nearby.

She listened closely, making out a soft enquiry. It was Shiloh. Largo had probably taken him in to watch over him. He was the most fragile of them all.

"Can Shiloh come?"

"Yes." Rosemary smiled and stared at the ceiling through a sheen of tears. "Tell him I miss him too."

The message was relayed and they said a sad goodbye. Rosemary padded quietly into the living room and sat on the sofa, staring at the phone. Before she'd really thought it through, she'd selected a number and dialled. The ringing startled her and she almost hung up. She didn't expect an answer.

"Rosemary?"

Her name was the sweetest, richest imaginable thing on his lips. She drew her knees to her chest and hugged them with one arm. "Kurt."

"What's wrong?" She could hear a soft shuffling of blankets and a muffled sound as he changed rooms. "Are you okay?"

"No." A groan sounded from Brandon's room and she hunched over the phone, dropping her tone to a whisper. "Why did you leave?"

Kurt's voice was just as low. "I knew what making a choice was doing to you. I couldn't let you suffer anymore. I thought you'd understand."

"I do, but..." Rosemary didn't know what to say. He'd done what was best for the nest when she couldn't. "Are you with Karen?"

"Yes. You chose her for me, just as I chose most of the boys for you. I thought it was only fair." His breath sounded loud in the phone. "How is everyone?"

"Managing. Barely." She gave a bitter laugh, then cut it off. She was being selfish. Again. "It'll take some getting used to. What about you?"

"Typical nine to five. Karen even has a white picket fence. I have the life you wanted for us all."

"Are you happy?"

Kurt cleared his throat. "Sure. You?"

For the first time that she could remember, all she could think to say to him was a lie. An obvious, poorly concealed lie, but the best she could manage. "Yeah." She tried to think of something to make the lie believable. "I mean, I'm doing really good in school and it's nice to see the boys living their own lives rather than tending to me."

"That's good." Sound was blocked from the phone suddenly, as though he'd covered it with his hand. When his voice returned, it sounded harried. "Look, I have to go. Karen's awake." His soft whisper ran up her spine. "But I'm glad you called."

The dial tone cut into her like a knife. She dropped the phone and buried her face in her hands.

"You coming to bed, Rosemary?" Brandon called.

Rosemary hissed through her teeth. Then she stood. "No." She strode down the hall and grabbed her coat and shoes. "I'm going home."

Chapter Nineteen

In her room for the first time in days, Rosemary hunted through the dark for an outfit that felt more natural and put on the prettiest pair of panties she owned. The black lace felt like a shield under the light folds of her pleated skirt, a soft, dainty shield that defied all that was expected of her.

Careful not to wake Stephanie, she sat on her bed and planned out her next step. There had to be a way to stop Brandon from hurting the boys without losing him. Much as she wished she could forget about him, she knew she wasn't ready to cut him out of her life. Not yet anyway.

A small box on her bed drew her attention. She picked up the envelope resting against it and tried to make out the words written on the white surface. It was too dark so she brought it and the box to the kitchen and turned on the light.

Her breath caught in her throat when she saw her father's name. She tore open the envelope.

Dearest Rosemary,

I hope this letter finds you well. Business has kept me from writing to you sooner, but news of your troubles has reached me and I had to find a way to help.

A new nest is a fragile thing and the volatile nature of the relationship between the queen and her prince can destroy it within the first years. You weren't taught all you needed to know because none could have foreseen you developing into such a beauty, so I know you are struggling more than most. I have a way to make it easier for you.

Within the box is a golden apple, but don't be fooled by its common appearance. The apple was picked from an ancient orchard in Greece, said to be the fruit of immortality. The true nature of the fruit is a closely guarded secret of the succubae and I learned of it on my travels. When a succubus eats the fruit, she can no longer starve without the touch of a man and no longer risks draining her nest and killing her men. This does not mean you won't need your nest, they are still the source of all your power which you need to defend yourself against others of your kind, but it will give you all some freedom from the hunger.

I give you one last warning. Make sure you are alone when you eat the apple and tell your men to leave you in peace for a few days. The magic of the apple will make you sleep, it is important that you are not disturbed.

You will finally find the peace you crave.

With undying love,

Your father.

Rosemary opened the box and peered down at the perfect apple, resting in a bed of black cloth. Reverently, she lifted it. Her father was right; it didn't look like much. It was hard to believe something so simple would fix all her problems.

But it would. She didn't doubt that her father would do anything to save her from the fatal end that many nests came to. A tender glow of gratitude and love filled her. She smiled and took out her phone even as she pulled on her shoes. She placed the apple in her purse wrapped in the black cloth and skipped up the stairs, tapping softly on the door to the boys' room.

Alaire opened the door. She held up a finger when Largo answered the phone.

"It's over!" She span around Alaire and grinned at Chetan and Wylie who stepped into the room, rubbing their eyes. "My father wrote to me, he found a way to fix everything."

"What are you talking about?" Largo said in her ear even as Alaire and Wylie said the same.

"This." Rosemary held the phone to her ear with her shoulder and took the apple out of her purse. "It's an apple, a magic apple from an orchard in Greece. My father discovered the secret of my succubus ancestors. They eat the apple and the threat of death to themselves and their nests is eliminated. Brandon will lose his power over us."

"You won't need us anymore." Chetan slumped onto the sofa and sighed. "I'm sorry. I guess I should be happy for you but..."

"No, I still need you, all of you. My father says the nest is the source of my power and I still need that if I'm to survive the attacks of my mother and any other cambion that comes after me." Rosemary felt giddy as she imparted the good news and laughed when Chetan looked up with obvious relief. "Think about it. We'll still be together, but we don't have to be afraid anymore. Once my stores of power are filled we can be together for nothing but pleasure. I'll be strong enough to keep Brandon from taking control."

"That sounds too good to be true," Largo grumbled.

Rosemary frowned. "My father wouldn't have sent it to me if it wasn't true. I trust him. Don't you?"

"Yes," Largo said quickly. "So what are you waiting for? Eat it."

"I had to tell you my father's instructions. He said the apple will make me sleep for a few days and I can't be disturbed."

"What happens if you're disturbed?" Wylie asked, looking worried.

"It won't work."

"Then you won't be safe in your room. Maybe you should stay here?" Alaire suggested.

"No. I'll get you a hotel room," Largo cut in. "You just have to figure out a way to get out of classes."

"I'll tell them I'm going to my brother's funeral." Rosemary's smile faded, but she forced it back stubbornly. Her brother's fate wouldn't be the fate of her men. She couldn't look back with regret, she could only look forward, see all the opportunities that lay before her. She turned to Wylie. "Go get Felix. I want to feed one last time before I sleep and give him back what I took."

"All right." Wylie turned towards the door, then turned back and took her hand. "You'll wait for me?"

"Of course." She laughed. "Before I sleep, I have to wait for you. I want you all there before I close my eyes."

"I won't be long," Largo said and hung up.

Wylie headed out the door. "Keep an eye on things, Shiloh."

"Shiloh?" Alaire looked at Chetan who shrugged. They both turned to watch Shiloh slip out of the kitchen.

He nodded without looking up. "No problem." He lifted a bottle to his lips and tipped his head back.

Rosemary frowned as she read the label. "Absinthe?" Her eyes slid to Alaire.

Alaire put his hands up. "Don't look at me. Felix gave it to him, said it would help him with the nightmares." He ran to the hall and called out to Wylie. "Why are you leaving the drunk in charge?"

"He's the most responsible!" came Wylie's reply.

"Shut up! Do you have any idea what time it is?" a random voice called before a door slammed.

Alaire cleared his throat. "Sorry!"

A few muffled grumbles sounded from the other apartments. Chetan pushed the door closed. Rosemary led Shiloh to the sofa and tried to pry the bottle from his hand. He wouldn't let go.

"Why didn't you tell me you were having nightmares, Shiloh?" She smoothed his dark hair away from his face and gazed into his overly bright eyes.

"I had something I had to tell you." Shiloh's eyes lost focus. He hugged her and shuddered. "All I could see was the crystal, all around you, holding you forever. She chained us to the walls and made Largo split our flesh with a whip." He took another gulp of harsh spirits and gave his head a little shake. "I'm not really drunk. Fae can't get drunk."

"You're more human than fae," Alaire pointed out. He flicked the rounded tip of Shiloh's ear. "Not even a little point and you don't have wings."

"Fae don't have pointy ears," Shiloh said around the lip of the bottle. He smiled dreamily. "And none of my ancestors could fly, though that would be cool."

"My point is that you're human enough to get plastered and you're drinking..." Alaire swiped the bottle and squinted at the label. "Some really strong shit."

"Doesn't absinthe make you hallucinate?" Rosemary said, frowning when Alaire returned the bottle to Shiloh.

Alaire shrugged. "I've heard something like that, but he seems okay."

"So much blood." Shiloh shook his head. "I didn't know you could bleed so much and live, Alaire."

Chetan laughed when Alaire's colour dropped. "Oh, yeah, he's swell."

"Give me that." Alaire plucked the bottle out of Shiloh's hands, found the cap and set it carefully on the sink like it might bite.

A gentle tap at the door brought Rosemary to her feet. She held the door while Wylie helped Felix to the sofa. Felix gave her a weak turn of his lips before slumping over and falling asleep against Shiloh's side. The door opened again and Rosemary walked straight into Largo's arms, relieved to have him there to take over.

"He's still at it?" Largo asked Chetan, gesturing to Shiloh who was muttering something to his hands.

"When were you planning on letting me know?" Rosemary backed away, feeling betrayed. "I'm your queen, I trusted you to take care of them for me, to tell me if they needed me! Are you so lazy that you'd let him slip away before stirring enough to get him help?"

Largo twisted towards her and snapped his fist into the wall by her head. "You had enough to deal with! I've done everything I could."

Blood ran in rivulets around Largo's knuckles and dripped on the floor. He braced himself on the fist, still embedded in the wall, and bowed his head. Rosemary could only stare at him. Largo never lost his temper.

"Hey, Shiloh's okay." Wylie took a firm grip on Largo's wrist and towed him to the kitchen. He forced Largo to sit at the table and grabbed the first aid kit from the top of the fridge. He spoke to Rosemary as he tended to the bloody mess. "Things have been tense, we're all dealing with it in our own way. Shiloh's body metabolises alcohol too fast for it to do any lasting damage, I'm actually more concerned with how much Felix drinks. I don't know much about djinn biology." He wrapped Largo's hand and patted his shoulder. "You broke a couple of bones at least. After Rosemary's settled in, I'm bringing you in for x-rays."

"It'll be healed by then." Largo tried to prove it by moving his fingers. He turned his back on them, stood abruptly and swore. His face was pale when he finally faced them. "I'm sorry about that."

"Don't worry. It'll be over soon." Rosemary fixed a steady smile on her face, but she was shaking inside. It better work. If Largo lost it, they were done for.

Chapter Twenty

The elevator opened to reveal a room that belonged in a palace. Black marble floors accentuated the glossy dark wood of the elegant coffee table and the matching loveseat and chairs, cushioned in white velvet. The lights in the sitting room were dim and the bedroom beyond was dark. Largo led the way and flicked a switch on the wall.

Crystal. The whole room appeared to have been carved from it. The bed frame sparkled like a massive ice sculpture, but on closer inspection rods of silver coloured metal could be seen inlaid for support. The night tables were topped with glass and rested on delicate crystal cherubs. A carpet covered the floor like a thick coat of snow, glittering in the dim light.

The bedspread appeared to be woven of crystal webs and Rosemary touched it to find it as soft as down. A faint vanilla scent hovered in the air and she inhaled and let it fill her, let it ease her as she spun around with a glowing smile to face the boys.

"Largo, it's beautiful. I don't know what to say."

Largo reached out to take her hand. He hissed and stumbled back. "I think feeding before you sleep is out."

Rosemary sighed and stared at the charred flesh of his palm. "I guess Brandon's not happy. Too bad for him that this is the last time he can use his little power plays to hurt us." She tried to picture the look on his face when he realised he'd lost his self-proclaimed kingship.

"Forget him." Largo stepped around her and lifted something off the bed, draped it over his arm and held it out. "I didn't know it would match the room."

The gown was a spill of diamonds over white silk. Rosemary tugged her lip with her teeth and took it with shaky hands, afraid it would fall apart in her hands. "Largo, this is too much."

"Rosemary, I've got plenty of money now. My job pays well and I don't have many expenses." His lips twisted. "Besides, it's not like they're real diamonds. The room cost more."

"If it makes you feel better, we all pitched in." Felix winked at her and punched Alaire in the arm. "Alaire is going to be paying me back until he's old and grey."

"I shouldn't ask, but how much did all this cost?" Rosemary loved it, but she didn't love the idea of them being in debt because of her.

"Around fifteen—ow!" Alaire glared at Felix when he punched him again, harder this time.

"Don't ask. It doesn't matter." Largo pointed to the bathroom. "Get changed. I want the full impact. Consider it payment."

Rosemary took a deep breath, laid her purse on the end of the bed and took out the apple. She set it on a plump pillow and went to the bathroom to change. She could hardly see the huge, opulently appointed room around her. All she could do was feel the silk skim over her, smell the vanilla that seemed to saturate everything and get back to enjoy her last moment with the boys before she surrendered to a liberating sleep.

Largo caught her by the waist and lifted her up so she almost flew to the bed. The silk created enough of a barrier that with the speed he wasn't burned. The blankets had been turned down and Wylie covered her with them when she was settled.

Felix, Alaire and Shiloh stood to one side of her, Wylie, Largo and Chetan on the other. Chetan pulled a white rose from behind his back and laid it on her chest. Then he sneezed.

Rosemary giggled. "I thought you weren't giving me any more."

"I changed my mind." He bent over and kissed her quick. A pale wisp of smoke curled between them and he covered his lips so she wouldn't see the burn. "Sleep tight, Rosemary. We'll be back in three days to make sure you're okay."

"But my father said—"

"We won't disturb you." Wylie smoothed the blankets, then kissed her forehead, the barest brush of his lips, but his skin still sizzled.

"Enough." Rosemary held her hand out to stop any more attempts to steal a painful kiss. "I don't want to hurt you anymore. That's done with. Just a few days and you'll get all the kisses you want."

"You heard her." Largo waved an arm at the boys and herded them out. "Remember. Three days." He grinned. "I'll have to come back anyway. That's all we paid for. If you need more time, I'll have to sell my car."

The door shut and Rosemary listened to the voices of the boys fading away. They sounded happy, but it was strained. She had a feeling they would spend the next three days worrying.

Without pause she picked up the golden apple and took a big bite. The sooner she began the transformation, the sooner she could reassure them. She chewed slowly savouring the strange, honey sweet flavour. Another bite and a drugging lethargy began to flow through her veins. She set her teeth in the crisp skin and found she'd lost the strength to bite down. The apple fell from her hand and rolled off the bed.

The elevator door slid open and steps sounded beyond the closed door of the room. After a few moments of silence the elevator door slid open again.

"What are you doing here?" Rosemary heard a familiar voice ask, stifled as though spoken through a pillow. She tried turning but her body felt weighed down. She focussed on identifying the voice as another spoke.

"I might ask you the same." She knew who spoke now. It was Brandon.

But who was the woman?

"I'm here to end this," the woman said, tone shrill. "I don't trust you. Your greed has drawn things on too long. I think you've fallen for that pretty face."

"You wanted to make sure this couldn't be traced back to you. Your husband got wind of your schemes, that's why you made me the offer," Brandon snarled. "I'm the one that learned of the apple. It's a perfect plan and I won't have you weaselling out of our agreement by taking things in your own hands."

"You're afraid of me." The woman's tone turned sweet and Rosemary recognised it.

Karen. What was she doing there?

"I'm not afraid, I refuse to be claimed," Brandon snapped. The steady sound of pacing filled the other room. "I took care of Rosemary, you were supposed to take care of the boys."

"Only Shiloh and Largo were a threat." Arrogance tipped Karen's words. "Largo trusted his former prince and Shiloh's so lost in dreams he can't decipher the present."

"What about Kurt?"

"Out shopping for a ring." Karen laughed. "Isn't it funny, he went from vowing to kill me if I hurt her to asking for my hand."

Tears gathered, hot and hopeless, on Rosemary's motionless lashes. Kurt had only vowed to kill one woman in his life. Her mother. The apple, the promise of a future, had been part of another plot. The first attempts had matched her mother's typical rashness, but this she couldn't have done alone.

Brandon had admitted that he'd done everything in his power to evade a nest. He'd done so again. He wasn't her prince, he'd pretended, to trap her and secure his freedom.

"How long since she last fed? You told me it might not work if she had power stored within."

Brandon laughed. "She was so desperate to keep me happy that she didn't feed for days, even from me. She learned to feed from a distance, but she didn't seem to get that the little she took was like an emergency reserve." There was a span of silence.

Rosemary held her breath; sure he was listening for her.

He continued in the same, boastful way. "The apple will pull her into a sleep so deep nothing can wake her. She'll fade away. Your prince will believe that the lack of a complete nest did her in."

"The others know about the apple." She could hear some concern in her mother's tone. Speaking of killing her daughter was nothing, but the risk of losing her prince was a completely different matter.

"Most are bound so tightly to her that her death will kill them." Brandon's tone turned cold. "I guess you'll have to figure out a way to deal with the rest."

The elevator sounded and they were gone. Rosemary listened to the silence, the darkness seeming to form into something solid, her flesh going numb. She grasped for the ties that bound her to the boys, determined to sever them, but they fluttered out of reach like willow boughs in a violent storm. She tried to reach out to them, give them warning, praying a few could escape.

Her desperate mental cries hit a wall of weakness. They were beyond her, keeping their distance as she'd asked. All she could do was wait in the prison of her body and feel it die around her. Vanilla and the soft scent of the white rose filled her senses, coming on a gentle breeze.

The face of an angel filled her vision, wreathed in light that filtered through the black of his hair. She looked into that face and smiled. Losing herself in those brown eyes would

cushion the fall. Maybe if she gave in, the others would meet their ends in merciful swiftness. She didn't know, but she thanked whoever looked down on her for this gift.

You've got promises to keep, Rosemary. The faint voice drifted into her mind, smooth and strong as leather. *Do you remember?*

Yes, Rosemary whispered, her fingers curling slightly, her body begging to feel him, one last time. Nothing she did could stop the force dragging her away. *I promised I'd try. I did.*

No. What did you promise Largo?

Rosemary wanted to shake her head, to deny what was impossible. She'd said it to comfort him. She didn't expect her words to come back to haunt her. *I swore not to give up.*

Good. Then don't. A hand fluttered over her hair. She latched onto the sensation as his presence covered her. *Hold on, just a little longer.*

Chapter Twenty-one

Unconsciousness brought peace. Consciousness came with a glaring pain. Smooth moisture covered her lips and forced a spill of energy that trailed down her throat and into her gut like lava, scalding and blistering her to the agony of life. Her body thrashed out of her control. A firm grip kept her from turning her head from the source of the pain.

She choked and screamed, biting and tearing her teeth into soft flesh. The hard pressure on her mouth backed off just long enough for her to gasp out one word. "Stop."

"No. If you want me to stop, you'll have to kill me." The grip fell to her shoulders and gave her a rough shake. "Actually, that might work." A droplet of salty water joined the metallic taste of blood on her lips. "Take it all and use it to spare the others. I'm done!"

She opened her eyes and fought through the blur of her vision to make out his face. The sculpted, pale line of his brow hid his eyes. She wanted to lift her hand, catch his jaw and make him look at her. She couldn't move. But she could speak. "I can't do this without you."

"Then help me."

"Tell me how."

Kurt laughed and his eyes, darkened to black in his rage and desperation, met hers. "God, I thought I was too late." He held her face between his hands. "Take all I can give. Don't fight me."

"I won't fight you." Rosemary strained for movement, managing only the barest breath and another twitch of her fingers. "I couldn't if I tried."

Like a monstrous hand in the black depths of a swamp, darkness wrenched her under. Kurt's touch barely kept her head above the viscous murk. His voice kept her breathing. "Just feel, cling to whatever you can, don't let go."

Cold skin slid over her, another body in the swamp, guiding her to shore. The body slipped and a burst of golden light ate away at the darkness, burrowing into her. She felt as though she was floating. Air rushed into her lungs. Her legs kicked and she was free of the suffocating force.

The light faltered and she dropped and fell into a slippery hole at the edge of the deadly pool. Part of her woke and could see the room, faded around the rim but sharp and clear in the centre. Kurt lay over her, partly embedded in her body, weakly dragging himself closer, lacking the strength.

His head dropped to her chest. He shuddered and went still.

"Kurt?" Rosemary threw one leg around him, digging through her lethargy for the strength to pull him up. "Kurt, don't you dare! I told you I couldn't do this without you!"

"Rosemary!" A form rushed at her through the blur of her vision. She let her head fall to one side. Largo knelt by the bed. "We're here."

"Help him." Rosemary stretched her hand to Largo, brushing her fingertips over his lips.

"We're going to help you both." Another came into focus beside Largo. A rainbow of colours distorted the face, distorted the form, like a brilliant light glowed within the body and the flesh was made of precious jewels.

Only one could ever take that form. "Shiloh."

Shiloh's hands rose over his head. "As the prince is claimed, the power shall be shared. From the pits of hell to the ether realms of the gods let it be known." He took a knee. "With honour and love, we bind our queen."

Largo knelt beside him and the brilliant light flashed out through the jewelled flesh and exploded in a white flame. Silver cords of magic wound around her, around Kurt, and bound them together.

When the brilliance faded, she looked at Shiloh and saw him smile. "Your prince needs you, my queen. Claim him."

A power, more pure than anything she'd ever known, scoured away all weakness and settled within, waiting. Rosemary rolled Kurt onto his back and rose over him. She kissed his lips and breathed into him when they parted.

"You hear that, Kurt?" She tasted him with a flick of her tongue, her lips curving when his eyes fluttered open. "You are my prince, you stubborn fool."

"I was the first to resist you." A single tear rolled down his cheek to be lost in the faint scruff over his lips. "I won't do it again."

"You better not." Rosemary kissed the rest of his tears away. "I want you now. Can I take you?"

"Yes." Kurt brought his hand to her face. She held it there when he didn't have the strength to. "Take me. Keep me. Keep us all."

There was nothing more to say. Rosemary let Largo help her remove her gown and wrapped her hand around the base of Kurt's cock, delving her tongue into his mouth as she guided him into her body. He was slack but as each inch breached her he hardened. She rose up and speared herself with him, clenching as she lifted so he wouldn't slip away. Their joining smouldered with the blazing aura of her power and she eased it into him with every rise and fall of her hips.

As his strength returned, he circled her waist with his hands and mirrored her movements. They shared the force that made them until the sparks of their life became one.

Kurt turned them and rested over her. "Remember when you asked me to show you how much I missed you?"

Rosemary hugged him between her thighs. "Yes."

"Let me do it again."

The weight of him pinned her to the bed. He took her wrists in one hand and held them over her head. Then he began to move.

His mouth covered her nipple and he sucked hard as he pistoned into her, rocking her body to violent sensations she'd only glanced on before. He leant back and took her hips in his hands, driving deeper and deeper. The core of her seemed to wrap around him, shivering at the brink of a peak that towered high above, hidden behind the clouds of another onslaught that sent her soaring until she tightened her grip, afraid of the fall.

Dropping forward, tangling his fingers in her hair, Kurt locked her gaze with his. "Let go."

The release sent her plummeting, but his tireless movement caught her and she flew into a white heat then thrashed in his arms. It was almost too much for her mind to take. Her body bucked and he tightened his grip.

"Shh. You'll..." He cried out and they rolled into the heat together.

Every muscle in her body clenched and unclenched, every nerve tingled, sensitive to even the folds of the sheets beneath her. She drank in air in gulps and begged it to soothe her.

Largo put a hand on Kurt's shoulder. "You all right?"

Kurt twisted away and hissed in a sharp breath. "Yes! Don't touch me. Give me a minute."

"We'll be in the other room," Shiloh said with an amused glint in his eye. Largo followed him out.

For what seemed like forever they lay there, trying to remember how to breathe. Rosemary, much to her satisfaction, recovered first. She turned on her side and traced the hard lines of his abdomen.

Kurt squeezed his eyes shut, jolting a little when she slid her finger over his pelvic bone. "Please have mercy. Torture me some other time."

"I don't think I have a taste for torture." Rosemary grinned and bent down to follow the path of her fingers with her tongue.

He growled. "You do like to be spanked. Is that what you're aiming for?"

"You're not up to it." She rested her chin on his chest. "But maybe some other time."

That made him laugh. "Maybe." He struggled to sit up and dropped his head to his palm. "We should go back to the others. If I'm this weak, I hate to see what condition the rest are in."

Rosemary used his shoulder to pull herself up. The room spun and she gasped. "I just fed. I don't understand."

Throwing his legs over the side of the bed, Kurt tried to stand. He fell over and crashed into the night table.

Largo and Shiloh burst into the room.

"Damn it, Kurt, you're not a god." Largo hefted his friend to his feet. "You brought her back from the brink of death, did you really think you'd have anything to spare?"

"You're fine." Kurt glanced at Shiloh who gently lifted Rosemary from the bed. "Shouldn't you take her? You're stronger."

"I think he can manage." Largo grinned and turned his head. They'd both been too weak to notice before, but half his face was an ugly shade of purple.

"You did that?" Rosemary lifted her head to look at Shiloh as he helped her into her clothes.

He shrugged and bowed his head, hiding behind his hair. "I didn't mean it."

"You should see Alaire, he woke him up from one of his nightmares." Largo helped Kurt to the door then half carried him to a loveseat. "We thought he'd lost his mind. His eyes were glowing and he was shouting about crystals. It took four of us to hold him down. Wylie sedated him and managed to get him talking some sense."

"It might be a good idea to start looking into the strengths and weaknesses of those in the nest." Kurt slumped over on the sofa and tried to make space for Rosemary as Shiloh approached. Largo hooked his arm and tugged him over. "I'm starting to think not only Rosemary needs training."

Largo nodded solemnly as he pulled his cell from his pocket and dialled. "Yes, your majesty."

Kurt tried to throw a pillow at him. It landed on the floor between them. He groaned and settled on giving him the finger.

Rosemary patted his knee and focussed on Largo. "Where are we going?"

"I know I swore I'd never bring you back there, but it's the only safe place." Largo gave the hotel address to whoever answered the phone and shut it. "We're meeting all the boys at our old apartment." He jutted his chin at Kurt. "He decided to keep leasing it, just in case."

Rosemary nodded with a weary smile and let her eyes close. She would follow them to a gutter if necessary. As long as they were all alive, and more importantly, free, she didn't care where they went.

Chapter Twenty-two

Chetan drove them to the cruddiest part of the city, weaving through the alleys while Largo sat tense at his side with a gun in his hand, watching through the window to make sure they weren't being followed. Shiloh sat beside her, nudging her every once in a while to keep her awake. Kurt sat on her other side, head propped on the backrest, his sweaty hand encompassing her icy fingers.

Chetan found a place to park behind a dumpster and he and Largo left the car to survey the area before letting the others out.

Rosemary wrinkled her nose as the stink of garbage assaulted her, burying her face into Shiloh's shirt to let the light scent of his spicy aftershave filter the smell. He tightened his grip as he made his way up the creaky metal back stairs. Largo held up a hand and unlocked the door. Chetan stood by Kurt, helped him stand and pointed the gun Largo had pressed on him at the shadows.

"All clear." Largo waved them inside and nodded to Chetan.

Chetan set the safety on the gun and stabbed it into the holster strapped to his belt with obvious relief.

Largo grinned. "Remind me to take you to the shooting range some time, genie boy. We wouldn't want you to shoot yourself in the foot."

"I won't shoot myself," Chetan said, hand on the butt of the gun. "I just don't know if I can shoot anyone else."

"Let's hope you don't have to." Rosemary waved Shiloh away and lowered herself to a chair. She blinked when Largo turned on the kitchen light and cringed as she took in the room. It seemed to have got worse.

The table was pressed wood, the white covering chipped and marred with stains that no amount of scrubbing could remove. The tiles on the floor were cheap stick-ons, most of them torn, revealing the gritty planks beneath. Only the cupboards and walls looked in good repair. Kurt had built them to replace the broken ones that had been there when they'd moved in, and Rosemary had painted everything a crisp white.

"How long will it take the others to get here?" she asked, thanking Shiloh when he brought her a bottle of water he found in the fridge with the seal still intact.

"They should be here any minute," Chetan said, glancing out of the dirt-smeared window. "Or now."

Largo opened the door. Wylie came in first, stopping short and catching Felix when he stumbled. Rosemary smiled and leant forward. Her smile faltered when Largo closed the door.

"Where is he?" Kurt stood, knocking over his chair and nearly falling with it.

"The girls had him. I thought being around them might help, he was hit the hardest." Felix braced himself on the table, Wylie hovering close behind. "When Largo called we sent Chetan to get you and went after Alaire. The girls, they were all..." He closed his eyes and clenched his fist. "Brenda told me two men came. I held her as she died. I told her to save her strength but she was determined to tell me." He lifted his head and met Rosemary's eyes. "Your mother had a message for you. You have an hour to meet her or she'll kill him."

For the first time in her life, Rosemary felt the hellfire in her blood, pulsing like acid through her veins. The window reflected the dark crimson eyes of demon kin—of a pissed off cambion queen.

She held out her hand to Shiloh. "Help me up."

Shiloh took her hand and draped her arm over his shoulder.

Kurt grabbed her by the waist, completely off balance. Only Shiloh's firm grip kept them all from tumbling to the floor. Sweat beaded at Kurt's temples and he shook as he tried to stand. "You're not seriously thinking of going?"

"You don't seriously think I'd just let her kill him." Rosemary twisted from him and bent low to meet his narrowed gaze. "Nothing's going to stand in my way."

Clearing his throat, Largo blocked the door with his large frame. "I wouldn't be so sure of that, Rosemary. Be reasonable. It's a trap; she doesn't want him. She wants you. Let me go with Chetan and Wylie."

In a swift motion that didn't even shift her, Shiloh flipped a dagger from somewhere under his coat and held it to Largo's neck. "The queen has spoken. Get out of the way."

Largo went for his gun. Chetan fumbled with his.

Shiloh pressed forwards until the blade kissed the base of Largo's throat. A single droplet of blood slicked the tip of the dagger. "Put it away."

"She's my mother! I know her. I can get him out alive without sacrificing myself." Rosemary wrapped her hand around Shiloh's arm and tried to pull it down. It wouldn't budge. "We need to act as a nest!"

"Rosemary's right." Kurt caught Wylie's eye. Wylie came to him and helped him to his feet. "If we don't go, together, she'll kill Alaire and come after us. She won't stop until we're all dead. It's time we face her, head on."

"Look at us!" Largo opened his arms wide to include them all. "You, Rosemary and Felix can hardly stand. The entire nest has been drained. We're no match for her."

"You're underestimating us and so will she." Kurt took a deep breath and put his head on Wylie's shoulder. "Wylie is the son of a hamadryad, raised in the woods, attuned with nature. Felix and Chetan are djinn. I am vard-lokkur. Shiloh is some kind of badass faery and you are a demigod." He grinned at Largo and inclined his head. "Rosemary is the cambion queen of a very powerful nest."

"Untrained. All of us," Chetan said, fumbling with a strap on his holster. "What are we supposed to do?"

"Improvise." Kurt gave Rosemary a half smile. "Trust our queen."

"I don't like it," Largo said, dropping his arms.

Kurt nudged Wylie forward. "You don't have to. Sometimes all a subject can do is obey."

"I know that," Largo snapped with a feral show of teeth. "I've been there before."

"Good." Kurt and Wylie stopped in front of Largo. "Then it shouldn't be too hard to get back in the habit."

Largo eyed him, glanced at Rosemary then turned and stormed down the stairs. Rosemary held her breath, praying they wouldn't give under his weight. When she heard him stomping on the asphalt she let out a sigh of relief. Then she urged Shiloh to bring her to Kurt.

Hand on his arm, she leaned in for a kiss. "Thank you."

Before he could answer, Shiloh turned her against him and caught her face in his hands. "I'm sorry to spoil the moment, but I didn't get mine before you went to sleep." His mouth

covered hers and his tongue slipped along her lips, spreading the sweet taste of nectar. The sweetness travelled through her in a tingling rush, feeling like it was sparking in her veins. He grazed his lips along her cheek and whispered in her ear. "Now, kiss him."

Shiloh released her and Rosemary found that she had the strength to stand on her own. She took Kurt from Wylie and kissed his lips, tasting the nectar as it teased along the play of their tongues. Kurt made a gruff sound of pleasure and pulled away from Wylie to embrace her.

"Now, Felix," Shiloh said, raking his hair from his face to grin at them before letting it hide him again.

Rosemary spun on her heel and rushed to Felix with a laugh. He surged forward at the last minute and they rolled on the floor, giggling and kissing.

Felix stopped the roll with him on top, a sultry glint in his playful eyes. "How much time do we have?"

Smacking his chest, Rosemary scooted out from under him. "None. Now let's go."

"Just to let you know, none of you are whole." Shiloh hugged himself and spoke to the floor. "It's enough for us to put on a good show, but that's it."

"It'll have to be enough." Kurt dropped his arm on Shiloh's shoulders and squeezed him, a silly smile on his face. "You're the man, Shiloh."

Rosemary and the remaining boys watched Kurt stroll out of the back door with a lightness of step that they'd never seen.

Felix mouthed, 'you're the man?'

"Faery kisses." Rosemary pecked Shiloh on the cheek as she passed him, understanding Kurt's good humour. "They're like a drug."

"I got sloppy thirds." Felix surged towards Shiloh and grabbed his face. "Maybe if I got it from the source..."

Shiloh stepped back and glanced pointedly at the dagger still in his hand.

Felix laughed and bounded out of the door. "Well, he's no fun."

"Now, I wouldn't say that." Rosemary span on the stairs and walked backwards down a few. "I'll have you know —" A slash of pain crossed her spine and she lost her footing.

Felix and Wylie lunged forward. Kurt caught her before she hit the ground.

"What is it?" he asked, cradling her in his arms.

Like a movie being played in her mind, Rosemary looked on Alaire, tied to a post, stripped to the waist. Her mother came up behind him and ran her fingers through a fresh line of blood. She smiled and lifted the whip for another strike.

"Alaire. She's hurting him." Rosemary blinked away her tears and grabbed a handful of Kurt's shirt. "We have to stop her."

"She knows the nest is complete." Kurt brought Rosemary to Chetan's car and sat her on the backseat. "She's betting that Rosemary doesn't know how to cut herself off from her men and she's right."

"Share it, Rosemary," Shiloh said, leaning over the front seat. "Share it like you would pleasure."

"No." Rosemary tensed against another lash. "Just get us there. I want to end this. I won't let her touch another one of you."

Chapter Twenty-three

The night was trapped in the silence only something truly powerful could exhume. They crossed the grounds, cutting through the grass, unconsciously keeping close to the scattered lights. In the darkness waited something with a taste for death.

"Hello, Mother." Rosemary took a step away from Kurt, and tried not to let her eyes slip to Alaire. "You wanted to see me?"

Midnight waves rustled on a taut back, and pale shoulders squared. A cutting laughter rang out and a whip snaked through the air.

Alaire made a soft sound as he braced for impact. He was bound to a flagpole, his arms stretched over his head, his brow pressed to the metal. His flesh was a mess of dry blood run over with a fresh spill, nothing left intact.

Rosemary could not react. They'd agreed. Her mother was in a position of power already. They didn't need to give her more.

The whip slashed down, but didn't hit Alaire. Instead it curled around the dark form that shielded him. Rosemary's eyes went wide as she watched Wylie absorb the strike and turn with a length of the leather wound around his hands.

"Enough." Wylie ripped the whip out of the queen's hand and tossed it aside. "You'll kill him."

"Are you volunteering to take his place, little man?" Her mother chuckled lightly, looking him over. She gestured to one of the men waiting in the shadows. "I think it's time for me to make a point."

The man stepped into the moonlight, caught Rosemary's eye and gave her a toothy grin.

"Gunner," Rosemary hissed and lurched forward.

Kurt hauled her back.

Metal glinted as Gunner reached under his heavy leather coat. He turned towards Wylie and a blade flashed in the dim light.

Rosemary screamed. "No!"

"Yes!" In a sweep of red velvet and black lace, her mother acknowledged her, a cruel smile on her lips as she drank in her pain. The curled slit of her crimson lips almost matched her eyes in the pallor of her face. She held a hand out to Wylie as he collapsed, arms wrapped around his gut. "Rather than the pleasure of killing one of your men before ridding myself of you, you've brought them all for me to play with. So considerate. So much like your father."

Blood oozed between Wylie's fingers, forming a black puddle on the grey walkway. It fed into the little cracks and a whisper sounded in the trees.

Rosemary's mother twisted around, gaping at the trees as they started to scream.

"You'd be wise to let us tend to him, Margaret." Kurt inched forward, leaving Rosemary with Largo. "His people might take offence if you leave him bleeding in the dirt."

"Take him." Her mother sneered as she watched Kurt lift Wylie and carry him to the others. "I never thought to see you brought so low."

"No," Kurt said, wiping blood on his jeans and baring his teeth in a bitter smile. "You thought to see me dead."

"Oh, I will." Twirling a strand of hair around her finger in a girlish way, her mother stepped over to Alaire and palmed a small knife. "But after him." She pointed at Rosemary with the knife. "Or her. What is your choice, daughter? Will you come to me and beg me to spare them?"

Dropping to her knees, gravel grating into her skin, Rosemary focussed on Alaire until he lifted his head. He mouthed 'no'. She nodded and took a deep breath. "I refuse to beg." She kept her gaze fixed on Alaire and watched as his eyes took on a shaky glow. His chest heaved, his mouth opened wide and he let out an animalistic roar.

Shocked, her mother swung at him with the knife. Metal clanged on metal and Gunner rushed forward to catch her before she fell in the force of her momentum.

A high cry split the silence and Rosemary stood and watched a grey falcon swoop over her head, circling above before faltering and gliding smoothly to land on Shiloh's shoulder.

Rosemary smiled at them then turned to her mother. "I pose no threat here. Leave me and my men in peace and we will do the same to you."

"You pose no threat? If not for my strength, I would have lost my entire nest to you, rather than merely the two rejects you've taken." Her mother stood tall, the wind tossing her black silk hair about her head, making the strands move like snakes. "But the threat you pose

to me is nothing compared to what I can do to you. A man never truly leaves his nest, Rosemary, which I would have taught you if I hadn't wished I could have smothered you at birth." She held out a hand and curled her fingers. "Come to me."

Rosemary grabbed Kurt's wrist. He jerked away and tackled Largo.

"Not me, Rosemary. I am your prince, she can't touch me." Kurt grunted when Largo's fist caught him in the jaw. He dropped Largo onto his back with an elbow to the gut and held him down with his forearm across his neck. "Margaret, let him go! We'll leave!"

Leave? Rosemary stared at Kurt. What was he thinking? Where could they go where they wouldn't come across another queen that would kill to guard her borders?

"That's not good enough." Her mother approached Kurt and Largo, slit the blade over her palm and held it out. "Just a drop and he'll either go mad or die. I've wasted enough time here. It is time for you to make a choice, daughter."

Rosemary sidestepped into her mother's path. She wrapped her fingers around the hilt of the knife strapped to her back. "I didn't want to have to do this." She tightened her grip and swung out. "But you leave me no choice."

A breeze of laughter followed her mother's easy spin. She evaded Rosemary's blade and flicked her own across Rosemary's wrist. Pain seared up Rosemary's arm and she lost her grip. The blade clattered on the ground.

"A queen trains her whole life to rule her nest, to guard her territory." Her mother took hold of her hair and wrenched her head back. "Even as a child she is beautiful and strong. I killed my mother when I was ten, my father watched." She brought the blade to Rosemary's throat. "I always feared the same would happen with you, your father loved you so, but you were such a pathetic thing I knew I would win. It was meant to end this way." She used the flat of the knife to tilt Rosemary's chin. "Count yourself blessed, you'll never have a daughter destined to kill you or die."

The cold razor edge pressed into her flesh.

"I will have daughters. And sons." Rosemary swallowed carefully against the blade, letting her gaze flick to Shiloh with Alaire perched on his shoulder.

Chetan tied a tight compress to Wylie's gut and stood by Felix. Kurt lay Largo out with a fist and rose to face Gunner who led her mother's men to cut him off.

"And they will take after their fathers as I did mine."

The cry of the falcon turned her mother's attention for a moment and Rosemary dropped out of reach, kicking out her legs to keep the knife from stabbing down into her body. Her mother howled in frustration and slammed her heel into Rosemary's knee.

Alaire let out a piercing scream as he tucked his wings tight to his sides and plunged through the night, spreading his wings just as he came level with her mother's face. He lashed out with his claws and her mother stumbled back, shielding her face with her arms.

Rosemary's blade rested inches from her hand and she stretched out to grab it, pain shooting up her knee with the effort. Rosemary refused to look at her knee, sure seeing the wreck of it would just make it hurt more. She focussed on getting her hand on her knife. She had to end this. Then she could see to the damage that had been done.

The shouting of her men holding back her mother, the voice of the falcon, the sound of the wind that seemed to urge her on, all faded as her fingers circled the cold metal hilt. Pushing up on one hand and one knee, Rosemary looked at her mother.

Her mother pushed Alaire from her with a burst of power, leaving herself open as she recovered. Rosemary took the opportunity to surge forward with the blade.

The blade hit something solid, but it wasn't flesh. The air had shifted, gaining the consistency of wood. Rosemary's hair clung to her face as she turned her head to focus on her mother's men, wondering which one had saved their queen. The men retreated, but none looked her way. They were watching something in the distance.

Tense, ready for the attack that was sure to come, Rosemary squinted to make out the shadowy figure rushing towards them. The black blur shifted as it approached, birthing light and flesh and words before lips could be seen.

"Rosemary, please don't." The voice was quiet, but it hit her with such force it might as well have shouted.

Rosemary stared as the form took shape and knelt by her mother. "Father?" She shook her head, dragging herself back with the heels of her palms, grateful when Kurt brushed by Gunner who hadn't moved and came to stand at her side. She needed the support.

Her father whispered harsh words to her mother that she couldn't make out and gestured to her men. Shiloh, Felix and Chetan circled them to join Kurt. Alaire landed beside Rosemary and changed in a rising mist of feathers and smoke.

"No more, Margaret. I won't have you kill our daughter." He looked past Kurt to where Alaire helped Rosemary to her feet, acting as a crutch when her shattered knee wouldn't support her weight. "And I won't allow her to kill you."

The fighting had stopped, but tension rode high, the very press of the wind and the moan of the trees telling them to end it in blood. Her father stood in the centre, between the men that guarded their fallen queens.

Rosemary searched those familiar eyes, always so full of pride and love, for a hint of where his loyalties lay. The answer sent a sharp pain through her chest. Alaire took her hand and lifted it to his lips. The tenderness that had no place in battle gave Rosemary strength. She knew they were outnumbered, outclassed. But she was not alone.

Squeezing Alaire's hand, Rosemary leaned on him and with his help limped to Kurt's side. She put her hand on his shoulder and faced her father.

"My prince has already told your queen that our nest will leave her territory." Rosemary hated how impersonal her words were, but she had to keep family ties out of negotiations. They really didn't matter. "She refused, but we will make that offer one last time if it will end this."

"We accept." The lines around her father's eyes deepened as regret settled on his face, but his tone was firm. He gave his wife a sharp look when she hissed an objection through her teeth. "You have a week to put your affairs in order —"

"No!" Her mother held her hand out to Gunner and he helped her up. She glared at her prince. "You've protected her long enough. I want her dead!"

Rosemary's father frowned. "If you pursue this, Margaret, I will have no choice but to leave the nest. Without me, your nest cannot stand against our daughter's. She will have the power to claim this land as her own."

"You would choose her over me." Margaret's bottom lip trembled and Rosemary stared. Her mother looked like she might cry.

"We've already lost a son, my love. I know you don't care for our daughter, but if you care for me, don't ask me to suffer another loss." Her father took her mother from Gunner and held both her hands to his chest. "Let her go."

Margaret sighed and nodded. "Very well, I will let her go, but a week is too long. I want her gone now."

"Be reasonable..."

Margaret's eyes narrowed. "I am being reasonable. Already her presence makes me look weak to the other queens. Most say I overindulge my prince, others say I am simply too soft to slay my own daughter. If I caste her out with her nest so broken, they may still believe I indulge you, but considering your worth, they will understand."

Before her father could argue, Kurt spoke up. "We will leave now." Rosemary frowned at him, but he leaned close and lowered his voice. "Rosemary, look at Wylie and Largo. Do you really want to leave them there while we haggle for more time?"

Rosemary looked at them, crumpled on the ground like toy soldiers, broken and abandoned, and shook her head. She waited until her mother swore to let them leave unharmed then asked Alaire to bring her to Wylie while Kurt finished the negotiations with her father.

Alaire picked her up, and giving wide berth to her mother's men, carried her to Wylie's side. He set her down and went to check on Largo.

"Are we all still alive?" Wylie asked, his eyes slitting open when she touched his face.

Rosemary nodded, feeling her throat close as she forced herself to look at his wounds. His white shirt was plastered to his skin with blood, but the earth seemed to have absorbed the rest, the ground beneath him was dry. It didn't look like any fresh blood was coming from the wound, but the shredded cloth Chetan had used to compress it was lumped up from his gut. Rosemary reached for the bandage and Wylie caught her wrist.

"Don't. You don't want to see—"

Felix dropped to a knee at Wylie's other side and tore the bandage away. Rosemary covered her mouth with her hand and felt herself sway.

Pressing through the wound, growing even as she watched, were roots. Their bark glistened black with Wylie's blood and she could see them absorbing his flesh as they spread.

"What's happening to him?" She looked from Chetan to Felix, sure they didn't have an answer, but needing to ask.

"Wylie is a dryad, Rosemary. His kin wants to take him home." Chetan's eyes took on an eerie glow, casting his features in a haunting blue light that seemed to spill out from his aura. Felix reached for him and the glow spread, enveloping them both. They spoke as one. "But they will heal him and leave him to you because he wants to stay."

"How do you know?" Rosemary retreated a little, afraid that the glow would take her as well. Alaire crouched at her side and growled at them. She blinked when she glanced at him to see his mouth full of sharp teeth.

"They know because you wished they did, Rosemary." Kurt joined them, glaring at Alaire until he backed away. He pulled Rosemary to her feet. "You'll have to be more careful as they come into their powers. They won't have much control at first."

"I wouldn't worry too much about the djinn." Her father's voice startled her as he came up behind them.

Rosemary looked around him, surprised to see her mother and the rest of her nest were gone.

Her father continued, speaking more to Kurt than her. "They can do nothing unless it is asked of them." He nodded towards Shiloh who had stayed with Largo. Largo was sitting up now, shaking his head as though trying to clear it. "You'd be wise to watch the demigod and the fae." He glanced at Alaire. "And keep a leash on the changeling. They bite."

Alaire looked insulted. He straightened and tried to speak around his fangs. Rosemary put a hand on his arm and frowned at her father. "I trust my men, Father, all of them. What I don't trust is you disappearing for so long only to come back in time to save Mother."

"I love her, Rosemary. I couldn't let you kill her." Her father's eyes pleaded for understanding.

Rosemary wasn't ready to give it. "But you'd give her so many chances to kill me?"

Her father smiled then, a bright smile that seemed out of place. "I knew she couldn't kill you. You've gathered a strong nest with loyal men. Her every attack only strengthened your bond. I knew it wouldn't be long before you were ready to claim your own territory."

"Our bond could have been strengthened without the threat to our lives. Why didn't you just tell me?" Rosemary felt like she'd been tricked. All the times she'd needed her father and he'd purposely stayed away, let her mother do whatever she wanted. He might have been confident that she'd survive, but there were too many ways it could have gone wrong. "And what territory? You've already said I can't stay here."

Her father took a step towards her, then stopped, inclining his head at Kurt who'd stepped forward. She wasn't sure what had passed between them, but apparently Kurt didn't want her father any closer and her father would respect his wishes. "I went to

California to meet with the vard-lokkur that reside there. They guard the land from demons and other dangerous immortals, but they are curious about you. They are willing to let you live there if you will let them study you." He waved his hand in a way to include them all. "You have a unique nest. They want to know how you lured such power to you. I think after losing me, they hope to learn how to protect themselves from other cambions."

"I like that idea." Rosemary fisted her hand at her side and the wound on her wrist opened, oozing blood over her fist to drip on the dirt. "You can tell your friends I will do everything in my power to avoid any more of their men being trapped."

"I'm sure they will be happy to hear that," her father said, jaw clenched as he watched the blood fall. A jingle of sound came from his pocket and he pulled out his phone, looking once at the number before pressing a button to silence it. He took a deep breath, looking towards Rosemary, but not quite meeting her eye. "I must go to your mother. I know you don't understand why I did what I did, but maybe one day, when you have children of your own, you will." He turned on his heel and walked away.

A cold rush of energy filled Rosemary and she took a step to follow, wanting to run to him, to tell him it was all right.

No one stopped her, no one said a word, but she couldn't go any further. Her father had done all he could for her. To keep her alive, he was letting her go. She couldn't give him any less. There was no telling what her mother would do if pushed any further. She wouldn't be the first to kill her own prince.

Taking a deep, bracing breath, Rosemary turned and reached for Kurt when her legs refused to hold her anymore. He took her up in his arms and cradled her against his chest.

"Shh. You did well, Rosemary. Let me take it from here." His arms locked around her when she shook her head and tried to wiggle free. "You're hurt. Let me bring you to the car."

"I am the queen of this nest, Kurt." Rosemary blinked away her tears and tried to look stern. "Put me down and let me tend to my men."

"Our men," Kurt said, smiling as he ignored her request and carried her to the parking lot. "And they're big boys. Let them 'tend to' themselves."

"What about Felix and Chetan? Maybe Wylie's kin will heal him, and Alaire seems to have been healed during his change, but powers of the djinn are overwhelming." Rosemary let Kurt set her on the hood of his car, and remained passive until he went to unlock the

door. Then she slid to her feet, favouring one leg, and limped across the parking lot as fast as she could. She screeched when Kurt swooped her up and span her back to the car. "Let me go!"

"You're worrying for nothing." Kurt sat her back on the hood and rested his hands by her hips, trapping her. "The djinn only need a wish to focus their powers on. What is your wish?"

"To have my nest with me, safe and whole." Rosemary closed her eyes, wondering if Kurt was right, if just wishing it would make it so. She opened her eyes, expecting to have all her men around her. There was only Kurt. "It didn't work."

"It did." Kurt pointed into the darkness. "Look."

They emerged from the line of trees, Largo and Alaire supporting Wylie, Chetan helping Felix who looked utterly drained and Shiloh taking up the rear, his skin shining enough to light the trees behind them while he watched the shadows for any sign of danger.

Rosemary sighed. "They're still wounded and weak."

"You didn't ask for them to be healed," Kurt said, sounding amused. He leaned close, his cheek brushing against hers. "I guess we'll have to take care of them the old-fashioned way."

Drinking in the heat of Kurt's body, Rosemary let her eyes drift shut and grazed his ear with her lips. "I think I'd like that, my prince. It's been quite some time since we were all together somewhere...comfortable. Maybe we can find a nice motel once we cross the state line." She backed a little to watch the lust flare in his eyes. "We never did finish that movie."

Kurt cleared his throat and looked over his shoulder, opening his mouth twice before a sound would come out. "Hurry up, boys," he called, running his hands up and down Rosemary's thighs. "I think our queen is hungry."

Chapter Twenty-four

Pen poised above the notes she was taking for her thesis, Rosemary cocked her head and listened to the slight shift in the air around her. The red waves of her aura lapped out, tasting the room for the essence of something alive. She drew it back and locked it securely behind a mental wall, a skill she'd been forced to master before the vard-lokkur council would approve her enrolment in the local college. Not that she was a danger to the students with a full nest to sustain her, but the council would take no chances.

Rosemary didn't mind. Classes were much easier now that she wasn't ruled by the hunger. And she was paid generously for any training or testing done with the council, so she wouldn't complain.

Besides, there were benefits to her refined skills. "I know you're there, Kurt."

Shadows unfolded from around Kurt like thick cloth. He was a little closer than she'd thought.

"You let me get too close," he said, bending down to kiss her bare shoulder. "If I was anyone else..."

Rosemary rolled her eyes. "I knew it was you."

A hand touched her other shoulder and she jumped.

"But you didn't sense me." Shiloh smiled, casting aside the burst of energy she'd thrust at him in panic. "You rely too heavily on the security of the council."

"And you don't trust it at all." Rosemary sighed and set her pen on her desk. It was a good thing the council had found her a room of her own on campus, the boys constantly popping in to test her would frighten a roommate. "You guys have to relax. There are wards on campus."

Shiloh dropped his head and hooked his thumbs in his pockets.

"There are things powerful enough to get through them. You've got to stop letting your guard down." Kurt folded his arms across his chest. "Do you know there has been talk of creatures with the ability to take any form?" His lips parted over his gleaming white teeth. "How do you know it's really us?"

Doubt clenched Rosemary's gut. She eyed Shiloh whose head was still down, then studied Kurt whose face was blank. Sending out a tendril of power, she felt around Kurt for the tie that bound him as her prince. She felt it and let it spill around her, covering her like blanket fresh out of the dryer, hot and lightly scented.

She leaned into him and lifted her head to kiss him. "If you're not Kurt, I'd like to know who you are." She smiled when his lips went still. "You tempt me to distraction."

"You don't play fair." Kurt groaned when she lowered her lips to his neck. "I just want you to be careful."

"I am being careful." Rosemary sucked his skin into her mouth, playing her teeth on it while she reached out to catch Shiloh's arm and bring him closer. "This is the first time I have the two of you together with no one else around. I'm carefully taking advantage of the opportunity you've given me."

Shiloh hissed in a breath when she undid his belt. "I was the only one who could slip in undetected. Largo may gain the ability soon, but he finds it difficult to conceal his girth."

"Which is convenient, since I've already had a taste of being taken by two dominants. This is something new." She nipped Kurt's neck and released him, then turned to claim Shiloh's mouth.

Kurt groaned and worked her crisp shirt from the confines of her skirt. "And to think I was once able to turn you down."

Rosemary pushed his hands away and took off her shirt herself. He'd ruined too many already and she was still trying to replace all the clothes she'd left behind. The council might be generous, but she still had bills to pay.

Both young men stood back to watch her strip. Enjoying their rapt attention, Rosemary unzipped her skirt and eased it down, dipping so they got a good view of her breasts pushed up in the lacy bra.

"God, I want you," Kurt said, removing his shirt and tugging at his belt.

Rosemary laughed and undid it for him when he couldn't get the leather strap through the buckle. He caught her face and attacked her lips, leaving her gasping for air.

Shiloh hovered near them, making Rosemary smile against Kurt's lips when he gave her a moment to catch her breath. Shiloh was so confident in his powers, but in moments like

this, the shyness returned. He would do nothing until she asked, which was exactly what she needed from him.

She moved away from Kurt and took Shiloh's hands, turning him so his thighs pressed against her desk. She tugged his shirt from where it was tucked into his jeans, pulled it over his head and tossed it aside. His chest rose and fell in time with his rapid breaths. Rosemary peeled off his jeans and his boxers. Then she got comfortable on her knees and took his quivering dick in her mouth. She peered up at him, watching his eyes close as she dipped and swallowed around the engorged tip of him. Slipping her lips off him, she circled her tongue, then teased the little slit that tasted of salty sweetness. His hands took a death grip on the edge of the desk as she sucked her way down his length.

Something bumped her inner thigh and she felt Kurt kneel behind her, lifting her up and spreading her with his hand. He jabbed a finger into her moist depths and pressed his chest to her back, reaching around to lift the weight of one breast in his hand.

"I can take you like this," Kurt said, adding another finger and curving both to tease the centre of her pleasure. He slid his fingers from her and coated her wetness up to her tighter hole. "But I think Shiloh wants more than your mouth."

"I'd be satisfied with nothing more," Shiloh said through his teeth, his hold on the desk gaining such force it cracked the wood when she rewarded the comment with another deep throat swallow. "But *I* would never refuse that sweet body."

Rosemary had a hard time focusing with Kurt teasing his fingers around the cleft of her ass. She lifted her head, bracing on one hand so she could stimulate Shiloh with the other. She looked over her shoulder at Kurt. "Don't toy with me. You let Largo take me from behind last time, and Felix the time before that. I've already told you, you don't have to do that if you're not comfortable with it."

Kurt shrugged. "I'll try anything once." His hooded lids implied much.

She thought over some of Felix's stories of experimenting with the girls he'd lost. Some things didn't sound humanly possible. Then again, none of them were really human.

"If you're sure?" Rosemary grinned when Kurt nodded and stood. She shoved Shiloh until he was sitting on her desk and climbed up to straddle him, using her hand to guide him to her slick folds. She eased down and took one of his hands to place it on her hip. With her arms wrapped around his neck, she took a moment to enjoy the filling feeling of him buried

inside her. Then she rose up until only the top of his dick remained within and wiggled her butt. "We're waiting."

Kurt growled and closing the distance between them, he bent down, one hand pulling his pants to him so he could go through his pockets, the other on her waist while he pressed his face between her spread cheeks.

She started when his tongue lapped up from the flesh stretched around Shiloh, to the base of her spine. Another lick and she shuddered.

Chuckling, Kurt bit off the top of the tube he'd found and spit it on the floor. "There's no part of you I won't touch, or take. You are mine."

He coated her with lube, pushing his fingers in until she dropped onto Shiloh and clenched around him, fighting to hold off an orgasm, wanting to linger on each new sensation before she surrendered to climax.

"You planned this," she whispered against Shiloh neck.

He wrapped his arms around her, his chin on her shoulder so he could watch what Kurt was doing. Rosemary didn't need to watch. She could feel it, the heat of the lube, the fingers straining past the knuckles, the moment when something larger demanded access.

Kurt grunted acknowledgement as he slowly worked his way in. She could feel sweat on the lips he pressed to her shoulder. "I had to do something. I can't compete with the games Felix comes up with, or the positions Wylie finds in his books." He paused and Rosemary pressed back a little to help him. He really didn't need to go so slow, she was adept enough for force, but she didn't want to speak up and ruin the effort he was making. He rested his forehead against the nape of her neck. "I can't make you laugh like Alaire, or reach you spiritually like Chetan. Largo's better at rough play and Shiloh makes you feel needed. Being your prince, I should be able to give you something the others can't."

Tightening her thighs on Shiloh's to hold herself in place, Rosemary twisted her body and curved one arm around Kurt's neck. She forced him to face her. "You give me everything. You've taken on a role that none of the others can. They are happy with their positions in this nest. I need you to be happy with yours."

Kurt pressed himself into her, the lube easing his way until he was fully embedded. He stayed there, just looking at her, his eyes as uncertain as Shiloh's had been before. "And what role is that?"

"You are my equal." She kissed him and released him so she could search his eyes for understanding. "I need someone to share the burden so that I can enjoy the life you and Largo have given me. You do that for me, and no one questions how much I need that, but you. Stop finding reasons to doubt us. I've done enough of that to last us a lifetime."

"You're right." Kurt nodded slowly, as though confirming something to himself. Then he grinned, looking past her to Shiloh. "Is that desk sturdy?"

"Yes." A smile spread over Shiloh's lips. "Largo made sure when he bought it."

"Good." Kurt drew himself back until he was almost out and slammed back in. Rosemary gasped and arched up as the pleasure rolled through her. Shiloh set his hands behind him and bowed his body up. "Because our queen requires something from her king, not something gentle." He hesitated, leaning over Rosemary's shoulder to look into her eyes. "I heard you said this would be the first nest with a king."

"Oh, yes." Rosemary bit her lip and groaned when he dragged himself out and stabbed back in. "And for tonight, I will let you command me, my liege. What is it you desire from your queen?"

"I desire you on the desk, riding our subject raw while I fuck you." He jabbed in, lifting her up Shiloh's dick, then used his grip on her hips to slam her down while he slid back. "Then we will take him to the bedroom, and if we are feeling generous, we will call the others to join us."

They kept moving, in a perfect rhythm that made it impossible to speak. In the moment of calm before her body was ready to explode, Rosemary managed to remark on his lusty words.

"And you will see to it that all our subjects are satisfied?"

Kurt gasped out a response seconds before he came. "With a woman like you, how could they not be?"

About the Author

Bianca Sommerland was born and raised in Montreal, Quebec. When not reading neurotically or writing as though the fate of the world rests on her keyboard, she is either watching hockey or teaching her daughters the beauty of a classic, steel pony while reminiscing about her days in Auto Body Mechanics.

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