

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



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Before Dawn

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BEFORE DAWN

Ann Bruce

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Prologue

She was naked and on her knees. And so was the warm male body behind her.

Oh God.

That was her only coherent thought as equal parts pleasure, deep and intense to an almost terrifying degree, and frustration racked her slender body. She arched, the back of her head digging into the shoulder behind it, her breasts pushing harder into the warm male hands cupping them, rhythmically squeezing them.

Shivers raced down her taut frame when soft lips pressed against the side of her neck, setting off tiny explosions on the acutely sensitive skin. Her nails dug into straining thighs when a tongue flicked out to tease the pulsing vein in her neck.

Her inner muscles contracted, eagerly anticipating the invasion of the erection pressing, burning into her buttocks. She moaned. It was a low, strangled sound of desperate need.

"Tell me you want me," came the raspy demand whispered directly into her ear, caressing it. "Tell me you want," she inhaled sharply at the small thrust of his pelvis against her smooth bottom, "*this*."

She writhed in his hold, trapped from behind by the hard body and from the front by the hands kneading her swollen breasts. But she didn't writhe to get away. She writhed because the friction was delicious and sinful and gave her a measure of relief from the need coiled so tightly in her middle. It had been much, much too long.

Eyes at half mast, she drew her lower lip between her teeth and gently bit down as her restless hands haltingly rubbed up and down the length of his smooth thighs. She pressed back and widened her knees slightly, silently begging him to come into her from behind and pump toward the release they both needed.

Through the haze, she felt two sharp points scrape almost delicately across her skin. They pushed down, piercing her flesh. And pain slashed through the fog of pleasure clouding her brain...

Mercy Jansen came awake with a jolt, sitting straight up in her bed, tangled sheets wrapped carelessly about her damp body. A body that felt heavy and seemed to throb, beating out remembered desire.

For long, drawn-out moments she sat there, listening to the heavy beat of her heart echoing in her head.

Oh Jesus. Not again.

Mercy raked her damp hair back with both hands. This couldn't be healthy. Having dreams—*erotic* dreams, at that—about a vampire. *Mental note to self—no more pre-born-again Anne Rice novels before bed.* She laughed weakly. Very weakly. After three consecutive months, she no longer found the dreams amusing. They were freaky, actually. Especially since she always woke up just before he drew blood.

Mercy closed her eyes and shivered delicately.

What would happen if she didn't wake at that point?

Despite herself, she slowly trailed her fingers from the swift pulse in her neck down between her still-flushed breasts, down past her navel and farther still. And her breath caught in her throat when she found her center warm and creamy, as she had expected. But what unsettled her was she still desired the man—the *thing*—of her nightmares. Thrilling, sensuous, erotic...but still nightmares when she lacked control and feared them too much to see them through to the end.

Jesus Christ. She needed to get out of here and away from these none-too-pleasant thoughts.

Mercy swung her legs off the bed and onto the floor, taking the sheet with her, wrapped about her body sarong style. She left her bedroom, the scene of her

nightmares, with the ends of the white sheet trailing behind her like a wedding gown train.

Needing fresh air to clear her muddled head, Mercy soon found herself tucked quite comfortably on the large, deeply cushioned porch swing on the back deck, a tall glass of cold water clasped between her hands, which were gradually becoming numb despite the unseasonably warm weather. The ice floating in the clear liquid clinked almost soothingly as she brought the glass to her lips and sipped. Her parched throat found relief. Mercy carelessly placed the glass on the wooden floor of the deck and settled back, pulling the sheet about her more securely.

It was a beautiful night, making her silently congratulate herself for having the foresight to purchase a home on the outskirts of the metropolis. It was quiet here, peaceful, and without the pollution that wouldn't allow her to see each glittering, preening star so clearly. She could almost trace their needle-thin outlines. Moreover, even if there weren't towering trees and vegetation around to ensure her privacy, her closest neighbor was much farther than a holler away. It was an inconvenience to commute to work on the mornings she had to go into the office, but it was a small price to pay for the privacy she had learned to treasure so dearly growing up in a crowded orphanage.

Mercy closed her eyes, drew in a deep breath and just as slowly released it, feeling the tension seep from her back and shoulders, leaving them as limp as silk pooled on a bedroom floor. The air had just the teeniest nip in it, enough to make the sheet necessary to keep her toasty and just a bit drowsy. A yawn was drawn from the very depths of her body, making her eyelids feel more weighted. Eventually, she recklessly tumbled off that edge between wakefulness and sleep.

The soft touch began in her hair. Long fingers softly combed through the silky, coal-dark strands before traveling down to trace the unguarded features of her face. Mercy softly stirred but didn't waken when her neck received similar treatment. A quiet sound

slipped past her lips...lips that parted for the mouth that gently covered them, moved lightly, sensuously over them. Even in her sleep, Mercy knew how to respond, needed to respond.

Her mouth opened wider, an invitation her dream lover accepted immediately. Cradling her head in both hands, he stroked his tongue inside her soft, soft mouth, exploring the slick surfaces, the ridged roof, the slightly rough texture of her tongue. He shifted her head to deepen the kiss, still keeping it leisurely and sensuous. Mercy moaned in her sleep.

Then she felt another pair of hands divesting her of the protective sheet. The hands unwrapped her slowly, carefully, as if savoring a gift received on Christmas morning. The spaghetti straps of her silk thigh-high nightgown were slipped off her shoulders and pushed down past her elbows. She shivered when the night air washed over her breasts, bared for the moon and the stars in the night sky to view.

She cried out against the mouth still making love to hers when two more paid homage to her breasts. *Dear God*. Hands stroked up and down her sides as two mouths covered her pebbled nipples and suckled, teasing her with the feel of the smooth edges of teeth, sporadically, just enough to drive her slowly insane.

Her soul-deep sound of need was choked when her breasts were left bereft. But the sound changed into a soft groan when long-fingered hands kneaded the mounds of her breasts, giving her a measure of relief. Her crumpled nightgown was rucked up to expose the lower half of her primed body. A pointed tongue teased her navel, flicking in and out of her bellybutton before erotically trailing its way down to her pulsing sex. Her thighs languorously fell open, her sex glistening, announcing her need to all who cared to look and touch.

Mercy tried to draw back from the mouth that ate at hers, but the hands tangled in her hair wouldn't let her escape. Instead, he— whoever he was—kissed her even more voraciously, forcing her head back. A muffled sound escaped her as she tried to draw

air through her nostrils. Fire sizzled her nerve endings and her hips arched off the porch swing when a mouth pressed deeply, intimately against her sex.

It was enough to send a ripple through Mercy's dream, enough to nudge her toward the waking world. She was slow, reluctant even, in crossing that bridge. Lashes fluttered then lifted. The hands and mouths retreated.

She thought she gasped. It wasn't fear, but a somewhat mild shock, as if she had been expecting this on some level. If she hadn't already gasped, she should have at the sight that greeted her. It was something right out of a Gothic horror. A solitary figure against the backdrop of the night sky and yet darkly shadowed so she could just barely make out his features. A small hysterical laugh threatened to bubble from her. All that was missing was the flash of lightning and a cape whipping in the wind. But there was no lightning and no cape, just a looming shadow of a man in the distance, watching her intently. Despite the cover of darkness, Mercy hastily rewrapped herself in the sheet. The crazy idea he was responsible for her erotic dreams and the episode just now teased her brain.

There was a gleam of eerie white. He was smiling. His lips moved. His words were slow, as was that disconcerting smile. "Soon, Mercy...soon."

And she awoke, a hand pressed to her madly beating heart.

Chapter One

Mercy deftly snatched a glass of champagne from a passing waiter to keep her company while she got some air not laden with expensive perfume and the musky scent of sweat. Event organizer or not, she deserved a respite after spending the better part of the night eluding an amorous Henry VIII. She had stupidly made a smartass comment about him having to have a lot of stamina to go through six wives, and Henry had taken that as a come-on.

Recalling Henry's pudgy swimming pool palms, Mercy was unable to repress a shudder and quickly lifted the slim flute to her lips and swallowed a mouthful of chilled, bubbly liquid, hoping to wash away the recollection. The champagne slid down her throat and hit her empty stomach. It gurgled, making her grimace as she shot her gaze around, hoping no one was within hearing distance. Not that anyone should be since this area was cordoned off from the public for the event.

As she hurried along the corridor, the din of noise—a blend of voices, clinking glass and silverware, and the lilting strains from a string quartet—receded and the tight, invisible band around her head eased. She never did like crowds. However, after looking at the museum's financial statements last quarter, the fundraiser had been a necessary evil.

The event had turned out better than she'd anticipated. Then again, the novelty of a costumed gala to celebrate the Valentine's Day opening of the museum's latest exhibit of Native American artifacts had been sure to attract the movers and shakers of this metropolis.

Or at least the women who'd wanted to play dress-up and had dragged their partners along.

Her office came into sight and a heartfelt sigh of relief escaped her parted lips. *Thank God.* She quickened her pace, the soft leather soles of her simple, flat sandals making no noise on the polished marble floor. She extended her hand and wrapped her fingers around the knob, taking a brief solace in the cool metal. She'd been warm all evening, despite the sheerness of her costume.

She opened her office door and swiftly stole inside the darkened space like she was doing something illicit. With her foot, she pushed the door close and reached back to twist the lock for good measure before raising the champagne flute to her mouth. It was empty. Steadily, Mercy reached for the lamp on her desk and flipped it on. Golden light spilled onto the cluttered desktop and threw the rest of the room into shadows. She held the glassware before her eyes, a little bemused. She didn't remembering draining it.

With exaggerated care, she set the flute on her desk.

"Would you care for another?"

With an embarrassing yelp of surprise, Mercy whirled around, sending layers of colorful silk flaring around her bare legs. "What the —"

She placed a hand over her left breast, as if needing confirmation her heart really hadn't stopped beating. A caped figure, gathered in shadows, stood just beyond the open door she was positive she'd closed and locked. It glided forward, the shadows seeming to move with it. And impossibly blue eyes captured hers. Mercy's instincts screamed at her to move back, to run away, but her rigid muscles couldn't obey.

"My apologies for startling you," continued the smooth voice that rivaled aged brandy, stirring something in the only part of her that was still functioning, her memories. "Mercy Jansen."

Hearing her name spoken by that voice jolted her from her paralysis. She stumbled back, as graceless as a newborn colt testing its legs for the first time. All too soon the edge of her desk hit her backside. With great effort she dropped her gaze, cutting the eye-to-eye contact, and the mist that hovered like London fog in her brain lifted.

Why was she acting like a nitwit bimbo from a teenage slasher flick? He was just another attendee.

Who'd followed her to a secluded part of the museum, well away from the crowd.

Get a grip, Jansen.

Mercy straightened away from the desk and pushed back the tangled fall of hair from her face, wishing she'd opted for the old schoolmarm costume. But *nooo*, she'd just had to indulge that whim to be girly.

She glanced up, deliberating skirting the eyes, and could not stop herself from staring rudely. Count Dracula, the young and romantic version, stood before her. He wasn't tall, perhaps a few scant inches under average, but what he lacked in stature he made up for with drama. Midnight curls gleamed with blue highlights and fell to shoulders draped in a black satin cape with a high, stiff collar that ended in dangerous-looking points. The floor-length garment was open, revealing the brilliant gleam of the crimson inner lining. Startlingly white lace spilled from his throat and tight cuffs, hiding all but long, elegant fingers that were paler and better manicured than her own. A touch of modernity was in the shiny leather pants encasing slim legs. Mercy blinked slowly and felt her eyebrows inch up. She had the absurd urge to ask if he'd had to be stitched into the pants, they were so tight.

Bracing herself for the impact, her eyes traveled back up. The beauty of his face was dazzling, if a touch too feminine for her taste. He looked like he should be the front man of a Japanese boy band. Full lips, aquiline nose, high cheekbones, arching eyebrows and sweeping lashes long enough to make her envious. And he looked like she had a decade on him.

That final observation, more than anything else, allowed Mercy to gather her wits.

"I'm sorry, but guests are not allowed in this area."

He moved deeper into the office. "You sound a little hoarse," he said, ignoring her statement, and held out a flute filled halfway with champagne. "Take this."

Mercy automatically accepted the offering. "Thank you, Mr. —?"

"Edmond," he said, a hint of an accent flavoring the name. It sounded French, which suited the name and his Gallic coloring.

"Thank you, Mr. Edmond."

He shook his head but his hair barely moved. "Just Edmond."

"Uh, okay."

He lifted his own flute, tipping it toward her. Feeling a little awkward, she touched her flute to his, very aware of his eyes following her every movement. Not wanting to insult a man who'd forked over two hundred and fifty dollars for a ticket to the fundraiser and a potential donor, Mercy took a sip, just enough to coat her mouth and her esophagus.

And squeezed her eyes shut as her head swam and her hand faltered, tilting the flute dangerously. She really should've eaten something beyond the banana and carton of cherry yogurt at lunch.

A hand caught hers. She had the impression of icy coldness a heartbeat before warmth washed over her like rain. The champagne flute was rescued from her unsteady fingers. Despite the voluntary darkness, her head continued to bob like a bottle tossed in the sea. Her hand reached back and found the solid surface of her desk.

"Mercy?"

That compelling voice filled her head, dampening the waves. She exhaled, unaware she'd been holding her breath 'til that moment. A heavy, artificial scent filled her nostrils and she instinctively turned her head away. Satin brushed the naked skin of her legs, cool and slick. His cape. Fingertips skimmed the curve of her cheek, the line of her throat, the slope of her exposed shoulder. And she couldn't protest, couldn't stir herself from the lassitude that trapped her in its silken grip. Not even long enough to lift her lashes, let alone break away.

The exploration continued, soft and gentle and warm...and somehow familiar.

There was nothing to fear from him. That thought whispered through her mind like a tendril of smoke.

Mercy let herself drift, let the sensual pleasure of his touch lull her.

The hand holding hers drew it upward until her palm met a chest that felt like marble under the layer of cloth. Soft lips grazed her jawline. He whispered her name again. From the jumbled, hazy mess of her thoughts, one question emerged.

“What are you?” she breathed.

Lips brushed her earlobe. “The man of your dreams.”

She wasn’t here. Mercy Jansen wasn’t among the three hundred or so costumed attendees indulging in free-flowing alcohol and tiny hors d’oeuvres that would look ridiculous held between his fingers.

Ryan McGinnis knew she wasn’t there because after three months of surveillance he would’ve been able to locate her in a crowd by her scent alone.

Scanning the room even though he knew he wouldn’t find her, Ryan cursed the Council. What in his last damned report hadn’t been clear? And why question him tonight of all nights? Even after he’d bit out *why* leaving Mercy Jansen alone even for a minute tonight was an extremely bad idea, he hadn’t been allowed to leave. And that was when he’d studied each member of the Council and, with a new level of cynicism, judged them, weighed them.

Christ, where could she be? She was trying to raise funds for the museum, so shouldn’t she be milling about, making nice with all the moneyed people?

Joséphine and a man too thin and too tall to be a convincing Napoléon Bonaparte passed by in front of him. Ryan ignored the appraising looks the tipsy pair aimed in his direction. Frustration flared. The woman, who was generally as predictable as a Swiss timepiece, had to choose tonight of all nights to deviate from expected behavior.

The man of your dreams.

As the mouth suckled at a bared breast, her thoughts slowly—oh-so painfully slowly—wove themselves together, one fragile thread at a time because the synapses between the neurons in her brain had slowed to one frame per second. And the picture that emerged made her think she'd lost more than just her Catholic sense of inhibition.

The sense of déjà vu was nearly overwhelming. She'd felt this before. She'd done this before.

She'd dreamt this before.

Oh God.

Her breath shuddered out of her lungs. As if they were trying to push through a wall of molasses, her hands came up and braced against his shoulders. She dug in the heels of her palms and pushed. He didn't budge. If anything, those deceptively slim arms encircling her tightened further.

Fear quickened her pulse.

Then she felt them. The warning dual scrapes of dangerously sharp points on her skin. She struggled wildly. Or thought she did. She couldn't be sure because her limbs felt heavy and clumsy, like she'd been dosed with Benadryl. A sound of frustration filled her head. Then it was too late as she cried out at the searing blaze of pain in her breast.

The wet sucking sounds were abnormally loud and filled her with revulsion and renewed strength. Tears stung her eyes as she fisted her hands in his hair and tried to yank his head back, but the locks of hair slid through her fingers like water. Something slammed against her head and another cry escaped her. Lights burst behind her closed eyelids, then a piercing pain, as if a sharp object was trying to bore its way into her brain. Disjointed images flashed in her mind's eye. Her hands came up to cradle her head, knead her temples to ease the pain, but nothing—

There was a loud crash, muffled as if it came from a distance, and suddenly the pain was gone.

Ryan took in the scene between one panicked heartbeat and the next. Mercy Jansen, half-naked, eyes glittering with tears, her skin as pale as the monster he'd just pulled off her—except for the ugly crimson smear staining one breast and the equally ugly, equally crimson rivulet trickling down her chest.

He didn't think. He spun around and launched himself at the creature he'd bodily thrown out into the corridor. The element of surprise, however, was no longer his. A booted foot met his torso, sending him flying back onto the floor as the air was forcibly expelled from his lungs. He slid on his back until his head thumped against the desk. Momentarily stunned, it took him precious seconds to flip back onto his feet.

He heard a hiss and caught a glimpse of bare fangs as fingers closed around his neck like a steel manacle. Before the vampire could dig in his fingernails and rip out a much-needed larynx, Ryan struck the creature's elbow with the heel of his palm with enough force to break it had his opponent been human. As it was, it weakened his target enough for him to encircle the wrist and twist the captured arm into an arm bar. He let gravity take his weight to the ground and heard a pop.

With an inhuman shout of pain and rage, the vampire whipped his dislocated arm from Ryan's grip, rolled away and delivered a vicious kick that managed to break through Ryan's block, stunning him for the second time tonight. The vampire flew to his feet and threw himself at the large window behind the desk. Glass shattered like an explosion had gone off and, even knowing the shards would be flying out the window, Ryan automatically whipped his head to the side to protect his face.

Cursing viciously, he ran to the window, hands braced on either side of the frame, and scanned the night sky from left to right. The moon was out, crisp and bone white, but the vampire was long gone. Despite already knowing what he would find, he looked down. There were only the broken shards of glass reflecting the moonlight up at him. No body.

Vampires could fly. Ryan still needed a jet engine and wings.

A moan, faint and abruptly bitten off, drifted to him. He turned toward the sound and felt something inside him clench painfully. Mercy was huddled against a bookshelf in a corner, having dragged herself there while he'd been otherwise engaged. Her breathing was labored and shallow and her forehead lined with pain. One white-knuckled hand clung to a shelf just above her head, which she rested against the raised forearm. The other hand cradled a plump breast, the one marred by blood still trickling from two puncture wounds. Having been bitten himself, he knew her flesh would be throbbing with searing pain.

With a muttered curse, he crossed the room, whipping his leather jacket off before he reached her side. He went down on his haunches and draped the garment over her shoulders. She flinched and her eyelids flew open, pinning Ryan with Elizabeth Taylor's eyes. They stunned him, not the incredible shade of violet staring back at him, but the fear he could read just underneath the drug-induced fog clouding her vision.

The French prick with the overgrown canines seemed to prefer his victims insensible.

Her lips parted, as if to protest his presence, but only a choked sound emerged as she shrank away from him.

Ryan quickly held out his hands, palms out, trying to look non-threatening and knowing he was probably failing miserably.

"Hey, I'm not going to hurt you," he explained. The words were quiet but hoarse since the muscles in his throat, like the muscles in the rest of his body, ached with the suppressed need to make someone pay for the look in her eyes. As his fingers curled into fists, he lowered his hands to hide them from her gaze. "Let me help you, Mercy."

Her eyes flared at the sound of her name. She started to shake her head as if to clear it and stopped mid-movement, the lines of pain etched on her face deepening. He reached for her then thought better of it when she instantly went rigid, his hands stopping an inch away from touching her. Frustration whipped through him. "Damn it, I have to get you away from here. It's not safe."

She'd either decided to trust him or could no longer fight the sedatives in her system. Either way, her eyes drifted shut and her body went limp. He caught her before she hit the floor.

After tugging his jacket more tightly around her, he rose with her in his arms, her head lolling against his shoulder, her hair streaming over his arm. She felt light, insubstantial, and he had to gather her more closely against him.

Chapter Two

Her world was black and heavy with a silence that pressed on her chest. Everything felt soft and slow, like licking her way through a thick layer of honey. Except Mercy wasn't doing any licking – she wasn't doing anything. Her limbs felt too heavy to move, as if weights she couldn't see lay atop them.

Lips, slick and damp, repeatedly brushed over hers. Her own parted on a sigh, as if inviting a deeper touch. The wet tip of a tongue answered, tracing the inside of her bottom lip. Sharp teeth nipped it then moved on. Hands cupped her breasts, as if offering them for the mouth that enclosed one tip, then the other.

Mercy shifted her body against the slick fabric next to her skin. Despite the arousal leisurely working its way through her bloodstream, she couldn't block out the tiny patch of discord squirming in the far corner of her mind, taunting her almost. She squeezed her eyes shut, as if that would help her concentrate. She reached for those elusive threads of memory, stretching as far as she could, but they remained infuriatingly beyond her touch. The harder she tried, the further they danced out of her reach.

A sharp, cold edge pressed into the flesh of her thigh, sliced – and she screamed.

Ryan captured the flailing hands and squeezed ruthlessly but she continued to thrash about wildly, her legs pumping, tangling in the hot sheets. He called her name despite knowing she wouldn't hear him over whatever dream demon was making her struggle against him with such desperation.

Manacled both her wrists, he jerked them over her head and let his body fall on top of hers, trapping her legs between both of his. When she continued to struggle, trying unsuccessfully to twist out from underneath him, he let her have his entire considerable

weight, deliberately crushing her. It was either that or slap her into full consciousness. The air was audibly squeezed from her lungs just before she went limp.

Ryan remained still, a little uncertain of her surrender. After several moments, he braced his forearms on the bed and lifted his chest off her. She sucked in a lungful of air, her body quaking. The sounds of her harsh breathing filled the room.

"Mercy?"

Another quivering breath. Very carefully, he released her wrists. Mercy didn't take advantage of her new-found freedom. Gently, Ryan brushed back the tangled mass of hair covering her face.

"You were only dreaming. You're safe."

Underneath him, she inhaled slowly and shook her head. It was dark in the room, the only illumination provided by moonlight filtered through chintz curtains, spilling through the window. He hadn't been able to think about anything except getting to her when her scream had ripped through the air. Her face was pale and her eyes were closed. Tears glittered on her lashes.

Something clawed at his chest. Hoarsely, fiercely, he promised, "I won't let anything happen to you."

Ryan started to sit up. Perversely, her hands shot out and clutched at the front of his T-shirt, keeping him above her. Startled, he looked down at her. Her eyes were wide open and filled with apprehension.

"Don't go." Her voice was raspy and broken. She swallowed. "Please. I-I can't...be...alone."

Oh Christ.

Feeling inordinately clumsy, Ryan shifted onto his side. When the fingers fisted in his shirt clenched, he made noises he hoped were soothing and pulled her body into the curve of his. Her face burrowed against his chest, soft hair tickling the underside of his

jaw. A slender leg slipped between both of his, naked breasts flattened against his abdomen.

He stroked a palm down the soft, smooth skin of her narrow back, stopping just shy of the curves of her buttocks before retracing his path. And as his blood heated and his body hardened, he wished he hadn't been thoughtful enough to strip her of her torn and bloodied clothes before tucking her in.

McGinnis, you do not take advantage of vulnerable women.

Ryan reined in the impulse to pull her closer, to explore the tantalizing crevice —

The female body in his arms trembled. Her lips moved against his pulse, as did the soft globes of flesh against his abdomen. Ryan froze and cursed the thin barrier of his T-shirt. And he knew she couldn't miss the erection pushing against her thigh.

Something hot and wet brushed the skin of his throat, and he cursed himself. While he was lusting after her, she was silently crying.

"Mercy?" He sounded like his throat was lined with gravel. "What's wrong? Are the puncture wounds bothering you?"

God, he hoped it was the bite on her breast. He'd been trained to handle those types of injuries.

"He's in my head," she whispered, revulsion and fear shading her tone, and quivered harder. "I can still see him, hear him. I can still...*feel* him."

His hands tightened on her body. In his mind's eye, he saw the scene in her office and blood pounded violently in his temples.

"Kiss me."

Her quiet demand cut through the red haze clouding his brain. Ryan drew back and stared at her, not sure if he'd heard right.

"Please," she whispered, tilting her head back and offering him her lips. Her short laugh was a rough, humorless sound. "I need to forget."

He'd watched over her for three months and wanted her just as long. He'd fantasized about being with her, about spreading her underneath him, driving into her, making her cry out his name as he made her come again and again.

There was no doubt he wanted her, but not like this, not as a tool to chase away bad memories.

A hand cupped his bulging erection. Even through the thick material of his jeans the heat of her palm seared him. He was lost.

Mercy felt the muscles in the male body curved over hers tighten even more and knew he'd surrendered. Not wanting to allow him time to reconsider, she felt for the tab of his zipper, making him groan in the process. A large, rough hand closed over her wrist, squeezed it hard enough to make her fingers go numb.

She looked up. He was staring into her eyes as if the anti-life equation was hidden in their depths, intense and scrutinizing.

"Last chance," he warned, his voice deep and rough and impatient and pleading all at once. No smooth, insidious seductiveness. Nothing at all like the voice that had whispered in her too-real dreams. She shifted her head, her nose brushing against the skin of his throat, and inhaled. No cloying cologne masked his warm, masculine scent. She flicked out her tongue, touched the hollow of his throat and tasted salt. And something inside her eased, even as arousal uncurled its heated fingers in her lower body.

Above her, he hissed in air between gritted teeth, and then he was crushing her into the mattress. One hand plunged into her hair. The other hooked the back of her knee and spread her open even more. While his mouth sealed over hers, he pressed the hard length of his cock against her sex. It was her turn to suck in a breath and hold it. He rocked his hips, small movements so they never broke contact, making her shiver uncontrollably in response.

Oh God.

The need to touch him, to know the feel of his bare skin against hers was a physical ache that made her entire body taut. Wanting desperately to explore him, Mercy struggled to free her hands, which were trapped between their bodies.

He immediately pulled back and muttered something unintelligible. Suspecting he thought she'd changed her mind, Mercy slid her freed hands into his hair and pulled his head back down, crushing his lips to hers. She slanted her head, parted her lips and traced the seam of his mouth with her tongue. His own plunged into her mouth, returning her kiss hard enough to force her head deeper into the pillow.

As her fingers raked across his shoulders and down his back, she wrapped her legs around his hips to pull him closer. The heavy material of his jeans was rough on the inside of her thighs, but it only added to the stimulation bombarding her senses.

She arched her hips up to meet the downward thrust of his, moaning darkly into his mouth when the center seam of his jeans rubbed and pushed up against her swollen clitoris. New fires started, making her melt at her core.

She went wild, tearing at his T-shirt until he broke off the wet kiss and pushed himself up and back onto his knees. He peeled off the T-shirt, tossed it aside then reached for the fly of his jeans. He found her hands, trembling with desire and anticipation, already there.

She popped the button. He pulled down the zipper and brushed her hands aside, shedding the jeans, a lot hastily, a little clumsily, and stared avidly the entire time at her nude, gleaming body laid out before him like an offering. Then he was as naked as she—all lean, corded muscles rippling under golden skin, his shaft long and thick and flushed with blood—and Mercy's mouth watered. As he tore a foil packet he'd retrieved from the hip pocket of his jeans and rolled on the condom, her lips parted and her tongue flicked out to wet them.

A low sound broke from his throat. Before she could grab him and pull him back to her, calloused hands clamped onto her thighs and spread them until her muscles protested. He lowered his head and the first lick of his tongue made her close her eyes.

Her fingers tunneled into his hair, the short, cool strands a sharp contrast to the heat of his skin, the heat of his mouth.

He licked her, up and down, making her writhe beneath him before sucking her clitoris into his mouth and letting her feel the smooth edges of his teeth.

The orgasm took her by surprise, making fireworks explode behind her eyelids, her body arch in one still moment before the spasms took over.

Ryan licked the glistening juices trickling from her vagina, loving the taste of her on his tongue. Here, she was as soft as silk, as slick as satin, and the thought of burying his shaft in her heated core made it twitch. He felt electrified. He was so close to release his body was shaking. If he had more self-control, he'd leave her.

But he'd never claimed to be noble.

And right now, he couldn't even be soft and gentle.

Planting his forearms alongside her torso, Ryan moved his open mouth across her hips and up to her belly. He swiped his tongue over a patch of skin and, primitive bastard that he was, sucked it hard enough to mark her.

She gasped, her abdomen tightening.

Fuck.

Beating back the frustration that sliced through him, he lifted his head and looked up at her. "Sor —"

"No," she breathed, "don't stop."

As if he needed encouraging, her hands went to his head and urged it back to her belly. Ryan dropped his head back down and picked up where he'd left off. To the accompaniment of low, needy sounds from the woman beneath him, he licked and sucked and nipped his way up her body.

When he reached her breasts and the small, round bandages covering the puncture wounds that marred her skin, something ugly filled him. There'd been no question the bastard was going to die. The reasons, however, had changed.

Despite the new tension, Ryan tenderly kissed around the bruised flesh surrounding the twin bandages before lavishing attention on the peaked, velvety tips. She sighed. Under his mouth, her breasts seemed to swell, filling with blood until her nipples were as red as berries.

He shifted, trailed his tongue along the skin stretched over her clavicle, buried his face in her sweat-dampened neck then drew back his hips. He made a sound deep in his throat when the tip of his cock parted her labial lips and the heat of her burned him through the thin layer of plastic. *Jesus*. Her legs lifted, encircling his hips, her ankles crossing against the small of his back, and she arched her hips as he thrust down, sheathing himself in a single stroke.

His shout was muffled against the skin of her neck. *Oh fuck!* She was slick and wet and hot and so tight it felt like her inner walls were clutching at him. Three months of fantasizing and she'd just blown those fantasies away.

His hips lifted, withdrawing his cock until only an inch remained inside her before diving into her again and repeating the cycle. He wasn't gentle. Mercy, however, only made little broken whimpers and held onto him as if he was her lifeline, her body straining against his.

Ryan reached between their sweating bodies, found the pulsing nub of her sex and stroked it roughly. She came apart, crying out as her body quivered with an endless orgasm.

The ripples of her inner muscles along the length of his shaft broke what little control he had. With a shout, Ryan ground his hips into her as his body exploded and his mind went gloriously blank.

Endless moments later, he collapsed on top of her, knowing he was probably interfering with her breathing but too exhausted to do anything about it at that precise moment.

For a long time, there was only the sound of their harsh breathing and the rapid, uneven tattoo of her heart in parallel with his. He started to doze off until a small hand cupped his shoulder and shoved. Taking the hint, Ryan rolled onto his side, pulling his penis from her body with a wet sound.

Sleep still beckoning, he let himself drift.

Wood creaked.

His eyes flew open, sleep forgotten, even as his hand reached for the Glock he'd placed on the nightstand before shaking Mercy out of her nightmare. Another creak. Both had come from downstairs.

"Wh—"

He slapped a hand over her mouth, cutting off her question. She stared at him, her eyes very wide. He put his mouth next to her ear and, in a very low whisper, said, "If I don't call for you in five minutes, open that window and climb down the trellis." He reached out and, without a betraying sound, swiped the two keys he'd placed beside his automatic. Pressing them into her hand, he instructed, "Go for the beige Volvo. It's sitting out in front."

He got off the bed as noiselessly as he could and crouched down beside it. He pulled Mercy after him and she wordlessly complied. Only momentarily taking his eyes off the open doorway, he scooped up his discarded T-shirt and tossed it at her. She caught the garment, pulled it over her head and wrapped her arms about herself as if the temperature in the room had suddenly dropped by ten degrees. Her eyes were very large and very dark in her wan face. But he didn't have time to comfort her.

"Stay away from the door."

In his birthday suit, Ryan darted to the doorway, keeping to the side, and scanned the hallway. It was clear. He stepped beyond the threshold and pulled the bedroom

door shut after him, glad he'd oiled all the hinges in the house when he'd first arrived three months ago.

He moved to the top of the stairs.

From downstairs, a male throat cleared. Loudly. Deliberately.

He froze. Then he cursed heatedly.

More throat clearing. If possible, the sound was faintly amused.

Ryan pulled his finger from the trigger guard and stalked down the stairs. A light came on in the living room, which he could see into from the lower steps. A tall, heavily muscled man stood by the side table holding the lamp, grinning from ear to ear and making Ryan wonder if the grin would grate on his nerves so much if a broken nose accompanied it.

"Damn it, Savage. How long have you been down here?"

"Long enough to know you got the better assignment."

Ryan turned away and raked a hand through his hair, muttering a few choice words under his breath.

"Is she as hot as her pictures?"

Ryan whipped his head around and pinned the other man with a glare that promised retribution, the slow and painful kind, at a later date.

Nate Savage lifted his hands, palms out. "Hey, sorry, buddy." He didn't sound the least bit apologetic.

Ryan compressed his lips. "Fuck off." He started up the stairs. "Make yourself useful and get some coffee going."

"I could've interrupted you as soon as I got here instead of waiting politely," Savage called after him, sounding too damned pleased for Ryan's liking. Ryan wisely decided not to take the bait.

The cold draft warned him she was gone before he saw the empty bedroom and the open window. He cursed. Not bothering with clothes, he raced down the stairs, ignored Savage's startled expression and burst through the front door.

When he caught sight of her, she was already on the ground and coming around the side of the house, headed for the Volvo he'd told her about. She turned her head, saw him and sped up.

What the hell?

Ryan leapt over the overgrown shrubbery concealing the porch railing and went after her. She was surprisingly fast and nimble, but the club he belonged to didn't recruit just anyone off the street.

When he was close enough to reach out and touch her, Ryan dove, caught her, and they both went down on the cold, crunchy grass. He'd curled his body around hers, taking as much of the impact as he could.

To show her gratitude, she turned into a wild thing in his hold, fighting madly to be free of him as low, feral sounds escaped from her throat.

He called her name, told her to stop, but she only fought him harder.

He ended up taking several blows because he was hampered by the need to not hurt her more than necessary and because frankly, small people, untrained or not, were hard to submit. A small fist struck his temple, making lights dance in front of his eyes. A slender forearm nearly crushed his Adam's apple as a bare foot dug into the inside of his thigh and another his stomach, making him grunt in pain. A knee would've found his groin had he not shifted at an opportune moment.

"Fuck!"

Employing the technique he'd used earlier, Ryan seized her fists, yanked them over her head and crushed her with his body. She went still, her muscles all but vibrating with tension, but her eyes gleamed up at him. Ryan wondered when he'd stepped into an alternate reality. Was this the same woman who'd initiated some of the best sex of his life?

"You were only supposed to run if there was trouble," said Ryan, his jaw so tight he wasn't sure how the words got out.

Mercy blew out the strands of hair that had somehow found her mouth, all the while eyeing him with blatant mistrust. He sighed then pried the keys from her fist. She resisted until his thumb found a pressure point in her wrist. She gasped, her fingers loosening.

"I'm feeling left out," Savage called from the open doorway.

Ryan felt like snarling, but he couldn't tell the other man to go back inside. With his naked ass making one hell of a target, he didn't feel particularly safe with Mercy and him outside with no cover. The safe house's isolated location was both a pro and con. And right at this moment, it felt like an army of ants was crawling all over the back of his neck.

Ryan could feel Mercy tense up beneath him. His exposed back and other body parts were cold and he didn't think she was all that comfortable herself on the uneven ground. He wanted to simply throw her over his shoulder and carry her back inside the house, but she'd only try to run away again. Tact in combat, he knew. Tact in getting a woman to trust him was as familiar to him as the feminine obsession with footwear. He was going to have to wing it.

"We'll go inside, I'll put on some clothes then we'll sit down and talk."

In silence, she continued to eye him with blatant mistrust.

"I'm trying to protect you," he said, an edge he couldn't mask in his voice. "Trust me, if I'd wanted to hurt you, I would've done it while you were unconscious and couldn't fight back."

A fleeting emotion slid through her eyes.

His voice lowered, hardened. "And if you're regretting what happened in that bed, just remember who started it."

Chapter Three

Mercy showered and dressed in the neatly folded clothes she found on the bed. The panties, blue jeans and long-sleeved T-shirt fit surprisingly well. There were even socks and sneakers in her size. She pulled them on, thinking they would've been handy during her failed escape attempt.

While running a comb through her damp hair, she realized she shouldn't be surprised by the attention to detail. From what she'd overheard, she'd been an assignment. She didn't know why any organization would be interested in her, but she didn't think it would be one of Uncle Sam's three-letter acronyms. An official government agency would've taken her to a hospital after her attack.

Or was she being hopelessly naïve?

Mercy went downstairs and, following the scent of freshly brewed coffee and the sound of low male voices, into the kitchen. Conversation stopped at her arrival. She studied them, both tall, one darkly handsome and so muscled she wondered if he had trouble bending down to tie his shoelaces. His clothes were black, from the pants to the shirt to the shoes to the shoulder holster. Even the firearm nestled in the holster was matte black.

The other man was dressed similarly but was leaner, blond and scowling at her. She assumed there was another bathroom in the house because his closely cropped hair was still damp. When she couldn't avoid it any longer, their eyes met and the soreness between her legs seemed to treble, making her intensely aware of it. Her skin tightened and prickled as gooseflesh rippled. Perversely, her core went molten and she had to fight the urge to squeeze her thighs together.

Golden eyes traveled the length of her. "How're you feeling?"

Mercy crossed her arms over her chest and hugged herself, feeling naked despite the clothes. "Fine."

His lips thinned, as if he knew she was lying. After a long moment, he powered off the portable television sitting on the counter then turned around, opened the refrigerator and pulled out a glass bottle of orange juice and a carton of blueberry yogurt. He retrieved a spoon from one of the drawers and put the items on the counter. Since both men were drinking coffee, Mercy assumed the juice and yogurt were for her. She stared at the items, trying to recall the last time someone had taken care of her, and couldn't. She'd always been the one taking care of details for the people around her. However, she only blinked at the juice and yogurt as she felt her stomach shrink.

Her gaze lifted back to the men. "Who are you?" She'd wanted the question to come out clear, strong, but the low words sounded as if her throat was lined with sandpaper.

The dark-haired one answered first. "Nate Savage." His head tipped at the blond. "And I'm sure you already know Ryan McGinnis."

Heat crawled up her neck and spread to her face as various parts of her body throbbed. Nate Savage lifted a single speculative brow. Mercy tightened her arms, then merely lifted her chin and calmly remarked, "Those are just your names, not who you are."

The scowl on Ryan McGinnis' face eased a bit and his eyes glinted with something like approval.

Savage's teeth flashed white. "Who do you think we are?"

Vampire hunters.

The words popped into her head and wouldn't be dismissed. But that was beyond the realm of all logic.

Mercy shook her head as if to clear it. "I want to leave."

"And go where?" asked McGinnis.

"Home," she said, a wisp of longing in her tone.

"You won't be safe there."

"A police station then."

McGinnis' look said he questioned her sanity. "And tell them what? You'll be lucky if they don't admit you to the funny farm," he said, a touch sarcastic.

"Someone attacked me —"

"*Something*," he corrected coldly, interrupting her.

Mercy pressed her lips tightly together to keep them from trembling. "Someone," she insisted softly, uncertainly.

"There's no time for denial. The sooner you come to grips with the truth, the better."

She glared at him. "And what is the truth?" she demanded, her voice going up an octave to keep even with her anxiety level.

"You were there," he said, sounding as if he was forcing the words out through gritted teeth. "You know what happened. You have the marks to prove it."

As if on cue, her breast throbbed and her sudden anger drained away. Her hand moved, hovered over her breast, then fisted and clamped around her elbow once more.

She shook her head. "A prop from a costume shop," she murmured, even though the canines had felt painfully real when they'd pierced her flesh. An involuntary shudder ran through her body.

"He jumped out a three-story window, yet there was no body on the ground."

"I only have your word for it."

He made a sound very close to a growl.

Savage smoothly stepped forward. "Please forgive my friend. We don't normally allow him to mix with civilized company. The etiquette lessons never took."

The dark-haired man moved toward her, but she jerked away.

"Do I need to be worried?" she asked McGinnis, needing to hear the reassurance from him. "I was...bitten." She gave her head a small shake, not quite believing the words coming from her own mouth. "What do I need? A tetanus shot?"

It was Savage who answered. "Vampires don't carry diseases, except vampirism."

Vampirism. Mercy shook, unable to repeat the word aloud. *Jesus*. Somehow, her lips moved as if her brain had switched to automatic pilot. "What about holy water?"

"Holy water and crosses are useless," explained Savage. "Silver, garlic, sunlight. You take their heads or stake them through the heart. Silver bullets will slow them down, but they won't kill them. Same with garlic. Burns like hell, but you need a lot to do serious damage."

"Jesus."

"Prayers don't help."

Mercy breathed deeply, carefully, not wanting to pass out and wishing she would. Savage managed to place a hand on her shoulder and guide her forward two steps before she shrugged off his touch and faced McGinnis again.

"Back at the museum, I assume you didn't just happen to be in the neighborhood."

His face was wiped clean of expression. "No."

"Were you following..." Her voice trailed off. She swallowed and tried again. "Were you following Edmond? He told me his name is Edmond. No surname."

"No," he said again.

It was a lengthy moment before his reply really hit her. Her eyes went wide and her fingers clenched reflexively.

"You were following *me*? But *why*?"

His response didn't immediately follow and his face seemed to sharpen, as if his skin was tightening over his features – and ice frosted the inside of her hollow stomach as an unseen hand curled around the column of her throat.

Without pausing to consider the consequences, she strode to him, reached out and grabbed a fistful of his shirt. "Why, damn it?"

"You were the bait."

She let go of his shirt and slid a step back. McGinnis' hand came up, but he seemed to think better of touching her. But there was no need. She wasn't feeling shock or faint. For some reason, his words calmed her. He didn't lie to her and he didn't try to pretty up the truth.

But was it truly calmness? Or had the ice inside her numbed every emotion?

"What made me so special?"

It was Savage who spoke. "About four months ago, I found one of Edmond's safe houses. He had pictures of you posted everywhere."

"Why?"

Savage shook his head. "We don't know."

It was Mercy's turn to shake her head. "No, not why did he have pictures of me. Why were you after him to begin with?"

A pained expression crossed Savage's face and he hesitated. McGinnis answered for him. "In the last year, he's tortured and killed five women that we know of."

Some of the calmness faded and the air was suddenly too heavy to breathe. Mercy forced herself to do so anyway.

Voice steady, she said, "He's a..." The word stuck in her throat, refusing to form on her tongue, as if saying it out loud would make it all too real. But then again, it was already real. "He's a vampire. Isn't killing his blood donors an everyday occurrence?"

"No. Vampires don't need to completely drain their food." McGinnis hesitated, clearly unsure for a moment. Then he added, "And he didn't drink these women's blood. He let them bleed out from multiple knife wounds."

"Oh," said Mercy, her voice very small, very hollow. She closed her eyes, as if that would keep her from swaying on her feet. A hand clamped around her upper arm and

she was roughly pulled forward and pushed down into a chair. She was seated sideways, with her right shoulder and temple against the chair back.

McGinnis crouched down in front of her. His rough voice was oddly gentle. "Mercy?"

She swallowed past the lump in her throat and forced her eyes to open and meet his. "You're saying a misogynistic serial-killer vampire has chosen me as his next victim?"

He didn't say anything. He didn't have to. The darkness in his eyes was answer enough.

She wanted to laugh but was afraid she wouldn't be able to stop. She drew in a breath, trembling as she did so. Nausea roiled in her stomach but she fought it back, hands balling into fists with the strength of her effort.

Hands hovered an inch above her shoulders for a second before falling away. "He won't get you."

"He did once tonight already," she said, so softly she wasn't sure anyone heard the words but her.

An expression too fleeting for her to identify crossed McGinnis' face, then it went blank, if a little stiff. An invisible hand squeezed her chest and another clenched in her stomach. She wanted to reach out and touch him, to do something to bridge that sudden distance between them. Before she could take back her thoughtless words, Savage spoke up. "That was my fault."

McGinnis' head whipped around. "Like hell."

"I let that French bastard get away from me tonight." Savage's hand rose and pressed gingerly to his side. He winced. "Twice," he added and lifted up his shirt.

McGinnis cursed while Mercy inhaled sharply. The upper half of Savage's muscled torso was a patchwork of bruises of varying size. It looked like someone had taken a meat tenderizer to him. The lower half was wrapped tightly with a bandage. There was

a thin line of red in the center of all that white gauze. Someone – *something* – had tried to gut him.

“Shit, you’re bleeding. I’ll go get my kit.”

Savage waved a dismissive hand at the other man. “I’ll be okay. Shallow cut. I was more pissed off about the shirt. It was my favorite one. Luckily, I keep a change of clothes in the car along with the first-aid kit.”

McGinnis’s shoulder muscles didn’t ease. “How’re the ribs?”

“There might be a fracture, but I’m good.” He grimaced slightly as he pulled down the shirt. “It only hurts when I move. Breathing’s not too bad.”

“You protected that pretty face of yours though,” McGinnis remarked dryly.

Savage flashed a quick grin. “Naturally. Don’t want to disappoint the ladies.”

“What happened?” asked Mercy, lifting her eyes from Savage’s torso to his face.

Savage shrugged, the movement easy despite his injuries. “I caught a break and found the hideout he’s using here. But he flew away before I even got through the front door.” He looked pointedly at Mercy. “All hot and eager to get to you.” Then at McGinnis, “I thought you had her covered?”

McGinnis’s lips thinned. “They called me in.”

“What?”

“Questions about my last report.”

“And it just had to be done today?” Savage asked.

“Apparently.”

“Fuck.”

“Exactly.”

Mercy’s glance traveled between the two men. “Who’re ‘they’?”

“The people who fund this little operation,” answered McGinnis.

“And direct it,” Savage added.

McGinnis kept quiet, his silence sufficient commentary.

"So, we're it for this," Savage said quietly.

McGinnis lifted a brow in question.

"I waited at the house for him to return. When he did, I took a shot but he managed to dodge the bullet. He was hurt but still damned fast. Pummeled me then ran off." A smile stretched across his face as he reached inside the front pocket of his loose-fitting pants, pulling out a small device roughly the size of a cellular phone and waving it back and forth. "While he was otherwise occupied beating the crap out of me, though, I planted a tracking device on him."

McGinnis' smile made Mercy grateful she wasn't the intended target.

"We'll have to move tonight," said Savage. "Don't know how long it'll take him to discover the bug."

McGinnis shook his head. "There's no 'we'. You're too hurt."

"You're going to need backup."

"Mercy can't stay here alone and I don't trust anyone else right now."

Mercy stared at McGinnis. She wanted to protest, and not because she wanted to assert her independence, but because she didn't want Ryan McGinnis coming back to her looking like his friend.

Oh Jesus. What was she thinking? McGinnis wasn't coming back to *her*. If he came back, it would be to tell her he'd killed the vampire and she could get on with her life. If he didn't come back...

She couldn't finish the thought. The sudden emptiness inside her was actually painful enough to hinder her breathing. She pressed a fist just underneath her sternum.

"Mercy?"

She shook her head. She had no business letting herself go down that road, especially not right now with her head so muddled.

"I can't stay here indefinitely," she said to McGinnis.

"It ends tonight."

"You can't promise that. Not really."

The corners of his mouth tipped down. "No," he agreed. "But I'm going to try damned hard. In the meantime, you'll be safe here."

While he went out and endangered himself. He wasn't doing it solely for her. It was his job. It was something he did on a regular basis. She had to trust he could handle himself. Obviously, he'd done so in the past and she had to believe he could do so...tonight.

"Why tonight? Why did he choose tonight?"

"I don't know, but he had to know that once we identified you we'd be watching you."

"We'? Don't you mean you?"

McGinnis' uncertain eyes probed hers. "Yeah."

Mercy's fingers found the edge of the table and clamped down until they whitened. "How long?"

"Three months."

Three months.

"It was you," she breathed, eyelids drifting down as relief washed over her. "It *was* you."

"What are you talking about?" asked Savage.

She opened her eyes, looked at him. "For the last few months, I've felt like I was being watched constantly. Even when I locked my doors and closed my curtains, I felt like someone was watching my every move."

Savage and McGinnis exchanged a look. Mercy's own words replayed in her head then she stared at McGinnis as realization dawned. "You put cameras in my house."

Even as his eyes went molten, the brown going golden, he gave a curt nod. She could feel the heat of embarrassment making a return trek up her cheeks. He'd seen her

do things while she had thought she'd been alone, things she wouldn't have done even in front of a lover. Now why did that knowledge make the rest of her body feel like melting?

Mercy dropped her gaze as she wrapped her arms about herself. Now was neither the appropriate time nor place and Ryan McGinnis was so not the right man.

"That doesn't explain the dreams though." Just speaking about them made her temples throb. She massaged them, fingertips pressing hard and rotating in small circles.

"What dreams?" McGinnis queried softly.

Her hands dropped into her lap. "Of...him." She swallowed. "Can they manipulate dreams?"

McGinnis nodded then asked, "What did you dream?"

Mercy took a deep breath. "Until tonight, erotic ones," she said, keeping her tone even. She gazed up at him through her lashes. "Then tonight, the dream started out the same..."

"You screamed," McGinnis reminded her when her voice trailed off. "And it wasn't in a good way."

"Because he cut me with something cold, something sharp," she said, the words slow and careful as she forced herself to relive the images. An involuntary shudder ran through her.

"A knife?"

"Maybe," Mercy murmured, and closed her eyes to better focus. The image in her mind's eye sharpened one layer at a time, as if someone was peeling away film after hazy film. When the picture was as crisp as it was going to get, shock rippled through her and her eyes flew open.

"A stone knife," she said, her voice clipped with urgency. "A stone knife that arrived at the museum this morning as part of the Native American exhibit."

"Why would he want that?" Savaged asked wonderingly.

She shook her head. "No idea. According to Professor Harjo, who helped me put together the exhibit, it's the least valuable item in the collection."

"Anything else?" prompted Savage.

"It's supposed to have mystical powers, but then a lot of the artifacts are supposed to have some kind of mystical power or some legend attached to them."

"If Edmond stole the knife," began McGinnis, "it would've made the news along with your disappearance because someone would've noticed him smashing a display case."

"But I didn't put it on display," she told them softly. "There were two knives available, so I put the more elaborate one on display."

Savage tapped his fingers absently on the countertop. "What kind of mystical powers?"

"Some kind of healing power." Mercy's brows drew together and, mostly to herself, she murmured, "What would he need to heal?"

"A knife with healing powers," said Savage, as if testing the oxymoronic words on his tongue. "Any truth to those mystical healing powers?"

"Of course not," she replied automatically. "They're just stories, told and retold and exaggerated with each telling. They're not true."

A dark slash of a brow lifted. "Just like vampires?"

Mercy stiffened, then suddenly feeling crowded, rose from her seat, forcing McGinnis to rise as well. He, however, didn't step back and she found herself much too close to him, close enough to feel his heat, to breathe in his scent. Her body swayed, wanting nothing more than to fall against him and let him support her. She hastily pushed the chair back and stepped to the side, skirting around the temptation.

She took two steps away from them, realized the windows were directly ahead of her and stopped. She hugged herself tightly, wanting to make herself as small as possible. But it was too late for that. The monster already knew she existed.

"What is it?"

She didn't turn around. McGinnis' question couldn't compete with the pitch black night on the other side of the glass.

She felt a presence at her back and knew it was McGinnis. Savage wouldn't make her want to step back to close the distance between them.

"What other mind games can they play?"

"What do you mean?" asked McGinnis.

"I don't know. I'm not sure, but I think he...searched my mind for the location of the knife. It happened back at the museum, when he...bit me," she explained, finishing with a shudder. A hand moved over the wounds once more but she didn't touch them, despite the layer of cloth between her hand and her breast. After a moment, the hand returned to her waist. She exhaled softly. "It hurt, a physical pain. Unlike the dreams."

"Your guards are down when you sleep," McGinnis explained. "When you're awake, he has to fight to get inside your head."

She laughed, but the sound wasn't happy. "He didn't have to fight very hard."

"He drugged you."

The muscles in her shoulders went taut, feeling almost brittle. "The champagne," she breathed. Her eyes closed, her anger overcoming the fear of what was beyond those windows. The heat of her emotions warmed her and she welcomed it.

With practiced efficiency, Ryan checked then strapped the weapons laid out on the bed to his body. Two semi-automatic handguns into the double shoulder holster, a revolver in the ankle holster, extra magazines in the custom utility belt, two daggers in the sheaths along his —

He knew she was in the doorway before she spoke.

“You look like you’re going to wage a war.”

Ryan glanced up. Mercy was hugging one side of the doorframe as if she needed it to keep her upright—or she simply wanted to maintain the distance between them. Her eyes were shadowed with a wariness that made his stomach knot. No sane woman would want to see the tableau of him readying himself to go out and do things that required guns and knives and sundry other weapons. And as soon as he dusted Edmond, he knew she was going to go back to her life and try to forget any of this ever happened. He would be relegated to that strongbox in her head where she locked away the unpleasantness in her life. He’d seen her do it.

Two months ago, her lover had admitted to cheating on her. She’d driven him into another woman’s arms with her emotional detachment, her ex had claimed, and Ryan had wondered how the idiot had been so blind. Mercy didn’t do big displays of emotion, but she had rearranged her schedule to play nursemaid, cook and personal assistant for four days when her ex had fallen ill.

After hearing the melodramatic confession, Mercy had calmly told him to leave and never come back. No tears, no recriminations. Afterward, she’d spent the rest of her evening working on the plan details for the museum exhibit. Her light had burned into the early morning hours.

Ryan found himself wishing for the well-armored woman he’d seen and admired in the past instead of the one now before him, vulnerable and uncertain, her shields torn down by that French prick and the necessity of him, Ryan, in her life.

In the beginning, he’d told himself if he was vigilant enough, Mercy would never need to know about the world beyond her own reality. Vampires would remain the product of overactive imaginations. She would never know he’d been watching over her, studying her every move, memorizing every facet of her.

And from the first, everything within him rebelled at the thought of him passing through her life and her not even having an inkling of his existence.

But this was worse.

"Please be careful." Her voice was soft, barely reaching his ears.

"I've been doing this for more than a decade. I'm not easy to kill." Even though he'd made more mistakes tonight than he had during his first year. Like going after Edmond with his bare hands at the museum. But the fury clouding his brain at the time had impaired his judgment. In fact, the memory of it threatened to impair his judgment right this moment.

The slender fingers curled around the wood flexed. His response obviously didn't soothe her, but he wasn't feeling like being all that nice.

"I wanted to apologize."

"For what?"

She hesitated then waved a hand at the bed. "I'm sorry for...putting you in that position."

He stiffened. "Really?" he asked, his voice dangerously soft. "Or are you just sorry you fucked me?"

She visibly flinched but Ryan didn't care. He could see the retreat in her eyes and was across the room in two strides. He snagged her wrist and yanked her inside the room. She gasped. Her back flattened against the wall and she stared at him, eyes wide. He loomed over her, well inside her personal space, and slapped his free hand on the wall beside her head, effectively caging her in.

"Don't make me out to be the bad guy."

"I—"

"But I'm no fucking hero either. I could've stopped you, but I didn't want to. I wanted you." His voice lowered, turned husky, as he closed the gap between their bodies. Her teeth sank into a corner of her bottom lip but she was unable to bite back the soft moan. "I still want you."

Her lashes lowered, veiling her gleaming eyes, and the fingers of her captured hand curled into a fist.

"I saw you with Dopey," he said between gritted teeth. Even now the memory made him want to take something – *someone* – apart.

"Dopey?" she echoed wonderingly.

"Roberts."

"Oh."

"Every time you brought him home, I wanted to kill him."

She blinked, coming out of her daze. "He was a mistake from the beginning."

Ryan bent down until his mouth brushed her temple. "Am I?" he asked roughly, forcing the words through constricted vocal cords.

She went still, not even daring to breathe.

"Mercy?"

Her chest moved. "I-I don't know." She shook her head. "I don't know you."

His lips touched the delicate rim of her ear, the merest brush of skin on skin, yet she inhaled sharply. "You know enough," he said, and rocked his hips forward.

Her eyes went to half-mast. "Lust," she breathed, turning her head, her parted lips seeking his.

"I can work with that," murmured Ryan, and licked her plump bottom lip.

Ryan McGinnis drew back and, without thought, Mercy followed the movement. He made a rough sound laced with amusement. Beyond caring about anything other than the sudden emptiness throbbing between her legs, she widened her stance and pushed up onto her tiptoes, rubbing the front of her body against the front of his. It was a little movement, but the reaction it garnered was tenfold. The fingers around her wrist tightened, his body crushed hers as if he wanted to meld their two bodies into one and his hard mouth clamped over hers.

His kiss was a brazen assault that would've driven her head back had the wall not been behind it. His tongue claimed her mouth, venturing deep, exploring all the different textures. Her free arm lashed around his neck as she returned the kiss, dueled with his tongue, sucked it deeper into her mouth.

With the heat of need coiling inside her, her pinioned wrist struggled for release and he complied. He broke off the kiss, leaving her panting breathlessly. He fell to his knees and the sound of protest died on her lips and her restless hands automatically found his hair. With a single yank, he unbuttoned her fly. He curled his fingers around the waistband of her jeans and pulled them down, taking her panties with them, tearing them in his haste. He tore her shoes off before freeing her ankles from her jeans and panties.

He cupped her hips and his voracious mouth covered her sex, and she moaned, her fingers clenching and unclenching in his hair. He wedged a shoulder underneath her thigh, opening her even more as he kissed and licked her labia. Mercy sank her teeth into her bottom lip but small mewling sounds still escaped as her body twisted this way and that, needing to get closer because it wasn't enough, needing to get away because it was too much.

His hands slid around to cradle her buttocks, to arch her pelvis. He held that part of her still and darted his tongue inside her humid channel. She cried out with pleasure.

"Oh God...please."

She begged some more, the sounds almost sobs, and tried to writhe and thrust her hips forward to impale herself on his tongue. He obliged and she cried out again. Then he shifted, took her heavy and throbbing clit between his lips and sucked. She came, her mind immersed in pleasure and her body lost to convulsions.

Before the last shudder racked her body, he shot to his feet and plunged inside her, his mouth smothering her startled gasp, sharing with her the taste of her own secretions. He held himself still within her and she savored the sensation of being filled so fully her entire head swam with bliss.

When it was no longer enough, when an aching emptiness throbbed within her, she broke away from his mouth and panted his name. Her fingers dug into his shoulders, wanting to tear through his clothes to get to his bare skin, and her legs wrapped around his hips like a vise.

With a harsh, wordless sound, he withdrew then began to thrust. She buried her face in his neck and whispered his name over and over again. His skin was hot and damp against her lips and she couldn't resist tasting him, loving the salty flavor on her tongue. He thrust harder, faster, pounding her into the wall. The tension within her began to build, becoming unbearable, and she told him so.

When her head swam again, her pleasure-fuddled brain took a moment to realize he was moving. Then her world tilted, her hands fell from his shoulders and the softness of the bed was underneath her back, the hardness of his body between her legs. He was hunched over her, driving in and out. His hands were planted on either side of her head, his eyes shut tight, his face a mask of agony and rapture.

"More...take more..."

His words were guttural, just barely discernible. But she heard and understood and didn't know how she could take any more of him. Then he moved, shifted, rolled and took her with him, and she found herself looking down at him, straddling his hips with his cock high up inside her, deeper than before.

"Yes," he hissed, and, hands clamped on her hips, bucked upward again and again. She braced her hands on his ridged abdomen and her head fell forward, her hair curtaining her face. She tried to move, tried to help, but he wouldn't let her. She sobbed. Another change in position and she became frantic as the need inside her became a wild, feverish thing.

He was above her again, a broad hand splayed across the bare skin of her middle as if to hold her down. His heat seared her, within and without. Her nails dug into his forearms as he quickened the pace.

"Close," he rasped, his teeth clenched. "Almost..."

His movements became frenzied as control deserted him. She squeezed her eyes shut. It was too much, too intense. She couldn't—

It shattered brilliantly. As if from a distance, she heard herself cry out in climax.

A low groan reached her ears, then the body above her shuddered.

Chapter Four

He was gone when she woke, sticky and sore and knowing further sleep would elude her. Mercy rolled to the edge of the bed, got to her feet and headed for the bathroom. Five minutes under a punishing spray of water and she emerged, flushed pink with heat on the outside and cold as ice on the inside. Despite Ryan's assurances, how could she do anything but worry until he returned? No matter how strong, how fast he was, he was still only human. And Edmond...Edmond was not.

Wrapped in a towel, Mercy searched through the drawers of the dresser in the room next to hers until she found a T-shirt that obviously belonged to Ryan. She slipped into the T-shirt, which hung down to her thighs, and, forgoing panties, pulled on the jeans Ryan had stripped off her earlier. She found the sneakers, one in a corner and another under the bed, forced her feet into them and went downstairs.

Savage was still in the kitchen, pouring steaming hot water from a kettle into a thick mug.

"Ryan'll be okay," he said without looking up. After returning the kettle to the stovetop, he stirred the contents of the mug with a spoon, the clinking of metal hitting earthenware almost musical. "He's been doing this for a while."

Feeling oddly anxious, Mercy moved deeper into the room to lean a little against the island counter, her arms crossed tightly over her chest. "That's what he said to me."

The stirring stopped. Savage looked at her, one eyebrow raised. "You two exchanged actual words?"

She could feel the blush crawl up her face as her glance skittered away. It fell to the green, barrel-shaped mug and its contents. She stared as the curls of steam rose and evaporated. Savage pushed the mug toward her.

"Lemon, honey and a little something to make you feel better."

She automatically wrapped her hands around the cup, not realizing just how chilled she was until the heat seeped into the flesh of her palms. She dragged it closer and lifted it. She blew lightly across the top and took a tentative sip. It was too hot but she drank it anyway. There was a hint of saltiness and she wondered what Savage had added in addition to the lemon and honey. Then the liquid warmth slid down her esophagus and pooled in her stomach, a comforting thing, and she could feel muscles she hadn't known were tense loosen.

"Thank you," she murmured. After another careful swallow, she set the mug back down. Quietly she asked, "Why do you do it?"

"Why do I or why does Ryan?"

Her gaze flickered up and she replied truthfully, "Both."

He folded his arms across his chest, rested a hip against the counter and crossed his ankles, like he was settling in for a long talk. "For me, it's almost a family business. I'm the fourth generation. My daddy, my granddaddy, my great-granddaddy. They all did it before me." His eyes became distant. "My mother didn't want this life for me, so my father agreed to never try to bring me into it. But when I turned eighteen, a delegate from the Council approached me and gave me the spiel." He shrugged. "And I said yes."

"Do you regret it?"

Another shrug, then his lips twisted humorlessly. "I'm saving mankind, aren't I? No greater reward and all that."

Mercy took a moment to absorb that then probed, "And Ryan?"

Dark eyes met violet, steady, weighing. "Ryan and his family—mother, father, younger sister—were attacked by a vampire one night. It broke in while they were sleeping. Killed his father before one of us showed up. The cavalry arrived, but it was Ryan who ended up staking it. He improvised with the broken end of a hockey stick."

Her stomach churned uneasily and she lifted the mug again and took another swallow. "How old was he?"

"Thirteen."

Oh Jesus, she thought, digging a fist into her stomach as if she could massage away the sick feeling congealing in the pit of it. She let the counter take more of her weight to still the trembling that threatened to make her knees buckle. She was thirty-two and Edmond terrified her. How had a thirteen-year-old boy coped?

By growing up and killing as many of them as he could.

Absurdly, tears prickled the backs of her eyes and she looked away quickly.

Savage straightened up. "Finish that," he ordered, tapping the lip of the mug with a thick forefinger. "You look like you need it."

She clutched the mug with both hands and brought it up to her mouth. The liquid, still hot but slightly more drinkable, splashed a little against her lips, hit her tongue and she swallowed. The yawn caught her by surprise, as did the invisible weights that attached themselves to her eyelids. She yawned again and set the mug on the counter.

"Mercy?"

Savage's voice sounded far away. She could barely focus on it. She wanted to lie down and close her eyes. She wanted to—

Her palms slapped the counter, fingers spread wide. It was a repeat of the episode in her office, but not as strong. Because the drug wasn't aided by alcohol this time.

Her eyes found Savage and narrowed, but it was so difficult to concentrate on all three of him with her head swimming, making the sleep that beckoned very tempting. She squeezed her eyes shut tight then opened them wide. The drowsiness didn't abate.

Still on the counter, her hands fisted. *Focus, Mercy, focus.*

She felt a hand touch the slightly numb flesh of her upper arm and she drew away, a little clumsy, a little graceless, as if her limbs were not entirely under her control. All three Savages were suddenly beside her, looming menacingly over her, and she stumbled away from them, turning as she retreated. The back of her hand smacked the mug and it skidded a little ways across the smooth counter. Her fingers snagged the

handle and, drawing on the pitiful dregs of her remaining strength, she hurled the cup at the middle Savage. The hot liquid, followed by the mug, hit the arm he'd raised at the last instant.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Mercy!" he exclaimed as she made a poor imitation of bolting. "I didn't want to hurt you!"

Despite the uneven, undulating floor under her feet, she dodged Savage and the doorway came closer. She was stopped short and cried out sharply when he seized a fistful of her hair and jerked. She tumbled backward, struck her head and, after a brief flash of dancing lights, her world went black.

Dawn wasn't far away. The late winter sky was still pitch black, but years of hunting vampires trained him to always know when the sun would come up. It had proved useful on more than one occasion.

Ryan easily navigated the Volvo through the relatively light traffic. He was thankful this metropolis never slept as it made it harder for Edmond to know he was coming. If his had been the only car on the road, it would've raised suspicion.

He dropped a glance at the palm-sized GPS-cum-tracking monitor. Edmond was three blocks ahead of him and still on the move. Where the hell was the little blood sucker headed? He'd been traveling either on foot or in a vehicle with no discernible destination for the last forty-five minutes. Between Savage and him, had they injured Edmond enough to force him to stick to the ground? As much as he didn't like taking on the vampire in unknown territory, Ryan couldn't safely deal with him in a well-populated area. Too much risk for exposure, too much possibility of collateral damage. He had to wait for the vamp to reach his destination then he could scope out the area and move in.

At this rate, he wasn't going to make it back to the farm house before Mercy woke up.

Ryan blew out a sigh. He'd almost managed to keep her out of his thoughts for a whole five minutes.

Mercy had drifted into an exhausted sleep before the aftermath even started glowing and Ryan had decided not to wake her up when he left. He knew it was cowardly, but had he woken her, he might not have left at all.

In the periphery of his vision, he saw the blinking red dot stop—and remain stopped. His pulse sped up. Months of watching and waiting were about to pay off. He eased down on the gas and the sedan smoothly accelerated, eating up the three blocks he'd deliberately maintained for cover.

He was in a densely populated residential area, high-rise apartment buildings stacked cheek to jowl on either side of the street. If Edmond used one of the apartments as a safe house, he wouldn't have too much trouble remaining unnoticed in the mass of sixty- to eighty-hour-workweek yuppies.

Ryan drove past the red dot and his eyes went to the rearview mirror. A doorman in a navy and gold uniform was helping a woman emerge from the back of a taxi with one hand before closing the car door with the other. The woman stumbled and would have fallen had the doorman not been gripping her hand. Was she tipsy from excessive alcohol consumption or a late-night blood donation?

Ryan was going to find out.

He turned right at the corner and pulled the vehicle to the curb but didn't kill the engine. The red dot started moving again. As it passed him on the monitor, so did the taxi in reality. There was no one in the vehicle besides the driver. *What the hell?* Had Edmond used the taxi earlier and the tracking device fallen off him?

The cell phone sitting in the cup holder beeped once. Ryan reached for it, didn't recognize the number displayed in the LED screen, but answered it anyway.

"McGinnis, it's Helsen."

His blood chilled.

Chapter Five

Consciousness came in drips and drabs. She became aware of the hard slab of stone under her head and body first. She wanted to move, to ease the small pains and discomfort of being in the same position for too long. But an instinct too powerful to dismiss wouldn't let her. Ignoring the burning pain in her muscles, she remained still, letting herself come to full wakefulness.

Her head was filled with a throbbing mass that used to be her brain, but the rest of her felt as normal as it was going to get. Her hands and feet were bound together with something tight and wide. Tape. Probably duct tape, that all-purpose tool.

Mercifully, she was still clothed, but the room was cold, drafty. Despite her vision being limited to the darkness behind her eyelids, she thought the room was large. Maybe even cavernous. A hint of salt teased her nostrils. Was she smelling the ocean? Was she being kept hostage in one of the many warehouses lining the waterfront?

Someone slapped her. Hard. Her eyes opened then narrowed when she saw to whom the offending hand belonged.

"Good," Savage said as he bent over her, "I was afraid I gave you too much of the sedative and you would sleep through everything. He wanted you awake for the fun and games. Probably wants to monologue so you can appreciate his plan before he kills you."

Fear turned her stomach into a ball of ice. It felt heavier than lead. Then the tentacles of cold traveled to her lungs, wrapped around them and tightened until she couldn't draw breath.

He. Edmond.

She must've said the name aloud because Savage's lips stretched into a grin that would've made her shiver with revulsion had she not been rigid with more than just cold.

"He's not here. Out having an appetizer, I think. But you're right. I brought you here for him. It's such a pity you're not just a pretty face."

Looking amused, he chuckled her under the chin. Something about that cavalier action, the presumed familiarity, the mere *touch*, made her anger rise and the sudden heat of it cracked the ice from within.

"You son of a bitch," she said, very low, very even, because allowing her hate to take over would only amuse him, like a dog performing tricks. "Ryan thinks you're his friend. He trusts you."

"I am his friend. That's why he's out on a wild goose chase and not here trussed up like you."

"Why? Is Edmond paying you that much?"

Savage's grin became brittle and his eyes hardened. "When the Council recruits you, they deliver a spiel about saving mankind, about how it's a noble and worthy duty. What they *don't* tell you is that your life expectancy is halved, the hours and pay suck and you're always lurking in shadows so the people you're saving can continue on with their mundane lives, happy in their ignorance."

"If you want money and adulation, try Hollywood."

He laughed. "If circumstances were different, you and I would enjoy each other."

She grimaced and shuddered. "In your dreams."

"No, in a couple days, it might be in *your* dreams." He paused a beat. "Well, maybe not considering his plans for you."

She froze. "He agreed to turn you."

"Yes. The money was just the icing." Savage leaned in closer, putting his lips too close to her ear, and she jerked her head away. He simply ploughed his fingers into her

hair and cupped her scalp, keeping her head still. His voice lowered conspiratorially. "Imagine what I can do with their power, their strength, their speed. Imagine what I can do with all the time in the world. The possibilities are endless."

She glared up at him, willing him to know the hatred and fury welling up inside her. "Burn. In. Hell."

He laughed again and drew back, straightening up. "I suspect I will, but only after a few centuries, maybe even a millennium of ruling my own little piece of this world."

"Are the bruises even real? Or did you paint them on yourself?"

"They're real enough," said Savage, running a hand over the front of his chest. "But not nearly as bad as I said. No broken ribs, no knife wound. Since his healing powers currently are better than mine, Edmond donated the blood."

Savage's gaze moved beyond her and Mercy saw his muscles tense, his entire body stiffening, his shoulders bunching. Then she felt the presence too. Her stomach lurched then roiled, even as it collapsed on itself, and the fine hairs on the back of her neck stirred as if disturbed by unseen fingertips. She didn't need to look to know who'd noiselessly entered the room. Her eyes remained steady on Savage's still, wary form. He was in league with the devil, but he wasn't foolish enough to turn his back on him.

Mercy swallowed but it was difficult with her mouth like the Gobi Desert. In stark contrast, the palms of her hands and the soles of her feet went hot and clammy. Fear was something solid in her throat. The cavalry wasn't coming to save her because Savage *was* the cavalry.

Ryan knew Vanessa Helsen was damned good at blending into the shadows when she needed to do so. After all, his line of work had started with her ancestors. That he spotted her from three buildings away meant he needed to hurry. Not that his instincts weren't already clamoring for him to do something, anything, to get Mercy back. Preferably something physical, something destructive. He smothered the urge, knowing Mercy couldn't afford to have him make any more mistakes.

He'd left the Volvo three blocks back and had gone the rest of the way on foot. He located her in the dark, narrow gap between two warehouses, crouched behind a stack of cardboard boxes. She was tall and deceptively slender. Her dark brown hair was cut short enough to be hidden under a skull cap because, as she'd once explained to him, it gave the enemy less to grab onto. The cap was black, matching the rest of her outfit. Boots, pants, long-sleeved shirt and, in concession to the chilly weather, padded outer vest. She shifted and he caught the tiny gleam of silver on her outer thigh. The blade strapped to her left thigh wasn't fully hilted in its sheath. It was an uncharacteristic oversight. The rest of her weapons were hidden from view.

One hand automatically going inside her vest, she spared him a quick backward glance when he deliberately made a small scuffling noise to alert her to his presence. He crouched down next to her and tapped a finger on the sheathed blade strapped to his own thigh. She shoved her blade fully into its leather sheath then handed him a wireless headset. Ryan separated the earpiece from the communication module. The former went in his ear canal and the latter clipped onto the collar of his shirt.

Vanessa gestured to the darkened building across the road and spoke in a low voice that wouldn't carry. "The tracer I put on Savage's vehicle says it's in there."

"Best point of entry?"

"Upstairs window on the north side. Lock's busted."

"See any movement?"

"No. Windows are all painted over. The vamp isn't risking a blind falling down."

"How long have they been in there?"

She hesitated then said, "Twenty minutes. But the vamp's MO is to take his time with his victims. And she was unconscious when Savage carried her from the house. If they wait for her to wake up, that could buy us some time."

He felt a sharp pang in his chest. Ryan hadn't realized he'd been hoping Vanessa had made a mistake, that it hadn't been Nate Savage who'd betrayed them. They'd been friends, or as close as people in their line of work could come to friendship. They'd

gotten wasted together when it became too much. And when he'd been new and on his first assignment, it had been Savage who'd saved him from having his throat torn out. How had he not known Savage had turned? How had he not even suspected? And now Mercy was paying the price for his blindness.

Then bitter anger took over, searing through his bloodstream, and he wanted to seize Vanessa and demand to know why she had allowed Savage to kidnap Mercy. But he didn't. He already knew why. Because in the greater scheme of things, it was more important to catch and stop Edmond.

Ryan realized he was strangling the hilt of his own dagger and forced himself to unclench his fingers and even out his breathing.

"Why are you here? Did the Council send you after me?"

She nodded. "The Council was suspicious of you. I was suspicious of the person who sicced them on you."

"Savage." He didn't make it a question.

She looked over her shoulder at him, a trace of uncharacteristic softness in her eyes. "I'm sorry." Her lips parted as if she wanted to say more but after a moment, she went back to the surveillance.

"Vanessa."

She turned and regarded him warily.

"Promise me one thing."

Her wariness didn't abate.

"When we go in, no matter what happens to me, you get Mercy out."

She was quiet for a long moment. "I can't promise you that," she said finally.

"Yes, you can." Jaw tight, his gaze bored into hers. "Vanessa, you owe me."

Her lips thinned, as if it took effort to keep her words back. Then she gave a single curt nod.

Something inside him eased. "Thank you."

"Don't." There was a wealth of warning and displeasure in that one word.

Head chillingly clear, hands steady, Ryan reached for his firearms and, even though he'd checked them before leaving the Volvo, did so again. "Let's move."

He started to straighten up. Vanessa gripped his wrist and Ryan automatically fell back down to his haunches, his eyes going to the warehouse across the road. The door beside the garage door was inching open.

Hands and feet still bound with duct tape, Mercy sat up on the stone table, legs folded with her heels almost touching her butt, and stared down at the old-fashioned miniature in her hands, her heart pounding heavily in her chest. A woman smiled back from the portrait within the heavy gold locket. The details were exquisite. Wavy hair black as ink, porcelain skin, slender nose and violet eyes with an upward slant set in a heart-shaped face. The likeness was uncanny. She could've been Mercy's twin.

After a lifetime of not knowing the people who contributed the genetic material that had formed her, it was strange to see someone who shared so many of her features. The strangeness wasn't accompanied by the sense of recognition or belonging she'd foolishly expected as a child though. She'd learned to be alone too well.

"Who was she?" Mercy asked without looking up, yet very aware of Edmond's scrutiny. They were alone. Shortly after Edmond's arrival, Savage had volunteered to walk the outside perimeter.

"Angélique," he murmured. "Your ancestor. Angélique could not bear children, but she had a younger sister who did. You look too much like her not to share the same blood." He took the locket from her hands, his movements slow, careful, almost reverent. "*Elle était mon ange de la nuit*. She found me, saved me, killed those who..." His voice trailed off and he shook his head, as if to clear it of those particular memories.

He slipped the locket over his head and it settled against the froth of lace spilling from his throat. He hadn't changed out of the outfit he'd worn to the museum and, under the harsh overhead lighting, he looked so very young, barely twenty. But

vampires didn't age, did they? Assuming popular myth was accurate, they would remain looking as young as the day they were turned. Eternal youth, but with more deadly side effects than Botox.

"She made me into what she was and we were happy together. I loved her. We were meant to be together for all eternity. *Elle était mon âme soeur.*"

It took her a moment to translate and decide "soul mate" sounded too incestuous in French. Then again, everything about his bond with Angélique was disturbing.

He took a breath, as if bracing himself. "Then they took her away from me."

He made it sound like the feud between the Montagues and the Capulets.

"Who are 'they'?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

Edmond's pale face went taut with anger. Had he been human, she supposed it would've flushed with color. "The Council." He said it like the organization was one of the plagues of Egypt. "Back then, I didn't know who they were. They were small in number and scattered. Narrow-minded, as they are still today.

"Angélique wanted a baby, a child to love, to complete our family. But they didn't understand. They called her a murderess but it wasn't like they thought." His tone turned pleading, as if wanting Mercy to side with him. "The children kept...dying before the transformation completed, so we had to keep trying."

Mercy stilled, gooseflesh breaking out as her skin became icy. *Oh Jesus.* She breathed deeply through her nostrils. Bile rose threateningly in her throat and burned, but she managed to keep from embarrassing herself.

Angélique sounded like a candidate for several life sentences in solitary confinement, but she'd been allowed to roam free and even managed to find a man after her own black heart. A soul mate, as Edmond had said. Mercy shuddered. Bonnie and Clyde. Angélique and Edmond. Who knew serial killers were pedantic enough to buy into the whole soul mates thing?

Jesus.

Mercy took a breath. Edmond had said “we”. He had helped Angélique in her sick quest. And in his quest to bring her back, he had tortured and killed at least five women in the last year. She was to be number six. Her laced fingers tightened until the knuckles went white. She didn’t want to be number six.

Her gaze went to the brass urn that Edmond had carried in with him and placed beside her, and tried not to shudder. She purposely kept her eyes from straying to the primitive stone triangle lying next to it. She didn’t want to remind Edmond of its presence.

Vanessa flattened a hand against Ryan’s chest and kept it there, as if afraid he would go after Savage, all the while yelling like a berserker.

He wanted to, but he didn’t.

Alive, Savage could provide intelligence.

Vanessa took out a semi-automatic and a silencer and screwed them together. Savage moved past them. Coolly, she extended her arm, took aim and squeezed the trigger. There was a soft *pffft*. Before Savage’s newly injured knee could even buckle, Ryan flew at the man. His fist struck Savage’s ribs, where he recalled the bruising had been ugly, and the knife edge of his other hand cut across the Adam’s apple.

While the bigger man choked and gasped, Ryan slammed him against a wall, face first. He seized a wrist and twisted it high up the center of Savage’s back while he fisted his other hand in short black hair. When he felt the other man’s muscles tense, Ryan lashed out his foot, aiming for the bleeding kneecap, and drew back Savage’s head and slammed it into the wall again. There was a crunch, like celery snapping, and he didn’t know if it was the knee or the nose. Maybe both. With his own knee, he struck near the small of Savage’s back, aiming for a kidney. Savage’s yells were muffled and his back arched as he tried to throw his body away from the wall for either escape or maneuvering distance, but Ryan only twisted the captured wrist until something popped out of place.

More muffled sounds of pain. Even then, Ryan didn't let go. He'd seen the other man continue to fight while hurt worse. Besides, he had nothing to use to restrain Savage. He didn't carry handcuffs like a cop because he destroyed the creatures he went after, not arrested them.

Quickly, methodically, he divested the other man of his modified firearms, silver knives, wooden stakes, incendiary grenades and the retractable silver garrote wire, of which Savage was particularly fond.

Finished, Ryan applied pressure on the sprained wrist. Savage moaned.

"He needs to be able to talk," Vanessa hissed in his ear via the earpiece.

"He can and he will," Ryan promised grimly.

"How did she die?" Mercy forced herself to ask, dreading the answer but knowing she had to keep him talking, to give her a chance to do something...anything.

"They found our home. And those cowards put a stake through her heart while she slept." His eyes closed and anguish crossed his suddenly boyish features. "I...escaped. When I returned, only ashes remained of *ma belle* Angélique." His lips trembled. "Two hundred years, and every day I feel the pain as if it were only yesterday."

For a moment, she expected him to put the back of his hand to his forehead.

"Two centuries?" She tried to keep the skepticism out of her voice and didn't quite succeed. "You've been trying to bring her back for two centuries?"

He stiffened, his eyes darkening with guilt. "I-I foolishly tried to...forget her." Those ridiculously long sweeps of lashes lowered, but there was a spasm of emotion on his pale countenance. "But there are no others like her."

And how long had it taken him to reach that conclusion? How many women had there been before he realized the supply of psychopaths in the world was—thank God—severely limited? And how had he auditioned the potential replacements?

Suddenly he spun around, his cape flaring. Seizing her chance, Mercy snatched up the stone knife and hid it between her hands. It was heavier than it looked and surprisingly smooth. She didn't want to know if the smoothness was a result of passage of time or frequent use. Edmond spun around again, his cape flaring once more, and she wondered if he simply liked the theatrical flair of it.

Edmond went to the urn, laid his hand upon it, caressed it like it was a lover. "I was wrong to think she could be replaced. I was wrong to think there could be another like her," he murmured, his fingers stroking the urn, back and forth, back and forth, back —

His hand stopped mid-stroke. A soft curse, then his head shot up and he glared at her, his eyes narrowed. "Where is it?"

Her hands twitched, clenching around the solid piece of stone until the sharp edges of it nearly broke her skin. She didn't answer. How could she with her heart wedged in her throat?

He came closer, reached for her, and Mercy acted. Stone knife clutched tightly between shaking hands, she slashed at his throat. She didn't feel the sharp tip cut into flesh, but it must've because Edmond jumped back from her, his mouth gaping open, a hand pressed to his neck. Something gurgled, bubbled. Frozen with a sick kind of disbelief, Mercy stared as bright crimson blood poured down between his white fingers. She'd nicked an artery. His lace cravat sucked in every drop that came into contact with it, making the blood seem to blossom and spread.

With his eyes holding hers captive, Edmond slowly took away his hand to reveal the dark, wide wound that was, before her very eyes, getting smaller and smaller as the flesh re-knit itself. Soon, there was no sign of the injury except for the blood staining his neck, hand and formerly white garments.

A choked sound squeezed past her constricted throat, jarring Mercy out of her petrified state. But it was too late. Edmond had closed the distance between them. She brought her knees to her chest and struck out with her bound feet. The impact jolted up

her legs, but Edmond absorbed the blow to the center of his chest like she was a mere child. He carelessly knocked her feet aside and bore down on her.

Pain exploded in Mercy's left cheek. She cried out as she fell back onto the table, her head bouncing once on the solid stone. Flashes of light behind her eyelids, then shooting pains in her head. The coppery taste of blood filled her mouth and she convulsively swallowed, nearly choking. Dazed and uncoordinated, her hands came up, more defensive than offensive, but he simply captured her bound wrists and pinned them over her head with one hand and encircled her neck with the other. A wickedly pointed nail dug into the side of her neck, very close to her own carotid artery and, despite trembling muscles, she ceased her struggles. The slender fingers imprisoning her wrists squeezed and the knife clattered onto the slab.

Her body went limp and her chest rose and fell with her ragged breaths. She let her head fall to the side. Her eyes closed, tears on her lashes.

"You resemble her so much," murmured Edmond, running the backs of his fingers over her tender left cheek, making her wince.

Biting down on her bottom lip to keep quiet, she shook her head.

He sighed. "You are right. At first, I thought you were her. I wanted you to be her. *Mais non*. You have her eyes, her nose, her lips." He skimmed a finger over each feature, ending at the corner of her throbbing mouth.

"*Regardez-moi*," he ordered softly. The hand around her throat tightened. Her lashes lifted. Through the shimmer of tears, Edmond was blurred and she was glad for that small favor. He lifted his finger, allowed her to see the red stain of her blood on his skin. "You share her blood." He licked it away. For the space of a breath, his eyes swam with a pleasure that was deeply, darkly sexual. Terror squeezed Mercy's insides and her body shook, the tremors seeming to rattle her heart, her lungs, her stomach. His lips lifted in amusement then he sighed. "But you do not have her soul."

Almost casually, he picked up the stone knife stained red with his blood and studied it, angling it this way and that. "For years, I searched for this knife." He ran the

pad of his thumb along an edge. Fresh blood welled, sliding down the blade. "Legend says it was used to expel the evil souls that took over living bodies. You make five cuts on the possessed victim—throat, wrists, heels—and when they bleed, the evil soul would be forced out with the blood.

"Since the only soul in your body is yours, *it* will be forced out, leaving this body for *mon ange*."

Somehow she found her voice. It was hoarse and tiny, but she could speak. "You tried this many times before and failed every time."

"But not with this knife and not with someone who shares Angélique's blood. This time, *it will work*," he declared fervently, his eyes bright with fanaticism. He pressed the tip of the knife against the hollow of her throat. "I found the knife and it led me to you. *Avant le point du jour, ma belle Angélique sera avec moi. Le destin en avait décidé ainsi.*"

It was meant to be.

Edmond leaned closer, smiling malevolently. Then his head exploded.

Mercy's scream jolted through Ryan but he didn't stop firing. The reports were loud in the enclosed space and blended into each other until it was a wall of noise that expanded to every corner and crevice in the room.

Edmond whirled around, the top part of his head a mess of blood and darker matter. Three more head shots then Ryan aimed lower. Each bullet made the vampire's body jerk with the force of impact, but he didn't go down. The stench of burnt flesh and hair filled the air as the silver bullets did what little they could. As Ryan emptied one gun then another, in the periphery of his vision, he saw Vanessa drag Mercy onto the floor.

Beneath the blood, Edmond's grin gleamed white in his already healing face. He wiped a hand across it, sweeping away the more solid chunks, flicked his hand once to shake off the stubborn bits and kept coming at Ryan.

Click, click, click.

He was empty. Ryan tossed down the guns and went for the wooden stake on his right thigh. Edmond came at him, almost a blur. Ryan stepped to the side but he wasn't nearly quick enough. A fist plowed into his solar plexus and, with Mercy's cry and Vanessa's curses in his ears, he was lifted off his feet and airborne. The stake flew from his fingers as he crashed into a chair. It splintered loudly under his sudden sprawling weight. He slammed onto the cement floor and the air whooshed from his lungs. There was no pain. That would come later. For one panicked heartbeat, however, he couldn't breathe. Still, knowing he didn't have the luxury of waiting for those dual organs to start up again, Ryan forced himself to roll to his feet.

Edmond, however, was already kissing distance from him. Still crouched, Ryan rammed his shoulder sideways into his opponent's knee. The joint didn't break, but the vampire went down. Ryan barely had time to stand before Edmond was up and lunging for him, looking bat-like with his arms extended, fingers clawed, his cape flapping. Without thinking, Ryan grabbed the collar of the cape with both hands and, foot planted in Edmond's abdomen, let himself fall backward, taking the vampire with him. As his back hit the floor, he pumped his leg and opened his fists, and the vampire sailed over his head. There was the dull, heavy sound of a body smacking the floor, followed by a shout of fury.

He sprang to his feet.

"McGinnis!"

Vanessa tossed a stake at him. Ryan stretched out a hand, ready to pluck the column of wood out of the air—and was struck from behind, the blow hard enough to make his head snap back. *Shit!* He stumbled, turned and saw insanity and murder in the glassy eyes fixed on him. The vampire's cold, slippery hands wrapped around Ryan's neck and squeezed, thumbs digging into the underside of Ryan's jaw. Neck muscles instinctively tensed, Ryan jerked his chin to his chest, trying to make it harder for the creature. He reached down, his fingers brushing the hilt of his dagger. A gun

fired, the sound reverberating through the room. Edmond jerked, lips peeled back from his teeth and fell down on one knee, taking Ryan with him.

Thank you, Vanessa.

Edmond didn't release his stranglehold on Ryan, but he was distracted for a split second. With his fingers, Ryan speared the vampire's throat and Edmond's head jerked back.

A loud *clang* behind them as metal crashed onto cement.

Edmond's head whipped around even as he screamed. "*No!*"

His grip loosened. In one swift, arcing movement, Ryan drew the dagger from its sheath, swung his arm up and plunged down, burying the entire length of the silver blade in the vampire's eye socket.

Edmond shrieked, throwing himself back and covering his face with both hands, shaking like a man with palsy. He shrieked again, his body writhing in pain as he grasped the protruding hilt and, hands quivering, started pulling the blade out of the smoking wound. Ryan felt the remains of the broken chair beneath his knees. A cursory glance at the littered floor, then he snatched up a pointy length of wood and fell on the vampire. Edmond tried to buck him off, but Ryan only clamped his thighs about the vampire's torso more tightly. With a quick strike with the heel of his hand, he forced the blade back in and, as fresh screams rent the air, stabbed the vampire in the chest with the makeshift stake.

It was like a fire ignited inside the vampire's body, engulfing him from within. He went black, clothes and all, like hardened lava. Shifting, magma-like red could be seen through the countless cracks in the outer shell. In a heartbeat, the black turned to gray and the vampire crumbled into ash beneath Ryan. The silver knife fell to the floor with a clatter.

In the aftermath, the sudden silence was deafening. The room and everyone in it were still, like a tableau.

Suddenly, a small weight hit his chest and slender arms went around his neck, nearly choking him. Soft hair and a familiar scent teased his nostrils. Mercy. His own arms went around her, squeezed until he was sure he'd hurt her but she didn't protest. Relief washed over him, leaving him exhausted and exhilarated at the same time. She'd seen him kill Edmond, and not cleanly, yet she hadn't run away from him.

Kneeling on the cold concrete, he held Mercy while her body shook with quiet tears and decided thirty-three was a good age to retire.

"We have to move."

Mercy wanted to ignore the words of reason coming from behind them. Moving meant letting go of Ryan and him letting go of her, and she wasn't ready. But the other woman was right, so when Ryan stood up, she let him take her with him. As he straightened, a wince escaped his lips and Mercy started to pull back, but he tightened the arm around her waist.

"Just the adrenaline wearing off," he explained, sounding a little stiff.

"How badly are you hurt?" asked Mercy as she tilted her head back enough to scan him from head to toe, her hands hovering gently because she was afraid to hurt him even more. "Do we need to get you to a hospital?"

He simply shook his head and pulled her closer until he could bury his face in her disheveled hair. He inhaled deeply.

Pressed up against his side, she let her eyes sweep the dusty room. Actually, not dust, but ashes. Angélique's ashes from the urn Mercy had deliberately knocked over, now mingled with Edmond's. They were together in death, and she sincerely hoped they were together in hell.

"The beauty of dealing with vampires is there's no body to worry about," murmured the woman who'd freed her as she followed Mercy's gaze. Her dark eyes came to rest on Mercy and Ryan. "I'll go deal with Savage. You two look like you need to find someplace safe and crash for the next twenty-four hours."

She left, her steps quick and silent.

Mercy allowed herself the brief luxury of burying her face in Ryan's chest as he awkwardly smoothed her hair before they made their way toward the exit.

As they emerged from the warehouse, Mercy wasn't sure if Ryan was leaning on her or vice versa, but it didn't matter. They were alive. The bad guy was toast, quite literally. And the sky was all warm hues of pink and orange and purple as the sun inched over the Atlantic.

Dawn.

Ryan paused and exhaled slowly, his body seeming to relax. And Mercy understood because dawn had a new significance in a world that was no longer ordinary.

Chapter Six

The darkness and the air cloaking her were hot and heavy and familiar.

Hands, male and large and rough with calluses, skimmed over her body in a surprisingly –and teasingly –gossamer touch. In response, Mercy arched her back, pushing her body up, wanting harder, deeper caresses. A bead of arousal trickled from between her legs. Lips followed the hands, branding every part of her body with each press of them upon her flesh. The curve of her shoulders, the hollow of her throat, the aching tips of her nipples, the taut surface of her belly. Sensation built, making her skin feel tight and heated until the air felt cool in comparison. The hands and lips trailed lower. She moaned and twisted and thrust her pelvis up shamelessly.

The touch she wanted didn't come. Instead, hands covered her knees, parting them, caressing the softer skin on the backs of them. Then lips retraced the path and moved to rounded calves, the sensitive arches of her feet, making her toes curl as she felt the kiss he placed there deep within her aching core. She threw out her arms and her palms found the bed sheets and swept over them, then curled into them when her toe was sucked into a warm, wet mouth. Mercy gasped. His tongue, rough and soft at the same time, rubbed the pad of her toe repeatedly.

She called out his name and earned the sharp nip of his teeth. He teased her until she trembled and begged for him to come inside her. With a laugh, he shuffled closer, letting her feet slide up his chest and over his shoulders. The hot, achingly soft tip of his cock parted the damp curls covering her sex, brushed her swollen clit. A current shot through her. Mercy sucked in a breath and didn't release it, her muscles tense in anticipation of that first thrust.

She waited, but he didn't move and frustration blazed inside her. She reached for him, or tried to, but her limbs wouldn't obey. She struggled to move, to sit up, to get

closer to him and couldn't. Something solid and heavy was atop her, keeping her pinned down, and she struggled harder.

As she fought to throw off the unseen weight, from a distance she heard a voice calling her name. It got louder and louder, closer and closer, as the dream receded and the darkness with it. When she opened her eyes, Ryan was staring down at her, concern on his face, brows drawn together. He lay above her, propped up on his forearms and as naked as she. They had stumbled from the shower, too exhausted to do more than fall onto the closest bed and into oblivion.

"Edmond?" he asked, carefully hooking stray strands of her hair with his forefinger and drawing them away from her face.

She shook her head. "No." *Thank God.*

With desire still coursing through her body, her hands swept up his back then down to taut, muscular buttocks. Her thighs spread open and her fingers flexed, urging him closer. His stiff cock twitched against her soft, moist flesh. She lifted her hips a little. "You," she breathed. "Just you."

He went rigid and his breath hitched in his throat. "You're hurt," he managed to whisper hoarsely.

"I know," she whispered back and hooked her legs around his waist, opening herself even more to him. "But don't say no."

Ryan squeezed his eyes shut, muttered a curse and worked his cock inside her sex, which was swollen and damp from her dreams. His moan mingled with hers. Her inner muscles clenched around that thick column of flesh, as if trying to keep it there. She almost didn't want him to move. She wanted to stop time and stay in this moment. Soon, however, her body clamored for more.

"Jesus, Mercy." His voice was guttural.

He dropped his head next to hers, burying his face in the pillow. When he moved inside her, her hips bucked and her hands skated up his back to clutch at his shoulders. He groaned in approval and wedged a thick forearm under her hips, lifting them. He

thrust, and the new angle made him go deeper. Her mouth fell open to gasp for oxygen as her senses flooded with pleasure.

The next thrust drew a choked, raspy sound from her. As did the next and the next and the next. Soon her world consisted only of the rhythm of their sweating bodies, the heat of his skin, the hardness of his shaft and the sizzle of sensation expanding until it pushed at her skin from within and threatened to break through.

A tingle started in her spine, reached her clitoris and her orgasm came in a rush. It hit her hard, swelling like it would last forever. She cried out as her whole body shook.

He muttered unintelligibly in her ear, pushed his cock deep into her one final time, grinding his groin against hers as he came.

After the last shudder, he collapsed on top of her, pinning her to the mattress with his greater weight. Mercy unhooked her ankles and lowered her legs, but didn't push him off. Her arms remained looped loosely about his neck and left shoulder.

She closed her eyes and, despite the room being filled with the soft, golden glow of the late afternoon sun, lazily drifted toward the endless realm of Dream.

A shift in the body above her yanked her back from that sweet edge of sleep. Her arms instinctively tightened about him.

"Don't leave me." Those three little words left her mouth before she could stop them, and Mercy stiffened.

Ryan caught something in Mercy's wide eyes that told him to tread carefully. It didn't take Freud to figure out her issues.

"I'm crushing you," he said, and he rolled onto his back, taking her with him.

"No," she protested and tried to slide off him. "You're more hurt than me. I wasn't the one getting thrown all over the room and nearly strangled to death."

He held her in place. "I'm not hurting so much right now. Sex, endorphins. Nature's pain reliever."

That remark startled a laugh out of her, but she still batted his hands away and settled beside his body. He gathered her to him and she curled into his side, head on his shoulder, an arm thrown across his chest and a leg draped over one of his.

"How long can we stay here?" asked Mercy, one finger absently stroking his hair-roughened chest.

"As long as you want."

"No, seriously."

He sighed. "Until whenever you feel like getting your life back in order."

The stroking stopped. "We have until tomorrow then."

His hand covered hers, flattening it against his chest. "We have more than just until tomorrow," he countered. "Do you think I'm just going to walk away from you?"

He read the answer in the stillness of her body. She wasn't even breathing.

"I'm not leaving you, Mercy," said Ryan quietly.

"So I get to see you in between assignments," she said in a neutral voice. "How many times a year would that be? Single digits?"

He took a breath. "Early retirement."

She didn't say anything and he could see her working through his response, looking at all the possible outcomes so she could prepare herself for the worst-case scenario.

"What will you do?" she asked finally. "I can't see you working a nine-to-five job."

"Neither can I, but it'll work out."

"Will it?"

She still sounded damnably neutral. Impatience and frustration reared their twin heads. After too many years of letting his fists speak for him, his facility with words was sorely lacking. Ryan moved, shoving her onto her back so he could raise himself up on one elbow and loom over her. She didn't look intimidated by him, but it sure as hell made him feel better. Gold eyes locked onto violet.

"Damn it, Mercy. Do you want me to leave? Do you want to end it now?"

Her eyes darkened and his heart pounded and his gut twisted with dread. His muscles clenched and knotted as she let the silence lengthen, her beautiful face a blank. When he thought he couldn't endure it any longer, she closed her eyes and gave a single shake of her head. The constriction around his chest lessened but didn't go away entirely.

"I need to hear you say it," he said, sounding a little stiff.

Something flashed across her face and he thought she would go back to fighting him.

She looked at him and said haltingly, "No." She seemed bewildered for a moment, as if not quite believing what she was hearing. "No, I don't want you to leave."

Elated and relieved, Ryan pressed a fierce kiss to her mouth, uncaring of the bruise on the left corner. She winced but her hands grasped the back of his neck and pulled him closer. Her lips parted and he obligingly deepened the kiss until his hands itched for the feel of her skin and desire writhed in his belly.

He pulled back, breathing hard and uneven. "Was it that difficult?"

"Yes." She was dangerously close to pouting, but he knew she wouldn't appreciate him pointing it out.

"I'll make it up to you," he promised huskily, circling a nipple with his fingertip. It hardened in response.

Her leg shifted, her knee brushing his penis. He was already half-hard. "Soon?" she murmured.

His answer was a low, wordless noise dragged from his throat. He covered her most intimate curls, petted her, and her legs widened. He pushed two fingers inside her cleft and his nerves endings lit up as his cock jerked and more blood rushed to it, leaving him a little lightheaded. She felt like warm, smooth honey and he wanted to feel

her around him again. His fingers twisted, bent and caressed her from within. Breathless sounds escaped her as her hips rolled encouragingly.

He withdrew his fingers, eliciting a soft protest from her, returned to her nipple and circled it again, coating it with her own essence. Her short nails scratched his neck then dug in when he covered the tip of her breast with his mouth and suckled. She whimpered, her legs moving restlessly and her fingers tunneling into his hair. She started to turn toward him and toss a leg over his hips.

Ryan drew back and clamped a hand on her thigh. "No," he panted and prodded her onto her other side until her head lay on his forearm and his heavy erection nuzzled the lush cheeks of her bare bottom. His penis slid back and forth between her cheeks while his fingers played with her sex, stroking, pinching, sliding in deep. His mouth grazed her neck and her shoulder. He dragged her top leg up until it draped over his. The head of his cock glanced the whorl of her anus and her breath caught. Everything inside him went taut. He hardly dared to breathe. He explored even further, felt with a fingertip, and she tightened against him. Disappointment flared through him and he had to sink his teeth into her shoulder hard enough to leave dents.

Even as her hand gripped his wrist, she whispered two words.

"Don't be," he said through gritted teeth. "You'll make it up to me." It was more a promise to himself. His teeth caught her earlobe and nipped it, making her gasp. He pushed his hips at her. "Do you want me?"

"Yes..."

"Put me inside you."

Her grip only tightened on his wrist.

"Do it."

She released his arm and reached a hand behind her back, curling her fingers around his shaft and, after rasping her thumb across the head, guiding him to the opening of her body. A thrust of his hips and he filled her with his cock. Her sigh mingled with his curse. He banded his arm across her middle and drove into her again

and again, short, selfish strokes that made her claw at his forearm. He breathed in the musky scent of sweat and sex and quickened his pace, growling broken, senseless phrases in her ear.

When Mercy came, she bit down on the flesh and muscle of his arm beneath her head to stifle her scream of pleasure. The last vestiges of his control shredded. He pounded into her, afraid he was hurting her but unable to stop himself. Then the first spasm coursed along his cock and streaks of pleasure whipped through every tight muscle. He shouted her name and, as shivers racked his entire frame, held her to him like he could meld their bodies into one.

Consciousness returned with nightfall. Cool, silky hair covered his abdomen and a soft tongue teased his navel before moving lower.

“What are you doing?” he asked, his voice gravelly with sleep even as his hands got lost in her hair.

Mercy lifted her head and gazed up at him through her lashes. His semi-erect shaft bobbed under her chin, desperately seeking attention. She ran a fingertip down his length to the root. “Making it up to you,” she murmured, and sealed her lips over him.

About the Author

Ann Bruce is the pseudonym for a self-professed computer geek who, in between snowboarding, reading comic books, and wearing out the buttons of her PS2 controller, writes because it's an acceptable means of explaining all the conversations that take place in her head.

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