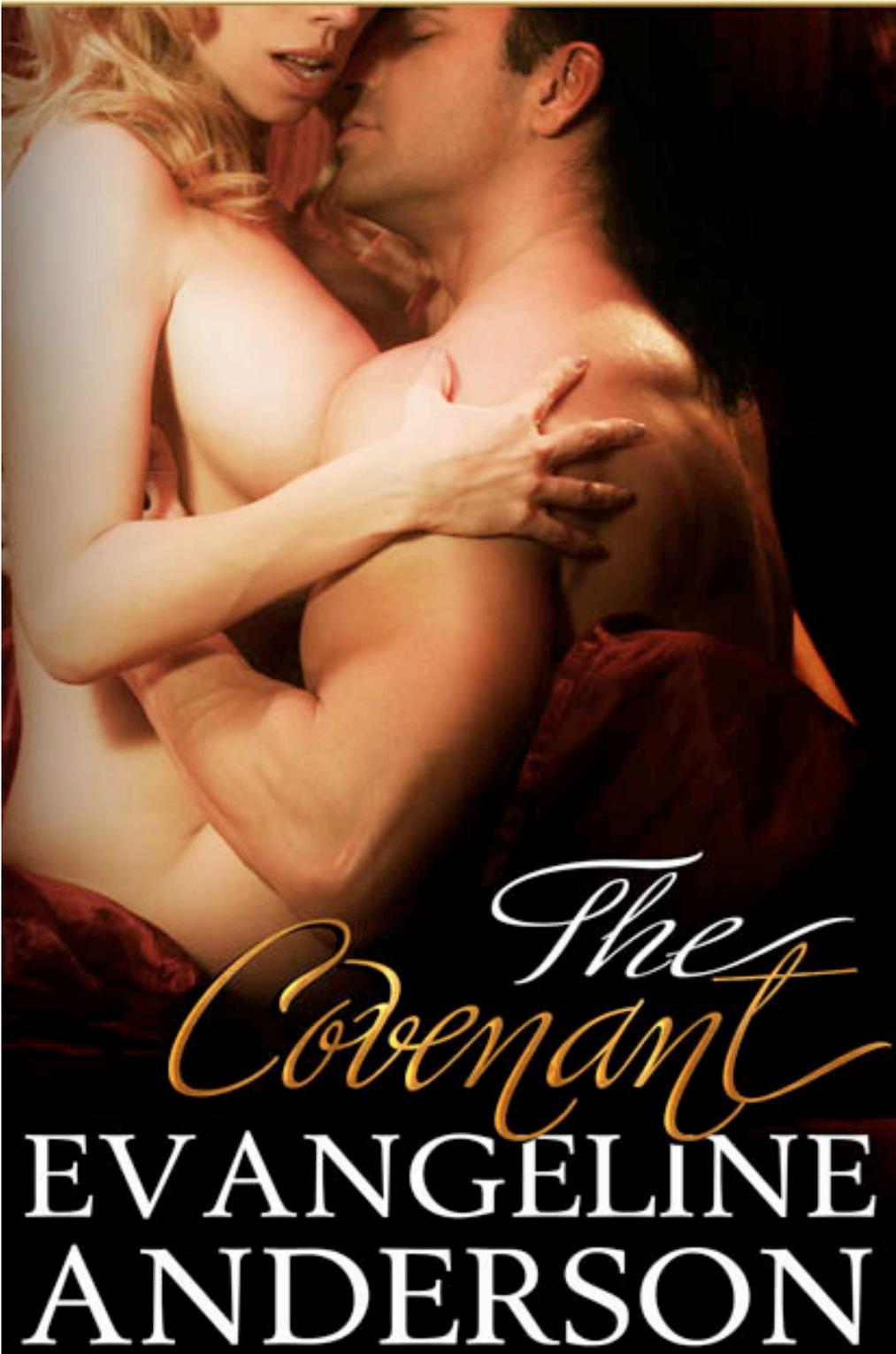


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



*The
Covenant*

EVANGELINE
ANDERSON

The Covenant

Evangeline Anderson

Kaitlyn Richards is a witch with powers beyond the norm. Her unique abilities make her one of the few people in the state of Florida qualified to be an S.E., or Supernatural Enforcer. As part of her duties she uses her home as a magical holding cell for creatures too strong to be contained in normal human jails.

Holden Sumner is a three-hundred-year-old vampire on a mission—he's been stalking a serial-killing demon for centuries and he needs Kaitlyn's help to kill it. The problem is, she won't give him the time of night. But Sumner is determined to get under her skin.

Though Kaitlyn is reluctant to get involved with a vampire, she agrees to help Sumner search for the killer. But in order to drive the demon back to hell and stop the slaughter of innocents, she will have to bind herself more tightly than she ever thought possible to a man she doesn't want to love.

She and Sumner must form a blood covenant...or die trying.

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The Covenant

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THE COVENANT

Evangeline Anderson

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Chapter One

“There he is in all his glory,” Detective Wanda Travers muttered. “Holden Sumner doing what he does best.”

“Yeah, that’s him all right,” I agreed.

I stared in disgust at the grainy black-and-white picture displayed on the small monitor in the Sarasota PD station. Despite the poor quality there was no mistaking the man—or should I say vampire—and what he was doing.

Holden Sumner was sex on a stick. His hair was so black it had blue highlights. It was just a shade too long and framed perfect features that would have made him a model if they’d had such a thing back when he was turned. His pale, piercing eyes were fringed by thick, black lashes that were ridiculously long for a man and his lips were full, curving in a way that was somehow erotic and cruel at the same time. He would have been almost pretty if not for his heavily muscled shoulders and tight, fighter’s frame.

I watched in fascination as he worked.

Even doing horrible things, he had a sensual grace that drew you in and wouldn’t let you stop looking. He was holding a victim—obviously a human male—and he hadn’t even bothered to glamour him. The guy was mid-thirties and looked like a drifter. There was a look of sheer terror in his face as Sumner bent the man’s head back, baring his dirty throat for the killing blow.

He was a good-sized guy—about an inch taller than Sumner’s six one—and he was struggling like crazy but it didn’t do him any good. Your average vampire is at least a hundred times stronger than a human and Sumner was anything but average. He was three-hundred years old if he was a day—stronger and older than any other vampire in the state. He ripped out the drifter’s throat with a single graceful move that made the bestial action look like a bloody ballet.

Then, as the arterial blood spurted out onto the dirty pavement at his feet, he looked directly up at the security camera that had been recording it all and smiled.

“What the hell,” Travers muttered, staring at the monitor. “I’ve seen it five times already and it still fucking unnerves me.”

“I can see why,” I murmured. If I had just seen a human perform the act Sumner had done, I would have thought he was a psychopath but for a vampire, it was business as usual. Everyone knew they led a bloody existence to say the least. Still, they were able to feed off a human without killing and most of them tried to—or at least tried to *pretend* they did. What we had seen on the tape was Sumner giving up all pretense,

showing us his true nature. The question was, why? I shook my head. "Who's the victim, anyway? Did he die?"

"Oh yeah, dead as a doornail. Just some homeless guy named Jason Drews living out of his van—which we haven't found yet, by the way. He's on a slab in the morgue now." She shook her head. "Why would he do that? Let himself be caught on tape performing a homicide?"

"A better question is who is this directed at?" I murmured. I was afraid I knew the answer to that one but I didn't want to admit it.

"Okay, I'll bite—no pun intended. Who?" She rewound the tape and I made myself watch the act again without flinching.

I sighed. "Maybe...maybe me. He knows I'm the only S.E. in the Sarasota area so he knows you would have to call me in on this case."

"You? What does Sumner want with *you*?" Travers, who was an out-and-proud lesbian, gave me a frankly appraising glance. "I mean, you're pretty enough with those big brown Bambi eyes and all your long brown hair. How long does it take you to wash all that, anyway? But Sumner has enough pretty young things to keep him busy from dusk 'til dawn without murdering someone just to get your attention."

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" I ran a hand through my hair.

As a matter of fact, it *did* take quite a while to wash and dry but I didn't just keep it long for vanity's sake. The women in my family draw some of their power from their hair—kind of like Samson in the Bible. That and touch—our ability to pull energy from physical contact—constitutes our magical power base. It was a good thing I had my hair to rely on—it had been ages since I'd been touched by a man. And speaking of men...

I stared at the black-and-white monitor again. "Sumner's been asking for a meeting with me for awhile now," I admitted to Travers. "I've blown him off five times in the past month."

"Five times?" She raised an eyebrow at me and whistled. "Most straight girls would jump at the chance for a private audience with tall, dark and fangsome."

"Yeah, well I'm not most girls." I shifted in the hard wooden chair I was sitting on uncomfortably. "And he's not interested in me for my looks—as you said, he's got plenty of other girls to play with."

"What's he want then?"

"I don't know." I blew out a breath in frustration. "He's a vampire and I'm a Wiccan—he ought to want to avoid me."

"Well he sure can't do that now. The minute we showed this to Judge Hardy he put out a warrant for Sumner's arrest."

"Just great." I had expected nothing less but I couldn't help feeling exasperated. "So when is the trial?"

Travers shook her head. "I know what you're thinking but you're going to be disappointed. We can't get him to trial until the special vamp magistrate comes to town

and the one for our area is tied up in the middle of a really big case right now in Jacksonville.”

I groaned. “Are you serious? So how long am I going to have to hold him?”

“At least a week. Maybe more. Sorry, Richards.” She shrugged at my disgusted expression. “That’s what we pay you that fat retainer for every month and the reason you get to carry the S.E. badge and act all badass like the rest of us.”

“That ‘fat retainer’ is barely enough to cover my car payment,” I informed her. “And I’m only supposed to have to keep vamps overnight. I’m not running the undead Hilton over at my house, you know.”

Because regular law enforcement doesn’t have holding cells that can accommodate vampires, they hire people like me with paranormal abilities to do it for them. As a Supernatural Enforcer, I keep a light-tight room in my house that is warded and bound with silver for just that purpose. But as I had reminded Travers, it was only supposed to be an overnight deal once in a very great while.

“That’s just too bad, Richards.” She smirked at me, not unkindly. “Looks like you and Sumner are going to be spending some quality time together in the very near future whether you want to or not.”

“That would be a resounding *not*,” I grumbled but I knew I couldn’t back out. For one, I was under contract. And two, this was probably all my fault. If Sumner *was* doing this in order to get to me, then he’d succeeded and I now had a death on my conscious. The guy on the grainy tape had probably just been a drifter but all life is precious to a Wiccan and Sumner had killed him just to get my attention. *Surely that can’t be it*, I told myself uneasily. But I couldn’t help shivering as I watched the ragged man jitter lifelessly on the pavement while Sumner smiled at the camera. Smiled and winked—how had I missed that before? As if it were all some big joke.

“He’s a cold-blooded son of a bitch all right,” Travers muttered, frowning at the monitor and running one hand through her short blonde hair. “Knowing how vamps hate your kind and watching this, if he didn’t have such a good alibi for every crime scene I’d really like him for the Witch Killer.”

I winced at the name. “Do you really have to call him that? We’re *Wiccans*.”

Travers gave me a look. “The media coined the term, not me. I guess ‘the Sarasota Witch Killer’ sounds better than ‘the Sarasota Wiccan Slayer’ or whatever. Anyway, what do you care? It’s just a name.”

“When you say ‘witch’ most of the general public gets this mental image of old hunchbacked ladies with long warty noses wearing black and riding on broomsticks. It degrades us and everything we stand for.” I put a hand on my hip. “How would you like it if there was a serial killer out preying on lesbians and they called him the ‘Dyke Eradicator’ or something like that?”

She sighed. “All right, point taken. But it doesn’t matter what we call the guy, the fact is he’s still at large. I just wish I could pin it on Sumner and kill two birds with one stone. But he’s always out partying in very public places when the kills go down.”

"How nice for him," I said but there was a lump in my throat. I'd been trying not to think of the Witch Killer who had been on the prowl in Sarasota for the past year. He hadn't killed anyone in months so the fire under the case had died down a little but one of his three victims had been a good friend of mine, a Wiccan named Rune. She'd been sweet and light and caring – embodying all the positive aspects of the Goddess in a way I'd never been able to manage myself. She'd also been the first to welcome me to the coven when I moved back to Sarasota three years before to be with my Nana.

"Hey, we'll get him." Travers put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. She was one of the few detectives on the case who really seemed to take the Wiccan part of the murders seriously. To the rest of the PD the Witch Killer was just your average garden-variety lust murderer and the fact that he targeted my kind in particular didn't seem to matter. I mean, most serial killers have a preferred victim type but that usually means race or physical characteristics, like blonde hair and blue eyes. Religion – especially a religion that most of the general public thought of as hocus-pocus – didn't usually enter into it.

"Yeah, we'll get him," I said, frowning. "I just hope he doesn't get another one of my sister Wiccans first."

"It's just a matter of time," she said firmly. "In the meantime, you're being safe, aren't you? Got your pepper spray?"

"Always." I nodded. "And don't worry, none of the coven is performing solo rituals any more. We stick together and we're much more careful now that we know we're being targeted."

"He may have moved on, you know. It's past time in his kill cycle for another murder."

"Or he could just be in jail, being held for something else entirely," I pointed out. "Serving ninety days for some misdemeanor or other and he'll be right back at it once he gets out."

"That's possible," she admitted. "But let's hope not. Maybe he finally picked the wrong witch – sorry, *Wiccan* – to go after."

"From your lips to the Goddess' ears." I sighed. "Okay, it's getting toward sundown. I'd better go to Sumner's lair and see if I can pick him up."

She frowned. "Not alone, you're not. We're pulling out the big guns on this one."

I shook my head. "Not necessary. Sumner did this on purpose. He *wants* to be taken in so he'll come quietly."

"You sure about that? Sure this isn't some kind of a trap? Maybe he's trying to take out the only S.E. in the Sarasota area so he can do something even worse and we'll have no way to hold him."

"I can't explain it but...that's not how he works. And besides, what's worse than ripping some poor guy's throat out? No, he wants to talk to me. If I go to get him, he'll come with no problems."

She nodded. "All right, I trust your judgment. But if you're not back at the station in a couple of hours I'm sending back-up after you."

"Fine." I nodded at the door. "I'm going."

Travers looked regretful. "Sorry, Richards, but I can't let you go it alone."

"Come with me then."

"I would if I thought you were really going to be in danger. But since Sumner is just trying to get your attention I need to stay here—I have another case that won't wait. A witness who's ready to talk but I'm the only one he'll talk to."

"Then who are you sending with me?"

She made a face. "I'm afraid the only guy I have free right now is Bleaks."

"Damn it, Travers, not that guy!" I ran a hand through my hair in agitation. "I can't stand him—he gives me the creeps."

"Yeah, you and me and everyone else with a vagina. Unfortunately, we can't kick him off the department just for being a jerk." She sighed. "Look, I know it's a pain but according to the regs, I have to send someone with you. Besides, Sumner is high profile. Captain wants him picked up and taken back to the station in an official PD vehicle."

I groaned. "This just gets better and better. So I have to leave my car here just so things look official?"

"Fraid so. Oh, I you need to cuff him too."

"Right," I said flatly. "Cuff a three-hundred-year-old vampire. You don't want much, do you?"

She stood and I stood with her. "Like I said, I know it's a pain in the ass but I also know you can handle it. You'd make a damn fine cop if you ever decide to stop doodling around in your grandma's magic shop."

"Thanks," I said dryly, "but that 'magic shop' is the biggest paranormal bookstore in the state and it's been in my family for generations."

"That's nice and all but if you're not making enough to break even maybe it's time to consider a career change. I know being a S.E. doesn't pay much but you still need the money or you wouldn't put up with this crap, right?" She looked at me sharply.

"We're doing just fine." I heard the defensiveness in my own voice and tried to dial it down. "I'm not just a S.E. for the money, you know. Nana believes it's a Wiccan's duty to get involved in the community. And not to toot my own horn, but there aren't many of my kind strong enough to contain and control a vamp—especially one of Sumner's caliber."

"You're right about that." She looked at me earnestly. "Are you strong enough, Kaitlyn? You and I both know he's a major player. He isn't your usual vamp detainee—some stupid teenager who got turned yesterday and trashed the high school on a blood high. In fact, I don't think we've ever had to bring a vamp of his power level to court before."

“That’s because the old ones and the powerful ones are too smart to get caught. Don’t worry—I’m protected. He won’t hurt me.” I stroked the silver-filigreed locket around my throat. It was ancient and contained something even older—a lock of my ancestor Fiona’s hair. The women in my family have always had power but Fiona was the first to harness it. The things she learned have been passed down from mother to daughter or in my case, from grandmother to granddaughter, for generations.

“You’re sure though?” Travers suddenly looked guilty. “Maybe I’d better come along after all. That witness can wait.”

“You and a whole squad of officers couldn’t do a thing if Sumner decided to act up,” I pointed out. “He did this in full view of that camera—he obviously *wants* to be caught for whatever twisted reason. He won’t make a fuss.”

Travers nodded. “Yeah, that’s what I think too. Well, let me call Bleaks for you then.”

I made a face. “If you must.”

“Afraid so. Take care of yourself. I’ll call later and let you know about the timing on the other case. As soon as the vamp magistrate is free he’ll be here for Sumner.”

“Yeah, all right. I just hope it doesn’t take too long.” I tried to keep the unease out of my voice and failed. The fact was, Holden Sumner made me nervous and it wasn’t just because he was an ancient, powerful vamp with enough mojo to suck the entire city dry. It was more in the way he had looked at me on those few occasions when we had met in the past. There was a hunger in those pale, piercing eyes that made me cold to my bones.

I wasn’t looking forward to having an entire week alone with him.

Not at all.

Chapter Two

The ride down to Sumner's place on Lido Key was about what I'd expected it to be—creepy and uncomfortable.

Officer Todd Bleaks, who drove me, was the ex-football type. He had a blond crew cut that showed off prominent ears and small blue eyes set a little close together. His nose had obviously been broken more than once and his mouth was a thin, lipless slash. Still, he was built and obviously sporting a six-pack under his blue uniform shirt, which was all some girls cared about. I, fortunately, was not one of them. Jerk plus abs still equals jerk to me and Bleaks definitely fell under that heading.

"So, you witches all perform your ceremonies naked, huh?" was the first thing out of his mouth as soon as we were on the road and safely away from the PD.

"It's called going sky-clad and yes, some ceremonies call for it," I said tightly. "It's not a sexual thing though—it's to draw you closer to the Goddess." I didn't know why I was bothering to try to explain to him except that Nana was always trying to get me to educate others about us. *Most of the hatred directed against our kind is born out of fear, Katy-child,* she would say. *Shine the light of knowledge into the darkness of their ignorance whenever you can. Let them know we're not a threat to them and then you'll see a difference.*

Only in this case she turned out to be wrong.

"Yeah, but you *like* being naked, right? Don't you guys have sex and orgies under the full moon on special nights of the year? Like Halloween?"

I wasn't about to go into sex as a way to raise power with the likes of Todd Bleaks. "You're misinformed," I told him. "And until you have a little more respect for what I do, I have no interest in discussing it with you."

"But—"

"No." I cut him off and turned pointedly to stare out the window. I heard him mutter something that sounded suspiciously like witch with a capital B, but I ignored him and concentrated on the scenery.

We were passing the statue called *Unconditional Surrender* that stands by the waterfront in downtown Sarasota. It was a twenty-five-foot rendering of the famous photograph taken after World War II where the sailor has the nurse bent over his arm and is kissing her for all he's worth. A lot of art critics in Sarasota hated it when it first went up but I'd always kind of liked it. It's so unashamedly romantic. I couldn't help wishing I could find a guy to trust and surrender unconditionally to that way.

I made a noise under my breath. Yeah, right—that wasn't going to happen any time soon. The last relationship I'd been in had ended disastrously as soon as I showed the guy I was dating that being a Wiccan was more than just mixing potions and dancing

naked under the moon at Beltane. The moment I'd revealed my true power—and let him know that touching him, making love with him, helped it grow—he'd run screaming for the door. Well, as my Nana always said, it takes a real man to date a woman who's stronger than he and so far I had yet to find one. But sometimes I felt so hungry, so filled with longing...

I sighed. I should probably just find a willing guy for a one-night stand—if nothing else it would strengthen my magic. But damn it, that wasn't what I wanted—what I *craved*. I wanted a man who would accept me as I was and give me what I needed with no holding back, no reservations. I know most women say they like to cuddle but I *needed* to—at least the magical part of me did. And right now it had been so long between boyfriends I needed a hell of a lot more than cuddling.

Well, there was nothing I could do about it now unless I wanted to cuddle with Bleaks. *Ugh*, just the thought of that made me feel slightly ill. Trying to put my thoughts to one side, I concentrated on the case to come.

We drove over the bridge and down into the swanky part of Sarasota—Saint Armand's Circle. It's a big shopping district filled with expensive eateries and fancy little boutiques all laid out like spokes on a wheel that draws the tourists like flies to honey. Holden Sumner had a private residence not far off the circle in an exclusive little neighborhood where there wasn't a single house under twenty million.

I, wondered, as we rounded the corner and Bleaks flashed his badge to get past the security gate, what Sumner was doing down here. True, there was a lot of money in town and vamps do tend to be wealthy, but Sarasota wasn't the type of city his kind usually went for. It's not sexy enough, for one thing. Basically it's a big retirement community. Most of the population is over sixty and tends to go to bed early—not good for a vampire. Sumner, who was always dressed in tailored Armani suits, ought to be somewhere hot and trendy like South Beach or glamorous like L.A. Not poky old Sarasota where the most exciting thing happening on a Friday night was the Golden Apple Dinner Theater's production of *Annie Get Your Gun*.

And yet here he was, a pain in my ass. I sighed, remembering the first time I had met him.

When he'd first come into town, Sumner had had the temerity to come and introduce himself at Nana's shop even though vampires and Wiccans are natural enemies. That's pretty much because we're immune to their glamour as well as the only ones capable of reigning them in—magically, of course. Even the strongest Wiccan is no match for a vamp physically. Still, vamps don't like the power we can exert over them—they like to be the top dog in any situation.

I was working the counter at the shop that night and I could still remember the appraising look in Sumner's pale eyes when he looked me over. And then when he shook my hand...

I pushed the memory away and lifted my chin. Nothing like that was going to happen again. I was on my guard now and Sumner was toast if he tried anything—literally.

“This looks like it.” Bleaks pulled up in front of a mansion with tall white pillars that looked like something out of *Gone With the Wind*.

“This is it, all right.” I got out of the car and started down the long front walk but Bleaks ran after me and put a hand on my arm. His touch made my skin crawl. “What?” I gave him an irritated look. This was definitely *not* the kind of touching I had been daydreaming about on our ride over.

“I’ll go. You can stay in the car.”

I yanked my arm away from him—or tried to anyway. His grip was like iron. “Look, Bleaks, number one, get your hand off my arm. Number two, I’m the S.E. I’m the only one qualified to bring Sumner in. So if anybody waits in the car it’s *you*.”

“Fuck that.” He scowled. “I’m the officer in charge here and that means what I say goes. Now get back in the car, bitch. This is *my* collar.”

I made a noise of frustration that turned into a squeak of pain. Bleaks was squeezing my arm so hard I was sure I would have fingerprint-shaped bruises where he was grabbing me. I was tempted to make him feel like my arm was red hot and burning his hand but I didn’t want to scare him off completely—he *was* my ride, after all. I didn’t want to be stranded in vampire territory with no way to get out until the back-up finally decided to show. “Stop it, Bleaks, that hurts!” I told him. “Look, he won’t even go with you and there’s nothing you can say or do to make him.”

“I’ve got *this*.” He slapped the gun holstered at his side.

I rolled my eyes. “Great. And unless it’s loaded with ash wood stakes or silver hollow points filled with holy water it’s absolutely useless. This is a three-hundred-year-old vampire we’re talking about—your bullets would bother him about as much as a mosquito bite would bother you.”

He frowned. “*You* don’t have stakes or silver bullets. Why would he come with you?”

I glared at him. “I’m about to show you if you don’t get your hand off my arm *right now*.” Wiccan magic isn’t about inflicting harm—we live by the three-fold rule. That is whatever you do, whatever energy you put out into the world—either positive or negative—will come back to you but three times as much. And as I said before, I didn’t want to be stranded. But I was rapidly reaching my asshole limit. Bleaks was about to find out exactly what a witch with a capital B can do when she’s pissed.

As it turned out, though, using my magic against him wasn’t necessary because suddenly Holden Sumner was standing right beside me. He didn’t open the ridiculously ornate front door and come down the walkway—at least not that I noticed. He just suddenly...appeared. I would have been frightened if I hadn’t known how fast vamps can move when they want to. It’s no wonder people used to think they could materialize out of thin air—it certainly appears like that to the naked human eye.

“Kaitlyn, it’s so good to see you.” He was wearing a beautifully tailored jacket that probably cost more than my car and his fangs were very white and sharp when he smiled. The jacket was a pearlescent dove-gray that brought out his pale eyes—eyes that were presently trained on Bleaks in a very unfriendly way. “Is this person hurting you?” he asked, his gaze flickering over Bleaks’ hand still clamped around my upper arm.

“He was but he’s about to stop. *Now.*” I gave Bleaks a meaningful look but he was either too stupid or too full of himself to take the hint. He only squeezed my arm tighter and, as much as I tried not to, I couldn’t help letting out a muffled noise of pain.

I didn’t see Sumner move but suddenly his hand was locked around Bleaks’ thick wrist and Bleaks was howling. At least he finally let go of me, though.

I stepped away, rubbing my arm. “Thanks. I think.”

“Do you want me to kill him?” Sumner’s voice never rose above a politely conversational tone. It was as though he was asking me if I would prefer sweet tea or lemonade.

“You-you wouldn’t dare,” Bleaks gasped. “I’m a police officer.”

“And an exceedingly stupid one at that.” Sumner smiled at him but there was no humor in his pale eyes. “Do you really think your shiny little badge will protect you? I could kill you now before you could blink. Or wait until later and make it look like an accident.” He looked at me. “What do you think, Kaitlyn?”

“I think you’d better let him go, Sumner. You’re already wanted for one murder. That’s why we’re here, as you no doubt know,” I told him.

“Yes, but what’s another homicide between friends, hmm?” He grinned at me charmingly. “I think you’ll have to give me a better reason than that to spare his life, sweetheart. I *really* don’t like the way he was treating you.”

“You can’t kill him just for being a jerk,” I said. *Even if he does deserve it.*

Sumner raised one perfectly arched black eyebrow at me. “What was that last part, Kaitlyn?”

I frowned. There was no way he could have heard what I was thinking. There’s no such thing as a telepathic vampire—they give up any paranormal powers they have in human life the moment they become undead. And we didn’t have any kind of bond so...no, no way. Before I could answer, though, Bleaks chose that moment to run off at the mouth again.

“Get your fucking hand off me, you leech. Or I swear I’ll put a hole the size of a goddamn door in you.”

My eyes dropped involuntarily to his other hand and sure enough, he’d managed to get his gun out and was pointing it at Sumner.

“Bleaks, no!” I exclaimed but he didn’t put the gun down. Sumner didn’t let go of his wrist either, however. He just stared at Bleaks coldly, as though the gun waving officer was a particularly nasty looking bug he’d found on the bottom of his shoe.

"You know," he remarked. "If you wound me it will only make me thirsty. And since you're the nearest source of blood I don't think that would be wise. Do you?"

Bleaks pulled the trigger.

"No!" I gasped much too late. There was a deafening *bang* and a huge gaping hole suddenly appeared in Sumner's side. It was raw and red and bloody and it would have killed a human. The vampire, however, simply looked down at the wound and frowned. A muscle clenching in the side of his jaw was the only hint he gave of what had to be excruciating pain, even for a vamp. Then in a move too quick to see, he wrenched the gun out of Bleaks' hand and threw it over the three-story house. Squeezing until I could hear the crunching sound in Bleaks' wrist as the tiny bones inside broke, he drove the other man groaning to his knees.

"Now that hurt. *And* you've ruined my favorite jacket. I think that demands some retribution." The whites of his eyes went suddenly blood-red, making the pale irises that much scarier. His fangs had elongated frighteningly.

"Wait!" I begged before he could strike. To my surprise Sumner actually did as I asked. He turned to look at me.

"What?" he demanded. "What reason can you possibly give me not to kill him now? Speak quickly, Kaitlyn. I'm very thirsty."

"He..." I said the only thing that came into my mind. "He's my ride home. I don't want to be stuck here with no way to get out."

"I see." He nodded gravely. "And will you give your blood for his, to heal the wound he inflicted?"

I looked at those bright, curving fangs and shivered. Giving a vamp permission to bite you is no small thing when you're Wiccan. Our paranormal powers mix with the supernatural force that animates the vamp and it creates a bond—one that is extremely difficult to break. Not to mention the fact that I didn't want to be stabbed in the neck with two very sharp and scary-looking pointed appendages. I've never liked shots. "No," I said in a low voice. "No, I won't. I won't allow you to feed on me, Sumner—not ever. Not even to save his life."

Bleaks looked up at me. His wrist was pretty much pulverized at this point but there was nothing wrong with his mouth—more the pity. "You *bitch*," he gasped.

Sumner slapped him. It looked like a glancing, casual blow but it rocked Bleaks' head back and then he spit out some teeth. "Watch how you speak to a lady," Sumner told him coldly. Then he looked back at me. The whites of his eyes were still blood-red and his fangs were long and white in the moonlight but he seemed calmer somehow. "I'm glad to know you're not attached to this waste of space in any way, Kaitlyn. It would have saddened me greatly if I thought you had any...affection for him."

"Who, Bleaks?" I tried to laugh but my throat was too dry. "The detective working your case just sent him along for the ride. But he's so full of himself he thinks he's in charge."

"I see." Sumner nodded and looked down at Bleaks who, for once, had the good sense to keep his mouth shut. "The ancient Greeks had a word for your actions here tonight," he murmured. "It's called *hubris*. Perhaps you should try to avoid it in the future. Very well then." He wiped the hand he'd grabbed Bleaks with on the undamaged side of his suit jacket as though he'd touched something dirty. "You may go back and wait in the car." He turned to me. "Kaitlyn, if you'd care to accompany me, I need to get a change of clothing and, ah, replenish myself."

I swallowed hard and tried to look unconcerned. "All right then."

"Excellent." Smiling, he offered me his arm. It was an old-world, courtly gesture that might have been romantic if he hadn't had blood-red eyes, inch long fangs and a gaping hole in his side.

I took his arm anyway. Vampires can sense fear like dogs and I was determined not to show any.

Sumner smiled even wider and he nodded his head slightly at me as if to say I'd gone up in his estimation. Then we strolled together up the long brick walkway and into the shadowy interior of his house.

Chapter Three

The inside of Holden Sumner's house was every bit as ostentatious as I had imagined it would be. Baroque-style furnishings filled the vast front room that was lit with a huge, antique crystal chandelier. The parquet wood floors had been polished until they shone and were dotted here and there with what appeared to be real Persian rugs. A man and a woman who looked to be in their early twenties lounged indolently on a blood-red brocade sofa like spoiled pet cats.

"Yvonna, my dear," Sumner said and the girl, who could easily have been a supermodel, unfolded herself from the couch and came over at once. She was five-eleven at least with that perfect slim-hipped, flat-chested boy figure the fashion industry seems to find so appealing. Seeing as how I'm five-foot-five with what my Nana calls "child bearing hips", I think I can be excused for feeling more than a twinge of envy. But then, as gorgeous as Sumner was himself, I couldn't exactly expect him to surround himself with ordinary-looking people.

"Yes, Sumner?" She was wearing a dark green designer dress that barely reached her thighs and strappy heels that made her long legs go on forever. Her eyes were slightly glazed as she looked at him. It was an expression I had seen before when dealing with vamp victims and I knew what it meant—she was glamoured within an inch of her life.

"I seem to have had a little accident." Sumner nodded down at the bloody wound in his side, which was already noticeably smaller. "I wonder if you would mind making a small donation?"

"Of course not." She pushed her heavy mass of blonde hair to one side and offered her throat. Sumner leaned forward...and I looked away.

When I looked back, hoping he would be finished, I found he was staring at me with those pale-on-red eyes. "No, Kaitlyn," he murmured. "I want you to watch this."

"What? Why?" I demanded. "Look, I'm not saying anything—I can see you need blood. But that doesn't mean I want to watch you feed off the poor girl."

"But I want you to see." He frowned. "Want you to know that allowing a vampire to feed from you doesn't have to be frightening or messy or painful. It can actually be quite...pleasurable if done correctly."

I snorted. "Sure. You could probably pull out her fingernails one by one and convince her *that* was pleasurable too. I see the look in her eyes—she's under your spell, Sumner. She doesn't even know what she's agreeing to."

"All of my people retain their free will," he insisted. "My glamour simply helps them forget other things—things too painful for them to remember."

I raised an eyebrow. "What, like how they ended up with you in the first place?"

Sumner frowned. "Yvonna's entire family was killed in a car wreck about a year ago. When I found her she was drinking herself to death and giving herself to any man who would have her. Now she's happy – or at least, she doesn't remember enough to be sad anymore." He nodded at the handsome young man who was watching us from the couch. "Paul's fiancée left him for another man who just happened to be his best friend. It was...most traumatic. I stopped him from killing them both with a shotgun."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "So you're just this great emotional healer, huh? A vampire Doctor Phil. And your need for a constant blood supply has nothing to do with it."

Sumner shrugged, his broad shoulders rolling under the tailored jacket. "I never said that."

"So what *are* you saying? That you're a vampire with a heart? You feel their pain?"

Sumner's eyes flashed. "I feel *nothing*, Kaitlyn, and you would do well to remember it." Then he smiled charmingly. "But I *do* seem to attract damaged humans."

"Gee, I wonder why that could be." But his assertions about the beautiful pet humans sprawled on his living room couch *did* make me wonder. Did he go out looking for people with problems? Or did they find him and beg him to make them forget?

"We've gotten off track." Sumner gave me a level look. "I want you to watch."

"I've seen enough. I saw the footage from the security camera down at the station," I pointed out. "It was...disgusting."

"It was meant to be. I had to get your attention." He raised an eyebrow. "But it doesn't have to be like that. I need you to know that. Need you to see."

"Fine." I gave in with a sigh. "I'll watch. And then we really have to get going before..." My words trailed off as Sumner prepared to bite the blonde.

It was sensual. There's no other word to describe it. I'd seen the bloody results of vampire attacks fairly often in my work as an S.E. and I'd even seen a rogue vamp attack a victim when we were trying to subdue him. It was, as Sumner had said, messy and painful. The victim didn't survive the fierce, bestial mauling. Not to mention the blatant attack I'd seen Sumner himself perform on the surveillance tape only hours before. I tried to remind myself of that as I watched but somehow it was hard to keep it in mind.

He stroked the blonde's throat gently, drawing a sigh of surrender from her parted lips. Then, his eyes never leaving mine, he cupped the side of her neck with one hand and drew her forward. She came willingly, even tilting her head to one side to give him easier access. And when Sumner's fangs slid into her she gave a little cry – of ecstasy, not pain, I was certain – and allowed herself to collapse against him.

Sumner took her weight easily – not that there was that much of it – and held her gently as he continued to feed. I didn't know if he was injecting her with some kind of lust drug while he fed or if his particular bite simply had an unusual effect on humans.

For whatever the reason, she was shuddering against him and making helpless little moans of pleasure as he drank.

Against my will I found myself wondering what she felt. What did a vampire's bite—Sumner's bite—do to a girl? Could it possibly feel as good as she seemed to think it did? Would it feel good to let him do that to me? To slide his fangs into my flesh? To penetrate me? I had a sudden mental image of the two of us in bed together, naked as he parted those cruel, sensual lips and pierced my throat...

I pushed the thought away—what was wrong with me? Sumner was a cold-blooded killer—I'd seen it on the surveillance tape myself. Had seen how those razor sharp fangs could rip out a man's throat with no remorse, no compunction. Just a bloody smile and a wink. *That* was what I had to remember, I told myself. That and the fact that killing is much more in a vampire's nature than kissing. I didn't know why Sumner wanted me to see him doing this but then again, I still didn't know why he'd wanted me to see him committing the homicide either. I had to keep that in mind and not let myself get swept away by his vampire charm.

It seemed to go on forever but at last he pulled away, leaving the blonde looking as if she'd just won the orgasm lottery. She turned and tried to kiss him but Sumner pushed her gently away. "Now now, my dear. It would be rude to engage in such activities in front of our guest."

She made a soft little sound of pure longing. "But Sumner, I *need* you."

"You don't need *me* necessarily, little one. Perhaps Paul can help you out." He nodded at the brocade couch where the male model-looking Paul was already unbuckling his belt. He pulled out a cock that was already hard, which made me wonder if watching Sumner bite the blonde had been a turn-on for him. Then I wondered if it had been a turn-on for *me*. There was no doubt it was completely different from the bloody footage I'd seen on the security tape.

I tried not to watch as Yvonna walked over, hiked up the short skirt of her designer dress, and straddled Paul right there on the couch. Grasping his thick shaft, she lowered herself down onto him in a long, slow slide that made them both groan. Then she dug her fingers into his biceps and gave him a smoldering look. "Fuck me, baby," she moaned throatily, rolling her hips in a way that left no doubt of her need. "Fuck me 'til it *hurts*."

Paul answered with actions instead of words. Gripping her hips, he pulled almost all the way out of her and then thrust in again, hard, making them both gasp. I realized I was staring and looked away as they started really going for it. I could feel my cheeks getting hot with a blush but at the same time my nipples were stiff beneath my bra and the lace panties I wore under my conservative blue dress slacks seemed a little too tight and irritating in the crotch.

You like to watch. The words seemed to float into my mind from somewhere else and I turned my head sharply to look at Sumner. He was staring back at me, a little smile playing around one corner of his full mouth.

“Nice, Sumner,” I said tightly. “Verrrry nice. Can we go now?”

“You’re blushing.” He brushed his knuckles lightly over my hot cheek and I jumped, feeling as though I’d been shocked.

“Don’t.”

“Does watching them embarrass you?” He sounded amused. “Does it arouse you?”

“You wish.” I frowned at him. “Look, we need to get out of here before the detective in charge of your case sends some backup and this whole thing turns into a big messy scene. Are you coming or not?”

“As soon as I pack a few things. Would you care to accompany me to my bedroom?” He gave me a charming grin. “Or would you rather stay here and watch the show? You’ll have to forgive Yvonna – my bite tends to have a certain effect.”

“So I see.” I was still trying not to watch the live-action porno that was going on right on the living room couch. Yvonna and Paul didn’t seem to be slowing down at all – in fact, it looked as if they were going to be busy for awhile. Her breasts were out now, the expensive dress pushed down to her waist, and he was sucking her nipples as he thrust into her, long and hard and slow. I looked away quickly, my face flaming again. “Fine,” I told Sumner. “I’ll come with you – but make it quick. And no funny business.”

“Of course not.” He made a little motion over his chest. “Cross my heart and hope to die. Oh wait – I’m already dead.”

“Funny.” I nodded up the winding staircase. “Let’s move it along. If Bleaks is still waiting for us he’s going to need some serious medical attention when we get back to the station.”

Sumner’s eyes – which had gone back to their normal pale shade once he fed – flashed warningly. “He may need more than that later.”

I sighed. “I told you – you can’t just kill people for being jerks. Or wait – I forgot, *you* don’t seem to need a reason to kill anyone at all. You just butcher them for the hell of it.”

“If you’re referring to the human I used to get your attention, I had a good reason for doing what I did to him.” Sumner started moving, but not upstairs where I had assumed the bedrooms would be. Instead, he led me toward a small wooden door set into the side of the gracefully curving wooden staircase. “I sleep below ground for what I am sure are obvious reasons.”

I looked doubtfully down at the dark narrow staircase that was revealed when he opened the small door. “You know, I think I might just stay up here after all.”

“Why, *Kaitlyn*.” Sumner gave me a mocking grin. “Afraid to come with me down into the dark? I thought you had more courage than that.”

“There’s a difference between courage and stupidity,” I pointed out. His taunt stung but I was reluctant to go down that dark stairway alone with him.

He raised an eyebrow at me. "I thought you had protection against my kind. Are you telling me your magic isn't strong enough to keep me off you?"

I crossed my arms over my chest tightly. "I have personal wards on me, yes. As for how strong my magic is, I'd be a fool to tell you that."

"Ah." He nodded. "Your magic is stronger at your own place of residence than in a strange house."

"I *am* in enemy territory here," I pointed out.

He nodded, his face going blank. "I'm sorry you feel that way. What if I promised not to abuse or molest you?"

"Define abuse or molest."

He smiled. "I promise not to harm you or hold you against your will if you come with me."

"Do you promise not to try...anything else?" I swallowed, my throat clicking audibly.

"Do you mean will I promise not to try to seduce you?" His voice dropped and he studied me through half-lidded eyes.

I shifted uncomfortably. "Yeah. That."

"Most certainly not. Seducing you will be my very great pleasure." He gave me a lazy smile that did strange things to my insides and offered me his arm. "Coming?"

Maybe it was stupid but I couldn't pass up his challenge again. After all, I told myself, I had the locket with Fiona's hair in it as well as my own considerable magic. And at least we knew where we stood. If I could hold my own in the heart of his lair, I knew I'd be safe with him at my own house for sure. So I took his arm without a word and let him lead me down the stairs.

His bedroom was an echo of the rooms above. A king-sized monstrosity of a bed, complete with four ornately carved posts and a dark blue and gold silk canopy dominated the room. The other furniture was made of the same dark wood—maybe mahogany—and also carved within an inch of its life. The bed was one of those old-fashioned high ones—the top of the mattress came up to my waist and there was a little set of wooden steps for getting in and out.

"Well?" Sumner asked, pausing in the act of packing some clothes into an oversized D&G duffle bag. "What do you think?"

I snorted. "It looks like a pimp lives down here. One with Louis XVI aspirations."

He made a face. "I allowed Yvonna to pick out the decorations. She has rather...gaudy tastes."

"You can say that again." I looked around, wondering why there were no pictures or personal items anywhere in the room. "I'm surprised you're showing me this, you know. Your daytime resting place."

He raised an eyebrow. "Well you'll shortly be showing me yours, will you not? Isn't that how the game is played? I'll show you mine if you show me yours?"

"I'm not playing doctor with you, Sumner," I said flatly.

He laughed. "What about playing Wiccan and Vampire? Is that more to your taste?"

I felt the corner of my mouth twitch despite myself. It was weird about Sumner—he could be a cold-hearted killer one minute and the bad boy from school you always wished you had a chance to reform the next. I had to remind myself that the killer was his real face—not the charming but harmless black sheep from the wrong side of the tracks. "Very funny," I said sternly. "Finish getting your stuff and let's go."

"In a moment. I have to change." Without any further warning, he began to strip.

I turned away quickly but not before I saw a flash of pale, perfect skin corded with muscle. Oh yeah, he put male model Paul from upstairs and every guy I'd ever dated to shame. I waited until the rustling had stopped and turned back to see him standing there wearing nothing but tight, faded jeans that molded perfectly to his muscular thighs. His head was tilted down and he was examining his wounded side with a small frown on his face.

Since he wasn't looking at me, I felt free to stare. His chest was broad with a small patch of curly black hair right between the flat copper disks of his nipples. Except for the rapidly healing wound his skin was flawless and smooth. I wondered if it still hurt him. It looked a lot better than it had earlier but still quite painful. At least it wasn't bleeding.

I don't mind *some* blood but a lot of it all at once makes me feel queasy. It's a weakness I try hard not to show, especially considering my job as a Supernatural Enforcer. An S.E. who pukes or faints at the sight of blood isn't a whole lot of good to anyone.

Sumner looked up and saw me watching him but instead of making a smart remark or a sexual come-on like I'd expected, he pulled a plain black T-shirt over his head and grabbed the D&G bag. Then he smiled at me. "I'm ready."

Well that made one of us.

Chapter Four

I was surprised that Bleaks had actually waited in the car for us instead of driving off the minute we went in the house. It might have had something to do with his broken wrist—his hand flopped limply at the end of his arm and he groaned in pain when he tried to move it.

“There’s no way he can drive like that,” I said flatly, watching the way he was cradling his arm to his chest. “We’ll have to call in back-up after all.”

Sumner frowned. “That will take too much time. I went to a lot of trouble to have you all to myself, I don’t intend to waste it dealing with the local law enforcement.”

His words sent a chill down my back. Even though I’d already established that this was all about me, hearing him say it out loud still made me feel vaguely sick. “Well I can’t be seen driving a police cruiser and you *certainly* can’t,” I pointed out. “So I’m afraid back-up is our only option.”

“Not true.” Walking over to the driver’s side of the car, he leaned down and looked Bleaks directly in the eyes. “Look at me.”

Bleaks looked up, his eyes blurry with pain. “Whadaya want?”

Sumner’s eyes gleamed in the pale radiance cast by the streetlight overhead and it looked to me as though his pupils expanded. “Your arm feels fine.”

“My...arm?” Bleaks looked down at his unhurt arm uncertainly.

Sumner made a noise of disgust at the back of his throat. “You really are exceptionally stupid, aren’t you? Not that arm. *This* arm.” He tapped the wounded wrist with one forefinger. “It feels perfectly fine. You can drive and you *will* drive us back to the police station.”

Bleaks nodded slowly. “Sure, I feel fine. I’ll drive us back now.”

Sumner clapped him on the shoulder. “Good man. Let’s go.”

“Wait.” I stepped in front of him before he could get into the car. I nodded at Bleaks. “This isn’t ethical. What if he gets permanent damage from driving with it like that?”

Sumner’s eyes were cold. “Well now, wouldn’t that be a shame?”

“Sumner—”

“I can show you permanent damage, Kaitlyn.” The whites of his eyes were suddenly blood-red again. “I can show you all about it.”

I took a deep breath and clenched my jaw. It took everything I had to stand my ground and not step away but somehow I did it. Running from a vampire never

works—they're too damn fast. All you can do is face up to them and try not to let the fear show.

Sumner stared at me with those pale-on-red eyes for a long moment and then nodded as though I'd passed some kind of a test. "Let's go now. My side still burns like fire. This idiot is lucky I'm letting him live at all."

I blew out a breath. "All right then. But there's one more thing before I can take you into the station."

"And what is that?" His voice betrayed no hint of impatience but the whites of his eyes were still red which wasn't a good sign. Still, in for a penny...

"These." I reached behind me and unhooked the specially made pair of silver alloy handcuffs I'd gotten when I first got my S.E. badge. The metal was etched all over with runes of binding and they had been spelled by my Nana as an extra precaution. They'd never failed me yet—once I got them on. But I had to wonder if they were strong enough to contain Sumner. If he'd let me put them on him in the first place, that was.

At first he looked annoyed but then he smiled. "Kaitlyn, sweetheart, I had no idea you were so kinky."

I lifted my chin, deciding to play along. "There's a lot you don't know about me. Hold out your wrists."

"Very well." He held out his arms grudgingly. "I want you to know, though, that only the prospect of spending extensive quality time alone with you is worth this inconvenience."

"You're going to be even more inconvenienced by a death sentence," I pointed out, opening the back seat of the car for him.

"Oh, I don't think it will come to that." A secretive smile played around the corners of his full mouth.

"I think it will. I don't see how you can avoid it after what you did."

"We'll see." Sumner settled into the back seat of the cruiser, still smiling.

* * * * *

He kept on smiling right through his booking, mug shot, and fingerprinting too. Travers, who had come out from behind her pile of paperwork long enough to watch, shook her head. "He's a happy son of a bitch, isn't he?"

"You have no idea," I murmured under my breath. We were standing behind the one-way glass watching the booking process but vampire senses are incredibly keen. For all I knew, Sumner was hearing every word we said.

"Good-looking too," she remarked. "Any explanation on why he did what he did?"

I sighed. "He says he had a good reason for his actions but what it seems to boil down to is that he wanted to get to me. To get my attention." I looked down at my

hands. "I'm sorry, Travers—I shouldn't have blown him off. If I'd agreed to meet with him earlier that victim he killed would still be alive."

"Hey." She grabbed my shoulder and gave me a little shake. "None of that, Kaitlyn. Nobody has the right to hold you hostage—emotionally or physically. It's your right to say no."

"All right already." I shrugged off her hand. "You don't have to give me the battered woman speech. I can take care of myself."

"And that's the only person you *do* have to take care of." She looked me in the eye. "You can't let that bastard get under your skin or you're going to be a basket case by the end of the week. Stay strong, all right?"

"Of course. I'll be fine." I lifted my chin. "This isn't the first time I've had a vamp houseguest, you know. It pretty much goes with the territory."

"Yeah, I know. But just because you let him into your house doesn't mean you have to let him into your head. All I'm saying is keep your guard up. I've seen his kind before—human or vampire, it doesn't matter. He's a master manipulator." She jerked her head at Sumner who winked and blew her a kiss, proving that he could hear and see us just fine—no surprise there.

I looked at her curiously. "If I didn't know you walked on the other side of the fence I'd think you spoke from experience."

"I do. I was married once, you know. He was my high school sweetheart and the biggest asshole to ever walk the planet." She frowned, still staring through the glass at Sumner who stared right back. "I should thank him, though. I think I would have repressed who I really was forever if he hadn't been such a monumental douche."

I laughed. "Well I'm not marrying Sumner—I'm just keeping him in the safe room at my house until the vamp magistrate can come. *Please* tell me it won't take more than a week."

She shrugged. "Wish I could say for sure but you know how these things go. If this is too much for you, though, just tell me. I can always try to get Sumner farmed out to a S.E. in Miami."

"No," I said stubbornly. "I can handle it. I can handle *him*."

She rounded on me, frowning. "But you still don't know what he wants with you. He killed a man *just to get your attention*, Kaitlyn. That's not exactly small potatoes."

"I can handle it," I repeated. "Whatever it is, I can handle it so don't worry about me."

Travers shrugged and blew out a breath. "Okay, fine. I hope you're right, though. The judge has ruled that he's to be confined to your quarters until his trial so you're pretty much stuck with him once you sign the papers and take him home. It's not like adopting a puppy from the pound—you can't bring him back if he piddles on the carpet."

The idea of Sumner taking a leak on my living room rug would have been funny if the vampire hadn't chosen just that moment to wink at me. I felt my stomach do a flip. This was exactly what he wanted for some reason. To come home with me. To be alone with me. But why? "I'll be fine," I repeated mechanically, hoping I was right. "Just fine, honestly, Travers."

She sighed. "All right, moving on. Do I even want to know what's wrong with Bleaks' wrist? He says it feels fine but it's obviously broken."

I felt my cheeks get hot. "Uh, yeah. He got a little...handsy with me. Sumner punished him for it."

"He *what*?" She looked really upset. "That little asshole – what did he do to you?"

"Just grabbed my arm. He had this idea that he was the arresting officer and I was back-up." I snorted. "Wanted me to wait in the car while he took down the big, bad vamp."

Travers rubbed her forehead and groaned. "That *idiot*."

"Yeah, pretty much. He's lucky Sumner didn't kill him. Bleaks shot him, you know – made a huge hole in his side."

"*What*?" She shook her head. "My God, this just gets better and better."

I shrugged. "Yeah, well. It could have turned nasty but it didn't. I think with a younger vamp it would've because he wouldn't have been able to control himself. Sumner was in a lot of pain – it looked like it to me, anyway." I remembered the gaping wound the bullet had made and shook my head.

"And he *didn't* rip Bleaks' head off? He's both the luckiest and the stupidest son of a bitch in the whole damn department."

"Well, be that as it may, you'd better send him to the ER to have the wrist looked at eventually. Sumner made him think it was fine so he could drive us in to the station but I don't know how long the glamour will last. If you want to fill out an incident report, I'd do it now before it wears off."

"Yeah, I suppose I'd better." She shook her head in disgust. "Stupid son of a bitch. He doesn't deserve worker's comp for something like this. What he deserves is to lose his job. He could have gotten you and himself both killed, playing cowboy like that."

"I suppose," I said, but I wasn't looking at her. Sumner was staring at me, his eyes fixed on mine as he listened to every word we said. "Look," I told her. "I think they're done with him. I'd better go."

"Fine, I'll go with you and give him the standard speech."

"You might as well. For what it's worth."

She studied him through the glass. "From the looks of him, not a whole hell of a lot. Still, we have to follow protocol."

We walked out into the main booking area to where Sumner was standing, flanked on either side by armed guards with his hands still cuffed in front of him. He smiled politely at Travers as we came up.

“Detective. So nice of you to come see Kaitlyn and me off.”

Travers glared at him. “You’re not going on a honeymoon, Sumner. You’re being held for murder. And I personally intend to see that you get staked for what you did to that poor helpless man.”

Sumner’s grin widened. “I don’t think so. And before you start feeling too sorry for that ‘poor helpless man’ why don’t you check out his van? I left it down on Fourth and Vine in the corner lot. You’ll want to take a very close look at it, I think. Then have a little talk with your colleagues in Dade County.”

Travers frowned. “What are you talking about?”

Sumner winked at her. “Just do it.”

“If you think this will get out of protective custody early –”

“Oh, I know it won’t or I wouldn’t bother telling you until later.” Stepping forward, he gave me a playful nudge with his elbow. “Kaitlyn and I are stuck together until the magistrate comes down to hear my case.”

I frowned at him and stepped away. “What game are you playing, Sumner?”

“That’s for me to know and you to not find out until I’m good and ready, sweetheart.”

Travers looked pissed. “Now listen here, Sumner –”

“Don’t worry, Detective. I’ll be on my very best behavior while I’m a guest at Kaitlyn’s house, I promise. So there’s really nothing more to say, is there?” He looked at me. “Shall we go?”

“If you touch her –” Traver’s began.

“I swear I won’t. Unless she *wants* to be touched.” Sumner spoke to her but looked at me, giving me a lazy, half-lidded smile that made me feel like a bunch of butterflies had taken off in my stomach. Of course, I tried not to show it.

“It will be a cold day in hell before I ask you to touch me, Sumner.”

He arched an eyebrow at me. “Then I hope you brought your mittens and scarf, Kaitlyn. Now, please, it’s getting toward dawn and I’m tired and wounded, as I know you told Detective Travers. Can we please get home?”

I didn’t like the way he said it—as though my home was his home by default. But there was nothing else I could do. It was my job to take him home with me and be certain he didn’t escape until his trial date. “Fine.” I jerked my head at him. “Come on.”

“Coming.” He smiled and followed me obediently. But at the last instant he turned his head to look at Travers who was still glaring at him. “Oh, Detective?”

“Yes?” she growled, obviously still pissed.

“You’re welcome.” Sumner winked at her and left her fuming as we went out to my car.

Chapter Five

"This is it," I said, pulling up in front of my single-story bungalow that was located on the decidedly un-ritzy side of town. There are a lot of million-dollar neighborhoods in Sarasota but mine isn't one of them. We got out—I held the door for Sumner since he was still cuffed—and walked up to the wraparound porch.

The porch is, in my opinion, the house's best feature. Inside it's charming but a little too old fashioned to be practical. For example, since it was built in the nineteen forties, it has three bedrooms but only one bathroom. I guess nobody spent more than fifteen minutes plucking their eyebrows or taking a shower back then. It doesn't usually bother me since I live alone but it's a pain when I have guests. Of course, vampires don't have to use the facilities the way humans do but I have yet to meet one that isn't a hot water hog. They love warm baths for some reason.

I unlocked the front door and stepped over the threshold before turning to face Sumner. He was waiting politely, an expectant look on his face. Vampires have to be invited in or they can't enter a private residence.

I pointed at him. "I want you to know something. I don't know why you wanted to be here so badly but now that you are, you're here on my terms. This is *my* house and you will respect that. Also the minute—the *minute*—the magistrate comes to town you are gone and your invitation is revoked. Do I make myself perfectly clear?"

"Absolutely." Sumner looked at me gravely. "Your house. Your rules."

"Good." I nodded at him and said formally, "Holden Sumner, you may come in."

He grinned as he stepped over the threshold. "Ooo, both names. As a child you always know you're in trouble when your mother uses both names."

It seemed strange to think of Sumner as a child or ever having a mother but I supposed he must have once upon a time. At the same time I couldn't suppress a little smile because what he said was so true. "You're right," I said grudgingly. "When I was a kid and my nana called me 'Kaitlyn Elizabeth Richards,' I knew I was in for it."

"Elizabeth? That's a lovely middle name." He was looking around my house as though absorbing every detail. Not that there was much to absorb, compared to his palatial mansion.

"Do you have one? A middle name?" I didn't know why I asked him—somehow the question just slipped out.

He looked at me briefly and shook his head. "If I do, I've forgotten it long since. It's been centuries since anyone called me anything but Sumner."

"Oh." I felt awkward and decided we'd had enough chit-chat. Time to get him settled down for the night so I could plow through some of the S.E. paperwork that

having a vamp on the premises entailed. "This way." I nodded down the long narrow hallway that led off of the living room. "I'll show you to your bedroom."

"I'd rather you showed me to yours." He grinned charmingly.

"Never gonna happen. Come on, unless you'd prefer to sleep on the couch."

He eyed my lumpy plaid couch that had one of Nana's wild, multicolored afghans draped over the back. The couch was older than I was and had one of the very first fold-out beds built into it. The thing was solid iron, which made it incredibly heavy. Too heavy to get out the front door, in fact, so I'd learned to live with it. "No, I don't think so," he murmured.

"All right then. This way." I preceded him down the hall, past my bedroom and the bathroom to the warded room I had specially prepared for vampires. The windows were bricked up to ensure that it was completely light tight but I had left the window treatments to make the small space feel less claustrophobic. Aside from the runes written in silver script along all the borders of the pale blue walls, it was decorated simply. There was a queen-sized bed, a dresser with an attached oval mirror and a tall chest of drawers. The bed had a blue floral-print bedspread I'd gotten on sale at Target. Some of my "guests" weren't terribly neat so I found it didn't pay to spend a lot on décor.

"Nice," Sumner said neutrally, looking around. "Very nice."

I smirked. "Not quite as opulent as what you're used to but maybe it'll do you good to see how the other half lives." I walked across the room and opened the door to the bathroom. "Both my room and this room connect to the bathroom. And in case you're getting any funny ideas, don't. The warding only extends to the bathroom—you won't be able to go anywhere else in the house without my say so."

"What? But there are no books in here." He looked around the room, frowning. "Or even a television. I'll be bored stiff."

I shrugged. "Those are the breaks. If you behave I'll let you have the run of the house later on and you can watch TV until your brain rots. The front door is warded too—once you come in, you're not going out until I let you out."

He grinned. "As if I'd want to get away from you."

I raised an eyebrow. "Flattery will get you nowhere. For the first night you're stuck in the box and I don't want to hear anything about it."

Sumner frowned. "You're turning out to be a very cranky landlady."

"You're not the first vampire to stay with me and you won't be the last. I'm just doing what I've learned works."

"Very well. Is that it for the tour?"

"Not quite." I pointed into the bathroom. "Extra towels are in the linen closet and put them in the hamper when you're done. You may be staying here but that does *not* make me your maid. Clean up after yourself and we'll get along a lot better."

Sumner raised an eyebrow. "Sounds like you've had some trouble in the past."

I frowned at him. "As a matter of fact I have. Most especially with older male vampires—the ones who were turned before women's lib. They seem to think female equals inferior and expect me to wait on them hand and foot. I can tell you right now, that's not going to happen."

"I would never expect it to. Well, thank you for the tour. And now that I've seen my somewhat limited area, maybe you can unlock these." He held out his hands, which were still cuffed in front of him.

"Fine, hold still and let me concentrate. These are easier to put on than they are to take off."

He did as I asked, watching me closely. Closing my eyes, I laid my fingertips over the thin circlets of etched silver. I was careful not to touch his skin. I felt within myself for the essence of the cuffs—the purity of the silver that made them special. I could see it shimmering like a ring of bright water in my mind. Then I took a deep breath.

"That which was whole is now broken," I murmured. "That which was strong is made weak. That which binds may be loosened until evil again I must seek." I let the power flow through me and into the cuffs as I spoke the final words of the incantation. "Be ye parted until the next time I have need of thee."

The cuffs fell off Sumner's arms and into my hands. I put them back together and looked up to see him rubbing his wrists with a look of wonder in his pale eyes.

"Your power..." He shook his head. "You're very strong."

I smiled at him sweetly. "Yet another reason to behave, right?"

"No, seriously, Kaitlyn. I've only ever felt power like that once before and that was over a hundred years ago. You're exceptional for your kind."

"Which ought to make you want to steer clear of me," I pointed out. "Wiccans and vamps are natural enemies, you know."

"No, we're both powerful supernatural beings who haven't learned how to play nicely together." He smiled. "We can change that, you and I."

"Not tonight we can't. Your visit to my little slice of paradise has generated a mound of paperwork and I have to get through it before I get paid."

He laughed, a low rich sound that echoed strangely in my tiled bathroom. "You should write a book. *Hosting Vampires for Fun and Profit*."

"More like just profit," I said, turning to go.

"Kaitlyn..." He put a hand on my shoulder and I shrugged it off angrily and turned back to face him.

"Rule number one—no touching."

"Is that really how you want to live? Never being touched?" he asked quietly.

"Never by you, anyway." I glared at him.

"Or anyone else, I'd guess," he murmured, studying me. "Not for a long time, anyway. How long has it been, Kaitlyn?"

I thought of my last disastrous relationship – the one that had ended so badly when I showed him my real power and let him know how I fed it. All I had done was light a few candles with my mind and but he couldn't handle it. And if he couldn't handle that... I shook my head. "None of your goddamn business."

"I need to talk to you," Sumner said. "I'm not just here to seduce you, although I must admit that the more I get to know you, the more I want you."

"Gee, thanks," I said sarcastically. "And the more I get to know you, the more obvious it is what an asshole you are."

His eyes flashed. "In my day it was considered very rude to insult a guest you had invited into your home."

"In *my* day you didn't murder someone to get an invitation," I snapped back. Then I sighed and raked a hand through my hair. "Look, I get that you want to talk, Sumner, but it's been a very, *very* long day for me and I'm extremely tired. I also have a mound of paperwork to wade through before I go to sleep so this isn't the best time."

He nodded. "I can see that it isn't. Very well, I'll leave you alone for now. But we must talk soon."

"If you say so." I turned to go again.

"I'll just take a bath since there's nothing else to do."

"You do that." I nodded at the big old-fashioned claw-foot tub that had come with the house. Like the wrap around porch, it was another one of those charming features that had sold me on the place even though it wasn't very practical and was hell to clean. "There's bubble bath and bath salts under the sink. Have fun. Just try to leave a little hot water so I can take a shower in the morning."

I knew from experience that vampires will get in the tub and literally stay in there all night long. Like I said, they love hot baths. I think it's because they're naturally cold blooded, like reptiles, and they need some outside source like hot water or fresh blood to warm them up. Speaking of fresh blood...

"Oh." I turned back to Sumner one more time. He was already fiddling with the taps.

"Yes?" he said, looking at me politely.

"I don't have any artificial blood substitute in the house right now but I can pick some up on the way home from work tomorrow. Can you wait that long since you just, uh, fed tonight?" I could feel my face getting warm as I remembered the way he had fed – the way Yvonna had moaned and moved against him, giving herself to his bite so completely... Quickly I slapped the thought away.

Sumner made a face. "I don't drink artificial – only fresh."

I put a hand on my hip. "That's going to be a problem since I'm not about to go out and find someone who's willing to let you bite them."

"You could offer yourself." His eyes were half lidded as he spoke. "I could make the experience most enjoyable for you."

I poked a finger at him. "Let's get one thing straight here and now, Sumner. I will never, and I mean *never* under any circumstances, let you bite me."

He looked at me. "That's a very great pity. I would love to taste you."

I got the feeling he wasn't just talking about my blood and my cheeks got hot again. I turned away so he couldn't see me blush. "I'm leaving. Have a nice bath."

"Thank you for your hospitality," he murmured. But I was already out of the bathroom and shut up in my own bedroom with a pile of paperwork and a rapidly beating heart. Damn it, I'd had plenty of vamps in the house before—it was part of my job. Why did Sumner affect me so much? Because I *let* him affect me, I told myself sternly. Time to get my mind off the sinfully sexy vampire who was probably completely naked on the other side of my bathroom door and get down to business.

Just as I was getting my mound of paperwork together—you'd think they could do it all on the computer by now but no, that would be too easy—the phone rang. I was inclined just to let it ring but then I saw *Nana* flash across the screen. Hmm, it was awfully late for her to be calling. Worried that something was wrong, I snatched up the phone.

"Hi, Nana," I said. "How are you? Is everything okay?"

"Katy-girl. I was just going to ask you the same thing." Despite her age her voice was still strong. As always, I felt better just hearing it.

"I'm fine, Nana. Why do you ask?"

She paused for a moment and I had the feeling she was trying to pick her words carefully. "I was just worried. I had a bad feeling—like you might be in danger. Are you, Katy? You'd tell me if you were, wouldn't you?"

Damn. I tried not to let Nana know when I had a vamp in the house because it worried her so much but I couldn't just outright lie to her. "I have...a house guest," I said reluctantly. "But he's locked in the safe room and everything's fine, I swear."

"I wish you wouldn't do that—take them into your house like that. You know how dangerous vampires can be, child." Her voice was tinged with disapproval and fear for me.

I sighed. "Yes, Nana, I know. You taught me, remember? But you also helped me spell the room and set the wards in place. We did such a good job not even Sumner can get out until I say so."

"Sumner? *Holden Sumner*?" Her voice went up a notch. "Katy-child, please tell me he's not in your house."

Damn and double damn. Me and my stupid mouth. "Yes, he's my guest, Nana. But like I said, I'm being safe. Everything is fine."

"I don't like that. Don't like it a bit. I still remember when he came in my shop. The way he looked at you—"

"He can look all he wants, that doesn't mean he gets to do anything else," I reassured her.

"You see that he doesn't. You need to keep him at an arm's length, Katy. He's like a poisonous snake that one—you never know when he's going to bite."

"Nana, I promise you, he is *never* going to get a chance to bite me." I raised my voice a little for Sumner's benefit though I knew it wasn't necessary. He could probably hear both sides of my conversation with perfect clarity.

"You see that he doesn't." She sighed fretfully. "I'm not easy with this, Katy. Not easy at all. The omens have been bad lately—dark portents the likes of which I've never seen in my whole long life. Blood on the moon, black dogs barking at midnight. I tell you, it scares me. Something bad is coming. Terrible bad."

I frowned. Other people might dismiss Nana's fears as the ramblings of an old woman but I had learned long ago that her instincts were incredibly sharp. Despite her advanced age she was still one of the strongest supernatural talents in the state. So if she said trouble was brewing, it almost certainly was.

"I'm sorry you're worried," I told her. "But please don't be—not about me, anyway. I've got my locket." I patted the locket with my ancestor Fiona's hair in it as I spoke. "So I'm fine. This other stuff though—the omens you're seeing—I'll be in the shop early tomorrow and we can talk about it then. Okay?"

"All right then. I know it's late so I'll let you go."

"Love you, Nana."

"Love you too, Katy-child. And be on your toes around that Sumner fellow. Whatever you do, don't let down your guard."

"I won't. Of course I won't."

We exchanged "I love yous" again and she finally hung up. I sat on the bed for a moment, thinking about what she'd said. Something bad was coming? Who was to say it wasn't already here and about to take a bath in my tub? Still, I didn't think Sumner was the bad thing Nana was talking about. Despite her unease about him being in my house, I wasn't afraid of him. Well, not terrified, anyway. It's healthy to have at least a little fear of vampires—it's called self preservation. But I didn't really think Sumner would hurt me. At any rate, I wasn't going to give him the chance to try.

I changed into my nightclothes—an old black nightie with tattered lace around the neck I'd had for ages—and tried to concentrate on the paperwork I was doing. But I could hear the water rushing into the tub and smell the puffs of scented steam that crept under the door. Then there was the soft sound of water slapping against the sides as Sumner climbed in. He made a low sort of hiss as though maybe he'd made the water too hot but I didn't hear him running any cold to compensate so he must have liked it like that. I knew I did—just this side of scalding was my preferred temperature for a bath, especially right now when we were finally getting some cooler weather. Sarasota is too far south to get much of a winter but we do have a little cold snap between January and March that I look forward to.

Then, as though the idea of Sumner completely naked in a tub full of warm water wasn't distracting enough, I heard a low, tuneful humming drifting under the bathroom

door. I couldn't tell what the song was—something slow and soft that sounded like it was from another century. Some kind of folk song, maybe? Some lullaby his long-dead mother had used to sing to him when he was a child?

The song changed after awhile, becoming less mournful and more sensual. Deep and tempting, Sumner's voice seemed to get into my head and refuse to let me concentrate on anything but him. As the soft humming continued, I kept picturing him with his head thrown back against the side of the tub, his black hair wet from the bath and pushed back from his high forehead...

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His lashes are dark crescents on his pale cheeks and the long, muscular expanse of his body is barely concealed by the opaque water. He lifts a hand, his fingers long and sensual, and strokes it over his chest, enjoying the feel of his own skin. It dips beneath the water and he touches his cock, sliding around the hard shaft and stroking upward.

As he touches himself he pictures me, pictures my hand on him, my mouth. He sees me touching him, tasting him and then he sees me lying on the bed completely naked, open and waiting for him.

His hands, those beautiful are hands all over me. "Can I touch you like this?" Fingers sliding down my trembling abdomen, cupping me carefully. "Is this all right?"

"Yes. God, yes. Feels so good..."

"I like to make you feel good." He's spreading me open. I'm so wet for him, so hot. Those cool fingers slip inside me as his thumb circles my clit.

"Sumner!" So close, already I'm so close and he's barely started. How can he do this to me? It feels so incredible—I never want him to stop. "Sumner, please!"

"Please what?" He presses up into me, long fingers thrusting gently but insistently inside me. Bringing me closer, pushing me over.

"Please, I think...I'm so close."

"Good." His pale eyes are piercing...penetrating. "I want to watch you come. Want to hear those soft, helpless little sounds you make when you're all alone touching yourself and you think no one is listening. God, it makes me hard."

His hot words drive me almost as much as his fingers. I love the way he looks at me—like I'm the only woman in the world. Like he can't bear to live without me. Because I feel the same way about him.

He leans forward and puts his lips to my ear. "I want to be inside you so badly. Want to feel all this soft, warm, wetness surrounding me while I make you mine. While I fuck you."

"I want...want that too," I gasp.

"Soon," he whispers. "Soon, sweetheart. You're little pussy is so hot and wet—I love it."

I arch my back and moan. "God, when you talk like that..."

One corner of his full mouth twitches up in a sensual smile. "You like that, do you? Like it when I talk dirty to you?"

"I do," I admit, half ashamed and a whole lot aroused.

"Good." He kisses me softly, looking into my eyes as he continues to touch me. "I like a girl with a dirty mind. You know what else I want to do to you, Kaitlyn?"

I shake my head. "N-no," I stutter.

He kisses me again. "I want to spread you open and taste you. Here." His thumb slips over my aching clit while his fingers work their magic inside me.

I bite my lip uncertainly. "I don't...don't like to do that. Don't like to let anyone do that to me," I whisper.

"You will." He stares at me, those pale eyes half lidded with desire. "You'll spread for me and let me taste you."

"I..." I shake my head but he nods.

"Oh yes, you will." His eyes are burning, pale fire filled with lust. "I can't wait to be between your thighs, Kaitlyn. I want to go down on you and lap your pretty little cunt until I have your honey all over my face. I want you pulling my hair and begging for more, completely out of control while I tonguefuck you."

God, I love that soft, deep voice in my ear telling me such dirty things! Suddenly I can't hold back anymore. My back arches as the pleasure peaks, rolls over me like a tidal wave. Sumner keeps touching me, riding out my orgasm, the expression on his face hungry, intense, patient...

Chapter Six

I sat up with a gasp. Had I fallen asleep somehow? No, it was the humming, I realized suddenly. Sumner's humming. He'd used it to put me in some kind of a trance. Then he'd invaded my mind and sent me a dirty little daydream. But how?

I didn't know but I was going to find out.

Leaping off the bed, I stalked to the bathroom and slapped open the door. Inside, Sumner was lying back in the tub exactly as I had imagined him. Or exactly as he had been in the daydream he'd sent me.

He opened his eyes and looked up at me languidly as I strode into the room. "A very rude interruption, Kaitlyn. Do you make it a habit to burst in on all your guests while they bathe?"

"Do you make it a habit to invade people's heads and send them dirty fantasies?" I demanded.

He smiled and arched one perfect inky-black eyebrow at me. "How intriguing. You've been lying in bed fantasizing about me?"

"I never said that." I felt my cheeks starting to get hot.

"You most certainly did." One corner of his full mouth twitched up in a mocking grin. "And you're *blushing*. Tell me, Kaitlyn, what were you imagining?"

"I... It wasn't what I was imagining – it was what *you* were sending me," I insisted.

Sumner shook his head. "I admit to having some...shall we say, rather lascivious thoughts about you as I was lying here. But I didn't deliberately send any of them to you."

"You're lying."

"I'm not." He sat up in the bath and I was glad that the water was opaque and covered him at least to the waist. "I know – describe your fantasy to me and I'll tell you if it was the same as mine."

"No." I crossed my arms over my chest. "Absolutely not."

"Well then, it works both ways. What about if I tell you what *I* was fantasizing about and you can tell me if it matches what you were thinking."

"It's bound to match because you sent it to me," I pointed out.

"If I did, it was completely unintentional." He smiled at me. "Let's see now... I was lying here thinking about how soft your skin looks and how much I wanted to touch it." His eyes flicked over my body and I felt suddenly naked in the tattered lace nightie I was wearing.

"This really isn't necessary," I said tightly.

“Oh, I think it is.” He shifted in the tub, the water lapping gently against his skin. “I was imagining touching you all over, sliding my hand down between your thighs to see how hot and wet you were,” he murmured.

“Sumner,” I said warningly but he only smiled and looked me directly in the eyes as he continued.

“I was whispering in your ear. Telling you all the things I wanted to do to you while I touched you. How I wanted to go down on you. Taste you...”

“I...” My breath caught in my throat.

“That’s it, isn’t it?” He gave me a lazy grin. “That’s what you saw.”

“Because you *sent* it to me,” I protested. “I never would have thought of something like *that* on my own.”

“Oh no? What a pity you have so little imagination.”

I put my hands on my hips. “I want to know how you sent it to me. There should be no way our minds are linked. I haven’t given you blood or done anything...anything else to form a bond between us.” My heart stuttered in my chest as I thought of the other way to bond. But there was no way I was going to let myself dwell on that, not with Sumner lounging naked in my bathtub.

He shrugged languidly and I couldn’t help noticing how broad his shoulders were. Little beads of water dotted his perfect skin and rolled down the flat muscular planes of his chest and abdomen with the lazy movement. “I honestly don’t know,” he said, sounding not at all concerned. “You’re right—we shouldn’t have any kind of a connection.”

“Then how—”

“I told you, I don’t know. But I *am* glad you’re here.” He shifted in the water. “In fact, I was about to call you and ask for help before you came barging in all full of righteous wrath and indignation.”

I crossed my arms over my chest again. “If you think I’m going to play geisha and scrub your back—”

“No, no. Nothing like that.” He smiled. “That’s a fantasy for another time, perhaps. But my need is completely different.”

“What *need*?” I narrowed my eyes at him.

Sumner frowned. “Do you do healing magic?”

“Of course I do, it’s one of the first things I was taught.”

Nana had taught me to practice on mice and birds, any small animal that I found that had been hurt in some way. I could still remember how proud she was when I healed my pet cat Ninja after he’d gotten into a fight with a Doberman. He’d been bleeding from a half-dozen deep bites and his poor little ear had been torn clean off. I hadn’t been able to reattach it or grow him a new one—my magic doesn’t work like that. But I’d taken away the pain and sealed his wounds to stop the bleeding—it was

one of the happiest moments of my life when I realized he would live and I had helped make it happen.

But healing a pet cat is a far cry from healing a three-hundred-year-old vampire.

"Why do you want to know?" I asked Sumner.

"Because of this." He started to stand up in the tub and I turned away at once. "What's the matter, Kaitlyn? Afraid you might see something you like?" There was mocking laughter in his voice that made me want to slap him. *Or touch him.* I pushed the thought away.

"There's nothing you have that I want, Sumner," I said, looking resolutely away.

"Fine. If you're going to be such a prude, please hand me a towel."

I reached for the one hanging on the rack in front of me and tossed it his way. Then I gave him a moment to get covered before turning my head to look at him again. "All right, now what is it?"

"This." He had stepped out of the tub with the dark purple towel I'd given him wrapped around his lean hips. He turned to the side and pointed at the place where Bleaks had shot him.

"That doesn't look good." I frowned. In fact, it looked a whole lot worse than it had earlier at his house. The wound wasn't gaping anymore—it had skinned over nicely. But the new skin that covered his side looked puffy and red, almost infected. I couldn't help thinking what a shame it was—a single ugly flaw in all that gorgeous physical perfection.

"I'm glad you find my *perfection* so compelling," Sumner said dryly. "But this really hurts so I'd rather concentrate on how to heal it."

"There you go again." I pointed at him. "Picking thoughts out of my brain."

"What?"

"I never *said* anything about your body being, uh, perfect." I coughed to hide my embarrassment. "I only *thought* it. But you answered me as though I said it out loud."

Sumner looked thoughtful. "You're right, I did. Hmm, I suppose your thought came to me so naturally I didn't even notice you hadn't spoken."

"And I've been catching thoughts from you too," I said, remembering the way I'd heard him murmur *you like to watch* while Yvonna and Paul went at it like bunnies on the red brocade couch. I narrowed my eyes at him. "You *really* don't know how this is happening?"

"No, I swear it." Sumner put a hand over his heart.

"Were you telepathic before you were turned?" I asked. A telepathic vampire was supposed to be impossible but maybe—

He shook his head and looked suddenly grave. "No, I had no paranormal talents. Those belonged to my wife."

So he'd been married too? Somehow it was even harder to imagine Sumner as a happy family man than it was to imagine him as a child. "What happened to her?" I asked. "Did she become..."

"A vampire too? No. She died." He looked away but not before I caught a flash of pain in those pale eyes.

"I'm sorry," I said softly.

Sumner frowned. "It was a long time ago. So long I can hardly even remember it." He sighed and shook his head, like a man shaking away a bad memory. Or maybe just a painful one. "If we can forget my past for a minute I'd really like to concentrate on this." He nodded at his side again.

I took a step forward, examining him more closely without touching him. Up close he smelled like warm skin and soap with just a hint of male musk underneath. "I don't understand why it isn't healed yet. It's almost like you started to heal and then got an infection somehow."

"That would probably be the particles of silver that were forced under my skin when the bullet hit me."

"Particles of silver?" I looked up at him, frowning. "Bleaks didn't have silver bullets. I'm sure of it."

"Ah...no. The silver particles didn't come from the bullet. They came from the threads my jacket was made of."

I thought of the pearlescent dove-gray suit jacket he'd been wearing and frowned. "You mean you, a vampire, were wearing a suit with *silver* in it?" I asked incredulously. "Isn't that kind of like Superman wearing a kryptonite cape?"

"Not exactly." Sumner looked slightly embarrassed. "As long as the fabric doesn't actually touch my skin it has no effect on me."

"Still..." I shook my head.

Sumner smiled appealingly. "I know it's silly but I liked the look of it."

"You mean you liked the way you looked *in* it," I accused.

He nodded. "Yes. I knew you were coming and I wanted to look my best. Is that so wrong?"

"It is when something like this is the end result." I didn't know how I felt about him dressing up for me so I concentrated on studying his side.

"If I had fresh blood, I could heal it myself."

"You've had fresh blood," I pointed out. "I saw you take it from tall, blonde and bubble-headed myself."

"Now, now." Sumner shook a finger at me. "It's not nice to speak so of Yvonne. She can't help her shortcomings."

I sighed. "Well I suppose from your point of view, she more than makes up for what she lacks in the brains department with her perfect figure."

He raised an eyebrow at me. "Jealous, Kaitlyn?"

I lifted my chin. "Of course not. Real women have curves."

"So they do." His eyes flicked over me hungrily, making me wish that I'd taken time to put on a robe before bursting into the bathroom to accuse him.

"Stop looking at me like that," I said. "You've got a supermodel waiting at home, remember?"

"Yvonna?" He laughed. "She and Paul are more of an item, I'm afraid. They were made for each other. And besides, she's a little too...skinny for my taste."

"Is that right?" I put a hand on my hip. "You expect me to believe that you have the epitome of female perfection living under your roof and you *don't* find her the least bit appealing?"

"You forget, Kaitlyn, what is considered the epitome of perfection has changed a lot since I was turned."

"I guess a lot *can* change in three-hundred years," I said grudgingly. "So what was perfection back when you were turned?"

"You," he said simply. "Full hips, full breasts, all that long, beautiful hair. Women try to look too masculine these days. That's what I like about you – you're the essence of femininity."

I laughed, trying to hide my embarrassment. "Oh please, the *essence* of femininity? I haven't even had a manicure in months and I wouldn't be caught dead in a skirt."

"That's not it," he insisted. "Having long fingernails or what you wear – that isn't what makes you beautiful. It's the way you carry yourself, the way your hips sway when you walk, the soft sound of your voice, your lips, so full and pink and ripe..." He leaned toward me and for a moment I thought he was going to kiss me. He might have, too, if I hadn't pulled away just in time.

"Look," I said, trying to cover my confusion. "All this is completely off the subject. What are we going to do about your side?"

"I don't know, Kaitlyn, what *are* you going to do? Don't forget that while I'm in your custody you're legally responsible for my health and well being."

"Damn it, Sumner." I frowned at him and he smirked back as though the almost-kiss had never happened. Well maybe it hadn't. Maybe I had been imagining it. Yeah, right.

"I said before that if I had fresh blood I could probably heal myself," he reminded me.

"And I said it would be a cold day in hell before I let you bite me. I'm not forming a blood bond with you so just forget it." I sighed. "I can go out and get you –"

"Some of the artificial stuff? No, that won't work." He shook his head. "If you won't let me drink from you, you'll have to heal me with your magic."

"But I don't know if I can," I protested. "I've never tried to heal a vampire before."

He gave me a half-lidded look. "You mean you don't *want* to try. Because you'll have to touch me to do it."

I bit my lip, remembering the first time he'd shaken my hand at Nana's shop. The rush of sensation that had coursed through me, the way my nipples had gotten stiff and achy and the tingling between my thighs...

"That's it, isn't it?" Sumner frowned. "That's why you're always jumping away from me. You really don't want me to touch you." He lowered his voice. "Do you find my touch that repellent, Kaitlyn?"

"Not repellent. Just...disturbing." There was no way I was going to tell him how it felt when I had skin-to-skin contact with him. Of course, maybe it was just that first time. I had been very careful not to have much contact with him since then. He was right—every time he touched me I jumped away.

But Sumner wasn't going to let it go. "Disturbing how?"

I shook my head. "Just drop it, Sumner. I'm not going to discuss it."

He gave me an appraising look. "I could find out on my own, I suppose."

"And how do you expect to do that?"

"I could hold you. Kiss you. Maybe see what I could pick up on through this strange little connection we seem to have."

I took a step backward. If he touched me... I knew my magic would protect me from any unwanted advances. The problem was, I wasn't completely certain that the things Sumner was suggested were unwanted. In fact, part of me wanted them very much, though I desperately wanted to deny that to myself. *He's a killer*, I reminded myself, trying to think of the grainy security camera footage. *A cold blooded killer*. But somehow the message wasn't making its way from my brain to my overheated body. If only it hadn't been so long for me. If only I wasn't so *hungry* to be touched...

"The connection doesn't seem to be that reliable," I pointed out in a trembling voice.

"Maybe not. But I'm sure I could tell what you were feeling just by watching your reaction." Sumner took a step forward, his eyes hooded. "By listening to your heart rate, watching the way you breathe, seeing your pupils dilate..."

I wanted to take another step backward but I held my ground. "Threatening me is definitely *not* the way to get yourself healed," I said, wishing my voice wouldn't shake quite so much.

Sumner frowned. "No, I suppose not." He stepped back and crossed his arms over his chest, his biceps bunching with the motion. "All right then, we'll leave it for now. But I do want to pursue this in the near future, Kaitlyn. I'd insist on it now if this damn thing didn't hurt so much."

"So the big, bad vamp admits he's in pain?" Breathing a little sign of relief, I motioned for him to move to his bedroom and followed him as he went.

“Unfortunately, yes.” He walked over to the D&G duffle bag and pulled out a pair of black silk pajama pants. “You might want to avert your eyes,” he said dryly. “I’m about to be naked for all of two seconds.”

I barely had time to turn my head before he dropped the towel. I registered just enough to see that he was all male before fixing my gaze desperately on the dark blue carpet.

“You can look now. I’m decent.”

It was definitely a relative term. He was still shirtless and the black silk pants, while loose, tended to cling to his lean hips and long legs in a most distracting way. When he turned to look in the bag again, I couldn’t help noticing that he had a truly spectacular ass. Unfortunately, he caught me staring when he turned back around.

“Admiring the view?” He smirked. “You like what you see?”

I could feel my cheeks getting hot again. “You really are conceited, aren’t you?”

“No, I can read your face.” He stepped forward. “You’ve wearing the same look I get when I look at you.”

“Which is?” I whispered.

“I think you know.” He sat on the bed. “Enough of this, Kaitlyn. Come heal me and I promise to stop pestering you – at least for tonight.”

I looked at his side again. In order to heal him I would have to touch him – there was no way around it. “All right,” I said flatly. “But we need to make this quick. It’s late and I’m tired.”

“That’s what you said earlier,” Sumner reminded me. “And I was prepared to leave you alone until you came barging in to interrupt my bath.”

“Whatever.” I made a move-along gesture with my hand. “Let’s just get this going.”

“Anything you say.” He lay back on the bed and smiled at me. “I’m in your hands.”

Unfortunately he really was.

Chapter Seven

I studied Sumner's side, trying to think how to begin. I knew how I encouraged living flesh to heal itself and knit together but this was vampire flesh and they aren't technically alive. Oh, they breathe and their hearts beat and they even feel warm to the touch—well, lukewarm anyway—but their bodies are being held in a kind of supernatural stasis. In essence, it's magic that animates them, not biology like normal human people.

Sumner, lying on his unhurt side, was perfectly still as I studied him. He didn't give the slightest hint of impatience though I could tell he was in pain. The patch I had to heal wasn't that big—just a little larger than my hand—but the redness and swelling seemed to be growing. In a strange way, it reminded me of my friend Stella when she ate fresh strawberries and broke out in hives. This area on Sumner's skin was like that—one big hive.

"That's it!" I snapped my fingers.

"What?" Sumner frowned.

"You're having an allergic reaction to the silver under your skin. That's why all the redness and swelling."

He nodded. "Makes sense. How do we cure it?"

I frowned. "Well, I can't exactly give you a Benadryl. I think maybe the best bet is to try to draw the silver out."

"Can you do that?"

"I don't know. I can try. I think...maybe if I use my magic as a magnet..." I was studying his side as I talked, my hands hovering over the affected area, not quite touching the skin. I concentrated, envisioning the tiny particles of silver thread, calling them to me. *I summon thee... I draw thee out... Come to me...* I could almost feel them moving, wanting to slip away from Sumner's field of influence and into mine. Almost...but not quite. It was as if the silver could hear me but his flesh wasn't responding to my magic at all—not even enough to let the silver escape.

I opened my eyes. "I'm sorry, Sumner. I don't think my magic will work for this. Your body is too...different from anyone else I've ever healed."

He frowned. "Try again. You didn't even touch me but I thought I could feel *something*. Maybe if you—"

"Yeah, all right." There was no way around it. I was going to have to touch him to prove to him that I was at least *trying* to heal him, even if it was a futile effort. Taking a deep breath, I gave in to the inevitable and put my hands on his skin.

As we made contact, Sumner and I both jumped.

I felt as though someone had shocked me but it wasn't an electrical shock. It was more...sexual. A tingling sensation ran over my entire body and my nipples were suddenly tight and achy. Even worse, I felt myself get instantly wet. I wanted to cross my legs because the sudden heat between my thighs made me feel so vulnerable.

"God!" Sumner sat up and looked at me in wonder as I pulled my hands hastily away. "What was that?"

"I don't know." I crossed my arms over my breasts, hoping to hide how hard my nipples were. "I felt it the first time we touched too—the first time you shook my hand in my Nana's shop."

"I felt something then too," he admitted. "But nothing like *that*. It was like some kind of...electrical charge. "He looked down at his lap where the black silk pants were unmistakably tented. "Only not electrical."

"Right." I sat back from him, making sure my knees were together.

Sumner frowned at me. "So this is why you didn't want to touch me? Because it affected you the same way it affected me?"

"It's...not a comfortable sensation," I admitted.

He raised an eyebrow at me. "To be instantly aroused, you mean?"

"What makes you think...? I mean, just because you're..." I motioned vaguely at the hard ridge that was still prominent under the black silk of his pants. "Doesn't mean that I'm—"

"Stop." He held up a hand. "Don't bother lying to me, Kaitlyn. I know how you're feeling—I caught it through our connection. Our link—whatever you want to call it."

"You did?" My voice came out in a squeak.

Sumner nodded and leaned toward me. "But even if I hadn't, I would still know. There are some things you can't hide from my kind."

"What are you talking about? How—"

He tapped his temple and gave me a mocking grin. "Heightened senses, remember? The minute we touched your heart started racing and your breathing speeded up."

"That could be anything," I pointed out. "Anxiety, fear—"

"Your scent changed too." He gave me a half-lidded gaze from those pale eyes. "You smell *hot*, Kaitlyn. In need."

"What are you talking about?"

"This." Suddenly he was holding my hands in his. I hadn't seen him move at all but all at once he had me in a gentle but unbreakable grip.

"What are you doing?" I demanded as the strange, sexual current invaded my body again. "I don't...don't like this."

"But you need it." Sumner stared at me implacably. "To tell the truth, you need a lot more than this."

"You don't know anything about what I need." I tried to yank my hands away from him but he wouldn't let me go.

"Yes I do—I can feel it. Touching is part of your power base, isn't it? You draw strength from physical contact—especially sexual contact. But you haven't had it in a long time."

I was mortified to be having this conversation and beyond uncomfortable to be sitting so close to Sumner while the sexual tingling raced through me. "Let go of me."

"No. Look at me. *Look* at me, Kaitlyn." He held both my hands in one of his and tilted my chin up so I had no choice but to meet his eyes.

"What?" I glared at him.

"You're hungry." His eyes were stern but his voice was gentle. "Starving. If I allowed myself to get as thirsty for blood as you are to be touched I'd be a menace to anyone who came near me."

"Well, I'm *not*." I yanked uselessly against his unbreakable grip. "I'm not hurting anyone but myself so let me go."

"But why? Why are you hurting yourself? Starving yourself?" He looked at me urgently.

I closed my eyes. "It's just easier that way, all right? The last time I had a relationship it ended badly—very badly. And it's always like that. The minute I show a guy what I can do or admit how much I need...need to be touched, he gets out." I opened my eyes and looked up at him. "You have to admit, it's not a very attractive combination—a girlfriend who can burn you alive with her mind and who also needs constant attention. A paranormally gifted co-dependant—what a catch." I tried to laugh but it stuck in my throat.

"Not attractive to a human, maybe. But I don't fear you, Kaitlyn."

"Maybe you should." I narrowed my eyes at him but instead of glaring back, he stroked my cheek. Then he leaned forward and kissed me.

His mouth was hot—gentle and urgent at the same time. I didn't want to but somehow I found myself responding, kissing him back. It was as though the inside of me was a desert—a dry, dusty place where nothing had bloomed in a long, lonely time. Sumner's hand on my cheek, his lips on mine, were like rain, a life-giving shower that revived that inner place.

But I can't do this. Not with him. No matter how good it feels. I forced myself to pull away and Sumner let me.

"What are you doing?" I asked, searching his eyes.

"Giving you what you need." His voice was a soft growl. "And taking what I want." He bent me over his arm and kissed me harder, forcing me to give in to him, to give in to the kiss until I was limp in his arms. Then his mouth began to travel down my throat.

When he pulled down the top of my black lace nightie, baring my breasts, I moaned and put up a hand to push him away. But somehow my fingers got tangled in his thick black hair. As he sucked one of my nipples into his mouth I gasped and arched into the hot wet pleasure. And somehow I found I was pulling him forward instead of pushing him away.

I was drowning in need, unable to help myself even as I felt his hand moving up my thigh. He parted my legs, his fingers slipping my black lace panties to one side so that he could cup my mound. He didn't press inside me though—not yet. He simply kept his hand there, his palm gentle against my slit as he continued to suck my nipples. I wanted to close my legs, wanted to pull away from the intimate contact but I couldn't do it—I needed it too much. Instead I pressed against him, rubbing myself like a cat in heat against the heel of his palm, moaning as I felt his hard flesh connect with my aching clit.

God, I needed this. Needed it so badly. And yet... *Oh God, I can't...I can't...* I could feel his fangs, sharp little points bracketing my nipple as he sucked. They provided a counterpoint of pain to the intense, aching pleasure. *If he bites me... If he takes even one single drop of my blood...*

The thought galvanized me. Suddenly I found the strength to push him away. Or to try to, anyway. To Sumner's credit when he felt me struggling, he let me put some space between us although he didn't completely stop touching me. We wound up in a semi-sitting position with his arm around my shoulder and his other hand still cupping me.

"No," I said, trying to make my voice stern instead of breathless. "No, I'm not doing this with you."

"Why not? Why deny what you need so badly?" he asked reasonably.

"I don't need—" I started to say but he shook his head.

"Don't lie to me, Kaitlyn." His eyes were lazy as he looked at me. "Can you honestly say that you don't need this? Don't want it?" Leaning forward, he kissed my mouth gently and, at the same time, I felt his hand shift slightly, his fingers spreading my heated pussy lips. Holding me open, he stroked gently, fingertips just barely gliding over my wet, slippery folds as I moaned and squirmed. The pleasure was intense, addictive. But still I was determined.

"I don't...don't need it that badly," I said against his lips, trying to catch my breath as he touched me. "If we go...go too far we'll bond. And I'm not about to have a long-term relationship with you."

For a moment he looked frustrated but then he nodded. "Fine, then let this just be about tonight. You have something I need and I have something you need. We can help each other."

I shook my head. "I don't think I can heal you. Your body is too different. And I don't care what you say, I'm not letting you bite me."

"I don't have to bite you to get what I need to heal," Sumner murmured.

“What...what are you talking about?” The way he was touching me, circling my clit slowly with one gentle fingertip was making it hard to think. Hell, it was making it hard to *breathe*. And yet I couldn't seem to ask him to stop.

“Blood replenishes me because it has human essence in it,” he murmured. “But it's not the only liquid that carries that essence.”

“I don't understand...” My words trailed off in a moan as he slid two long fingers deep inside me. God, it felt so good. To be invaded...penetrated. *Filled*. The empty place inside me begged for more. But I still didn't understand what he was talking about until Sumner withdrew his fingers and held them up between us.

They were glistening with my juices. In fact it made me embarrassed to see exactly how wet I was for him. Sumner kept his eyes locked with mine and, without a word, slid both fingers into his mouth. He sucked my essence away with obvious enjoyment, making appreciative sounds deep in his throat that made me blush.

I felt my breath catch in my throat as he finished. “You're saying you want to...want to... So you can heal yourself?”

He raised an eyebrow at me. “Can you think of a better way? It's not actual sex and there's no blood exchange involved, so we won't bond—since that seems to be such a concern for you. I'll get what I need to heal and you will too.”

I frowned at him. “I'm not sick or injured.”

“Part of you is.” He looked at me seriously. “Please, Kaitlyn, let me do this. And not just for our mutual benefit.”

I bit my lip. “Why then?”

“Because I *want* to. Want to taste you. God, you have no idea how badly I want it.” His eyes were burning, intense. I found I couldn't look away from them.

“That...that fantasy you sent me while you were in the bath,” I said hesitantly. “It was real? What you really wanted to do?”

“I didn't know I was sending it to you,” he reminded me. “And yes, I was lying in the bathtub fantasizing about going down on you. Thinking of spreading your sweet pussy open so I could taste your honey right from the source. You taste so sweet, Kaitlyn.” He leaned forward to kiss me again and then whispered in my ear, “I won't be satisfied until I have your legs wrapped around my head and my face buried between your thighs, lapping your hot little cunt.”

My heart seemed to skip a beat and then it started racing. God, I wished he didn't know how much his dirty talk excited me. But from the expression in his eyes as he studied my face he did—he knew *exactly* how much he was turning me on. In fact, I couldn't remember the last time I'd been this hot, this *ready*. The main difficulty would probably be just making myself stop before we went to far. Not begging Sumner to finish what he started...

Wait a minute, am I actually considering this? Even after Nana's warning? It appeared that I was. I was so hungry – the pleasure he'd given me so far was like a gentle rain to the barren place inside me. What I needed was a flood. And yet...

Sumner was watching me intently, waiting for my answer. "Say it, Kaitlyn," he murmured as I nibbled my bottom lip in indecision. "Whatever you're thinking, whatever you're afraid of just say it."

"I..." I looked down at my hands. "It's just...this, what you want to do, isn't easy for me. I get...self conscious. Uncomfortable."

"I think I can help you with that if you'll let me." He lifted my chin. "Look into my eyes."

"You can't glamour me," I pointed out. "I'm immune."

"No, you're *resistant*. There's a difference. If you let down your guard just a little and let me in, I can help you lower your inhibitions."

I frowned. "Lower my inhibitions, huh? And what else will you do if I let you mess around in my head?"

Sumner sighed. "All right, you don't trust me, I understand. But I swear to you, Kaitlyn, this won't go too far. I won't *let* it go too far."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "No biting. No blood. And no sex."

"I'll keep my pants on the entire time," he promised, smiling a little. "You, however, I want to see completely naked."

I blushed again and started to shake my head. Despite the fact that my nightie was pulled down to show my breasts and hiked up to my thighs, it *did* still hide the features I really wanted to keep covered – my hips and ass.

"Look at me." Sumner cupped my cheek and stared into my eyes. "Let me in – just a little, Kaitlyn. Just a little is all I need. Trust me, just for tonight."

I thought of Nana's warning. *Don't let your guard down*, she'd said. No doubt it was good advice. Good advice that I was going to ignore, I realized. It might not be the smartest thing I had ever done but I was going to do this now with Sumner. He was right – I needed what he was offering badly and I couldn't wait anymore for the perfect man to walk into my life. Not when I was so hungry to be touched. And there was one other thing to consider – I still wore the locket containing my ancestor's hair. As long as Fiona's magic protected me, I could allow my own to slip, just a little.

"All right," I said, nodded at him. "I'll trust you – just for tonight."

"To a certain extent. I notice you're still wearing your protective talisman." He eyed the locket around my neck and I clutched it in one hand.

"Don't even think of trying to make me take it off. It's spelled not to leave my neck unless I really desire it to and I don't. Not with you."

He stroked my cheek. "I understand. I wouldn't ask that of you. Not now."

"Not ever," I whispered.

He looked sad for a moment but then he nodded. "Then I suppose I'll have to take what I can get."

"This is all I can give you," I said. And then I relaxed. I let the magic that I kept around me, so familiar it was like a second skin, slip just a little and I let Sumner in.

I don't know what I expected, maybe that he would make me into some kind of wild woman—a tigress with an insatiable sexual appetite. But it wasn't like that. Not at all.

Sumner just looked at me, stared into my eyes for a long, breathless moment. Then his pupils dilated, the inky blackness within eating the pale iris until it was nothing but a thin silver ring. "See yourself, Kaitlyn," he murmured. "See yourself as I see you."

And suddenly I did.

It was like looking into a mirror that someone had placed in my mind's eye. In it I saw a woman with long brown hair and big brown eyes. She had a generous ass, full breasts and wide, curvy hips. She didn't look anything like the cover of a fashion magazine but somehow it didn't matter. She was absolutely *stunning*.

Beautiful, Sumner whispered in my head. You're so beautiful, Kaitlyn. From the moment I saw you, I wanted you. Wanted you so much.

He pulled me to him and kissed me again, gently on the mouth. "Can I see you naked now?"

Though the idea had made me feel nervous and uncomfortable before, now it didn't bother me a bit. "Of course."

Standing, I shimmied out of the nightie and let it fall in a little puddle of black lace on the floor. I hooked my thumbs into the sides of my panties but before I could push them down, Sumner said,

"Wait."

I raised an eyebrow at him and gave him a little smile. "I thought you wanted to see me naked."

"I do." His voice was thick. "But I want to make you naked myself. Come here." He was sitting on the side of the bed, legs spread, so I came to stand between them. He was tall but the bed was low—his face was about the level of my inner thighs. I had a vague idea that having his face so close to such an intimate part of me would have made me extremely uncomfortable in the past. Now I felt intrigued.

"Well?" I murmured, running a hand through his hair. It was thick and silky between my fingers. "Now what?"

"Now this." Slowly, Sumner slid the black lace panties down my thighs, revealing the soft thatch of well-trimmed curls at the top of my mound. Leaning forward, he rubbed his nose against me there, making me shiver as he inhaled. "God, you smell good." His voice was a low growl and I felt a shiver of anticipation go through me.

"What else?" I whispered, tugging lightly at his hair.

Sumner looked up at me with a predatory grin. "Impatient, Kaitlyn?"

I tugged a little harder. "What if I am?"

"Patience, sweetheart. I promise to make the wait worth your while." He began pulling the panties down again at what seemed like an excruciatingly slow pace. Obviously he was in no hurry. In fact, he actually knelt at my feet and helped me step out of them before sitting back on the bed. "God, you're gorgeous," he murmured, his eyes drinking me in. "Just let me look at you for a moment."

I twirled in a little circle for him and gave him a wink. "Like what you see?" I asked, throwing his own words back at him.

"You have no idea how much," he said hoarsely. "I can't wait anymore. Come here." He gestured for me to step closer, which I did with no reservations whatsoever.

Sumner reached out and took me by the hips, pulling me close and then closer. He leaned forward and at first I thought he was going to inhale my scent again. Instead he pressed his lips gently to the very top of my slit, kissing me there as though he was kissing my mouth. I gasped when I felt his tongue flicker out to taste me just the tiniest bit. God, I needed more! Why was he going so slowly?

"Because I want to savor this," Sumner murmured and I realized he must have caught my impatient thought through our strange connection. "I've been wanting this—wanting *you*—from the second I saw you." He looked up at me, his eyes filled with pale fire. "Now spread your legs."

I did as I was told, feeling strangely powerful as he drank me in.

"Beautiful... So hot. So *wet*." Sumner spread me delicately with his thumbs, opening me, putting my slippery pink inner folds on display. In the past such a thing would have mortified me. Not now. Instead of a blush of embarrassment, I felt a slow sexual flush of desire heating my body.

It wasn't just that I was opening myself up for him, or giving him a show. It was the expression in his eyes—the reverent, almost worshipful way he looked at me. When he leaned forward to place a teasing, tender kiss on the aching bud of my clit he touched me as if I were something incredibly precious and rare, kissed me as though he might break me if he wasn't careful. I felt beautiful—adored in a way I never had before.

I knew I shouldn't let my feelings rule me, knew that what we were doing was just for tonight and that tomorrow I would probably regret it. But I couldn't regret it now any more than I could feel ashamed of being nude in front of him. Letting Sumner see me in all my naked glory, letting him touch me and kiss me and explore my body was a heady experience—it made me feel free. Free to give in to all my darker impulses.

Gripping the back of his hair, I tugged *hard*. "You're driving me crazy. What are you waiting for, Sumner?"

He looked up at me, licking his lips. "For you to be ready. But I think you are."

I opened my mouth to agree but suddenly the world tilted and I was on my back on the bed with my lower legs hanging over the side. I felt dizzy for a moment and realized that Sumner must have done one of his vampire moves—so fast it couldn't be seen with the human eye. Only this time he'd taken me with him. Taken me and put me

exactly where he wanted me because there he was, kneeling in front of me, a ravenous look in his eyes.

"Let me in, Kaitlyn," he ordered in a soft, almost dangerous voice. "Spread your legs and let me in."

I couldn't have resisted if I'd wanted to. Parting my thighs I welcomed him, moaning softly as his broad shoulders split me wide, opening me for him completely. I had never felt so vulnerable—so exposed.

So hot.

Sumner pressed his mouth to my slit and took a long, slow taste, licking upward as though he was eating an ice cream cone. I moaned and jerked under his mouth and he looked up at me and smiled.

"Feels good, sweetheart?"

"Feels *incredible*," I admitted. And it did. To be perfectly honest, I had never enjoyed this particular act before. I had always felt too self-conscious to relax completely and let myself go. Then, too, I had never been with anyone who seemed so completely into it. Most guys seemed to think it was something they *had* to do—but it was clear that wasn't the case with Sumner. From the look in his eyes he was enjoying himself as much as I was—maybe more.

He licked me again, another long, slow taste, and then kissed me gently, swirling his tongue around and around my clit, making me moan and thrash. God, he was good! But when he looked up again, his eyes were pale-on-red.

"Sumner?" I looked at him uncertainly.

"Can't hold back anymore, Kaitlyn," he growled hoarsely. "I've been trying to go slow—didn't want to scare you. But, God, you smell so good, taste so good..." The naked hunger in his face was both frightening and compelling. I felt a surge of heat between my thighs—knowing he desired me so fiercely was intoxicating.

"Then don't." Reaching down, I grabbed a handful of his hair again and pulled him toward me. "Don't hold back, Sumner. I'm not afraid of you. Take what you want."

"Can't help it. I have to." He buried his face between my thighs again, his open mouth hot and wet and urgent against my pussy.

And then he devoured me.

I moaned and bucked against him as he lapped my open cunt. No longer was he trying to be careful or delicate. It was clear he was past drawing tantalizing designs with the tip of his tongue. Instead he was fierce in his hunger, sucking and licking me and tilting my hips up so that he could thrust his tongue deeply into my pussy.

I cried out and grabbed two handfuls of his hair as he tongue-fucked me. Sumner growled in obvious approval at my reaction and then redoubled his efforts. The wild abandon he tasted me with was incredible and a little frightening. I had never been so hot in my entire life and the intimate physical contact was flooding the barren place inside me, overwhelming me with exactly what I needed.

I was close, so close...I just needed a little more to push me over the edge. Unbidden, the image of the hard ridge of flesh I'd seen tenting his black sleep pants flashed through my mind. His cock. I wondered how big he was—how thick. How would it feel to have him inside me, stretching me open as he plowed into me? And how would it feel to let him bite me at the same time?

It was a powerfully forbidden thought. Having sex with Sumner—actual, penetrative sex would form a physical bond. Letting him bite me would form a blood bond. But have sex and letting him bite me at the same time—that would form a connection I would never be able to break. A life-long attachment that wouldn't even end in death because I would be tied to him for all eternity. A blood covenant.

No! No I could never, I would never... But the idea wouldn't leave my head. It was all I could do not to drag Sumner up to me and beg him to fuck me and bite me at the same time. I wanted the image to leave my head but I couldn't get it out. I wondered distractedly if it was coming from my mind...or Sumner's. But that didn't make sense—there was no way he could want to form an eternal blood covenant with me. No way in hell.

With the forbidden image in my head and Sumner lapping and sucking my pussy it didn't take long for me to start climbing toward the peak. But I still needed something more to get there. Something...

Sumner seemed to sense my need. He looked up at me for a moment, his cheeks and mouth shiny with my juices. "What is it, Kaitlyn?" he murmured hoarsely. "Tell me what you want. Tell me how to make you come."

"Inside me," I whispered, fighting the urge to beg him to take off his pants and finish me with his cock instead of his tongue. "I need...need to be filled."

His eyes blazed. "God, sweetheart—wish I could do this right. But since I promised not to..." Without warning he thrust two long, strong fingers deep inside me and started to pump.

It wasn't exactly what I needed but it was enough—would have to be enough. I cried out and went with the motion, moving to the rhythm he established, giving myself completely.

"That's right, Kaitlyn," he murmured. "Wish it was my cock inside you instead of my fingers. God, I want to feel you wrapped around me, squeezing me with this sweet little cunt while I fuck you. Want to fuck you so hard..."

I pressed back against his fingers, thinking what a talented tongue he had. I loved when he used it to lick me almost as much as when he used it to talk dirty. Now if only he could do both at once...

I can. The thought in my head was faint but unmistakably him. Then, keeping his eyes locked with mine, he lowered his head again and sucked my clit into his mouth. *Watch me, Kaitlyn,* I heard him say. *Watch me eat your sweet pussy. Watch me fuck your hot little cunt with my fingers. Watch me and come for me, come all over my face.*

I couldn't hold out any longer. The combination of his deep, sexy voice inside my head and the way he was torturing my clit so sweetly with his tongue while he thrust into me with his fingers pushed me over the edge.

Moaning, I pressed my hips upward, giving in to the tidal wave of sensation that suddenly rushed over me. My spine felt like a lightening rod, as though someone had shot a massive jolt of electrical current through my entire body. My fingers and toes curled and I actually saw stars in front of my eyes for a moment.

"Sumner!" His name was dragged from my lips, I couldn't help myself. I'd never felt this way before. Never been so out of control and free at the same time.

That's it, I heard him whisper inside my head. That's right, Kaitlyn, give it up for me and let yourself come.

I couldn't have refused him if I tried. I let the pleasure take me, sweep me out to sea in a wave that nearly drowned me with its intensity. I was completely lost and for once I didn't give a damn.

Chapter Eight

When I came back to myself, Sumner was still sitting between my thighs or maybe I should say leaning because his cheek was pressed to my inner thigh and his eyes were closed. I was surprised to see that he looked almost as wrecked as I felt. I wasn't sure what had happened between us but it was no ordinary orgasm, at least on my part.

I stirred and he looked up at me, his pale eyes half-lidded. Then he sat up, stretched languidly and smiled. If I hadn't known better I would have sworn he had come too. He certainly seemed to be experiencing one hell of an afterglow.

"Hey," I said, feeling uncomfortable. "I, uh, I should probably go."

"Leaving so soon, Kaitlyn?"

I glanced at the clock on the wall. "It's almost three in the morning," I said, sitting up. Suddenly I realized I was still naked and a near paralyzing embarrassment filled me. "Um, could you hand me my nightgown?"

He frowned. "Has my glamour really worn off so quickly? I'll have to remember to use more next time."

"There's not going to be a next time." Leaning over, I snagged the black lace nightie from the floor myself and struggled into it as quickly as I could. Now that the hunger to be touched wasn't roaring so loudly inside me that I couldn't hear anything else, I was beginning to be ashamed of what I had just done.

Sumner arched an eyebrow at me. "You seemed to be enjoying yourself. Are you sure there won't be any repeat performance?"

"You said yourself this was just for tonight." I cleared my throat. "Are you...are you healed, by the way?"

Sumner stood gracefully, exhibiting none of the stiffness of a man who'd just spent the last half hour on his knees on the hard floor. He examined his side and then smiled at me. "See for yourself." He turned so I could see the smooth, unblemished skin. There was no trace of the silver infection left—nothing at all to show that he'd been wounded just hours before.

It had always amazed me how fast vampires can heal and I couldn't help being fascinated. Leaning down, I put my hand on his side unthinkingly...and pulled it back again as though I had been burned. Despite all the intimate touching we'd done, it was still there. The current of electrical sexuality was muted somewhat but I could still feel it tingling in my fingertips...as well as the tips of my breasts and the vee between my legs.

Sumner must have felt it too because he caught my hand and pulled me close to him. "You're still hungry, Kaitlyn."

I tried to pull away. "Is that what you think this is? Some kind of manifestation of my...my..."

"Your need to be touched?" he finished for me. "Maybe. Or maybe it's part of the connection we seem to share. I don't know. All I know is that it makes me want you."

"Well you can't have me." I pulled away and he let me go, very reluctantly. "I'm sorry, Sumner, but we shouldn't have done what we did. I'm glad you're healed but that's it. No more. I have to go to bed."

"Stay here with me tonight." His voice was low and intense. "Let me taste you again."

I tried to laugh but my throat was suddenly dry. "Didn't you get enough of that already?"

His eyes blazed. "I can never get enough of you."

My breath caught in my throat as a surge of need went through me. Damn him, here we were starting all over again. I couldn't do this. I was already ashamed of the way I'd acted, I wasn't about to repeat my mistake.

"Sorry, Sumner," I said, trying to sound firm. "One ride is all you get."

He frowned. "Very well. But at least let me tell you the reason I'm here."

"Besides seducing me, you mean?" I remembered what he'd said earlier about that not being his main goal and then I felt another surge of guilt at the fact that I had let him do what he'd done. Honestly, what was wrong with me? The man was a murderer, a prisoner in my house and I'd had an intimate encounter with him. How stupid and unprofessional could I be?

"I haven't given up on that, you know." He smiled at me but his eyes were grave. "But there is something I have to tell you – it's very important but I'm afraid it will take awhile to tell it all."

I sighed and it turned into a yawn. "Can't it wait? I'm exhausted and I have to get up in four hours."

Sumner seemed to consider and then he nodded. "It can wait – for now. But not for long."

"Tomorrow," I promised and yawned again. "We'll talk tomorrow when I come home from work."

He smiled charmingly. "Very well. And you're sure you won't come back to bed with me?"

"No," I said firmly, trying not to be tempted by the come-hither look in his eyes. "No, absolutely not."

"Sweet dreams then, Kaitlyn." He took my hand and kissed it, his lips brushing my knuckles gently.

I shivered as the familiar sexual shock ran over my body and pulled my hand away. "Good night, Sumner."

“Good night,” he murmured. “I’ll be here if you change your mind.”

“Don’t hold your breath,” I told him. Lifting my chin, I went back through the bathroom and into my own bedroom. But I could feel him watching me all the way, those pale eyes filled with desire.

And part of me wanted to go back.

* * * * *

I really *was* exhausted. Despite the load of guilt and uncertainty as well as the lingering desire I still felt, though I tried to deny it, I fell asleep almost as soon as my head hit the pillow.

And then I had the dream.

A black shadow was flying over my house. Not flying so much as hovering. In my mind’s eye I could see it—like a stain against the sky, a black cloud hanging just over my roof.

And it was trying to get in.

I could see it trying. Thin tentacles of darkness were sliding down, finding their way under my doors and through the cracks around my windows.

Somehow I knew the oily black tendrils and the shadowy cloud they came from were evil. I could feel their malevolence, their desire to do me harm. And not just me—the cloud was filled with hatred for all women. It reviled anything female, wanted to eradicate it. Maim and torture and murder anything feminine at all.

This was hatred in its purest form and somehow I knew if one of those tendrils touched me, if the oily black tentacle somehow found a way to make contact with my skin, I would be lost.

Just as this knowledge came to me, I saw it coming in my bedroom window. First it slid down the glass, obscuring the view of the moon outside like an oily film. Then it began to work its way through the cracks between the bottom of the window and the frame. I could smell it now—a sweet, rotten smell that gagged me. It smelled like death.

Coming for you little witch, whispered a voice in my mind. *Coming for you and all the others like you*. The voice was cold, like something long dead was speaking to me from the grave.

I sat frozen in horror, staring at the creeping tendrils coming toward me, smelling their foul stench, hearing the dark, clotted voice calling to me. But soon it would touch me. And when it did...

“No!” My paralysis broke suddenly and I bolted from the bed. I had to get out of this room, out of the house! I ran for the door...only to see black tendrils seeping under the crack below it. They waved in the air like blind snakes, searching for me. I ran to the other window but it was coated in the black oily film too. I ran back to the bed and huddled in the middle of it, the covers pulled up to my chin. It was coming, the evil thing was coming for me and I couldn’t get away.

That was when I looked up and saw that the ceiling above the bed was a writhing mass of oozing black, dripping down toward me. I wanted to get away but when I put my foot down a bubbling black puddle covered the floor. I tried to think of a spell to say, tried to summon my power to keep me safe but it was gone and my mind was a blank. I couldn't think, couldn't move—I was paralyzed by fear.

Panic clawed at my throat—I was trapped. *Trapped.*

"No," I gasped as the oozing black tentacles dripped down to caress my face. "No, please. *Please.*"

"Kaitlyn? Kaitlyn!" A low firm voice brought me out of the dream.

Who...what...? I was confused, the dream still clinging to the corners of my mind.

"Kaitlyn, wake up. Don't let it get to you."

I opened my eyes to find that I was huddled in the middle of my queen-sized bed with the covers bunched between my clenched fists. Sumner was standing in the bathroom doorway, looking at me as though he wished he could come into my bedroom. But the wards I had put in place held and he could only stand there, watching me.

"I'm sorry." I shook my head, trying to clear the frightening images away. "I just...I had the worst dream. It was just...just awful."

"I know," he said quietly. The moon was out overhead and I could see his pale eyes gleaming from the dark confines of the bathroom. His bare, muscular chest looked like it had been carved out of white marble.

"How could you know?" I demanded. "Did I shout in my sleep?"

"Some." He looked at me inscrutably and I wondered if I had projected the nightmarish images across the strange connection we seemed to have. If so, they didn't seem to have bothered him as much as they had me.

"I'm sorry if I woke you up or bothered you," I said, running a hand through my hair. "You can go back to bed now. I'll try not to let it happen again."

"Are you certain you want to sleep alone?" His voice was soft and deep...enticing. I *almost* gave in. But then I remembered Nana's warning about Sumner. I would be stupid to ignore it twice. Letting down my guard with him sexually was one thing. Letting him into my room while I slept, completely helpless...that was unthinkable.

I shook my head firmly. "Go back to bed. I'll be fine."

"I'm sure you will." But instead of turning to go back to his own bedroom, he slid down and settled himself in the bathroom doorway, leaning against the frame.

I frowned at him. "What are you doing?"

"Keeping watch. Go back to sleep, Kaitlyn. I'll be here if you need me."

The idea of him staying there, watching over me, was both strange and somehow comforting. Straightening my covers, I turned my back and tried to get back to sleep.

But it was a long, long time before I could.

Chapter Nine

Seven o'clock came way too early the next morning. I slapped at my buzzing alarm clock at least twice before dragging myself out of bed and into the shower stall that occupied one corner of my bathroom across from the tub. I had to be at Nana's shop by eight thirty to be ready to open by nine and I knew Nana would want to talk about her fears of the night before.

Nana. Suddenly I was wide awake and the hot water pouring down on my head had nothing to do with it. What was I going to tell her about what I'd done last night? *I can't tell her. That's all there is to it.* It was true but I didn't like lying to her. Still, it wasn't like I discussed every aspect of my love life with her—that would have been way too uncomfortable. But she had specifically warned me against Sumner. If she had even an inkling that I had ignored her warning...

"Good morning, sunshine," a deep voice murmured in my ear.

I jumped and turned my head to see Sumner standing behind me in the shower, completely naked.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I tried to cover myself with my arms and failed to his obvious amusement.

"Just saying good morning. And don't hide your lovely assets, sweetheart. I saw it all last night, remember? I *tasted* it." Leaning forward he placed a soft kiss on my cheek. "Delicious."

I drew back, away from him. "Get out of the shower and don't make me regret last night any more than I already do."

He frowned. "You *regret* it, do you?"

I gave him a level glare. "How could I not? You're a killer, Sumner. Not twenty-four hours ago I watched footage of you ripping a man's throat out and yet I still allowed myself to...to get involved with you. I don't know what I was thinking."

"That's not a very nice way to speak to someone who sat up all night guarding your dreams." His voice was soft but there was a warning note in it.

"Guarding my...oh." Dimly I remembered the horrible nightmare I'd had in the wee hours before dawn and the sense of comfort I'd had knowing that Sumner was watching out for me afterward. "I—" I began.

His eyes were suddenly pale-on-red, his face blank. "I'm a killer, am I? A dangerous animal that can't be trusted?" Suddenly he had me backed against the icy tile wall, his large hands on either side of my head. The length of his hard body was pressed against mine and the sexual electricity shot through every inch of me, making it hard to breathe. Leaning down, he licked a long, hot trail from the base of my throat up

to just below my ear. "If you really think I'm that dangerous then you're very, *very* foolish to say so to my face," he murmured. "I could rip out your throat in a heartbeat, Kaitlyn, if I were so inclined."

"I..." My mouth was suddenly too dry and my heart was hammering in my chest so loudly I was sure he could hear it over the drumming of the shower. His mouth was still pressed against the vulnerable side of my throat and I could feel the light prick of his fangs against my skin. "You wouldn't," I whispered, hoping like hell I was right. "You won't hurt me. I know you."

"Not nearly as well as you think you do." Sumner withdrew, his eyes going back to their usual icy-pale. "If you're really so concerned about getting involved with a killer, you should steer clear of vampires in the future."

"I was trying to!" I crossed my arms tightly over my chest, trying to hide how hard my nipples had gotten when he touched me. From fear? Desire? Both? "You were the one who committed a homicide to get into my house."

"I wouldn't have had to if you'd just responded to my earlier invitations to talk," Sumner pointed out.

"Why should I accept your invitations?" I demanded. "What have you ever done to give me reason to trust you?"

"What reason indeed?" He looked tired now—defeated somehow. I was almost tempted to feel sorry for him. Almost.

"The very first time you came into my Nana's shop you had me on the defensive," I pointed out. "The way you looked at me, the things you said—"

"The way you felt when I touched you." He lifted a hand and stroked my cheek gently with one finger.

I flinched away. "I'm not having this conversation with you. Especially not here." Turning, I slapped off the faucet and stalked out of the shower stall. I felt much better after I had a towel wrapped around me.

Sumner followed me out of the stall, dripping wet and completely gorgeous. Not to mention utterly irritating. Droplets of water clung to his long black lashes like jewels and ran down his flat, corded abdomen to his...

"Here." I threw a towel at him. "Cover up."

Neatly sidestepping the little patch of sunshine that was coming in the bathroom window, he caught the towel and did as I asked. "Really, Kaitlyn," he said in a lighter tone. "You have to stop being so prudish. Have you never seen a naked man before?"

Not for the last two years. But there was no way I was going to admit that out loud. "I have to get to work," I said, turning for my bedroom. "I'll be back tonight."

"And we'll talk." It wasn't a request.

I sighed. "And we'll talk," I said. "But business only. No more about sex—nothing else is going to happen between us so get that through your head now, Sumner."

“Of course,” he said quietly. “Will you at least release the wards so I can have the run of the house?”

I frowned. “The sun’s up outside. Shouldn’t you be wanting to sleep?”

He shrugged. “I’m old. The sunlight no longer affects me as much as it does younger vampires.”

“All right, I’ll release the wards.” I held up a finger. “But only if you promise to behave. You can watch TV or read but no snooping through my personal things. Got it?”

“Absolutely.” He sketched a little salute. “I’ll behave like a perfect gentleman.”

“Somehow I doubt that.” I closed my bedroom door, ignoring his protests as I hurried to get dressed.

I was running late and Nana was not going to be pleased.

* * * * *

Nana’s shop was called Magic by the Numbers and, as I had told Travers, it was the oldest one of its kind in the entire state of Florida. There’s not really much call for the craft in Sarasota but we do manage to survive, mostly because we’re located not far from the beaches, in one of the touristy parts of town. People wander in, mostly drawn by our ever changing window display, which is my job, and usually end up buying something once they meet Nana.

It’s not that she spells them to buy – it’s just the aura of mystique and wisdom that hangs around her. They find themselves telling her their troubles and she recommends a book or a potion or a lotion that might help. Nana gives out practical advice as well as mystical wisdom and the combination seems to do the trick. I can’t tell you how many thank-you letters we’ve gotten from people who came from out of state and just happened to stumble into the shop on a whim.

She was usually there early and since I was running a little late, thanks to Sumner, I was surprised not to see her when I unlocked the front door. *Probably stopped to chat over her morning coffee*, I told myself as I started to get things ready for the day’s business. From years of living in Southern Florida Nana had developed a taste for the creamy, sweet café con leche, a Cuban type of coffee that’s about one-third sugar, one-third cream, and one-third coffee. She liked to get it at Antonios, a little Cuban sandwich shop around the corner. And if the woman who owned the place happened to be in, she and Nana would chatter like two old magpies for ages.

I turned my attention to the window display, which this week consisted of lots of colored candles arranged in a concentric circle and mystic crystals hanging from thin, invisible fishing line. The crystals caught the sunlight and made rainbows that attracted the eye. After dark they caught the candlelight and made an even more beautiful display. The whole thing was mounted on a backdrop of black velvet – simple yet

elegant. Also easy. I had been working a lot with the PD lately and I didn't have time to work up anything overly elaborate.

The display was nice but I couldn't help sighing when I looked at all the candles. They were spelled by Nana to burn slowly so we didn't have to replace them every day but slow burning or not they still had to be lit and there were over fifty of them. I liked the way the display looked but it was a real pain in the ass to climb up into the display window and light every last one of them with a match or lighter. Still what choice did I have?

Magic. The thought came to me as I was grabbing the lighter and I almost pushed it away. I could do one candle, maybe two but it had been ages since I was strong enough to do more than that. Fire magic isn't very complicated, but it takes a lot of strength to get started in the first place. But today I realized I felt like I could do it. I felt...strong. Good. Like I'd taken a paranormal multivitamin or something. But so many candles at once...could I do it? *Only one way to find out.*

Experimentally, I closed my eyes and concentrated on the display. I saw fire in my mind, many tiny golden sparks leaping to life, coming into being because I willed them to. *Be ye alive. Be because I will you to.* I concentrated, pushing my inner strength out like a hand, a hand made of fire –

"Easy now, Katy-child. You'll burn the whole shop down if you're not careful."

The voice right behind me startled me. I opened my eyes and spun around. "Nana! I didn't know you were here yet."

"I was in the back checking the inventory. You know, we need to get in some more blessed thistle soon." Though *Magic by the Numbers* was essentially a book shop, Nana kept a full Wiccan pharmacopeia in the back room for practitioners of the Craft who came to her for supplies. She nodded over my shoulder. "That was quite a display of power. I'm impressed – you're stronger than me now. Have been for quite some time now, probably."

I looked behind me to see that every single candle in the window was lit and blazing brightly. "It was an experiment. I just thought I'd try to see if I could do it."

"Well I think you answered that question." She smiled at me. "So I guess you found yourself a man. It's about time."

"What?" I looked at her blankly.

"Don't give me that innocent lamb look, Kaitlyn Elizabeth," she said tartly. "I was young myself once and my power used to have a lot more to do with having a man when I needed one than never cutting my hair." She patted the thick silver bun at the crown of her head and smiled at me.

Nana wears her hair in a lovely if outdated style that used to be called a Gibson Girl. It makes her look younger somehow, despite the fine lines around her eyes and mouth. She walks with a cane but other than that she's doing pretty well for her age and she isn't some tiny little old lady who looks like a stiff wind might blow her away,

either. She had an hourglass figure in her day and she's still got the hips to prove it. Hips that I inherited along with her powers.

"So who is he?" she asked when I didn't answer. "I hope he's someone special."

"I..." I could feel my cheeks getting hot as I belatedly realized the reason for my power surge—it was Sumner. What we had done the night before had recharged my batteries in more ways than one. But there was no way I could tell Nana that.

"Well?" She was looking at me sharply.

"He's just...he isn't important," I mumbled, turning back to the window display. Now I wished I would have taken the time and trouble to light all the candles by hand. If I had, I wouldn't be having this embarrassing conversation about my love life or lack thereof with my own grandmother.

"Now, Katy, if you had to find someone just for the night, it's nothing to be ashamed of. Witches have always gotten bad reputations through no fault of their own. Got to replenish yourself *somehow*." Nana wasn't above calling herself a witch although I much preferred the term Wiccan myself. "I've seen how hard it was for you to call your power to you these past two years since you broke up with that last one. What was his name?"

I actually had to think for a minute because all I could see in my mind's eye was Sumner. Staring at me with his eyes full of pale fire. Touching me...tasting me... I pushed the thought away. "Uh...Carl," I said at last. "And *he* broke up with *me*."

"His loss," Nana said.

"Yeah," I said, still blushing. "I guess so."

"I just want you to know I'm not judging you for doing what you have to. I did it in my day too, you know. *Unless* the person you did it with happens to be that vampire." She tugged on my shoulder and I gave up pretending to see to the display and turned reluctantly to face her. "Was it? Tell me the truth now, Katy. I need to know."

I was sure my face had to be fire engine red at this point and my cheeks felt hot enough to light a match. "Nana," I said with as much dignity as I could muster. "I love you but what I do in my own bedroom is none of your business."

"I knew it!" She snapped her fingers. "I *knew* that was why I was worried about you. Katherine Elizabeth, I want you to promise me right now you'll stay way from him from now on."

"I can hardly do that, Nana," I said, trying to keep the exasperation out of my voice. "Since he's staying at my house until his trial date."

"You know what I mean." Her faded brown eyes flashed. Nana isn't all sweetness and light—she has a serious temper when she's riled. "That vampire is dangerous and I don't want you going near him, no matter how badly you're in need."

"He didn't hurt me!" I shouted, losing my temper. "Can't you see that? Look..." I held out my arms and widened my stance. "See? Perfectly fine. Not so much as a single fang mark."

“What’s wrong with you?” she demanded. “Can’t you see what he is? What do I have to do to keep him off you? Lay a compulsion on you?”

“You wouldn’t dare!” I exclaimed. A compulsion spell was extremely strong magic and it was usually used to keep two people apart or draw them together. In this case, I was pretty sure Nana intended to do the former and not the latter.

“I would hope I wouldn’t have to, young lady. You can’t trust him, you know.” Nana shook one gnarled finger in my face.

“I never said I trusted him. I said he didn’t hurt me. He *wouldn’t* hurt me,” I said, miffed at having to defend Sumner. And I wasn’t even sure I was right. I couldn’t help remembering the way he’d pressed me against the shower wall, the things he’d said. But surely he wouldn’t follow through on those threats. Would he? Was I being a fool?

Nana looked primed to give me a piece of her mind but then something changed in her face. The fire went out of her eyes and she looked old and tired. “Oh, Katy,” she murmured, shaking her head. “I’m just worried for you, child – can’t you see that?”

“I see it, Nana,” I told her. “I just...what I do is my business. I’m twenty-eight, I know what I’m doing.”

“I guess you think so and I can’t tell you any different.” Leaning heavily on her cane, she made her way back through the stacks of books and display items and sat on the small padded stool we kept behind the checkout counter.

“Nana, I’ll be okay,” I said, following her. I hated fighting with her. After my mom had completely lost herself to drugs when I was nine, Nana had practically raised me. I learned the Craft at her knee, how to control my powers, my family’s history, everything worth knowing. But at some point you have to cut the apron strings – or so I told myself.

“Look at it this way, Katy,” she said, leaning on the counter and looking up at me. “Say you had a dog. Other people told you this dog is vicious – it’s been trained to attack and killing is in its nature. But this dog is always sweet to you, always licks your hand, never even bares its teeth no matter what you do. Now, would you trust a dog like that?”

I frowned. “Well, if it had never bitten me personally –”

“See Katy, that’s where you’re wrong.” She slapped the countertop for emphasis. “The true nature will come out in the end. You let an animal like that lick your face and it’ll end up ripping out your throat.”

Somehow I knew we were no longer talking about the metaphorical dog. I sighed. “Would it make you feel better if I told you that I’ve already told him to keep his distance? That last night was a one time deal?”

She looked slightly mollified but not much. “I’m just worried, child. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.”

“Meaning you think I’ll let him seduce me?”

She gave me a level look. "Meaning you might not be able to help it. You opened the door to him once. That makes it that much harder to keep it closed in the future."

"Nana, please, I promise you, nothing else is going to happen. And not that much happened in the first place," I protested. "Just...just some kissing and a little fooling around. That's all, I swear."

She narrowed her eyes. "So you *didn't* form a bond with him?"

I shook my head. "No, Nana. I would *never*." Then I thought of the strange connection Sumner and I seemed to share. But Nana was already upset enough. There was no way I was letting her know that Sumner and I seemed to pick up on each other's thoughts and feelings at times. The idea of her granddaughter tied to a vampire in any way might be more than her heart could stand.

Nana looked at me for a long moment, searching my eyes with her own. I looked back, trying to seem completely innocent. Finally, she nodded.

"You're still holding something back but whatever it is, it's your business, I guess."

"Nana—"

"No." She held up a hand to stop me. "Just remember I warned you. No good can come of you getting involved with Holden Sumner. If you bind yourself to the darkness, you'll never be free of it. It will swallow you up."

I felt like I had when I was twelve and she'd caught me copying someone else's math homework. Scolded. Ashamed. Angry.

"Fine," I said tightly. "Believe what you want. I'm going to go in the back and do inventory."

"Go then. Just remember what I said."

"I hardly think I could forget since you won't stop harping on it," I snapped.

She started to say something else but I turned my back and stalked into the dim back room that smelled of dried herbs and old books. Normally the smell calmed me, made me feel relaxed, but not today. Today I felt headachy and blue and miserable. I *hated* fighting with Nana but she needed to realize I wasn't the scared nine-year-old she'd taken in so long ago. I could and did fend for myself on a regular basis and I could handle Sumner on my own terms. Couldn't I?

I pushed the doubt out of my mind. My one night with the vampire had been a mistake—one I didn't intend to repeat. Nana didn't have to worry about me getting in deeper with Sumner. As soon as was humanly possible he was going to be out of my life and out of my house forever. That was the promise I made to myself and didn't intend to break it.

* * * * *

Around four o'clock I got a call on my cell phone from Detective Travers. There weren't many customers in the shop—an older couple who had wandered in by

accident and a new mother who was looking for some herbs to help with breastfeeding. Nana was already handling both of them so I decided to take the call in the back room.

"So, how's the house guest?" The detective's words were glib but she sounded strangely distracted.

"About how you'd expect," I said. "Charming, ruthless, a borderline sociopath, and a known murderer. But then, we already knew all that."

"Yeah, about that murderer part..." She paused for a long moment—so long I thought my cell had dropped the call.

"Travers?" I asked. "You there?"

"I'm here." She signed noisily into the phone. "Look, I hate to interrupt your day but could you come down to the station? There are some things I need to show you and I don't want to talk about them over the phone."

"Sure, no problem at all." I was actually relieved. Nana and I still had a cold war going and I hadn't been looking forward to closing up shop in the frosty silence that pervaded the air.

"Good. The sooner the better. Maybe you can, ah, shed some light on this. Because I have to say, it's got me stumped."

The idea of anything stumping Travers was intriguing. "I'll be right there," I promised. "Just let me tell Nana I'm going."

* * * * *

Half an hour later I walked into the station and found the detective waiting for me. "Come back to my office," she said with no preamble. "I want to show you something."

I walked back with her and sat in the chair across from her desk. "Okay, I'm here. So what's going on?"

"Look at these." She pushed some photos across her desk. They were the kind that had names and dates at the bottom—that is, the dates the subjects were last seen.

"What are these? I mean, why do you want me to see them?" I asked. There were seven pictures—all of girls who looked to be between the ages of twelve and fifteen. All with long dark hair and dark eyes.

Travers tapped the stack of photos. "All of these girls went missing in the past year and a half from in and around Dade County. All poor, all Hispanic. Most of their parents were migrant workers, which means they probably aren't the only ones who disappeared."

"Because illegal immigrants might be afraid to report a missing child to the authorities," I finished for her. "I get it. Missing girls—a lot of them. Were any found?"

Travers looked grim. "Not alive. Several bodies have turned up, though." She nodded at the photos. "Consider those the 'Before' pictures. You really don't want to see the 'After'."

"God." I felt suddenly sick. At Travers' request I had once helped locate a missing child who, thankfully, had turned up alive. But I usually didn't have to deal with the grimmer side of missing persons cases. Especially not missing children. I looked up at Travers. "Why are you telling me this?"

"We found the van belonging to Jason Drews. It was right where Sumner said it would be."

"You mean..." I put a hand to my throat. "The victim on the tape?"

She nodded. "Yeah, the one Sumner killed. The way he was acting so cocky about it really pissed me off. I went after Drews' van myself last night, had it towed in, went over it with a fine tooth comb."

"What did you find?" I asked, though I already had an idea.

"Nylon rope that matched the ligature marks on the victims' throats and wrists. Duct tape that he used to cover their mouths. Blood stains on the carpeting. And some other things you don't want to know about." She shook her head. "I sent it all out to the lab on a rush job but I think I know what we're going to find."

"That Jason Drews was a..." I couldn't finish the sentence.

"Serial killer." Travers nodded. "Preying on innocent children—not a one of those girls was over fifteen and most of them were closer to eleven or twelve. He's been operating in Dade for some time. I guess he thought he'd come up here since things were getting hot for him around Miami."

"And Sumner *knew* about this?" I asked. "You don't think..."

"That he framed Drews?" Travers shook her head. "No, I don't think so. Here." She pushed another photo across the desk. The little girl in this one looked to be no older than nine or ten. Her eyes were wide and uncertain and her hair was parted down the middle and braided.

"Who is she?" I asked, dread filling my stomach like ice. "Is she...did Drews kill her too?"

"That is Maria Rodriguez and no, she's not dead. She's the sole survivor. I talked to the detective down in Dade who was handling the case. The little girl went missing a few days ago but then the night before last she was returned to her parents. Showed up on the doorstep *poof* just like that without a scratch on her." Travers snapped her fingers for emphasis. "You know what she told the detective in charge of the case when he asked her how she got away?"

I shook my head numbly. "No. I can't imagine."

Travers took a deep breath. "She said that an angel set her free. She said the bad man took her but before he could hurt her an angel with black hair and white eyes stopped him."

"Black hair and white eyes?" I felt like my heart had skipped a beat. "Sumner?"

She spread her hands. "You know anyone else who fits that description?"

His eyes aren't really white. They're more like a pale, pale gray.

"You've been looking deeply into his eyes or something lately, Richards?" Travers looked at me sharply and I realized I'd spoken my thought aloud.

"No, I..." I coughed, trying to cover my confusion. "But why? Why would he do that?"

Travers frowned. "That's what I was hoping you could tell me. Even if the scum he offed was a serial killer who deserves to die, that isn't his call to make. I mean, he's still going to have to go to trial for homicide. If he was tracking this guy and wanted to kill him, why not do it quietly and get rid of the body?"

"Because then I wouldn't see it." I shook my head. "He wanted to get my attention and a way into my house but he also wanted me to know he wouldn't kill an innocent victim."

Travers snorted. "So it all comes back to you again? Damn, Richards, what the hell is going on between you and Count Hunkula?"

"I wish I knew." I sighed. "Look, Travers, I really need to get home."

She raised an eyebrow. "And do I want to know *why* you're so eager to get back to Sumner?"

"Don't start," I snapped. "You sound just like my Nana."

"So Nana doesn't want you dating the undead, huh?" Travers gave me a grin. "Imagine that. I guess it makes sense though. Vampire boyfriend equals no great-grand babies. That's a bummer."

"Yeah, go ahead, have a laugh." I shook my head. "You just keep on laughing. I'm going to get to the bottom of this."

"You let me know when you get there, okay?" She nodded at the last picture on the desk. "Oh, and tell Sumner that Maria Rodriguez says thank you."

Chapter Ten

When I walked in the door a delicious smell greeted me. It was warm and spicy and exotic. It was also a mystery – what the hell was going on?

I walked into the kitchen to see Sumner standing behind the stove, stirring something in a large pot. He was wearing tight jeans and a black button-down shirt he hadn't bothered to tuck in. A colorful dishrag was slung over one of his broad shoulders and he was humming softly to himself.

"Good evening, Kaitlyn," he said, not bothering to turn around. "Why don't you go get changed? Dinner will be ready in about ten minutes."

I stood staring at him, uncertain of what to say. Since I'd become a S.E. I'd had over fifty vampires stay at my house at one time or another and not a single one of them had ever expressed an interest in human food. Which makes sense – vampires don't eat. They live exclusively off blood and while they can *drink* other things, solids don't agree with them at all.

Finally I found my voice. "You cooked?"

Sumner turned his head and gave me an enigmatic one-sided grin. "Why not? I thought you might like a home-cooked meal."

"You thought you'd soften me up some," I accused.

Sumner made a *tsk-tsk* sound and shook his head. "Now, Kaitlyn, is that any way to act when someone does something nice for you? Didn't your Nana teach you any manners?"

"What she taught me was to beware of vampires bearing gifts. And believe me, you're not exactly on her good list right now," I said, putting a hand on my hip.

"Found out what we did last night, did she?" He arched an eyebrow at me and I could see the desire burning in his gaze. I looked away quickly.

"That's none of your business."

"It was none of your Nana's either," he pointed out. "I would never discuss anything we do in the privacy of the bedroom."

I felt my face heating up. "That's because there isn't going to be anything else to discuss."

He smiled. "She warned you against me, didn't she?"

"So what if she did? She worries about me." I took a deep breath. "Anyway, I told her not to worry because I already told you nothing else was going to happen." I nodded at the bubbling pot on the stove. "And I'm standing firm on that, Sumner. No amount of wooing or seducing or soup is going to change my mind."

“Of course not,” he said smoothly. “If you must know, I made dinner in an effort to make up for the...regrettable incident in the shower this morning. I let my temper get the best of me.”

I frowned. “Vampires don’t usually say ‘I’m sorry’.”

“Because we don’t have to. It’s easier to kill the offended party than apologize.” He grinned at me, showing a hint of fang. “Are you going to get dressed for dinner or not?”

“If you think I’m going to put on an evening gown just because you cooked—”

“No, nothing like that.” Sumner shook his head, eyeing my dress slacks, button down silk blouse and heels. Just because I don’t do skirts and dresses doesn’t mean I don’t dress nicely. “I just want you to put on something more comfortable. I want you to be relaxed while we talk.”

Ah, there it was. The real reason he was trying to soften me up.

“That’s only part of the reason,” Sumner said and I realized he’d picked up my thought. Damn it, was the weird connection between us growing stronger or what?

Before he could answer that thought too, I shook my head. “Fine, I’ll change.”

Sumner turned back to the stove. “You do that while I get the bread out of the oven.”

I wanted to ask if he’d made the bread himself—the idea of him with his sleeves rolled up, flour up to his elbows as he kneaded bread dough was both ridiculous and intriguing. But in the end I decided to just go change and worry about the details of the meal later.

* * * * *

“This is albondigas locas soup,” Sumner said, placing a steaming bowl in front of me when I came back to the kitchen and sat down at the tiny wooden table just big enough for two. “Literally translated, it means ‘crazy meatballs’.” He smiled charmingly. “A little recipe I picked up when I spent a few decades in Spain.”

“So...you made all of this?” I dipped my spoon into the steaming broth and stirred. Besides tiny little meatballs about the size of a dime, there were also chunks of tomato, fresh cilantro, corn and rice. I thought I could smell a hint of lime and cumin in there too. Yummy.

“Even the meatballs.” Sumner smiled at me and poured us both a glass of red wine. “Don’t look at me like that, Kaitlyn. I had to do *something* to keep myself occupied. Daytime television is horrible and none of your books or magazines is worth reading. Unless I wanted to learn how to catch a man, that is.” He nodded at a *Cosmo* I’d left laying open on the kitchen counter. “And I know perfectly well how to catch one already. Although what I do with him once I have him is entirely different from what your little periodical recommends.” He flashed his fangs in a frightening grin.

I frowned. “I *do* have a shelf full of classics at the top of my closet. Dickens, Bronte, Austen—”

“Ah, yes.” He held up a finger. “But you specifically told me *not* to rifle through your personal belongings. Which is why I spent the day cooking rather than fondling the contents of your underwear drawer.” He gave me a penetrating look. “Although I *do* hope you’re wearing something lacy under there.”

I frowned and put a hand to my throat. I was wearing something considerably more comfortable than my work clothes though not a bit sexy. Unless you consider gray sweat pants and an old Lillith Fair T-shirt sexy, that is. I was also wearing my warmest pair of fuzzy socks in deference to the chilly weather outside. I couldn’t help thinking that hot soup was exactly what I wanted on a day like this, not that I would have expected Sumner to make me any in a million years.

“You *did* tell me to put on something more comfortable,” I pointed out. “What I have on under it is none of your business. Where did you get the ingredients for all this, anyway?”

“Your local grocery store delivers.”

I frowned. “No they don’t.”

“Yes, they do,” Sumner said blandly. “When someone asks them *nicely* enough.”

“You can glamour someone over the phone?”

One corner of his mouth went up in a teasing little smile. “Let’s just say I have a few tricks up my sleeve. I also got some artificial blood substitute.” He made a face. “Though I must say I think this ’87 Burgundy is far superior—not as nourishing, however, most regrettably.” He took a sip of the wine. “Eat up.”

The soup was really good. It was spicy without being too hot and deliciously tangy. Sumner had prepared a crusty loaf of French bread and a crisp green salad to go with it. He’d even made his own salad dressing—a homemade honey mustard with shallots and raspberries that was pretty much one of the best things I’d ever put in my mouth. But I didn’t eat in silence.

Once I was settled with everything in front of me, he began to talk.

“You know I came here with a purpose,” he said, taking another sip of wine.

I nodded. “I know. I just don’t know what it is.”

He leaned forward. “I’m here because I need your help, Kaitlyn.”

I widened my eyes and put down the spoonful of soup I’d been about to eat. “You need *my* help?”

“Don’t look so surprised. You’re a powerful witch.” He smirked. “More powerful after last night, I’m sure—”

“Don’t start with that,” I interrupted. “And I prefer the term *Wiccan*. I thought you had something serious to say.”

“I do.” The smile was suddenly wiped off his sensual mouth. “And I need you to listen carefully, Kaitlyn. What I have to say may be a matter of life and death—not just for you but for your whole coven.”

I wanted to ask what my coven had to do with it but he had already started so I ate my soup and listened.

"In seventeen-hundred and ten back when I was still human, I lived in a small village in the foothills of the Blue Ridge mountains," Sumner began, a faraway look in his pale eyes. "It was a different time then—a different country. We were still under crown rule with no thought of the Revolution yet to come. The town I lived in was called Haven but it's gone now—wiped off the map. As far as I know I am the only person who even knows it ever existed.

"I was an apothecary—the only one in town. I mixed potions and powders and draughts for the sick—they would seem ludicrous to you today. Medically useless, some of them downright harmful. But they were all we had and back then we thought they were wonderful."

He looked down at his hands. "I was married—had been for only a year at that time. My wife was beautiful. She looked..." He looked up at me. "She looked a little like you, to be honest, Kaitlyn. You have the same eyes."

"I'm...flattered I guess," I murmured and he nodded.

"You should be. She was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. And she picked *me*." He said it as if it were a miracle, his eyes getting that faraway look again. "She could have had anyone—her father was rich, her family prominent. He wasn't happy when she chose a poor apothecary over the wealthy farmers' sons she could have had. But she made her choice and I was it. We were..." He shook his head as though trying to find the words. "I can't even describe it. We were beyond happy."

"You must have been to remember it so vividly," I said.

Sumner looked at me and glanced away. "It's not often I do let myself remember. It's not a memory I can bear to dwell on for long. But I need to tell you—need to start at the beginning to make you understand."

"I'm with you so far," I told him. "Go on."

"We were happy. Blissfully happy for one year and then the madness started."

I put down my spoon again. "The madness?"

"It started out with small things. Several of the cows in the village went dry and wouldn't give milk. Some children got sick with a rash no one had ever seen before. Then for one entire week there was a red ring around the moon."

"Blood on the moon," I said, thinking of what Nana had said the night before. "A black dog howling at midnight."

Sumner looked surprised. "Yes. How did you know?"

I shook my head. "They're fairly common bad luck omens."

"Yes, but they all came at once. I remember my wife got so upset because a bird got into our house and couldn't get out again."

"Foretelling the death of someone in the house," I said, again remembering Nana's teaching.

"True." He nodded gravely. "And she was further upset by the dreams."

"Dreams?"

"She said she dreamed of a black cloud over the house. A cloud of evil that meant her harm."

"My God." The details of my dream the night before came rushing back and I shivered. "That...I had that dream. Last night."

"I know," Sumner said quietly. "I saw it. It wasn't just a dream, Kaitlyn."

"What do you mean? You think there was actually something there?"

He frowned. "Let me finish my story and I'll let you decide for yourself."

"All right." I took a sip of wine—I needed it. "Go on."

"Anyway, the bad luck kept coming and there began to be talk of witchcraft."

"This was around the time of the Salem witch trials, right?" I asked.

Sumner nodded. "At few years before. The Salem trials are still remembered because so many people were accused. Haven was small—not even three-hundred people lived within the township. But the founding fathers agreed that witchcraft was to blame for our misfortune and so a witch finder was called.

"His name was Matthew Stern and at first he seemed normal enough. But then he set himself up in the church and the interrogations began. People were frightened—they wanted someone to blame for the bad luck that plagued Haven. Accusations began to fly. My-my wife was one of the accused."

"Was she a witch?" I asked softly.

Sumner shook his head. "Not the way they meant. Back then it was believed that witches were communing with Satan, drinking the blood of the innocent, dancing naked beneath the moon, having sexual congress with the devil—all that. Sarah...my wife, had some power but she used it only for good. She was trained as a midwife, you see."

"So if any of the babies she delivered died..."

He nodded. "She was blamed. And that seemed to be part of the bad luck—there was a rash of miscarriages and still births. Sarah had nothing to do with them, of course—she did everything she could to heal and help the women she treated. But still, she was accused."

"What happened to her?" I asked softly.

"She was taken away. I was there at the time but I couldn't stop them." He swallowed, his eyes still blank and hard and faraway. "Stern questioned her—tried to break her down. Some of the women he took confessed simply because they were so frightened but Sarah wouldn't do it. She had an indomitable spirit."

"Did they ever let her go?"

"She was held in a makeshift jail—a shack erected for Stern's prisoners." Sumner laughed bitterly. "Prior to that we hadn't even had a jail—Haven was too small to need one."

"What happened to the women who confessed?" I asked. "Were they released?"

"For all the good it did them." He took a deep breath. "Because that was when the killing started."

"Wait—someone killed them? The ones who were released?"

He nodded. "At first we thought it was an animal attack. Those were bleak times—we lived on the edge of a wilderness. Bear attacks weren't uncommon. So when the mutilated body of a young woman named Sally Hanson, who had confessed and been released, was found on the edge of the forest we were saddened but not terribly surprised." Sumner shook his head. "But then there was another...and another and each killing was worse. All women who had been accused, all horribly disfigured— butchered. And toward the end..." He looked down at his hands, his face carefully blank. "Violated. Both before and after death."

"A serial killer?" I asked.

"Of a sort." He looked at me earnestly. "Do you believe in demons?"

I raised an eyebrow. "I'm a witch, what do you think?"

"I thought you preferred 'Wiccan'."

"To hell with political correctness." I sighed. "I am what I am and yes, I believe in evil."

"But evil personified," he pressed. "Satan and his minions. The pit filled with a lake of fire."

I nodded thoughtfully. "I've never encountered one but, yes. Yes I do." Nana had brought me up as a believer and I had never lost my faith.

Sumner blew out a breath. "Good, that makes it easier."

"Wait a minute. You think that a demon killed those women in your home town?"

"I know it did," Sumner said grimly. "It arrived without form—the dark, evil cloud that Sarah dreamed about and it brought the evil omens and bad luck with it. But when the witchfinder came, then it found a host. Matthew Stern was the kind of man it could inhabit and it used him to do what it wanted."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "You have proof of this?"

"I saw it with my own eyes. I saw the demon inhabit him on the night he killed Sarah."

"He *killed* her?" He had told me that his wife died but he'd never said anything about her being murdered. I stared at him uncertainly.

"Yes." He looked straight ahead and I sensed that he wasn't just telling me this—he was reliving it. All of it.

I felt a surge of pity for him then—something I never thought I'd feel for a vampire, especially not him. "Sumner..." I murmured but he shook his head and went on doggedly, as though he had to get it out.

"She'd been held for over a month and they wouldn't let me see her. One evening I couldn't stand it anymore. I went to the jail to demand her release, to break her out and run away with her—I don't know. I didn't have a clear plan. I just knew I was desperate.

"When I got there it was well past sunset. Darkness came early because of the mountains—they cast huge shadows, blocking the light. There was no moon that night and of course there were no streetlights at that time. So the blackness was almost absolute when I got to the door of the jail. I looked through the window and I saw..."

Sumner closed his eyes briefly before continuing and I sensed that what he was about to say was hard for him. Very hard.

"You don't have to do this," I told him. "Don't tear yourself up like this, Sumner."

"I need you to know." He took a breath and went on. "I saw him standing there in the firelight. Sarah was strapped to a table. She was...he had taken off her clothes. He had a knife in his hand as he stood over her. He had her gagged so she couldn't cry out but the look on her face was one of such *terror*."

Sumner pinched the bridge of his nose, as though trying to drive back a headache although I was fairly sure vampires didn't get them. "Of course I shouted at him, screamed for him to open the door. It was only wood, you know. Now I could easily rip the door of a bank vault off its hinges but back then I was human...weak. I couldn't do anything but watch."

He got up abruptly and started pacing, as though the force of the memory was so strong he couldn't hold still any longer. "He looked back at me before he started and I saw his eyes. They were human at first and then they...changed." Sumner shook his head. "I couldn't get to him so I ran for the constable—the only other man in town with the key to the jail. But by the time I got him up and out of bed and back to where Sarah was..."

"It was too late," I whispered.

Sumner nodded. "She was...gone. Butchered. Mutilated by that animal. That *thing*." He had his back to me but his voice shook, filled with a pain so agonizing it hurt just to listen to it. I got up and went to him.

"Sumner," I murmured, daring to touch his shoulder. His muscles were tight—touching him was like putting my hand on a block of wood or ice. "I'm sorry," I told him. "So sorry, but...but I don't see how what happened to your wife has to do with demons."

He turned to face me and his eyes had gone pale-on-red. "Neither did anyone else before the trial."

"They put the witch hunter on trial?"

He nodded. "He claimed he was just interrogating Sarah – trying to get a confession out of her any way he could in order to save her soul. But when they saw what he had done to her...well..." Sumner shook his head. "I testified, of course. Told what I had seen – how his eyes changed."

"Like yours?" I asked but he shook his head.

"Not like mine. He wasn't a vampire if that's what you're wondering. And he proved it at the trial. After I testified they changed again – his eyes. And he spoke in a voice that wasn't human." Sumner shook his head. "I can't even describe it. But he – *it* – told about the things it had done. Admitted to killing the other women as well. It...gloated. Described everything in minute, loving detail." He looked sick, remembering.

"What did they think?" I asked. "What was he?"

"More like what was *in* him," Sumner said darkly. "It was in his eyes, we could see it there. When he was sentenced to hang it *laughed*. Laughed and said, 'No matter. You may kill the vessel I inhabit but I will return. I will always return.'"

I frowned. "And you're sure he wasn't just crazy? Schizophrenic, maybe?"

"No." Sumner shook his head. "If you had seen what I had seen you wouldn't doubt."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "You saw something else?"

"When they hanged him. The whole town saw it." His eyes went faraway again. "As he was kicking and choking out his last breath, a vast dark cloud came out of him – pouring out of his mouth like some foul vomit. I don't know how else to describe it, Kaitlyn. It poured out of him and sank into the ground around the hanging tree – some say it cursed the ground. Maybe the whole village." He frowned. "I don't know. After that, though, people started moving away. Going to different settlements, going back where they'd come from. Inside a year Haven was dead. But by then, I was long gone as well."

"Where...where did you go?" I whispered. What I really wanted to ask was how he had survived such grief. How could anyone bear it?

Sumner shrugged. "After the hanging, after I buried Sarah, I wandered for weeks in the wilderness of Virginia and up into what is now Pennsylvania. I was...half mad with sorrow and guilt. Seeing what was happening to her and being unable to save her...it was almost more than my mind could take. It nearly broke me. I *wanted* to die."

"Why didn't you?" I asked.

"I almost did. I was sick, nearly starved. Staggering and raving – completely out of my mind." He looked at me soberly. "And then she who made me as I am today found me."

I was intrigued. "Your maker? What was she like?"

"She was ancient. Iroquois – they were a matriarchal society, you know. She was revered by the rest of her tribe so when she said I must be saved, they agreed." Sumner

sighed. "I lived with the People of the Flint for a long time, learned their language and their legends. And I found out something very interesting."

"Which was?" He seemed to have shaken off some of the sadness now – or perhaps simply buried it again. At any rate, his eyes had gone back to normal so I went back to sit at the table with my now-cool soup.

"I found out that what happened in Haven had happened before. About seventy-five years prior, a Seneca tribe had suffered a similar rash of murders. Young women mostly, all known to have paranormal power."

"Witches," I murmured.

Sumner nodded. "They had been killed by a man with a 'dark heart' as the tribes people called it. They said that his heart was dark and hollow like a dead tree, allowing him to be filled with evil when it came looking."

"And they were sure it was the same thing?"

"The description of his eyes – like black flames – that was the same. And they spoke of how a great dark spirit poured out of him when he was killed."

"That does sound the same," I admitted.

He nodded again. "And there were legends going back hundreds of years. This thing – this demon for want of a better word – it comes back over and over. Every seventy-five years, in fact." He looked down at his hands. "I begged her – the maker as they called her – to change me. To make me what she was so that I would live to see it again. Live to see it and kill it."

"And she agreed?"

He looked away for a moment. "After much pleading on my part, yes. I had to strike a rather stiff bargain – make some promises that may come back to haunt me." He looked me in the eyes. "But it was worth it. Worth it to have a chance to find the demon and kill it permanently."

"So you became what you are – a vampire – to get revenge?" It was certainly the best reason I'd ever heard. Mostly people want to get turned in order to stay young and beautiful forever but the process carries a high mortality rate so it's always a gamble. Sumner had taken that risk for an entirely different motivation.

"Yes," he said simply. "That's why. I traveled up and down the east coast and found a pattern. As I told you – this thing comes back every seventy-five years but not to the same place."

"It moves?" I asked, intrigued.

He nodded. "Along the coastline. It started farther north and it's been working its way down for centuries. I don't know why. In 1785 I caught wind of it in North Carolina. I caught it – the man it had inhabited, rather – and killed him."

"So you got your revenge," I said reasonably. But Sumner shook his head.

"The same thing happened – the spirit, demon, whatever you want to call it – came pouring out of his mouth as the life left his eyes." He frowned. "I knew then that I

would be dealing with it again. And sure enough, I found it in eighteen-sixty, in Georgia. This time I was determined to kill it for good."

"And did you?"

He shook his head. "I came close—wounded it badly, I think. I wanted to believe I was successful and indeed, it seemed that I might have been because there were no killings in nineteen thirty-five, the next year in its cycle."

"But now you think it's come back again?"

"I know it has. I knew when I heard about the 'Witch Killer' that was stalking Sarasota."

"Oh my God." I put a hand to my mouth. For some reason I'd been so caught up in his story I hadn't put two and two together. But now that Sumner was spelling it out... "The Witch Killer. The one who's been killing Wiccans. You think..."

Sumner nodded grimly. "It's back. I'm certain of it. The demon has found a human host somewhere and it's killing again—killing your kind, Kaitlyn."

Chapter Eleven

"You've barely touched your soup," Sumner remarked, sitting back down across from me. "I hope my story didn't ruin your appetite."

"I...uh... It *was* kind of graphic, for want of a better word," I murmured. I was still stunned at his last revelation. The idea that Sumner had been tracking a demonic serial killer for centuries—a killer that was now stalking my own home town—had taken all the wind out of my sails. I looked up at him. "Is that why you killed Jason Drews? Because you thought he might be the...the vessel this thing is using?"

Sumner frowned. "I thought he might be when I first started tracking him but no, by the time I killed him I knew he wasn't the one."

"Then why? Just to get to me? To send me a message without killing an innocent person?"

He gave me a level look. "I have killed innocent people before, Kaitlyn. Don't fool yourself about that or try to make me into something I'm not."

"So you were, what—making an example of him? Punishing him?"

He shrugged. "I needed someone to kill in order to get held at your house and Drews was handy."

His nonchalant act wasn't fooling me. "You let his last victim go. Took her back to her parents. Why didn't you kill her too?"

Sumner's face went dark. "I don't kill children—ever. Not even when I was first made and the thirst was an unquenchable flame inside me."

I gave him my best blank face. "So what you're saying is, you're not a monster."

"Oh, I am that, Kaitlyn." He gave me a chilly smile that made my blood run cold. "But I'm a different kind of monster from Drews or the thing I am hunting. When I kill it's most often quick, silent and nearly painless."

"What you did to Drews didn't *look* painless," I pointed out. "You scared the shit out of him and then ripped his throat out."

His eyes blazed. "And I would do it again. *Will* do it again if I find anyone else repeating his actions."

"You won't get a chance," I pointed out. "You're stuck here until your trial and after that..." I shook my head. "Just because Drews was a murderer doesn't mean you'll get off for killing him. There's still due process to go through and you're a vampire—the jury isn't going to be too terribly sympathetic no matter what good reasons you had for doing what you did."

"We'll see." Sumner didn't look worried in the least. "In the mean time, I need your help."

So we were back to that again. "Sorry, Sumner, but I don't see what I can do to help you. Even if you knew who the uh, demon was using to kill Wiccans I don't see what I could do about it."

Sumner leaned across the table. "You're a powerful witch—the most powerful one I've seen in centuries."

"But I don't usually use my magic for harm—especially not physical harm," I said. "It just doesn't work that way."

He shook his head. "It doesn't have to. I have the physical side of it covered. What I need from you is a spell binding it back into the pit, never to return. You have to bind it *while* I kill its host. It's the only way to be sure it can't ever come back again."

"And how do you know this?" I demanded.

Sumner frowned. "I told you I almost killed it before. That was the last time I encountered it—back in eighteen sixty. At that time I had the help of a very lovely...and very *reluctant* young witch."

I narrowed my eyes. "There's something you're not telling me. *Why* was she reluctant?"

He sighed and sat back. "Because in order to form a net the demon can't escape I need to merge my powers with one of your kind."

"You're talking about a bond." I pushed away from the table. "No, Sumner. No way."

He looked frustrated. "Why is this such an issue for you? Do you fear me that much?"

I lifted my chin. "I'm not afraid of you. But I'm also not interested in forming a permanent connection with you."

"We already have a connection," he pointed out.

"I know. And I damn sure don't want you inside my head any more than you already are."

"Not even to catch the thing that butchered your friend?" Sumner nodded. "Oh yes, I know about Rune. I didn't get to her in time, unfortunately. But I know what it did to her—it was the same thing that was done to my Sarah."

I felt a twinge but tried not to show it. "Don't try to guilt me into this, Sumner. Rune was my friend but I don't think she would have wanted me to open myself up to one evil even to stop another one."

"So you think I'm evil? Is that it?" His eyes blazed.

I shrugged uneasily. "You said yourself you're no white knight. You're a vampire—you take life in order to exist. That's against everything I stand for. Everything I believe."

"I haven't had to kill in order to live for centuries," Sumner said in a low voice. "Now I only bring death where it is richly deserved."

"So you're the judge, jury, and executioner all by yourself?" I crossed my arms over my chest. "Nice, Sumner. Very nice."

His eyes blazed pale-on-red. "Do you know what Jason Drews was doing to those little girls? Do you have any idea the terror and agony he inflicted on them when he violated and killed them?"

I swallowed hard. "Look, I'm not saying Drews didn't get what was coming to him—just that you weren't the one who should have made that decision or carried out the sentence."

"But I am the only one who cares!" He got up and started pacing again. "The only one who can catch this thing—this demon. And I need your help. Please, Kaitlyn..." He sank to his knees before me and looked up into my eyes. "If you want me to beg, I will. I need your help."

The sight of Sumner on his knees before me nearly left me speechless. I was willing to bet begging wasn't part of his usual repertoire—ripping someone's throat out if they didn't get what they wanted was more the vampire style than asking nicely. So the fact that he was actually on his knees before me shook me as almost nothing else could have.

That and the desperation in his face were almost enough to sway me. But I couldn't help hearing Nana's warning ringing in my ears. *If you bind yourself to the darkness, you'll never be free of it.* "How do you know I could even help you?" I said reluctantly. "You said you had the help of a witch before and you weren't able to kill it."

"The binding between us wasn't tight enough." He sounded bitter. "In fact, it was barely there at all."

"Was it..." I cleared my throat. "Was it a blood bond or a physical bond?"

He shook his head. "She refused a physical bond and I respected her reasons for that—she was married."

I raised an eyebrow. "She let you form a blood bond with her, then? She let you bite her?" It surprised me since a blood bond was usually stronger than a physical bond and much harder to break.

Sumner sighed. "No, she didn't allow me to bite her. Fiona pricked her finger with a silver needle and gave me a single drop of her blood. I think you can understand why when the time came, our bond wasn't strong enough to banish the demon forever."

I stared at him—shocked for the second time that night. "Fiona? Did you say the witch's name was *Fiona*?"

He frowned. "Yes, why?"

"And she was living in Georgia in eighteen sixty? *Fiona McKenna*?"

"That was her last name, I believe. Why?"

"Because." I stood up, knocking the chair over backward in my haste to get away. "That's my ancestor. She's practically the matriarch of our line—the source of our power."

"Truly?" Sumner looked as surprised as I felt.

"That explains it." I reached up to grasp the locket around my neck in one hand. "The weird connection we have—you've had some of my great, great, great grandmother's blood."

"Only a drop, as I told you," he protested.

I shook my head. "It doesn't matter. A drop is enough. If I formed a bond with you the binding between us would be..."

"Incredibly strong," Sumner finished for me. His eyes shone eagerly. He was up in a flash and pulling me close.

"No," I gasped as I felt the flow of sexual need between us, sparking like a live wire when his body pressed against mine.

Sumner obviously felt it too. Cupping my cheek he murmured, "Think of it, Kaitlyn, together we could be invincible. We could overcome any obstacle with a bond that powerful between us. A bond like that would be—"

"Almost impossible to break. I'm sorry, Sumner." I pushed away from him, nearly stumbling over the chair I'd knocked over. I was still clutching my locket in my hand. It was a gesture of protection—of warding. "I can't," I told him, shaking my head. "Can't bind myself to you that way, that strongly. No matter how good the reason is."

"Kaitlyn—" He held out a hand to me but I turned and ran for my bedroom door. He could have caught me—I knew how fast he could move. But when I looked over my shoulder he was just standing there, a look of sorrow and frustration etched on his handsome features.

I threw up some wards around my bedroom door, then shut it and locked it tight. As though my flimsy locks would be any use against a vampire's strength. But I knew my wards would hold—they would have to.

Wrapping my arms around myself, I sat on my bed and trembled. I'd had such a close call—he'd *almost* convinced me! If I had bound myself to him in any way...I shook my head, feeling sick.

What I wanted more than anything else was to call Nana. I wanted to apologize and tell her she'd been right all along. My hand hovered over my cell phone but... part of me didn't want to hear her say *I told you so* no matter how gently she worded it. I knew I shouldn't let my foolish pride get in the way of the most important relationship of my life but I persuaded myself that I could call her the next day. When I had calmed down a little and decided what to do about Sumner.

I ran a hand through my hair in agitation. Should I try a binding spell to keep him away from me? Or just wait until he went back to his room and quietly put the wards I'd relaxed back in place? He hadn't seemed violent but his desperation had been clear

and I had seen the grief in his pale eyes when he talked about his wife. Dead three-hundred years and he still mourned her—that was devotion. Devotion and determination. He was a man—or a vampire rather—motivated by revenge. And I had the feeling that he would do anything—*anything*—to get the vengeance he was after.

One thing was perfectly clear, I couldn't let him near me again. All it would take for him to have an almost unbreakable grip on me was a single droplet of my blood. Of course, he could bond me to him physically if we made love but that was damn sure never going to happen now. I shuddered when I thought about how close I'd come to it the night before.

So a physical bond was out since I was totally and completely unwilling. I was fairly certain I could trust Sumner not to rape me—he wasn't that kind of monster, as he had pointed out. But I wouldn't put it past him to take a little love bite and form a blood bond. Just one drop of living blood from my body to his mouth, that was all it would take. I shook my head... God, what was I going to do? What?

A soft knocking on the bedroom door interrupted my frantic musings. I jumped and let out a very undignified gasp.

"Kaitlyn?" Sumner's voice was soft.

"Go away, Sumner," I said, my voice shaking. "I'm sorry about what happened to your wife but there's no way in hell—"

"I know how you feel." His deep voice was muffled by the door but I could still hear the sorrow and muted anger in it. "Believe me, Kaitlyn, I know what you think of me. I just wanted you to know I won't try to force anything on you that you don't want—I may be what you consider evil but I am not that kind of monster."

"That's nice to know," I said tartly. "But I think I'll stay in here just the same."

"It's your choice to believe me or not. To trust me or not." Now his voice just sounded tired. "This is your house—you have the right to feel safe in it."

He sounded so sincere that I almost went to the door. I wanted to open it—to see his face and know that he really meant what he said. But then I stopped myself. It could be a trick. It was better—safer—to keep myself locked up in the bedroom at least for tonight. Tomorrow I could reassess how I felt. So I stayed where I was.

"Kaitlyn?" Sumner said.

"Thanks for the reassurance," I said, trying to sound formal and businesslike. "And thank you for dinner. But I was about to go to bed anyway. I have to finish this paperwork sometime and I'm also really tired." I manufactured a yawn that wouldn't have fooled a three-year-old, let alone a three-hundred-year-old vampire but Sumner finally seemed to get the hint.

"I understand," he said. "I'll leave you alone. Sleep well."

After that story you told me? I don't think so.

“I’m sorry if what I told you disturbed you,” he said, answering my thought, much to my discomfort. “But I felt like it was important for you to know. Good night, Kaitlyn.”

Before I could answer, I sensed that he was gone.

Chapter Twelve

I was in a chilly, dark room lit only by a single, smoky fire. It wasn't close enough to warm me and I shivered as I watched the flames leap in the hearth. I was never going to be warm again because...*because the grave is cold*. I knew that somehow. Just as I knew I would be in my grave soon – as soon as *he* was done with me.

As though my thoughts had brought him to me, I saw a tall, skeletal shape striding across the room. The raw wooden planks that had been laid as the floor creaked under his feet. This building was still new – the newest in our township. And the most feared.

"How are you, my dear?" He leaned over me, his blue eyes kind and concerned. "Feeling ready to confess yet?"

"What do you want with me?" I whispered. "I'm not-not what you think I am. Please just let me go."

"I can't." He gravely shook his head. "Not until you admit your sins."

"I haven't sinned. I've never hurt anyone. Please..." I hated to beg but I couldn't help myself. "Please, just give me back my clothes."

"It shouldn't bother you to be naked, my dear. Don't you dance with the devil like this, bare beneath the moon? I know you do. I know your ways."

The sharp blue eyes ran over my naked form. Bound as I was to the crude wooden table I could do nothing to cover myself. I felt my cheeks heat as I blushed dull red with shame. No one had ever seen me this way except my husband and he had seen me only in the darkness of our wedding chamber. When my husband looked at me, touched me, it was with reverence and love. I felt cherished, precious. Beautiful.

But when *he* looked at me like that, with those sharp blue eyes I felt violated. Felt like the harlot he said I was.

"Please," I whispered, my voice breaking. "Please just let me go. I'll do anything."

"Anything?" His hand ran up my leg, making me want to gag. I could feel the power within me rising, rebelling against his filthy touch. I wanted to throw it against him, to smother him with it, to bathe him in flames. But I didn't know how. I'd never used it that way before, never used it for anything but good. All my expertise lay in coaxing reluctant babes from their mother's wombs or healing the little hurts of children. I didn't know how to hurt. To maim or kill. But oh God in heaven, how I wanted to now!

His eyes narrowed. "You're angry with me. The witch within you is rising, desiring to hurt me." He leaned forward, his long, spidery fingers pinching my inner thigh cruelly. "Be warned, my dear. You cannot overcome me. I have my own power within."

As he spoke, a cloud formed around his head. It was black and thick like tar and it seemed almost to sink into his very skin somehow, permeating his entire being. Making him different. Other.

And then his eyes changed.

They went from bright blue to black. And not just the iris. His whole eyes filled with it, burned with it, the whites obscured by obsidian flames. They danced in his eyes, filled with an obscene, evil glee. The thing that looked at me was no longer human – not a bit.

I opened my mouth to scream and he gagged me, shoving a dirty piece of linen down my throat to muffle my sounds of horror. Then, with a flourish, he produced a knife. Its blade was dark with crusted blood but the point of it shone in the firelight, deadly and sharp.

Leaning over me, he took a handful of my matted blonde hair in one hand and yanked my head back, stretching my throat, baring it for his blade. The black flames danced in his eyes and his voice was thick and hissing, like a snake speaking with a human tongue.

“Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.”

No! I wanted to scream. *No, no, please! Please!* But I couldn’t speak, couldn’t move. I was trapped and I was going to die.

The knife came down, the sharp edge of the blade glittering in the firelight. I felt it bite into my skin as the thing above me laughed. And laughed...and laughed...

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“No! No, no, *no.*” I sat bolt upright in bed, shaking off the horror of the dream. *It wasn’t real. Wasn’t real,* I told myself over and over. *Just a dream and it’s over now. Just a dream. Only a dream.*

And then I happened to look up at the window.

Black ooze covered it, making a greasy film that blanketed the glass and kept out all but a glimmer of moonlight. *What the...* I stared uncomprehending, wondering for a moment if it was raining outside. But no rain I’d ever seen had that color and consistency.

Then, as I watched, something else began to happen. The oily film that covered the window began to find its way inside. Creeping under the crack between the bottom of the window and the sash, it oozed its way in. And then it began to stretch and elongate.

It was hard to see in the darkness of the bedroom but I recognized the movements as the oily film came toward me. It had formed itself into tendrils... a dozen long thing snakes that looked like they were made of crude oil. They were sliding through the air silently, seeking blindly.

Seeking *me.*

Oh my God! It was just like my nightmare. The thing over the house—the cloud made of evil. And it was trying to get inside—*was* inside already. And it wanted me, wanted to do me harm. To kill me and absorb my power into itself so that it could go on taking innocent victims.

I couldn't let it touch me. Couldn't bear to have those oily black tentacles anywhere near my skin. I wanted to leap from the bed and run, to get away. I started to put my feet on the floor...and then I saw the mass of shadows, sliding and squirming like a roiling nest of snakes. It was coming out from under my bed, just waiting for me to put a foot down in it like an unsuspecting swimmer stumbling into a bed of water moccasins.

No...no! It has to be a dream. But it sure as hell didn't feel like a dream. I pinched myself hard on the upper arm. Sure enough, it hurt. I was awake and my horrible nightmare of the night before was somehow coming true. But that would mean...

Shaking, I forced myself to look up at the ceiling.

Black, oily stalactites were forming over my head. Growing ever longer, they dripped down, reaching for me.

I was trapped.

I wrapped my arms around my knees, shivering, helpless. The presence of evil in the room was so strong it was like a fog—a poisonous gas that made it hard to breathe, hard to think. The evil thing wanted me, wanted to consume me because it hated me and everything I was. Everything feminine was abhorrent to it. It wanted to rend, to suffocate, to butcher and destroy until there was nothing left and I was its intended target.

"Kaitlyn!"

My head snapped up in response to Sumner's call. He was standing in the bathroom doorway, framed in light, his pale eyes flashing like an avenging angel.

"Sumner?" I felt sluggish, so filled with terror that everything seemed to be going in slow motion.

"Come here," he said urgently. "Get away from it, right now. Jump to me—I'll catch you." He held out his arms, indicating that I should jump from the foot of the bed.

I wanted to do what he said but I felt frozen—my mind numb with horror. All I could do was shake my head mutely. *I can't. I can't.*

"Yes, you can. Don't let it in. Don't let it control you!"

His words made sense but somehow I couldn't act on them. The thing was already in my mind, I could feel it growing there like a knot of poisonous snakes. Growing, coiling, taking over. I was paralyzed with fear, unable to move even as I felt the first black, oily tentacles brush against my hair.

Sumner seemed to understand what was wrong with me. I could tell that he wanted to come to me but the wards I'd put up were still in place. There was no way he could get through. He would have to stand there and watch the evil consume me

because by now I couldn't even open my mouth to release the magic. My skin felt cold and despite my extreme terror, my heartbeat seemed to slow. I was freezing...was already frozen in place, unable to move.

But Sumner didn't give up. His gaze flicked over the doorway, as though studying something I couldn't see. Then he looked up at me. "Don't move. I'm coming in."

If my mouth had still worked I would have asked how he planned to get through the wards. They were the strongest magic I had and if he thought he could just walk right through them...

Sumner backed up, like an athlete about to make a running leap. He was wearing nothing but the black silk sleep pants and his broad chest was pale in the glow of the bathroom light. Then, too fast for my eyes to follow, he was suddenly through the doorway. I felt a surge of energy as my magic was disturbed but before I could really register it, Sumner was on the bed beside me.

He wrapped me in his arms, shielding me from the seeking tentacles, protecting me from the dripping, oily stalactites coming down from the ceiling.

"Listen to me, Kaitlyn," he murmured in my ear. "Fight it! You have the power. Don't let it control you."

In his arms I begin to thaw. Though vampires aren't known for their high body temperature, he seemed to radiate a kind of psychic warmth that permeated the layer of frost that had settled over my mind and body.

"Fight it," he said again. "Drive it back. You can do it—I'll help you."

For the first time, from the moment I had woken up and realized that my nightmare was not a dream but reality, I began to feel in control of the situation. I even felt able to do as he said. *I am not helpless. I will not be a victim!* Reaching up, I wrapped my fingers around the locket with Fiona's hair in it and called on my magic.

"By the power of the light. By the power of good and right. By the Goddess and her blessed sight, evil one, I banish you." My voice was shaky at first but it grew stronger as I chanted.

"That's right, Kaitlyn." Sumner's voice was low and encouraging in my ear. "You have the power. Send it away." His eyes blazed in the darkness, the pale irises seeming to shed a light of their own. I could see that some of the black tentacles were touching him, sliding over his bare shoulders but if they bothered him, he didn't show it. He just held me tight, shielding me and murmuring encouragement.

Taking a deep breath, I chanted again. It wasn't any formal invocation or spell—just the words that came to my mind. I had always practiced white magic, trying not to hurt anyone unless I was protecting myself or the ones I loved. Now the good energy I had sent out into the universe came back to me threefold and I felt myself grow stronger, the light inside me shining brighter as I fought the evil.

And slowly the evil presence began to recede.

Like the tide going out, I felt it ebb slowly away. The tentacles pulled back and slid under the crack in the window. The sense of oppression I felt, the feeling of malevolence so strong it sucked all the air out of the room, eased. It seemed to take forever but at last when I looked up at the ceiling, it was clear and clean. The oily, oozing black stalactites were gone and there was nothing but pale white paint glowing in the moonlight that shone through the clear window.

Sumner let out a breath. "It's gone. For now."

"For now? What do you mean for now?" I demanded, my voice shaking. In fact, all of me was shaking almost uncontrollably—a reaction to what had almost just happened.

"I mean it will come back. In this form or in human form when it re-enters its host." He looked down at me, searching my eyes with his. "You know that, don't you, Kaitlyn? This thing wants you. It isn't going to give up."

"But I sent it away. It's gone now." I became suddenly aware that I was practically sitting in his lap and that neither one of us had a whole lot of clothes on. Sumner had on his sleep pants and I was wearing a soft faded T-shirt that barely came down to my thighs.

I could feel the current of sexual electricity flowing between us, just under the skin and I wanted to move. But his grip on me was too strong, his touch too comforting to deny. After what had almost just happened, I needed some comfort, even if it was from a vampire.

"You banished it but you didn't bind it back to the pit," he pointed out.

"I don't think I could," I said, remembering the way it had crept into my mind, invading my senses, freezing me helplessly to the spot. "It's too strong."

"It's too strong for either of us to handle alone," Sumner said. "But together..."

"Don't start that again." I pushed away from him even though I really didn't want to and crossed my arms over my chest. "And speaking of how strong you are, how did you get past my wards?"

He frowned. "It wasn't hard."

"*It wasn't hard?* Those were the strongest wards I'm capable of. You shouldn't have been able to put a toe over the threshold, let alone get all the way into my room." I was beginning to feel a little panicky. If Sumner could get past the wards with little or no difficulty, what about the other vampires I hosted as part of my S.E. job? Here I was feeling so smug and safe when obviously, I was completely unprotected.

He sighed, obviously catching my frantic thoughts. "Please don't think that. Your wards are very strong—strong enough to keep out even the most determined of my kind."

"They didn't keep *you* out," I pointed out.

His eyes flashed. "And it's a good thing they didn't, don't you think?"

"That's beside the point," I said stubbornly. I felt a surge of anger and welcomed it. Anger was an easier emotion to feel than fear or...whatever else it was I was feeling for him. "Look, stop stalling and just tell me, Sumner. How did you get past my wards?"

He ran a hand through his hair—a very human gesture of frustration, I thought. "You're not going to like it."

"I'll add it to the list," I said dryly. "Spill."

"Your magic..." Sumner cleared his throat. "It's very strong, very potent. I can feel that. The thing is though, I don't know if it's because of the bond I had with Fiona or for some other reason. But your magic...doesn't actually seem to work on me. Or not very well, anyway."

"What?" I could scarcely believe what I was hearing.

He nodded. "It's true. That's probably the reason you couldn't heal me magically of the silver infection."

"You were healed in the end, though," I pointed out.

"Because you let me feed from you." Sumner's voice went low and his eyes were suddenly half lidded. "It was your, ah, human essence that healed me, not your magic."

I felt my face flush at the reminder of our one night together. I glared at him angrily. "You should have told me my magic didn't affect you."

I didn't want you to know because I didn't want you to feel frightened of me," he said softly.

"But the wards..." I began.

"I feel a tingling sensation when I go through them—it's like passing through a curtain—but I can get through with little or no difficulty."

"The cuffs? My silver cuffs?"

"The silver impedes me a bit, but I could have gotten out of them with a little effort."

"When I invited you into my house?"

His eyes flashed. "I could have come in without your invitation. And I can leave without your permission as well."

I threw up my hands. "So basically there's nothing holding you here."

"That's not true." Sumner leaned forward, looking into my eyes. "You hold me here, Kaitlyn. Because I need you. Because I want you." His eyes were luminous in the dark bedroom and I could smell the warm scent of his skin very clearly.

"You need me to avenge your wife's death," I said, sitting back, away from him. "But if you think you can seduce me into bonding with you, think again. It's still not going to happen."

He looked frustrated. "Why is it so difficult for you to believe I want you? I admit I need your help to overcome the demon but you're not the only witch in this area, Kaitlyn. I could have chosen someone else."

"Then why don't you?" My heart was beating too hard but I tried to keep my voice even.

"Because I don't want anyone else." He leaned forward again and murmured against my cheek. "I want you. In every possible way."

"Stop it." I could feel my cheeks getting hot again and I was glad it was too dark for him to see me blush. "This isn't the time or the place."

"On the contrary, Kaitlyn. It's dark and we're in a warm, comfortable bed together. Not to mention we've just survived an attack by a malevolent entity that tried to kill us. We ought to be celebrating the fact that we're still alive."

"You're not," I pointed out. "Alive, I mean. So save the celebration for something else. And someone else, all right?"

He frowned. "I don't have to ask nicely. I could bind you to me here and now."

"Sumner..." I started to back away but suddenly he had me by the arms and was pulling me close. He tangled one hand in my hair and gently but firmly pulled my head back, exposing my throat.

"It wouldn't take much," he murmured, his pale eyes gleaming in the dark. He leaned forward and pressed his face to my neck, his breath hot against my vulnerable skin. "One little bite," he whispered and licked a long, slow trail from the hollow of my throat to just below my ear. "Just the tiniest nick."

I shivered helplessly, my pulse racing as I felt the press of his fangs, the sharp little pinpricks of pain indenting my skin but not quite piercing it. "Sumner, don't," I whispered in a breathless voice.

"You would rather I bonded you to me another way?" He lifted his head and stared into my eyes again. "You prefer sex to blood?"

"No, I-I never said that," I protested.

"You didn't have to. Your scent says it all." He made a quick move and suddenly he was on top of me, the weight of his muscular body pressing me into the bed.

"Sumner," I gasped as he pinned my arms above my head and spread my legs with his own.

"This is how I want you." His eyes burned into mine. "Under me. Open. Naked." Leaning down, he murmured against my lips, "I want to be inside you, Kaitlyn. *Deep* inside. Want to feel you hot and wet around me, opening for me, taking me in. While I *fuck* you."

I felt my breath catch in my throat as the electrical need sizzled through me. God, there was no way this ought to be turning me on. He was basically threatening me, telling me he could take whatever he wanted and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it. And yet...

"You-you said you weren't a rapist. Said you weren't that kind of monster," I reminded him breathlessly.

Sumner smiled, his fangs very white in the dim room. He rolled to one side, taking his weight off me, but still held me immobile. "You can't rape the willing, sweetheart. Don't forget, I can tell how much you need me." Holding my wrists above my head with one hand, he trailed his fingers down my body and pushed my T-shirt up to my neck. "Look how hard your nipples are," he murmured, flicking one idly, as though to make his point.

I gasped as fire shot through me. "Sumner, please!"

"And your pussy," he continued, ignoring me. His large hand traveled down my trembling belly and twisted in my plain white cotton bikini panties. With a sharp tug, he ripped them away, leaving me completely bare for him.

"No!" I bucked my hips up, trying to get away from him but he stilled me with a single palm placed firmly on my hip.

"Just proving a point, Kaitlyn. There's no need to get so upset," he purred. "Now spread your legs."

I shook my head mutely. No. No way in hell was I going to do this. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of knowing what his touch did to me.

"Go on." His deep voice took on a coaxing tone. "Spread your legs. I promise not to hurt you." He stared at me, his eyes seeming to pierce my soul. "I won't let you go until you do, you know," he murmured. "So unless you want to be here all night, I suggest you comply."

There was no way out of it. My magic was useless against him and he had me pinned neatly to the bed with no help in sight. But that wasn't the only reason I parted my thighs for him. As reluctant as I was to admit it, I wanted him. Wanted his touch even though I knew I shouldn't.

"That's very good." Sumner leaned forward and kissed my cheek gently. "Such a good girl to spread your legs for me, Kaitlyn. Now let's see exactly how unwilling you are, shall we?"

"Sumner," I whispered, my voice pleading.

"It's all right, sweetheart," he assured me, his hand sliding over the slope of my abdomen. "Everything is going to be all right. Don't be afraid. I would never hurt you."

You already are, I wanted to say and then his fingers found my wet, throbbing folds and slipped inside.

I cried out, bucking upward again but this time for a different reason.

"Oh, yes." Sumner pressed a light, teasing kiss to my lips and whispered in my ear, "Your little pussy is so hot and wet and ready for me right now, Kaitlyn. And you're so empty inside—you want to be filled. *Need* to be filled."

I knew he wasn't just talking about my sex. It was the dry, barren place inside me, the source of my power that he meant. And despite the way he had touched and pleased me the night before, I still ached for more. Needed his touch.

“Just because my body is willing doesn’t mean my mind is,” I told him, trying to make my voice strong even though part of me just wanted to melt, to open to him and give him whatever he wanted. But I couldn’t let him know that, couldn’t let him have any idea that he already had so much power over me.

“Is that right?” His thumb was slipping over my clit in a slow, delicious rhythm that seemed intended to drive me wild. I could barely hold still under that light, teasing touch. I wanted to roll my hips against his hand. Wanted to beg for more. And Sumner knew it. “Can you honestly deny that this is what you want?” he murmured. “What you need? I can feel your desire, Kaitlyn, your thirst for more.”

I looked him in the eyes. “Do you turn me on? Yes. Do I want to be bound so tightly to you I might never get free of you? No. Please, Sumner...*please*.” I didn’t like to beg but I couldn’t help it. My body was reacting to his touch so strongly that if he didn’t stop soon I wouldn’t want him to stop.

The look on his face went from teasing and intent to somber in a heartbeat. “You’re serious. You really fear being bound to me that much.”

“Yes,” I whispered. “I can’t...can’t let myself do this. Not with you. I’m sorry.”

“So am I.” Slowly he withdrew his fingers and rolled away from me.

I sat up, pulling down my T-shirt and feeling empty inside in more than one way. For some reason I felt like crying.

“I’ll leave your house at once.” Sumner’s face was like white marble in the moonlight. His features were impassive, giving no clue as to what he was feeling.

“You can’t leave until your trial,” I pointed out.

He waved a hand. “A mere formality.”

“But—”

“Don’t worry that this will negatively impact your career as a Supernatural Enforcer,” he interrupted me. “I’ll be sure that no one remembers any of this—yourself included.” He turned toward me. “Look at me, Kaitlyn. This will only take a minute.”

I realized he was talking about erasing my memory. “What? No!” I scooted to the edge of the bed but he followed too quickly for my eyes to track.

“Don’t make me hold you down.” There was a warning note in his voice that I knew I shouldn’t ignore. But I couldn’t help it.

“No!” I started to run but suddenly he had me, his large hands wrapped around my upper arms in an unbreakable grip as he stared into my eyes.

“Hold still,” he murmured.

“So this is it?” I said bitterly. “You’re just going to wipe the slate clean?”

“It’s better that way.” His voice was calm, detached.

Anger surged through me. “You don’t even need my permission or cooperation, do you?”

“No,” he said simply.

"Why all the coaxing and sweet talk last night when you wanted me to drop my guard then?" I demanded. "Why bother when you could have erased my inhibitions any time you wanted to?"

A look passed over his face almost too quickly for me to read. Anger? Regret? "I wanted it to be real between us," he said softly, his eyes searching mine. "Didn't want to force you into anything you didn't want to do."

"The way you're forcing me to forget now? Sumner..." I dared to lift my hand and place it against his bare chest. His skin felt as hard and cold as stone to my touch. "Please," I whispered. "I need to remember. As long as that thing...that demon is out there, I and my fellow Wiccans are in mortal danger. I need to know that—not just forget it."

He shook his head. "I'll protect you. I've fought it before, I can fight it again. I won't be able to banish it completely but you'll be gone by the time it comes back. Maybe the next seventy-five-year cycle I'll find a witch who won't fear me too much to bond with me."

He didn't look very happy or very hopeful about the idea but I could tell he was determined. He was going to erase my memory and go about his business, fighting this unbeatable thing by himself the way he'd been doing for the past three-hundred years. And I would have no idea what was going on under my very nose. Or any memory of what had happened between us.

"Sumner," I said softly, raising my hand to his cheek. "Please... I don't want to forget. Not just about the demon. About...all of it. I don't want to forget about *you*."

His gaze flickered over my face, studying me intently. "I wish I could believe that."

"It's true," I insisted. "Look, I know I'm hard but I've *had* to be. I haven't...haven't had much luck in the love department. I always seem to fall for the wrong guys." I swallowed, forcing myself to go on. "But that doesn't mean that what we did last night didn't mean anything to me. It meant a lot. More than I want to say and I don't...I just don't want to lose it. The memory of it."

At last his expression softened. "You really do mean that."

"You know I do." I stroked his cheek. "And I'm sorry I can't help you fight this thing. I should, I know. It's my responsibility as a member of the Wiccan community. But..."

"You fear to bind yourself to me. I know." He nodded, looking regretful.

"Yes," I whispered. "I'm sorry." His cheek was rough against my palm, his eyes still luminous and full of an otherworldly beauty in the dark room.

"Very well. I'll leave your memory intact." He released me and I let my hand drop to my side.

"Thank you," I said rubbing my upper arms where he'd been holding me.

Sumner laughed humorlessly. "You're welcome. For all the good it will do you. Maybe you can dream of me sometimes, since we're obviously not meant to be together."

"Maybe," I said. He got off the bed and headed for the doorway. "Wait – where are you going?" I asked.

"There are still a few hours of darkness left. I need to go out and see if I can locate the demon."

I frowned. "How are you going to do that? I mean, if it's floating around in that horrible black oily cloud..." I shivered. "How can you possibly track something like that?"

"The fact that it's in that form probably means its host is incapacitated in some way," Sumner said. "Or maybe it's just taking a break away from the physical form. It can't stay in the host for too long – it wears out a human body at an incredible rate."

I thought of the dream I'd had where I was Sumner's wife. Of the almost skeletal appearance of the demon's human host and how his eyes had changed when it entered the man's body. "I didn't know that."

He shrugged. "How could you? Anyway, if the demon is in its incorporeal form, it will be looking for another witch to attack. Even if it can't kill without a human body, it can siphon energy. So that's what it will be trying to do."

I felt a surge of panic. "I need to call my entire coven and warn them this thing is on the prowl! If you hadn't been here to help me –"

"It would have drained you completely," Sumner said grimly. "But there's no need to warn everyone yet. Obviously you're the most powerful witch in this area, prompting the demon to attack you first. Simply tell me the name of the second most powerful witch and how to get to her house."

"The second most...oh my God!" I jumped out of bed and reached for a pair of jeans.

Sumner frowned as I threw them on. "What are you doing? Where are you going?"

I turned to face him, my heart racing in my chest. "Nana. It's going after my Nana next."

Chapter Thirteen

We were too late.

By the time I got to Nana's house the demon had come and gone, leaving her cold and stiff in her bed.

"Nana!" I cried, shaking her. "Nana, wake up! *Wake up.*" She shook like a rag doll in my grip, her eyes looking up at me lifelessly. "Oh God," I whispered. "Oh God, please no." All I could think about was the way we'd been fighting the last time I saw her. I'd wanted to call her and apologize—why hadn't I? How could she be gone when I hadn't had a chance to tell her one last time how much I loved her?

"Kaitlyn, come here." Sumner pulled me to him and I pressed my hot face against his cool chest and sobbed. I didn't like to look weak in front of him—in front of anyone, really—but I couldn't help it. I had lost the one person in the world who loved me unconditionally. I was utterly bereft.

Sumner wrapped his arms around me and stroked my hair without saying a word. Really, what could he say? No words of comfort could assuage this pain. Nothing could help because nothing would ever be the same again.

"She's gone. I can't believe she's gone," I whispered brokenly. "Oh, God, Nana..."

"Maybe not," Sumner said, his voice rumbling against my ear.

"What?" I looked up at him uncertainly. "What do you mean?"

"The demon drains a victim's life force along with her power but it doesn't always kill. Here, sweetheart, step away." Sumner pushed me gently aside and laid a hand over Nana's heart. Then he stood there with his head cocked to one side as though he was listening for something.

"What are you doing?" I asked dully as tears streamed down my face. "It doesn't matter what you do. She's dead."

"No, she's not. But she's very close." He looked at me sharply. "I can save her, Kaitlyn, but there's a risk."

"You can? How?" I sniffed back my tears and looked at him hopefully. "Anything—anything at all. I don't care, just do it."

He shook his head. "Hear me out. The demon has drained her mentally, physically, and spiritually. There's a chance I can bring her back if I give her some of my blood. However..." He held up one finger in warning. "The amount I'd need to give her might turn her. How do you feel about that?"

"Turn her?" I frowned. "You mean...into a vampire?"

Sumner nodded. "I'm sorry but she's very far gone. So I'll do what I can if you want me to but I can't promise there won't be adverse consequences."

I thought of what he was saying and about how Nana felt about vampires. She pretty much hated the lot of them. That's not to say she was racist—most witches felt the same way. I knew that I had only a short while ago. That might be changing now that I was really getting to know Sumner. But Nana was old school—she would *hate* being undead. Still, if there was even the slightest chance of saving her...

"Do it," I said, trying to push away my doubts. "I-I'm not ready to let her go yet."

"As you wish." Without another word Sumner bit the inside of his wrist, pried open Nana's mouth and let the blood flow in.

At first it dripped down her chin and I was afraid she was too far gone for it to do her any good. Then her throat worked and she swallowed convulsively again and again. Her hands came up and clamped onto Sumner's forearm like claws and she drew his arm down, latching onto his wrist and sucking for all she was worth. And yet, the entire time the expression in her eyes never changed. It was as if she wasn't really there for what was going on—as though only her body was responding to the blood but her mind wasn't engaged at all.

Sumner stood there stiffly, allowing her to take and take with no complaint. I noticed that his already-pale skin was growing paler and paler but he didn't say anything at all until he finally pulled his wrist away.

"Enough." His eyes were huge and he looked positively gaunt, his cheekbones standing out in sharp relief. "She should be all right now," he said, nodding at Nana who had turned on her side and was sleeping peacefully.

Seeing the traces of his blood, bright crimson against her faded lips, I had a sudden stab of anxiety. "How long until we know if she's..."

"Undead?" Sumner raised an eyebrow at me. "It should be fairly obvious when she wakes up."

"But when will that be?" I insisted.

He shrugged. "It could be anywhere from a day to a week."

"A week! What am I supposed to do for a week?"

"Get ready," he said grimly. "Get a cooler and pack it with bags of blood just in case. If she wakes up with the thirst, you don't want to be the only source of nourishment nearby."

I wanted to ask him where the hell I was supposed to get bags of blood but he was looking worse by the minute. I began to get the idea that he'd really gone all out for Nana and possibly given more than he could afford to lose.

"Sumner..." I put out a hand to him but he ducked away from my touch.

"Forgive me, Kaitlyn but I'm very, *very* thirsty right now." His eyes were pale-on-red. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't," I insisted. "I know you won't. I just want to say thank you. You didn't have to do that." I nodded at Nana who was snoring a little now.

"Wait and see if she turns. Then decide if you still want to thank me," Sumner said harshly. "I'm sorry, but I have to go now. I need to replenish myself at once."

I had a sudden attack of conscious. "You're not going out to go bite some innocent person, are you?" I asked anxiously. I had wanted to save Nana at all costs but I didn't want anyone else to die for her.

Sumner shook his head. "No. I can make it home. Paul and Yvonna can each donate a pint or two."

I thought of the way letting Sumner bite her had affected super model-looking Yvonna before and felt a flash of irritation. "Is that all you're going to do? Just bite them? You're not going to do...anything else?" I asked, unable to help myself.

He smiled thinly. "Why Kaitlyn, if I didn't know better I would think you were jealous."

"Hardly." I crossed my arms over my chest, frowning. I had been in such a hurry to get to Nana's house I hadn't put on a bra and now I regretted it. My T-shirt was much too thin and see-through, especially considering the way Sumner's gaze was roving over my body.

His expression was suddenly serious. "I told you before that Yvonna and Paul were together and I took nothing from them but blood. But you cannot deny me the right to seek what I need if you aren't willing to give it yourself."

I knew he was talking about more than blood and I felt a surge of guilt. He had saved Nana's life and saved me from a fate worse than death at the hands...or rather tentacles...of the hideous demon. And yet I still couldn't find it in me to offer him my blood. But as for offering anything else, there might be a way...something I had overlooked before. I just needed time to consider it.

"Just wait," I said, staring up at him. "I-I need to think but please wait for me. I mean, take blood—I know you can't help that. You need it. But...would you hold off on taking anything else?"

Sumner looked at me directly. "Meaning will I promise not to have sexual relations with another woman while you consider your options?"

"Or a man," I said quickly and he laughed.

"Kaitlyn, my dear. You must think me completely depraved."

I raised an eyebrow. "I thought all vampires were bisexual."

He shrugged. "We dabble from time to time. Eternity is a long time...one gets bored. But I find that I far prefer the female form. It's much more beautiful. So many graceful curves..." His gaze swept over me again, making me shiver as though he had touched me. "Yes, I'll wait for you. But I can't wait forever."

"I'll call you within the next few days," I promised. "I just need to see to Nana."

“And I need to see to the demon,” he said grimly. “Although it might have gotten enough power from your grandmother to keep it sated for awhile.”

“Meaning...?”

“That it won’t seek to drain or kill again for several nights.”

“Good.” I felt relieved. I didn’t like to think of the thing coming after me again, especially without Sumner around to help me. He seemed to read my anxiety because he raised his hand as though he wanted to touch me but didn’t quite dare.

I stepped into the touch, pressing his palm to my cheek and looking up at him. “Yes?”

Sumner shivered at the feel of my skin under his hand and his eyes flashed, making him look like the dangerous predator he was. *Very brave of you, Kaitlyn.*

I lifted my chin. “I’m not afraid of you,” I said, answering his thought aloud. “What did you want to tell me?”

“Only this. If you feel threatened in any way you have only to call me. I’ll be there in a heartbeat.”

Knowing how fast vampires could move, I didn’t doubt him. “Thank you,” I said softly. “For everything.”

“You’re welcome.” And then he was gone.

* * * * *

I spent a lot of time the next few days getting ready. First I found a blood bank that catered to vampires and stocked up as Sumner had suggested. Then I enlisted the help of the coven to keep watch over Nana since I couldn’t be at her bedside 24/7. Not if I wanted to do what I was planning on doing.

I gathered all the materials I needed and spent hours working out the details. I made my plans as I sat at Nana’s bedside, waiting for her to wake up and fearing what might happen when she did. Would she ask for O.J. or O Neg when she opened her eyes? Either way she wasn’t going to be happy about the way I’d chosen to heal her from the demon’s attack.

But at the end of the day, she was the reason I decided to take a risk with Sumner. The demon’s attack on her had made it personal—even more than its attempt to drain me. Nana was the only person I truly loved in the entire world—my only real family. And the way I’d felt when I saw her lying in bed so still and lifeless...well, I didn’t want anyone else to have to go through that. Not if I could help Sumner stop it.

At last I was ready but it took me a good hour to work up the courage to call him. I hadn’t seen him in three days, or nights, since that was how vampires measured time, and it made me nervous to think of being near him again. It wasn’t just what he was—it was the way he affected me. The way I missed him, even though I knew I shouldn’t.

Every time I closed my eyes I thought of him. The way he’d kissed me and tasted me. Threatened me and cooked for me. Touched me both physically and emotionally.

But most of all the way he had held me when I'd thought that Nana was gone. You expect sex and death threats from a vampire—comfort and empathy, not so much. He was such a contradiction I didn't know what to think of him.

Yet I was determined to go through with my plan.

All these thoughts raced through my head as I sat on my bed with my cell phone in my hand. Finally, I knew I couldn't stall anymore. It was nearing midnight and I would need several hours to perform the ritual I had cobbled together. The room was all arranged, the circle drawn, and Nana was safe in her house with one of the coven's oldest and wisest members. But I only had the night before I had to go back and check on her again. It was now or never.

I scrolled through my cell phone, looking for his number. I didn't know when he had done it but sometime when he was staying with me Sumner had programmed himself in. He'd put himself in as S. Vampire—har, har, very funny. I let my finger hover over the send button and took a deep breath, rehearsing one more time what I was going to say.

"Good evening, Kaitlyn."

The cell phone fell from my nerveless fingers and I looked up with a gasp to see him standing there in front of me. "Sumner?" I asked incredulously.

"You were about to call me, I believe." He smiled and stepped forward. "Forgive the intrusion but I could feel you thinking about it for the past hour. I finally decided to just come over."

It shook me that he could feel me across such a distance. Was the connection between us growing stronger?

"It's just that I'm very attuned to you," Sumner said, answering my thought. "Don't worry, Kaitlyn, I know how you feel about being tied to me."

I cleared my throat. "I've, ah...been rethinking that, actually. That's why I asked you here tonight. Or was *about* to ask you here, anyway." I looked at him pointedly and Sumner smiled, one corner of his full mouth going up in a charming grin.

"I'm here now. Pray, enlighten me."

I took a deep breath and just decided to spit it out. "I've decided I want to help you kill the demon—permanently."

He frowned. "You *do* realize that will require some kind of bond, however minor?"

I nodded. "I do. And I'm prepared for that." I motioned to the circle I'd drawn on the hardwood floor of my bedroom and the four pillar candles that sat at the four corners of my bed, which was in the center of the circle. There was also a chalice filled with red wine and an athame—a double edged dagger with a black handle—on my nightstand.

Sumner's gaze flicked rapidly over my preparations and he looked at me with understanding in his pale eyes. "A ceremony, Kaitlyn?"

"To make the binding temporary," I said evenly. "Or as temporary as possible, anyway. I'm sorry, Sumner, but I can only risk so much."

He nodded gravely. "Not to worry. I'm grateful you've decided to help me at all. But do you think it will work? Remember your power does not affect me."

"It affects *me*," I said evenly. "And I'm half of this binding. Yes, I believe it will work. Besides—this is indirect magic. It isn't aimed at you—it's meant to control the degree of bonding between us. That's all."

"I see." He looked thoughtful. "Tell me, what changed your mind?"

"That thing went after my Nana." I wrapped my arms around myself and lifted my chin. "It's not going to get a chance to go after anyone else, ever again."

"I hope you're right." Sumner stepped toward me. "So what is it to be, Kaitlyn? Blood or sex?"

"Not blood," I said. "That's too permanent. Too hard to break."

His eyes flashed. "True. Sex then."

"Yes." It was all I could do to get out that one simple word. I was wearing a long, red silk robe and nothing else and I had never felt so naked in my life. The way Sumner was looking at me—his pale eyes half-lidded with desire—made me shiver with fear and anticipation. No matter what else happened, this was going to be a night I would never forget.

I forced my legs not to shake as I got off the bed and approached him, still wearing the robe. He was standing outside the chalked circle, which was good since I hadn't called it yet. I faced him, one hand poised on the tie to my robe, and looked into his eyes.

"How much do you know about Wiccan ceremonies?" I asked.

"Enough to follow your lead. Though I have never been invited to participate in one before."

"Well you're invited to this one." Taking my courage in both hands, I pulled the sash of my robe and let it fall open, revealing the fact that I was nude underneath.

Sumner sucked in a breath as his gaze flickered hungrily over my body. "Beautiful," he murmured.

"Thank you." His words helped my confidence somewhat but it was still hard to let him see me naked.

"Kaitlyn," Sumner gave me a penetrating look. "I can take away your anxiety. The way I did the night I tasted you."

I remembered the freeing sensation of giving up some of my self control to him. The way I had felt so beautiful and powerful and perfect when I saw myself through his eyes...and reluctantly rejected it.

"Thank you but no," I said evenly. "I have to do this for myself. Part of this ceremony is about balancing our male and female energies—a meeting of equals. I can't act as your equal if I give up my control to you."

He nodded. "As you wish. But please know that I find you incredibly beautiful and desirable right now." His eyes flicked over me again. "With your lovely curves on display and your long, silky hair... You take my breath away, Kaitlyn. Truly, you do."

In the past I might have made a quip about him not needing to breathe since he was dead but no such thought came to me now. Instead I felt grateful to him and empowered by his admiration. It made it a little easier to do what came next.

Shrugging my shoulders, I let the robe fall to the floor in a scarlet heap at my feet. "We must be sky-clad – naked – in order to do this," I told him.

"Of course." He was dressed in tight, faded jeans, a white T-shirt and a black leather jacket. A far cry from the dapper image he usually projected to the world with his ultra-expensive tailored suits. But it didn't matter to me what he was wearing that night – only what was under it.

Moving slowly, his eyes never leaving mine, Sumner began to strip. He shed the jacket and tugged the T-shirt over his head, baring his broad chest. Then he traced his long fingers down his corded abdomen and unbuttoned the jeans. He had black silk boxers underneath that he pushed down along with the denim and kicked aside with his shoes and socks. Then he stood upright, his hands at his sides, and let me look.

Though I had seen him naked, or mostly naked before, I had never really allowed myself to stare. The thought of seeing him unclothed had seemed too embarrassing – too dangerous. Now I allowed myself to drink him in, all of him. From his broad shoulders down to his long muscular legs, he was perfect. He looked like a marble statue of a man you might see in a museum. My eyes traveled to the juncture of his thighs, the area I had tried to avoid looking at in the past, and this time I stared.

His cock was more than half hard, long and thick against his thigh. It was already a good size and I swallowed hard, wondering exactly how big it was going to get. I had read somewhere – probably in a woman's magazine – that only three percent of men are larger than seven inches long. Guess it must be my lucky day – Sumner was definitely in that three percent. And it had been so long since I'd had sex I was practically a virgin all over again. I just hoped I could handle him.

I don't know if he read the anxiety in my face or caught it through our connection but Sumner frowned and shook his head. "Please don't fear me, Kaitlyn. I swear I'll be gentle."

"Thank you for that," I said, my voice sounding shaky in my own ears. "But I'll be all right. You don't have to worry about me."

"But I *do* worry." He started to step toward me but I put up a hand to stop him.

"The ceremony has begun. You can't enter the circle until I call it."

"I see." He nodded. "Very well, I'll wait."

"Good. Get the lights, please." He did as I asked and the bedroom was plunged into darkness, lit only by moonlight. Fortunately, I knew my way around with no problem. I went to my nightstand where the chalice and athame lay and picked up a silver lighter.

Ever since I had decided to bond with Sumner I had been working on a way to make our binding as limited as I could. To that end, I was combining several different Wiccan rites into one. This was going to be a type of hand-fasting or joining ceremony mixed with the Great Rite, which means ritual sex. And I was going to add a part I'd made up myself – something to make it as temporary as possible.

I went to the first candle, in the east corner of my bed and lit it. As I did, I spoke the words of the ritual, calling the circle. "Hail to the guardians of the watchtowers of the East. Spirits of Air, powers of Thought. I call upon you to lend your essence to this rite." I moved to the next candle and lit it. "Hail to the guardians of the watchtowers of the South. Spirits of Fire, powers of Will. I call upon you to lend your essence to this rite." And to the next. "Hail to the guardians of the watchtowers of the West. Spirits of Water, powers of Emotion..."

By now the familiar words had calmed me. I had been calling the circle almost as long as I had been with Nana. It was one of the first things she had taught me as a neophyte witch and I swore I could almost feel her presence with me, guiding me as I did it. Although what she would think of the ritual I was performing was beyond me.

"Hail to the guardians of the watchtowers of the North," I said, lighting the last candle. "Spirits of Earth, powers of Stability. I call upon you to lend your essence to this rite. I conjure ye, O Circle of Light to be a temple between the worlds. In the name of the Silver Lady and the Golden Lord. Wherefore do I bless and consecrate thee, So Mote It Be."

Then I looked up at Sumner who was waiting quietly, watching me. His eyes gleamed in the candlelight, its golden glow reflected in his pale irises. "How do you enter the circle?" I asked him.

"In perfect love and perfect trust," he answered, stepping over the chalk line.

"Good." I took a deep breath. "Do—"

I had been about to ask him if he knew the five-fold kiss, an important part of the Great Rite, but he dropped to his knees before me without being asked. Leaning down, he placed a gentle kiss on the tops of both of my feet.

"Blessed be thy feet, which have brought thee in these ways," he murmured. Straightening a little, he kissed my knees. "Blessed be thy knees, which shall kneel at the sacred altar."

I shivered at those words. For the purposes of this ceremony, the altar was my bed and I would certainly be kneeling on it soon enough.

Sumner straightened up and took my hips in his hands. I looked down at him and he captured my eyes with his. Still holding my gaze he murmured, "Blessed be thy womb, from which comes all life." Then he leaned forward and kissed my pussy, his tongue slipping deeply into my folds to find my clit.

He lapped, long and slow, opening me, learning me again as he had the first time he'd tasted me. I shivered under his touch, little sparks of pleasure jolting through my

entire body, making me feel weak with need. The thirsty place inside me was crying out for *more* and Sumner seemed more than willing to give it to me.

A long sigh fell out of me as he performed the intimate kiss. The intensity in his eyes and the obvious pleasure he took in pleasuring me made my pulse race and my breath come short. God, he was incredibly *good* at this. And I'd never had a lover who seemed to enjoy it more. In fact, he might have gone on all night if my knees hadn't started to buckle.

I gripped his shoulders and moaned breathlessly as he steadied me. "Sumner...the ritual."

"Of course." He rose smoothly to his feet and I couldn't help noticing that his full mouth was shiny with my juices. "Blessed be thy breasts, formed in beauty" he said softly. Leaning down, he sucked both of my nipples in turn, taking each into his mouth as deeply as he could, until I felt the sharp pricking of his fangs against the tender flesh of my breasts.

I moaned again—I couldn't help it. With every touch I needed him more. I was beginning to feel as though someone had drained all the blood out of my veins and replaced it with fire. My body ached for his, ached to be filled with him. But I knew I had to take things slowly, to follow the steps of the ceremony exactly if I wanted it to work.

"Just one more kiss," Sumner whispered, looking into my eyes. "Are you ready, Kaitlyn?"

"Yes," I told him, my voice hoarse with longing. "Yes, please..."

"Very well," he murmured, pulling me close to him so that our bodies were pressed against each other, breasts to chest and groin to groin. "Blessed be thy lips that shall utter the sacred names," he said softly.

Then he took my mouth in a kiss so intense I literally couldn't have remained standing if he hadn't been holding me up.

I could taste myself on Sumner's lips—the essence of my femininity—the honey he had lapped so eagerly from my cunt. It was salty and sweet and utterly delicious in his mouth as he shared it with me. My breasts were flattened against the planes of his chest and I could feel the hot, hard length of his cock branding my belly and inner thigh. He shifted his hips to the side and suddenly I felt him parting my folds, the thick shaft sliding against my clit as my pussy opened for his invasion.

He kissed me more deeply and his hands slid down to my hips, urging me to spread my legs wider for him. Any other man—a human man—might have had difficulty supporting me, standing as we still were. But by virtue of what he was, Sumner was incredibly strong and I knew I could trust him. I shifted, parting my thighs, and allowed him to hold me and wrap one of my legs around his thigh as he worked his hips in a primal rhythm that was slowly driving me crazy.

We were still kissing and he hadn't entered me—not yet. Instead, he was rubbing against me, sliding the thick length of his cock up and down, stroking against my

aching clit over and over as he held me open for the intimate dance we were doing. I was so close to coming I thought I was going to die—the orgasm building and building inside me until I felt as if I were going to explode.

But we couldn't do this yet—not yet. There was more of the ceremony to get through.

"Sumner..." I pulled away from the kiss and he reluctantly let me go.

"What now, Kaitlyn? I can't wait much longer—I want you too badly."

"I want you, too," I assured him breathlessly. "But we still have one more part of the ceremony to get through before..."

"Before I *fuck* you," he growled, leaning forward to kiss my neck. I could feel his fangs graze my vulnerable throat but he didn't break the skin. Good, because even if he bit me now I didn't think I could stop. And having sex with him while I gave him blood...well, I wasn't prepared to go there. Not at all.

"Just...just one more part," I assured him. "I-I need you to let me go."

Sumner was clearly extremely reluctant to do that but finally we disentangled ourselves and I went to get the chalice and the athame. Holding them up between us, I spoke the words of the hand-fasting ritual, binding myself to him verbally as I would soon bind myself to him physically.

"Holden Sumner," I said, looking into his eyes. "You cannot possess me for I belong to myself. But while we both wish it, I give you that which is mine to give. You cannot command me for I am a free person. But I shall serve you in those ways you require and the honeycomb will taste sweeter coming from my hand.

"I pledge to you that while we hunt this evil together, yours will be the name I cry aloud in the night, and the eyes into which I smile upon waking. Until we have banished it to the pit, I pledge to you my living and my dying, each equally in your care. I shall be a shield for your back, and you for mine. I shall not slander you, nor you me and I shall honor you above all others. This is my vow to you. This is a joining of equals."

Sumner looked at me, his pale eyes shining in the candle light. "That's...beautiful, Kaitlyn. Utterly beautiful." His voice was slightly hoarse and the look on his face was close to reverence. "May I repeat it back to you?"

I was taken by surprise. "Well...it's not necessary but if you want to..."

"I do." Looking into my eyes, Sumner repeated the vows I had made. And then he added something of his own. "These promises I have made to you by the sun and the moon, by fire and water, by day and night, by land and sea. Should I fail to keep the oath I pledge to you today, may the elements themselves reach out and destroy me."

I looked at him uncertainly. "That's a very strong oath you just took and we're within the circle. You *will* be bound by it."

"Good, I want to be." He was looking at me intensely. "I want to be bound to *you*, Kaitlyn."

"It's only until we kill the demon," I reminded him reluctantly. "I'm sorry, Sumner, but I can't offer you more than that."

"Then I'll take what I can get." He kissed me again, his fangs pressing hard against my lips, his tongue invading my mouth with an urgency that made me moan and almost spill the wine.

Finally I pulled back from him again. "Just one more thing."

"What?" he growled and I handed him the athame.

"You know what to do," I said and he nodded.

Raising the dagger, he kissed the flat of the blade and then plunged it point first into the chalice.

It was a symbolic gesture – the male energy entering into the female essence. It was also as far as I had ever gone while performing the Great Rite. Though it is, by nature, a sexual ritual, the sex doesn't have to be actual physical contact. It can be symbolic – shown only by the blade of the athame entering the sacred chalice. And that was where it had always ended for me before.

But not this time.

Carefully, I withdrew the athame from the chalice and laid the dripping blade back on my nightstand. Then I took a sip of the wine and offered it to Sumner. His eyes never leaving mine, he took the cup from my hands and took a long, slow sip as well. He handed it back without a word.

"So Mote it Be," I murmured.

Then I placed the chalice back on the nightstand and climbed onto the bed.

Chapter Fourteen

I got on the bed on my hands and knees, naked in the candlelight. Though I couldn't see him, I was very aware of Sumner watching me. I could feel his gaze on my body like a hand stroking my skin, could taste his desire in the air like a rare spice.

Taking a deep breath, I spread my legs, opening myself for him. I could feel my pussy lips part with the motion and I knew he would be able to tell how wet I was just by looking.

My heart was pounding as I looked over my shoulder at him. "I... I'm ready."

Sumner approached the bed slowly, like an animal stalking its prey. His eyes were pale-on-red and his fangs were long and white in the candlelight. I had never seen him look so predatory, so frightening. And yet...I didn't fear him. We were safe within the circle together and I trusted him not to hurt me.

He climbed on the bed, his weight indenting the mattress behind me. I had an old-fashioned full-length mirror—the kind that swivels and stands on its own—that I had pushed to the corner of the room when I was making preparations for the ceremony. Now when I turned my head to the side, I caught a glimpse of our reflection in it. Me, kneeling in the center of the bed, spread open with my hair like a long silky brown curtain around my shoulders and Sumner behind me, his cock hard and ready, poised to slide deep into my wet pussy.

"This is how you want it?" His voice was harsh with need but his hands were gentle when he touched me, stroking my hips and flanks, reaching under me to fondle my naked breasts.

I shivered at his touch, feeling my nipples harden as he plucked them. "I-I'm offering myself to you. A sacrifice," I tried to explain without my voice wavering too much. "You can do what you want. Take what you want." It was hard to offer myself so freely but in order for the ceremony to be binding, I knew I had to make myself open to him. Completely open.

"What about what *you* want?" he murmured. "Don't you want to see me while I make love to you?"

"I can see you," I gestured toward the mirror and he looked up and caught sight of it.

"Ah yes. Very nice. Did you do that on purpose?" he murmured. "Did you want to see me enter you? Like this?" Lifting my leg to give a better view, he slid the broad head of his cock over my wet folds until he was lodged just at my entrance.

I gasped at the feel of the thick, plum-shaped head just beginning to breach me. God, he was so *big*. "I...no, I didn't do it on purpose," I protested.

"Oh?" Sumner said softly. "I thought maybe you wanted to watch me slide into you. Slide my cock into your hot...wet...cunt." He suited actions to words, pressing until just the thick head of his shaft was all the way inside me. "How does that feel, Kaitlyn?"

"Good," I moaned. "Big. Just...go slowly, okay?"

"I wouldn't have it any other way," Sumner growled softly. "I've been waiting for this from the moment I met you. I certainly don't want to rush it." Pressing forward, he slid another thick inch into my open pussy. "God, you're so tight and wet, sweetheart. I can't wait to fill you completely."

"Do it," I whispered breathlessly. "Do it, Sumner. I want you to."

"Are you certain?" He slid forward again and by now the mirror showed that he had over half of his thick shaft buried in me. "Once I slide all the way inside your sweet little pussy and fill you with my cum, our bond will be complete," he reminded me.

"I-I know," I whispered, unable to stop watching as he pressed another thick inch of his cock inside me.

"So I think it's important to do this slowly," Sumner continued, withdrawing a little so that I could see my juices slicking the shaft of his cock before he thrust in again. "That way if you change your mind..."

"I've come this far," I pointed out, my voice raspy with need. "I'm not...not going to back out now."

"We'll see," he rumbled, pressing a little deeper into me. God, he was driving me crazy!

"Please, Sumner—*please*." I didn't like to beg but I couldn't help it. I needed him so badly, needed to be filled with him, with his cock. The place inside me, the source of my power, begged for it—for him. And every nerve in my body was on edge, wanting more.

"Slowly, Kaitlyn," he murmured. "Very slowly, sweetheart." He pushed forward again and then, finally, I felt the head of his cock pressing against the end of my channel.

I gave a low moan as he filled me completely. I could feel his thick shaft stretching me even though he was holding absolutely still. I had never felt so open, so penetrated, so helpless. And yet it was wonderful—perfect. Exactly what I needed.

"Do you feel that, Kaitlyn?" Sumner asked in a low voice, gripping my hips tightly. "Feel me all the way inside you? Filling your sweet pussy with my cock?"

"God, *yes*. But please, Sumner. I need...need more."

"I know what you need," he growled, pulling out of me again. "*This*." And he thrust forward hard and deep, pounding into me.

A cry was torn from me and I gripped my bedspread tightly, trying to be open enough to take him, trying to survive his rough, delicious fucking. Sumner did it again

and then again as I moaned beneath him, overcome by need as the pleasure built sharply inside me.

God it was too much, *too much*, and yet I had to take it. I had started this and there was no way to end it other than to give myself to him completely, to open myself and let him fuck me to completion.

"That's right, sweetheart," he said, answering my thoughts. "You're mine now. And until I claim you completely this isn't over."

It will never be over.

I didn't know where the thought came from—him or me—but I was past caring. Past thinking. Past doing anything but feeling as he thrust into me over and over, pushing us both toward the brink.

"Sumner," I gasped. "Oh God, *Sumner*."

"That's the way, Kaitlyn." His voice was deep and harsh but still somehow controlled. "Open yourself for me. Just open up and let me fuck you."

I couldn't do anything else—didn't want to do anything else. His deep, driving thrusts and my own building pleasure drove me from my hands and knees to my forearms. And at last I simply grabbed my pillow and tried to hang on as he plowed into me. *Can't take it...can't take much more...*

But it turned out that I didn't have to. After all the delicious buildup, my orgasm hit me suddenly, like a runaway train. I felt blindsided by it, almost faint with the explosion of pleasure.

Sumner felt it too, through our link. "That's good, Kaitlyn," he murmured, slowing his thrusting as he rode out my orgasm. "Let yourself come. Come with my cock inside you."

I shivered helplessly under him, feeling my inner muscles contract, squeezing him mercilessly. And yet somehow, he didn't come. He just kept thrusting slowly, his hands keeping a tight grip on my hips as he guided me through my pleasure.

At last I lifted my head from the pillow and looked at him in the mirror. "Sumner? Are you...? We're not bound until you..."

"Until I come inside you. I know. But I'm not ready yet."

"But—" I began and then I felt a rush of dizzying movement. Suddenly he was lying on his back on the bed and I was straddling him. Thought it didn't seem possible, he was still buried to the hilt inside me. I looked down at him in astonishment. "What—"

One corner of his full mouth quirked up. "I told you I wanted to make this last. Who knows if you'll let me make love to you again after this."

"It is supposed to be a one time thing," I admitted, rather breathlessly.

He nodded. "You see? I have to make the most of the time and opportunity I have."

"But..."

“Are you tired of having me inside you?” he asked, looking at me directly.

I could feel my cheeks heating. “Well...no.” In actuality, the more intimate contact I had with him, the better I liked it and the more powerful I felt. He was feeding the part of me that craved touch, flooding the desert again as he had the night he’d tasted me. Not to mention the fact that the feeling of him so deep inside me, penetrating me, owning me, was incredible.

He smiled, his eyes lazy with lust. “I thought not. So why not make the most of our time together?”

I stroked his chest. “So...you like this better? With me on top?”

“I like to watch you riding me, yes,” he admitted. “Looking into your eyes while I fill you. And, I like to do *this*.” Reaching to the place we were joined, he parted my folds and began to touch me.

“*God*,” I moaned breathlessly as his slid the broad pad of his thumb over my clit in long, slow strokes.

“Much better,” he murmured, still stroking up into me as he caressed my clit. “I like to be face to face when I make love. This way I can see it in your eyes when you come.”

“I-I’ve already done that once,” I pointed out. “That’s usually the limit for me.”

“Oh, I think we can change that.” He gave me a lazy grin that made my stomach flutter and continued to touch me.

I don’t know how long Sumner prolonged our encounter. It seemed like hours that he thrust up into me, deep and slow and almost gentle at times, especially compared with those first passionate strokes when I was on my hands and knees. He caressed my clit and told me how beautiful I was, how he loved to watch me ride him and take his cock deep in my pussy. He made me lean forward so he could kiss me and suck and lick my breasts and then sit back to take him as deeply into myself as I could. It was beyond a doubt the single most intense sexual experience of my life and before it was over I had lost count of the number of times he made me come.

At last I was exhausted. “Sumner,” I whispered, my voice hoarse with fatigue. “I know you’re immortal and you could probably keep this up all night but I can’t...can’t take much more. Please...”

“Please what, Kaitlyn?” His eyes blazed up at me and I knew what he wanted me to say.

“Please,” I whispered. “Come inside me. Fill me up with your cum and bond me to you.”

“With pleasure.” With one last, deep thrust he filled me to the hilt and then I felt a heated flood bathing my core, penetrating my very being as he came. As he did, his thumb teased over my sensitive folds again and somehow triggered my own pleasure once more.

I cried out and clutched at his broad shoulders, feeling my body open for him in the most intimate way possible as he filled my channel with his seed. We were bound

together now—the binding was complete. I could feel the spell taking hold, the ceremony doing exactly what I had planned it would do. It was a physical bond that held us together but more than that, it was a spiritual one. I could feel Sumner inside me and knew he could feel me in him as well. It was beautiful and scary and perfect all at once.

We were one.

Chapter Fifteen

“So now what?” I asked Sumner. I was lying on the bed still trying to recover with my head pillowed on his shoulder and my flank pressed against his. I knew it probably wasn’t smart to be doing the whole post-sex snuggling thing but we had sort of fallen into the position naturally and I was feeling too comfortable and worn out to move.

He sighed. “Now we wait. Or rather, *you* wait. I’ll be out hunting the demon—I’ll call you when I find it.”

I frowned and sat up, pulling the light chenille throw I kept at the bottom of the bed over me. “That’s crap. We’re a team now – we need to stick together.”

“You’ll be running your grandmother’s store all day,” he pointed out. “Not to mention your duties with the police force. You can’t be out all night too.”

I lifted my chin. “I can stand a little sleep deprivation.”

“A little, yes,” Sumner said gently. “But I don’t want you to be so depleted that when we actually do find the demon you –”

“Don’t worry about me,” I cut him off. “I can handle it.”

“You can’t be up all day and all night and still expect to be in condition to fight it.” He sat up as well and leaned over to push a strand of hair out of my eyes. “I remember what it was like to be human, Kaitlyn. It takes so little to exhaust you.”

Like what we did just now. I wasn’t sure if he was making a veiled reference to the fact that I had given out sexually a long time before he had or not, but just the idea that he might be made me feel warm.

Sumner laughed, obviously catching my thought. “Don’t worry about that, sweetheart—I was *more* than satisfied. I just wanted to make sure that you were too.”

“Oh.” I cleared my throat. “I was. Satisfied I mean.”

“I know,” he said.

I frowned. “That’s pretty cocky of you.”

“No. I just know what I felt—through our connection. I think that bonding must have strengthened it. I’m much more attuned to your emotions now.”

Like he hadn’t been tuned in to me enough already? *Crap...* I sighed. “Okay, we’re getting off the subject here. The point is, you’re no longer running a one-man show. I’m your partner and I want to help.”

“And you can,” Sumner said. “Give me the addresses of your coven members—the demon will be looking to drain them if it’s in cloud form or kill them once it enters its human host again.” He frowned. “As terrible as it sounds, we have to hope it’s in

human form when I finally find it. It can't be killed and banished to the pit unless its human host is destroyed at the same time."

"Why is that?" I asked.

"I don't know, exactly. I think maybe the human host anchors it here, to this plane of existence. As long as he is alive, he provides kind of a safety net for the demon."

I raised an eyebrow. "And we're sure it's a *he*?"

Sumner frowned. "I've never known it to enter a woman, not because it couldn't, I don't think—because it won't. It *hates* women. All women."

I shivered. "Yes, I felt that too. It hates anything feminine. It wants to destroy any woman it can get its hands—or tentacles or whatever—on."

"It tends to like a host that mirrors its feelings," Sumner said thoughtfully. "Someone who's ripe for violence against the fairer sex."

I smiled a little. "The fairer sex? There's a euphemism you don't hear every day."

Sumner rolled his eyes. "Forgive me. I try to stay current but sometimes I forget and fall back into more antiquated speech patterns."

"No, don't apologize. It's actually kind of...charming."

He gave me a lazy smile. "Why, Kaitlyn, you actually admit to finding me charming? Could it be that I'm breaking down your defenses at last?"

I bristled. "Don't read too much into it, Sumner. What we have is strictly temporary and you know it."

"Oh, I know it." He lifted my chin and looked into my eyes. "But I know something else as well. The connection between us—the attraction—is deeper than you want to admit."

"It's just because you had Fiona's blood—that's all," I said uneasily. But Sumner shook his head.

"No, Kaitlyn, that's not it. I had a single drop—a drop tainted with silver at that since she used a silver needle to prick her finger. One drop of blood doesn't explain the way I felt the first time I saw you in your grandmother's shop. The way I felt drawn to you immediately. The way I *wanted* you."

His eyes were half-lidded with desire and I could feel his lust for me through our bond. It made me nervous—not because we'd finished the ceremony and our one time joining was supposed to be over. But because I found that I wanted him as much as he wanted me. Found that, despite the marathon sex session we'd just finished not thirty minutes before, I still burned for him.

Can't do this. I scooted away from him abruptly, wrapping the chenille throw more firmly around myself and knotting it at my chest like a towel.

"Why not?" Sumner asked softly. "The night isn't over yet, sweetheart. Why not let me make love to you again?"

I was so tempted I could hardly stand it. I thought of his hands on my body, the way it felt when he kissed me, touched me. Filled me with himself. But... "We can't do this," I told him, forcing myself to ignore the way I craved his touch. "We have a serial killing demon to catch. We don't have time for anything else right now when there's so much danger."

He gave me another half-lidded glance. "Indeed. The very great danger that you are falling in love with me. And I with you."

I felt like a hundred butterflies had taken off inside my stomach. "Sumner, *please*. Be serious."

"I am," he said quietly.

I wrapped my arms around myself and looked away from his intense, burning gaze. "I don't want to talk about this right now."

"But this may be the only time we have. If we are successful in killing the demon and banishing it permanently –"

"The bond between us will be broken," I finished for him. "And it's not like we were going to go on like we are now after that."

"No, you're right, we couldn't. For more reasons than you know."

I looked up at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Only that should we succeed, I will have certain obligations that will have to be fulfilled." When I still looked at him doubtfully, he shook his head. "Never mind. My debts and promises are nothing to do with you."

I wondered what he was talking about but it didn't look as if he was going to be any more forthcoming. "Look," I said. "Just-just tell me what else I can do to help you with the demon."

"Very well," Sumner said, sighing. "You need to find a way to banish it." He frowned. "Fiona used a certain spell when I worked with her but either it wasn't strong enough or our connection wasn't—I don't know which."

"I can look in Nana's book of shadows," I said. "I think she might have some of Fiona's notes in there."

Sumner looked interested. "She still has some of her original possessions?"

"She's the one who made me this." I cupped the locket I wore. "It has a lock of Fiona's hair in it."

"I've noticed you never take it off. It's a powerful talisman."

"Fiona was the strongest witch in our line."

"No, she wasn't." Sumner shook his head. "You're stronger than her, Kaitlyn—I can feel it."

"I can hardly believe *that*," I said skeptically. "Fiona was an incredibly powerful woman."

"She was very focused," Sumner said thoughtfully. "She knew exactly how to harness her power."

"In the end though, it didn't help get rid of the demon," I pointed out.

"It might have, though. If she'd allowed me to bind her to me more tightly."

"The way I did," I said softly.

Sumner reached out and stroked my cheek lightly with his knuckles. "Yes, and I thank you for that, Kaitlyn. I swear your trust in me is not misplaced."

"I hope not." I looked down at my hands. "Well...I should really go check on Nana. A senior member of the coven is with her tonight but if she wakes up—"

"You want to be with her," Sumner finished for me. "I understand. But do be careful, sweetheart."

"Of course I will," I said. "Don't worry, Sumner—this is Nana we're talking about. She'll be fine—we both will."

"You can't assume that," he said, frowning. "You have no idea how strong the thirst is in a new vampire. The need for blood—it's a compulsion—a driving force so strong it pushes everything else out of your mind. You will do and say anything to get it—even things that you might have found loathsome or repulsive before."

"Nana would never hurt me," I said firmly but I felt a little queasy inside at the thought. I pushed my anxiety firmly away. "We'll be fine."

"Just have a bag of blood ready and waiting the minute she opens her eyes," Sumner said darkly.

"I will. There's a whole cooler of the stuff waiting at the foot of her bed. Look, Sumner, I should really get going."

He sighed. "Very well. And I should too."

"All right," I said awkwardly. "But I still think I should be with you when you're hunting the demon."

"Just find the right spell to banish it," he said. "And I swear I'll call you the minute I locate it. I'll keep it busy until you arrive."

"Well..." It seemed like the best offer I was going to get. Finally I nodded. "All right, then. I guess I'll see you later." I started to get off the bed but he caught my arm and pulled me back.

"No goodbye kiss?" he asked, raising his eyebrows.

"Sumner—" I started to say and then he covered my mouth with his and gave me a long, leisurely kiss that took my breath away.

Despite trying not to, I could feel my body responding. My nipples got tight and achy and my sex was suddenly hot and wet and swollen with need.

Sumner rolled me over on the bed so that he was above me and pulled open the chenille throw I was wearing. "Don't go," he murmured, cupping one of my breasts

and lightly pinching the nipple until I bit back a moan. "Give yourself to me again. Just once more, Kaitlyn."

I wanted to in the worst way but I was afraid. Afraid that what he had said earlier – that we were beginning to have feelings for each other – was true. Afraid of losing myself in the desire he sparked inside me with his touch. Afraid that I would never be free of him if I let him get too close.

"I can't," I whispered against his lips. "I'm sorry, Sumner, I just... I can't."

He pulled away and frowned down at me. "Why? Because you're afraid to admit how you feel?"

"Because...because that part is over now." I struggled to sit up and pulled the throw closed again. "The plan was to bond temporarily in order to defeat the demon. We did what we have to do but that doesn't mean we can do it again."

"So making love again just because we want to doesn't fit with your plan?"

"You want to," I pointed out. "I never said –"

"You didn't have to." Sumner got off the bed and went to where his clothes were piled in a heap on the floor. "Don't forget, Kaitlyn, I know what you're feeling now. I can feel your desire."

"Sumner..." I followed him off the bed but I was so filled with frustration and conflicting emotions I didn't know what to say.

He got dressed in a blur and turned to face me. "You want me, Kaitlyn. As badly as I want you." He cupped my cheek and looked into my eyes. "Don't lie about that. To me or to yourself."

Then, before I could answer, he was gone.

Chapter Sixteen

“Damn it, he’s *got* to stop doing that,” I muttered to myself. I felt irritated, agitated and pretty damn pissed at Sumner. I was even more pissed at myself. I would have sworn after our marathon sex session I wouldn’t want it again for a month. But Sumner had managed to get me hot and bothered all over again before making his flashy vampire exit.

Well, at least the power-hungry place inside me had finally had enough for awhile. I took a deep breath and concentrated on it for a moment. There was no doubt about it—sex with Sumner had really charged me up. I could probably take down anything that came at me right now. Hopefully Sumner would find the demon soon—while I was still feeling like Super woman. That way we could dispatch it quickly and the bond between us would be broken. And as for his cryptic talk about the obligations he had to fulfill once we were done, well, he was on his own with that. Whatever it was.

I got dressed and went back to Nana’s house to check on her. She was still sleeping peacefully and the senior Wiccan said there was no change. I thanked her and took over, perching on the edge of the dark blue armchair I’d dragged up from downstairs to put by Nana’s bedside.

She looked so serene but I couldn’t help wishing that she was awake so I could ask for her help. I might have more power but she had more experience. Still, I could look in her book of shadows and see what I could find. If Fiona’s original spell was in there I might be able to use it or modify it somehow and be ready to banish the demon when Sumner found it.

When he found *him*, I amended to myself. Whoever the evil bastard was that the demon was using for a host was still running around somewhere and whether he was currently possessed or not, just the idea made me feel sick. To have that evil, oily blackness living *inside you*... I pushed the thought away, shivering.

Sitting by Nana’s bedside, I tried to study her book. It was a huge, old-fashioned leather-bound thing that looked like a movie prop and it was filled with Nana’s careful, spidery handwriting. There were drawings too, sketches of some of her favorite herbs and the diagrams for the correct configuration of spells and ceremonies. Far to the back was a collection of yellowed, brittle pages bound together with a white satin ribbon—all that remained of Fiona’s own book of shadows.

Carefully I untied the ribbon and began to leaf through the pages. They were incredibly delicate and I felt as though I was handling some precious artifact on loan from a museum. The world had been so different when these pages had been written. And yet, Sumner had been there and seen it all. In fact, he was already over a century old when he’d convinced Fiona to help him. The thought sent a chill down my spine,

especially when I remembered how intimately we were bound, but I pushed my apprehension to one side and concentrated on the task at hand.

I had never really studied Fiona's spells before, preferring to rely on Nana's tried and tested ones. But now I looked them over carefully, searching for a hint of how she had vanquished the demon. After all, I told myself, even if she hadn't banished it for good, she had still thrown it off its game. Sumner had said it missed a cycle after they fought it together. Maybe with the stronger binding that I had with him, I would be able to use Fiona's magic to greater advantage.

There was a lot of magical herbology—apparently my ancestor had been even deeper into plants than Nana if that was possible. And then I found what I was looking for. On the next to last page was a block of densely written script that looked more like a diary entry than a spell or ceremony. The ink was old and faded and I struggled to read it. It was legible only because Fiona had had lovely handwriting, much prettier than my own messy scrawl.

The vampire, or Mr. S as I shall call him, came to ask for my help again tonight. This time I could not refuse him for Meredith Sims was found butchered in the woods near the edge of town. I was one of those that saw the body—the carnage was unspeakable. How can I condemn any more of my sister witches to die if I can help them? Though I am tying myself to one devil in order to defeat another, I feel I have no choice.

"I hear you, Fiona," I muttered.

He wanted us to merge our power but I cannot be unfaithful to John, who is the kindest and best of husbands. Indeed, John knows nothing of any of this for I cannot burden him with it. I love him dearly but if he knew his darling little wife was a practitioner of the ancient arts, if he had even an inkling that I could easily overpower him with but a word, I cannot be sure that his affection for me would continue.

Huh. Seemed that Fiona had had the same trouble as me—finding a man who wasn't threatened by her power. Well, well. The more things change...

Mr. S was a perfect gentleman. I could tell he was disappointed about my decision not to bind myself to him more tightly but he did not rant or curse me. Indeed, he said that he would take what I wished to offer and that we must hope it is enough. Standing in the moonlight with him, I thought his eyes, which seem almost to be the color of silver, quite bewitching. Is it wrong to think that, were I not already tied to

John, I might have agreed to a deeper bonding? But I must not think such things. Surely the improper thoughts that he inspires in me are wrong and unnatural.

I nearly laughed. So Sumner had always been a charmer—how utterly unsurprising. It was kind of funny to read that my own great, great, great grandmother had had the hots for him, though. I read on and was glad to find what I was looking for.

We are ready for the confrontation. I have pricked my finger with a silver needle and given Mr. S a single drop of my blood. This night I am to wait in the clearing by the old mill for him and he will bring the monster to me. I have spent all day preparing and I am awaiting his call as I write this. I feel the best thing to do is conduct a very simple ceremony of binding and expulsion. Mr. S will hold the fiend within the circle as I chant the incantation. Then he will plunge the silver knife into his chest, killing the human host. If my magic is strong enough the demon will not be able to leave the host as it has in the past. Instead, the human host's departing soul will be bound to it inexorably and will weigh it down to the pits of Hell where it will never again escape. I only hope I am strong enough to do this.

That was the last of Fiona's commentary and then she listed the requirements for the spell. It was, as she had said in her notes, extremely simple with very little required in terms of materials. Good, I didn't want to try to follow a list of insanely complicated steps while Sumner was trying to contain a demon-possessed serial killer within the circle. Fiona had been smart and practical—I liked that. I had a new respect for my ancestor. She has been stronger than me in more ways than one, no matter what Sumner said.

* * * * *

A few more nights passed with no sign of the demon or his human host. Sumner and I were both worried. He theorized that the host was incapacitated in some way and the demon was waiting until he was strong enough to be inhabited again.

"Either that or it's moved on," I pointed out. We were talking on the phone and I was over at Nana's house, keeping an eye on her and practicing for the ceremony. I had the circle drawn and the candles placed and the only other thing I needed was my athame. I had taken to carrying the whole lot with me in a bag everywhere I went because I didn't want to be caught without it if Sumner should call me. But now I couldn't find the damn athame.

"I've never known it to change its hunting grounds in the middle of a cycle," Sumner said, interrupting my train of thought. "It should stay within a twenty-five-mile radius of the first kill."

"Which was pretty much right in the middle of town. Or that's where the body was found, anyway." I felt sick. I had barely known the first victim but she had been a very powerful witch—which could be a reason why the demon had gone after her first.

"I've been all over Sarasota from downtown to the beaches," Sumner said. "I even went as far as Lido Key. I haven't felt its presence."

I continued rooting through my bag for the athame. "Maybe it's decided to retire."

"I don't think so," Sumner said darkly. "It enjoys what it does too much to just stop—it's like a human serial killer in that regard."

"I haven't felt it either," I said, giving up the search and deciding I must have left my ceremonial dagger at home. If I wanted to practice tonight I would have to borrow Nana's. "I've been staying over here at Nana's place every night since we...well, since the last time you and I saw each other and I haven't had a single bad dream."

"I know," Sumner said softly. "I would have felt it if you had."

"I'm curious about something," I said, sitting down on Nana's overstuffed floral-print couch. "That night the thing came after me I was having a nightmare before it woke me up. I dreamed...dreamed that—"

"You dreamed you were my wife, tied down to the witch finder's interrogation table," he finished for me.

"Right," I said, grateful that I didn't have to be the one to say it out loud. "So, uh, if we're close enough that you can pick up my thoughts and I can pick up yours, then...well, whose dream was it, Sumner? Did I dream it and transmit it to you? Or was it the other way around?"

"Vampires don't dream," he said. "We do, however have very vivid memories and I had been thinking about what happened to my wife that night. Reliving it, in a way."

"So...you sent it to me?" I asked.

"Not intentionally. But I suppose some of my thoughts might have crossed our connection and spawned your dream. For that, I am sorry."

"Don't be," I said. "I only had to dream it. You lived it. But...the details were so sharp. Do you really remember that clearly?"

"There is no dulling of details or blurring of facts for us," Sumner said. "Should I wish to, I could remember the exact fabric of my wife's dress on the day she was accused and taken from me. The expression in her eyes as they dragged her away—"

"Don't," I said quickly. "Don't do that to yourself again, Sumner. I understand why you had to that night—you were trying to make me understand what you were up against and why you needed my help. But don't torture yourself all over again now."

"All right." His voice dropped. "I would rather speak of the present than the past anyway. I miss you, Kaitlyn. How are you doing since we last saw each other?"

"I'm fine but I'm worried about Nana," I said, deliberately changing the subject. "Are you sure it's normal for her to be out of commission this long? I mean, shouldn't she be in the hospital?"

"They could do nothing for her there," Sumner said dismissively. "Right now she is in a type of suspended animation. My blood is holding her perfectly stable physically."

"While it cures her, you mean?" I asked.

"Or changes her," Sumner said. "I won't lie to you, Kaitlyn, the longer she stays under, the more likely it is that she is being turned rather than healed. Are you sure you're well supplied?"

"We have a whole cooler full of blood," I assured him. "We're set. But I really, *really* hope she doesn't come back undead. She's going to be really mad at me if she does."

"Because she hates my kind," Sumner said. It wasn't a question.

"Well, most Wiccans do," I pointed out. "We are sort of natural enemies."

"Or natural allies."

I snorted. "Yeah, try telling that to Nana."

"I may have to. If she has become what I am, she will need a mentor."

Just the thought of Sumner showing Nana the ropes on how to be a good and effective vampire made my head spin. I literally didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "Let's just hope it doesn't come to that," I said.

"As you wish," he said amicably. "There are other things I would rather speak of anyway."

"If this is about how you feel about me—"

"And how *you* feel about *me*, Kaitlyn." Sumner's voice dropped to a low, seductive growl.

"Sumner—"

"You're getting hungry, Kaitlyn, I can feel it. I can feel your lust rising through our bond, like the tide coming in. You need to be touched again."

"No, I don't," I denied, knowing it was a lie. "Look, Sumner, I really can't talk about this right now. I need to concentrate on getting the banishing ceremony right."

"Very well." His voice was still soft and low. "But know that I want you as much as you want me, sweetheart."

"I don't—"

"Goodbye," he said, and hung up.

"Damn it, Sumner," I muttered, slapping my cell phone down on the couch beside me. "Always have to have the last word, don't you?" Sighing, I tried to put him out of my mind, which was pretty much impossible.

I was just getting up to go check on Nana again—Sumner's words about her probably turning instead of healing had made me nervous—when the front door bell chimed.

I looked at my watch. It was past ten on a weekday night. Who could possibly be out there? Unless...

“Look, Sumner,” I said, going to the door. “I don’t care what you think you feel through our connection, there’s no way I’m going to sleep with you a—”

The words died on my lips as I opened the door and saw who was standing outside.

Chapter Seventeen

"Bleaks," I said, staring at him blankly. "What are you doing here?"

"Came to apologize," he said gruffly. "You weren't at your house so I decided to try here. Can I come in?"

"I don't know if that's a good idea." I stood firmly in the doorway, blocking his way inside. Even if he really did want to apologize, Todd Bleaks was just about the last person on Earth I wanted to socialize with.

"Aw, c'mon, Richards," he said, his thick eyebrows coming down low over his dull, china-blue eyes. "Look, I paid for what I did already, don't you think?" He held up his hand, which had a blue fiberglass cast on it. It reached from his knuckles all the way up his forearm and his fingers looked swollen and purple as he flexed them slowly. "I had to have reconstructive surgery. They say if I'm lucky I'll get the use of it again once the cast comes off—as long as I go to therapy."

"I'm sorry about your arm," I said neutrally. "But I don't think now is a good time to discuss it. It's past ten o'clock and I have to work tomorrow."

"Yeah, well..." He shrugged, beefy shoulders rolling under his light-blue polyester uniform shirt. "Look, I'm only here because Travers said I had to apologize. So would you let me in so I can do that already? It'll just take a minute, I swear. I'll be out of your hair in no time."

I frowned, alarm bells going off in my head. "*Travers said you had to?*"

Sumner had assured me that he had taken care of Detective Travers' memory, as well as everyone else involved in his arrest. He'd also taken the surveillance footage, which was the only evidence against him and somehow managed to get the death of Jason Drews reclassified as an unsolved homicide. I had felt bad about my friend's memory getting wiped, but I understood it was pretty much the only way. Sumner couldn't effectively track the demon and its host if he was supposed to be stuck at my house every night awaiting trial. And I would lose my S.E. license in a heartbeat if it came out that he was out and about instead of cooped up in my spare room.

"Yeah, she said I overstepped my authority when we went to pick up Sumner," Bleaks said, obviously unaware of my inner turmoil. "And since today is my first day back at work, she said I had to come apologize. So would you let me in already?"

"No," I said, and started to shut the door in his face.

Bleaks threw his heavy shoulder against the thick wooden panel and muscled his way inside. "I don't think so, *bitch*," he hissed. "I'm not a fucking vampire—I can come in whether you say so or not."

“What do you want?” I asked, backing away from him. “Get away from me, Bleaks, or I’ll—”

“Or you’ll what?” Moving faster than a man with his bulk should have been able to, he was suddenly on me. I tried to push him away but he caught both my wrists in his good hand. Before I could do anything to stop him, he had whipped out a pair of silver handcuffs and cuffed them in front of me. “Or you’ll cast one of your filthy little spells on me? I don’t think so.”

“Bleaks, look,” I said, trying to stem the rising tide of panic inside me and sound reasonable. “I’m sorry about your arm, and I’m sure it really hurts, but it wasn’t my fault.”

“I’m not here because of the arm.” He smiled at me and I noticed for the first time that his eyes were disconcertingly empty. It was as though he was looking to me but not really registering what he was seeing. His smile was the kind of look you might see on the face of a man with irreparable brain damage. Empty...vacant...*creepy*.

“Then why—”

“The pain this body feels is of no consequence to me,” he went on, talking over me.

“*This body?*” I was beginning to get a very bad feeling about this.

“I’m here because of *you*, Kaitlyn,” he continued. “You and the old woman upstairs. The power of both your deaths combined should be more than enough to keep me satisfied until my time comes round again.”

As he spoke, his eyes changed. I watched in horror as the dull china-blue began to bleed black. The inky cloud crept from his pupils and spilled outward, covering both irises and whites until his eyes were filled with burning, oily black flames.

“My God,” I gasped, stumbling in my haste to try to back away from him. “You. It’s *you*. You’re the host.”

“And a very valuable host this body has been, too,” the demon said amicably, still holding me by my cuffed wrists. “It’s amazingly strong—for your kind, anyway. And the uniform allowed me to get my victims alone with no trouble at all. They trusted me—right up until the moment I gutted them.” The smile widened, baring his teeth in a shark-like grin.

“No,” I gasped. “No, get away from me. Get away!”

But yanking against the grip on my wrist was like pulling at a brick wall. Bleaks was strong and the thing inside him made him even stronger.

“Oh, I don’t think so,” the demon said, pulling me close and looping an arm around my neck, effectively cutting off my air supply. “I think we ought to have some fun first.” It looked around Nana’s living room, its burning black eyes scanning everything. “I see you’re all set up for a ceremony. Perfect.”

“Can’t...breathe,” I gasped, but it ignored me and kept talking.

“I see just about everything but the athame. Where is it?”

“Don’t...don’t have it. At home.” Black spots were beginning to dance before my eyes but I fought grimly to stay conscious. If I let myself faint now I might never wake up.

“But the old woman is also a witch. We can use hers. Where is it?” When I didn’t answer it squeezed a little tighter and whispered in my ear, “Come on now, Kaitlyn. Show me the knife and I’ll ease up a little. It’s not as though I *want* to strangle you here and now – I’d much prefer to wait until after our fun. After all, you have to take a deep breath to scream, right?”

I didn’t want to show it anything but by this time the need to breathe was like fire in my lungs. I nodded my head in the direction of the formal dining room, which was just off the living area.

“Good, very good.” The arm around my neck eased just enough for me to draw a ragged, gasping breath. “Let’s go get it, shall we?” The demon pushed me in front of him and we shuffled awkwardly to the dining room.

Nana used the large oval dining room table as a work area. With the exception of her monthly coven meetings she almost never had enough people over to serve a meal there. So it was always filled with her tools and books and herbs in all stages of drying.

Lying among the magical paraphernalia was her athame. Its long silver blade glittered in the dim light of Nana’s work lamp and its dull black handle was molded to the shape of her hand.

“Perfect,” the thing inside Bleaks purred in my ear. “And it looks so *sharp*.”

Unfortunately, he was right. Most witches like to keep their athames dull since they are used for ceremonial purposes only. But Nana believed that the more you used a magical implement, the more attuned to you it became and the more powerful it was. She used her athame to cut the herbs for her spells and potions on a regular basis and kept its blade honed to a razor point.

“I wanted to kill you with your own blade,” the demon said, reaching for the ceremonial dagger and hefting it in his good hand. “But I think it will be even better to butcher you with this one. It was your ancestor’s, did you know? The little bitch who wounded me.”

Nana’s athame had been handed down from Fiona? I hadn’t known that but I supposed Nana would have told me if I had asked. Anyway, it didn’t matter whose it was now – only how it was going to be used. I shivered.

“I’ve been planning my revenge for the past one hundred and fifty years,” the demon continued, pushing me toward the circle chalked on Nana’s hardwood living room floor. “I swore to myself that her descendents would pay for what she did to me. Pay many times over.”

I shivered again at the cold menace in its voice and even more at being close to it – in contact with it. When it had invaded my house in its incorporeal form, I had thought that I couldn’t stand to let those oily black tentacles touch me. Now I knew why – being so near something that was pure evil was like breathing poison gas. It made me feel sick

and faint and fogged my brain until it was hard to think clearly. Like some kind of psychic stench that was so strong it blocked out everything else.

No, have to fight it! Can't let it make me weak. Have to get away!

But the thing still had Bleaks' muscular arm looped firmly around my neck and I didn't see how I was going to manage that. I wanted to say something, to spell it, curse it, get it off me. But my mind was a blank, just as it had been the night it had attacked me at my house. And this time I didn't have Sumner to come and rescue me.

Or did I?

The thought gave me some hope. We had a connection and he'd felt my emotions from across town before. Was it possible for him to sense what was happening to me now? Could I somehow send him a message?

Sumner, I thought, as hard as I could. I'm in trouble. It's here – the demon is here at my nana's house. Please, I need help!

I tried to listen, tried to feel the place inside my mind where we were joined to see if he had heard me but I couldn't. I was too filled with fear, my mind too clouded with the demon's miasma.

"Now then, Kaitlyn," the thing said, pulling me inside the chalk outline on Nana's hardwood floor. "Call the circle."

"What? *Why?*" I gasped breathlessly.

It laughed in my ear, a low, evil sound that made me feel as if I was going to be sick. "Because I've decided I'm going to take you with me and we'll need a little magic to make that possible."

"You can't," I protested, a chill going down my spine. "I'm a physical being with a corporeal frame. You're just borrowing a host body. As soon as you use it up, you'll be returned to the spiritual plane."

"Exactly and you'll be coming with me. It's a simple matter, really—I'll tie your soul to my incorporeal form—my demonic essence, if you will. When I leave this body you'll come with me. Because by that time, you'll be dead as well. Very, *very* dead."

"You can't-can't just hijack someone's soul like that," I protested.

"Oh no? Watch me." The demon laughed again, a horrible gargling this time that sounded completely inhuman. Was Bleaks' body breaking down? "I don't know why I didn't think of it sooner," it said. "This way I'll have some nourishment while I wait for my time again. And some company."

I had a sudden vivid mental image of being stuck with this thing forever. Of being pressed against it in the darkness while it fed on me and tormented me for the next seventy-five years—or maybe eternity. It would be hell—literally. *No, I can't. I'd rather die! Rather anything at all than that.* But how was I going to get out of it?

The arm around my neck clamped down again and I felt something small and hard being shoved into one of my cuffed hands—the lighter. "Call the circle," the demon

growled, shoving me toward the first candle. "We don't have all night. I have to attend to the old woman when I finish with you."

My hand shook as I clumsily lit the first candle. Nana was alone and unprotected upstairs and I was about to be tied to the demon inhabiting Bleaks' body for all of eternity. Or for however long it took for the thing to tire of me. What was I going to do?

Destroy its physical form. That seemed to be my best bet. I had fought it off once before in its incorporeal form—well, with Sumner's help. But my chances of fighting it off while it was inhabiting Bleaks' beefy, muscular body were slim to none. How could I incapacitate it enough to mortally wound the host body? A hex? A sleep spell? *Please, Goddess, help me!*

An incantation for temporary paralysis rose to my mind. I didn't have any of the herbs that went with the words but at this point I was desperate. Slowly lighting the last candle, I finished calling the circle and went right into the incantation, keeping my voice low and indistinct.

"Goddess bright, lend strength to my charm. I have need of your power lest this creature do me harm," I whispered, lingering over the last candle. I could feel the power flowing to me as I envisioned Bleaks' beefy form lying immobile at my feet. "Bind its limbs from front to back. Do not allow its foul attack. Hold it in your mighty grip. Do not let it—"

"I don't think so." A cruel hand grasped the hair at the back of my head and yanked me upward, breaking my concentration. "I know your ways," it continued, speaking in my ear. "You aren't the first witch I've fed on and you won't be the last. You all try some sort of magic but none of it works in the end."

I gasped in pain as the demon yanked, twisting its fingers in the long strands at the nape of my neck. Though I tried to hold on to it, I could feel the power I had accumulated dissipating.

"Nothing more to say? That's good. I think we'd better keep it that way. Open your mouth again and I'll gut you." It held the glittering blade of the athame in front of my face and chuckled evilly. "Not that you'll die right away—I'll make sure of that. But it will certainly make your last moments a lot more *uncomfortable*. Don't you agree?"

I didn't dare answer it. Instead I looked longingly at Nana's front door. Where was Sumner? Why hadn't he felt what I was going through and come to my aid? What was I going to do?

"Hold out your wrist," it said.

"Why?" I asked, without thinking.

A sharp yank that felt as if it were tearing chunks of my hair out brought tears to my eyes. "I told you, no more talking. Hold out your wrist," the demon repeated. "Now, little witch."

Trembling, I held my cuffed wrists up in front of me. The demon still had its good hand tangled in my hair and its grip on the handle of the athame was clumsy since the fiberglass cast on Bleaks' bad hand got in the way. Still, it managed to draw the razor-

sharp blade across the vulnerable flesh of my inner wrist before I could pull back. I cried out in pain as blood gushed from the severed bracelet of blue veins and ran down my forearm.

“That’s good,” grunted the demon. “And now it’s my turn.” It released my hair and forced me down on the floor on hands and knees. I started to scramble away, out of the circle, but it pinned me down with a hard knee to my lower back. Looking up and back, I saw it draw the blade of the athame across Bleaks’ thick wrist. The blood that came out wasn’t red—it was black and sluggish, spilling from the wound slowly like oil or viscous syrup. It dropped the athame with a clatter on the floor. I wanted to reach for it but it was too far away.

“Please,” I whispered but the demon was already yanking me to my feet again. It put an arm around my waist and gripped my wounded wrist with Bleaks’ pale, bloated fingers. The fiberglass cast dug into my skin painfully as it forced my hand up.

“You with me and I with you. We must be one though we are two,” it intoned, bringing the oozing, oily black wound toward my own scarlet-streaked wrist. “Into shadow shall I lead. In blackest night shall I feed. Far from the light of moon or sun, in darkness shall we two be one.” There was a crackle of magical power as it finished the incantation and I knew the spell was active.

“No!” I gasped, trying to yank away. If our wounded wrists touched, if even a drop of that oily black blood entered my system, I would be linked to the demon forever. I squirmed in its grasp and the blood that slicked my skin worked in my favor. I managed to slide my hand out of its grip.

“Little bitch!” the thing hissed. It locked one muscular arm around my waist and reached to catch my flailing wrists. I tried to slide away but it was too fast for me and caught the chain that linked my cuffs, effectively immobilizing my hands. “Hold out your wrist,” it demanded. “Do it now or I’ll break your arm.”

“Let her go!”

The demon and I both looked up to see Sumner standing in the doorway, his pale eyes blazing with protective rage. I felt a pulse of pure relief. Sumner was here. He would save me! But...why was he just standing there? Why didn’t he come to my rescue?

The demon understood before I did. “Hello, old friend,” it said with an evil chuckle. “Here to rescue the damsel in distress? Oh but you can’t, can you? You haven’t been invited in.”

My heart almost stopped in my chest. It was true—Sumner didn’t need permission to come into *my* home because we had a connection but this was Nana’s house. A private residence that didn’t belong to me. He had to be invited in.

I opened my mouth to invite him but the demon was too quick for me. Bleaks’ meaty palm slapped over my mouth, the hard fiberglass cast mashing my lips against my teeth. I gave a muffled cry and tasted blood. The cold, bloated fingers gripped my cheek, holding me through I struggled and thrashed.

“Well, well, what a shame,” the thing said to Sumner. “Seems we’re right back where we started, aren’t we old friend? With me doing the dirty work while you watch.”

“If you touch her...” Sumner’s voice was low with rage.

“Oh, I’ll do more than touch her. I’m going to butcher her while you watch—just as I did your wife. Do you remember that, Sumner?” The demon laughed and held me tight—squeezing my waist until I could barely breathe. “Of course you do—it was the start of a long and beautiful relationship. This one looks like her, you know,” it continued. “Except for the hair. Your Sarah was a blonde, wasn’t she? But she had the same eyes—not to mention the same luscious full hips and ass. You know, maybe I should have some fun with her before she dies.”

I felt something hard and hot press against my buttocks as the demon ground against me. *Oh God, not that too!* The idea of the thing inside Bleaks doing *that* to me was beyond nauseating. I felt my stomach lurch at the thought.

“I’ll kill you.” Sumner’s eyes had gone pale-on-red and his fangs were longer and sharper than I had ever seen them. He was absolutely terrifying but there was nothing he could do. Not without an invitation.

The demon shrugged. “You’re welcome to kill this body—I’m almost done with it anyway. But you should know that when I go, I’m taking this little witch with me. I’ll feed on her soul to keep me strong while I wait for my time to come round again.”

“No!” Sumner roared.

“Oh, yes.” The demon laughed its horrible gargling laugh. “I was just in the process of binding her to me when you so rudely interrupted. A process I think we should continue now.” It had my arms pinned down in front of me and now it began inching its wounded wrist closer to mine.

Sumner looked wild and through the fear that clouded my mind I couldn’t help feeling sorry for him. He was going to watch again as his past repeated itself, unable to help, unable to stop the demon until it was too late. Of course *I* was the one who was about to be raped, butchered and tied to a demon for all time but the pain on his face was terrible to behold.

“Wait. Take me instead,” he said, his voice hoarse with emotion. “Being a vampire had altered me—my soul is older, stronger. You’ll have much more nourishment during your resting time.”

The demon looked up briefly. “Let you into the house so you can kill my host body before I’m ready? I don’t think so.”

“I’ll swear not to lift a finger toward you if you let her go,” Sumner said earnestly.

The demon hesitated and I could sense it was actually considering his offer. Then it shook its head. “What oath could you possibly swear that would make me believe you?”

"I swear on the soul of my wife, Sarah." Sumner's eyes were desperate but his voice was level. "I would never dishonor her memory."

"Well, well." The demon had stopped trying to press its wounded wrist to mine. Instead it was staring at Sumner. "I do believe you mean that."

"I do," Sumner said. "Think how much stronger you'll be if you feed on me instead. Tie my soul to yours."

No, Sumner, I thought at him as hard as I could. I didn't know why but I couldn't let him sacrifice himself for me.

He looked back at me. *Trust me, Kaitlyn. I know what I'm doing.*

No, I can't let you! Twisting my head sharply, I managed to get one of Bleaks' swollen fingers between my teeth. Fighting back my nausea at the revolting act, I bit down as hard as I could.

The demon howled and yanked its hand away from my mouth. It might not care what kind of agony Bleaks endured while it wasn't occupying his body but it certainly seemed to feel his pain when it was in residence. Or maybe I had just surprised it. Either way I had a window of opportunity and I was determined not to miss it.

"Come in, Sumner!" I shouted hoarsely the minute the meaty palm left my lips.

Sumner was at my side in a flash. He ripped the demon's arm from around my waist and pushed me out of the way. Then he was on top of Bleaks bulky' form, his hands locked around the thick throat.

The demon struggled madly in his grasp, thrashing like a fish. I had to move quickly to get out of the way of flailing arms and kicking feet. But despite the wild struggle, Sumner was somehow managing to keep it contained within the circle. Which meant it was time for me to do my part.

Think, Kaitlyn. The spell, the banishment spell. Quickly! At first I felt so overloaded with emotion I could barely think. My mind was a blank—I was panicking. *Goddess, help me! I have to do this!* I took a deep breath and then another and saw that the athame was laying just within my reach. Avoiding Bleaks' thrashing form, I managed to grab it. When I felt the dull black handle mold to my hand, the words of the spell rose to my mind, like bubbles coming up from very deep water.

"Goddess, bright," I said as loudly as I could. "I call on thee to aid me now. The evil contained within this circle is not of this realm—help me to bind and banish it, to cast it back into the pit from whence it came." Tightening my grip on the athame, I thought of my ancestor. "Fiona, if you can hear me, come to my aid. I seek to finish the work you started. Help me now."

I felt a flow of power like a bright golden cable in my mind. Something I could grab onto and use to banish the demon for good. Whether it came from the Goddess or Fiona, I didn't care. Whatever its source, I intended to put it to good use. Tracing the *naudhiz*, or binding rune, in the air with the point of the athame, I began to chant.

"Evil demon from the deep,

*He who comes to murder sleep,
I bind thee from this Earthly realm
I send thee back to darkest Hell."*

As I spoke, I felt the power growing and going out from me. It was as though the golden cable was winding its way around the evil spirit being held in the center of the circle. The demon inside Bleaks howled and foam ran from his mouth as Sumner held on grimly, keeping the large body inside the circle. *It's working. It's really working!* Feeling encouraged I kept chanting.

*"Goddess, in thy goodness bright,
Aid my efforts on this night.
To the darkness of the Pit
I bind it and I banish it."*

The demon howled again and this time the howl became a garbled laugh. Sumner's fingers were still locked around its thick throat. Bleaks' face was a dull purple now and still it wouldn't stop.

I opened my mouth to finish the spell but before I could the demon twisted like a fish under Sumner. He was sitting on its chest, pinning both its arms to its sides but somehow it managed to wiggle its good hand free. I watched in what seemed like slow motion as it reached for Bleaks' gun.

"Sumner, watch out!" I screamed but the black 9mm Glock was already pointed at the vampire's torso. There was a crashing *bang* that seemed to echo throughout the entire house and the smell of burning filled the air. I flinched at the deafening noise, my eyes squeezing shut involuntarily. When I looked again, a gaping hole had appeared in the left side of Sumner's chest.

"No!" I cried and ran forward but Sumner looked up at me and shook his head. His face was paper pale but his eyes still blazed.

"Finish...it. Finish it...Kaitlyn," he gasped.

I forced myself to retreat and grasped the handle of the athame even tighter. Sumner was right—I had to finish. And I'd seen him survive a gunshot wound before so he should be all right. I hoped. Anyway, though he had to be in terrible pain he was still keeping the demon in the circle. Taking a deep breath, I chanted the final stanza of the spell.

*"Get thee from this Earthly plane
No more to kill and break and maim
I bind thee in the pits of sin
Never to return again."*

There was a blinding flash of light within the circle as a wave of power radiated outward like a silent lightning bolt. I felt the golden cord tighten, gripping the demonic essence in an unbreakable hold and knew the spell was complete. Now all

Sumner had to do was kill the host body—stab it through the heart with Nana’s athame—and the cycle would be broken. The demon would never be able to return.

The flash of power had blinded me for a moment and I blinked, trying to see if Sumner was ready to take the ceremonial dagger and finish the job. But when my vision cleared, I was horrified.

Somehow the demon had gotten on top. It was holding Sumner down, sitting on his wounded chest and laughing manically. As I watched, it caught my gaze and raised its cut wrist, which was still oozing the black sludge that passed for its blood.

“Not alone!” It howled, its black eyes blazing. “You may banish me, little witch, but I won’t be going alone.”

Before I could do anything to stop it, it pressed its bleeding wrist to the ragged wound in Sumner’s chest. I gasped as I felt a second, much darker burst of power radiating outward from their contact. The demon’s spell was complete. When Sumner died he would be tied to it forever.

I wanted to kill it—wanted to rush forward and stab it in the heart. But Sumner wasn’t looking too good. His face was deathly pale and the grip he had on the demon seemed to be weakening. Still, though it was on top of him, he held it within the circle, a look of grim determination on his face.

“Sumner?” I wished I could see the wound in his chest more clearly. It didn’t seem to be healing like it should but with the demon in Bleaks’ beefy form sitting on him it was hard to tell.

His eyes caught mine. “Kill it.” His voice was hoarse with pain. “Kill it, Kaitlyn.”

“But you’re tied to it. I can’t. What if you...” *What if you die?* I couldn’t say it. Couldn’t make myself finish. But Sumner understood.

“Doesn’t matter. Do it. *Now.*” He could barely gasp out the words. His strength was fading—for some reason he really was dying.

I couldn’t do this to him. Couldn’t condemn him to an eternity of torment and suffering and pain with the demon he had stalked through life as his only companion.

Kaitlyn, you must. His eyes burned into mine, pale-on-red and I knew he was using our link because he had no more strength to speak aloud. *If you do not, my entire life, my existence as a vampire, has been for nothing.*

“No...no!” I shook my head violently, rejecting the idea.

Sumner’s eyes pleaded with me. *Please...I’m losing my grip. If the demon frees itself before you kill it you will be its next victim. And after that your grandmother. Please, Kaitlyn, do not let me die in vain.*

It was the thought of Nana lying helpless in her bed upstairs that got me going. The demon was growling and snarling like an animal and I could tell Sumner couldn’t hold it much longer. If it got out of the circle, the spell would be voided and all bets were off.

My heart felt as if it were about to burst but somehow I clenched both fists around the handle of the athame and raised it high above my head. Then, with a silent prayer

that the Goddess would guide my aim, I brought it down as hard as I could, right between Bleaks' shoulder blades.

Chapter Eighteen

My silent prayer was answered.

As the blade of the athame sank to the hilt in Bleak's back, the thing inside him gave a moaning howl and arched backward, ripping the dagger from my hands. I gasped and jumped back as it fell on its side, its eyes wide and black and burning.

I could see the oily, viscous slime—the demon's essence—filling Bleaks' mouth and ears. It dripped from the corners of his eyes and oozed from the sides of his mouth—trying to escape.

But my spell held.

Even as Bleaks' big body writhed and thrashed the demon couldn't get away. Sumner had spoken of the black smoke pouring from its host's body but that didn't happen this time. Instead, the black faded gradually, being reabsorbed into Bleaks' body as his struggles stilled. As his eyes turned from obsidian flames to dull china-blue and then went dead, I knew his soul had departed, taking the unholy entity with it.

The demon was gone—this time for good and with it, my bond with Sumner.

I felt it die, leaving only the thread-thin connection we'd had before this whole thing started. And I feared that Sumner was dying with it.

I pushed Bleaks' body to one side—no easy task since my hands were still cuffed together in front of me—and knelt on the blood-soaked floor beside the vampire. The hole in his chest hadn't healed at all as far as I could see and his eyes were closed. I couldn't tell if he was breathing or not.

"Sumner," I whispered, afraid to speak too loudly for some reason. "Sumner, please...please wake up."

I nudged his broad shoulder but he didn't move. He looked like a wax statue—something all the life had gone completely out of. Or maybe something that had never been alive in the first place.

"Sumner," I said again, my voice breaking on his name. There was a smear of demon blood across one of his high cheekbones. It looked very black against the pale perfection of his skin. My eyes blurred as I reached over awkwardly to wipe it off. "Sumner," I whispered. "Please don't really be dead. Oh God, please...please don't be dead."

To my surprise, his eyelids fluttered open. "Kaitlyn..." His voice was so faint I could barely hear it.

"Don't talk," I said urgently. "Use our connection. Why aren't you healing?"

Don't know. Silver bullets?

I could barely hear him in my mind. It was like the few wispy thoughts I'd caught from him before we formed our physical bond. Obviously now that the bond was gone, the connection between us was weakened considerably. That was what I had wanted in the first place – told myself I wanted. So why did it upset me so much?

I scrambled over to where Bleaks or the demon inside him had dropped his gun. Fumbling, I slipped the magazine out. Sure enough...silver winked at me from the insides. Dropping the gun, I went back to kneel beside Sumner.

"It's silver all right. How do we heal it?"

He gave me a ghost of a smile. *No healing...silver wounds. You know that.*

"Bullshit." I let my hands hover over the gaping hole in his chest, trying not to think about how I could see his heart and the broken and shattered ribs inside. A human with this wound would already be dead and Sumner was fading fast.

Closing my eyes, I called on my magic. Binding the demon had depleted me but I gathered every resource I had left, pulling from every corner of my being. In my mind I saw the power glowing, a silver cloud of light – of healing and strength and wellness. I shaped it into a ball and pushed it at Sumner, willing it to fill in the terrible gaping hole, to heal him, to keep him here with me.

I felt the power leave me and I opened my eyes...to see nothing had changed. Sumner was still dying, the life leaving him little by little.

"I-I don't understand." I clenched my fists, filled with frustration and panic. "What's happening? Why didn't that help?"

Sumner looked up at me patiently as though waiting for me to finish my efforts and then shook his head slowly. *You forget, Kaitlyn. Your magic...does not work on me. But I thank you...for trying.*

I felt like an idiot. How could I have forgotten my earlier attempts to heal him when he'd had the silver particles embedded in his side? My magic was useless to him – I could neither harm nor heal him. He was beyond my reach.

Beyond my reach. Slipping away. My vision blurred again and my eyes stung as I looked down at him.

His eyes closed again. *Goodbye, Kaitlyn.*

"No!" I surprised myself with my vehemence. "No, I won't let you go. I *can't*," I raged, my voice breaking again.

I didn't understand why I felt the way I felt. A month ago I would have said "good riddance" if I'd heard that Holden Sumner was dead. But now...now, somehow, for some reason, I couldn't bear to lose him. Couldn't bear never to see him again. *It's just because I know the demon is waiting for him – waiting on the other side to take him down with it if he goes.*

Yes, that must be it. I wouldn't wish that fate on my worst enemy and if I could save Sumner from it somehow, I had to. But how? He was so still, so pale. As though every drop of blood had been leached from his veins.

Blood. He needs blood. I nearly slapped my forehead. He was a vampire – of *course* he needed blood to heal. And we had an entire cooler of it upstairs, sitting at the foot of Nana’s bed.

I started to get up and go racing up the stairs to get some when I looked at Sumner again. He was almost gone. I reached out to him through our ever weakening connection and felt that the fire of his life force was almost out. Nothing now remained but the tiniest spark and as I watched, that flickered and started to die.

“No!” I gasped. There was only one thing I could do.

Fumbling, I pushed back the clumsy steel handcuff that encircled my wrist. I was still bleeding from where the demon had cut me with Nana’s athame. Indeed, if it had cut much deeper I might have been joining Sumner in death. But that wasn’t going to happen. Neither one of us was going to die – not if I could help it.

“Here.” I pressed my bleeding wrist to his full lips. “Here, Sumner – drink.”

His eyelids flickered again, his pale eyes like silver half moons under his dark lashes. *You don’t...want to do this. Blood bond...hard to break...*

“I don’t care about that now, you idiot,” I said fiercely. “I only care about *you*. You can’t leave me. Now drink!”

His eyes closed tightly and he latched onto my wrist. I felt him pull at the wound and then his fangs sank deep, taking even more.

I gritted my teeth against the sharp pain. I knew Sumner could make taking blood a pleasurable experience when he wanted to but he was too weak just now, too in need to do anything but drink.

And though my magic was useless to him, my blood was exactly what he needed.

As he drew from me, the gaping hole in his chest began to heal. It was amazing to watch the bone and blood vessels and tissues knit themselves together – like some kind of fast motion film you might see in biology class in high school. Only this was no camera trick – Sumner was actually healing before my eyes.

And as he healed, I felt a second, stronger bond forming between us. He was in my mind now – a solid, tangible presence. I could feel him there and I knew that as long as the blood bond lasted, I would always have access to him. Not only that – *he* was going to have access to *me*. And not just a few stray thoughts and emotions – he was going to be able to read me like a book, flipping to any chapter of my life he cared to examine at any given time. It was going to be incredibly intimate.

And incredibly invasive.

Sumner’s eyes flickered open and he looked up at me. *You regret our new bond already.*

“I never said that,” I protested uncomfortably.

You didn’t have to. I am sorry for tying you to me this way.

“It was my choice,” I reminded him. “I didn’t want...”

Didn’t want to lose me. His eyes were still locked with mine.

"You're tied to the demon. I couldn't let you die—the minute you go, he's got you for eternity. I wouldn't wish that on anyone, not even you."

He raised an eyebrow. *So that is the only reason you are letting me drink from you at last? The only reason you were willing to make yourself vulnerable to save me?*

"You were willing to save me," I pointed out, dodging the question. "You offered yourself to the demon in my place. I just wish you could have kept it from tying you to it."

And if I had? If I had managed to avoid letting it contaminate me with its blood, would you have been able to let me go?

"I don't know, all right?" I burst out in irritation. "Damn it, Sumner, I saved your life. Why can't you just be happy about it? Why are you giving me the third degree?"

Forgive me, Kaitlyn but I need to know your motivations. Now that the demon is dead and banished forever, I have obligations to fulfill. Promises I made centuries ago that must be kept. He had finished feeding now and was licking my wrist. His tongue was hot against my skin. Hot and wet. It reminded me of the way he had licked...other parts of me.

I shivered, lust rising in me suddenly at the slow, delicious caress. I pushed the troublesome emotion away quickly. Now wasn't the right time. There was never going to be a right time—not with Sumner.

Why can't you admit how you feel, even to yourself? He whispered the words through our newly strengthened connection. *Why, Kaitlyn?*

"Because there's nothing to admit," I said roughly. "Are you done yet?"

Almost. He looked up at me, his eyes half-lidded. Apparently either drinking my blood or coming back from the dead had made him incredibly horny. I knew because I could feel it—could feel the emotion almost as my own.

It is your own, Sumner informed me. I have told you before that you want me as much as I want you.

"I can't believe you! You were nearly dead a minute ago. I save your life and for what? So you can start that ridiculous crap again?" I demanded.

It's not ridiculous and you know it. You wept for me, Kaitlyn. He raised his hand and cupped my face lightly, swiping at my cheek with his thumb. *You swore you couldn't bear for me to leave you. That must mean something.*

Part of me wanted to admit that what he was saying was true. That I had saved him, not because of the demon now waiting for him on the other side of mortality but because I couldn't bear to lose him. Because I...loved him? No, that was wrong. Crazy. Completely untrue.

"Sure it means something. It means I'm an idiot," I said, looking away from him. I wanted to pull my wrist away from his mouth, to put some distance between us, but I couldn't quite make myself. "A Wiccan who let herself get blood bonded to a vampire. So stupid."

Is that truly how you feel? His eyes caught mine and searched them.

“Why don’t you see for yourself?” I demanded. “You’re inside my head now – isn’t that what you always wanted?”

No. I wanted to be inside your heart. The words were so quiet, even through our link, I could barely hear them. But still they made me feel awful. Like Sumner had gotten hold of my heart somehow and was squeezing it.

“You can stop with the guilt trip anytime,” I told him, my voice sounding raw.

It was never my intention to make you feel guilty. Only to make you aware that you feel at all. Kaitlyn, I –

“Oh my Goddess, no. *No.*”

The voice from the stairs beside me made me jerk in surprise. Looking to my right, I saw Nana standing there, swaying in her bathrobe and staring at the sight of Sumner licking the last traces of blood from my wrist.

Chapter Nineteen

"Nana!" I exclaimed, pulling away from Sumner at last. I ran over to help support her and then remembered that I was supposed to be careful at the last minute. "Uh...how are you doing?" I asked, studying her closely. "How do you feel?"

"I *was* feeling fine until I saw what you were doing just now with that...that *devil*." She eyed Sumner balefully. He was sitting up now and straightening what remained of his ragged, blood-drenched T-shirt with sure, quick motions. It reminded me of nothing so much as a cat grooming itself.

"Nana," I said warningly. "Please don't start. I know how it looks but Sumner needed blood. He was about to die."

"You should've let him die then," she spat, still glaring at him. "Why did you let him in here in the first place? And what is this mess all over my living room floor? Did *he* kill that man?" She jerked her head at the prone body of Bleaks, the athame still protruding from between his shoulder blades. "He did, didn't he? You let him in here and he butchered someone, just like the devil he is."

"Nana!" I exclaimed. "Don't be like that—you don't know what he did for you."

"For me? What are you talking about, Katy-child? What does *that*," she jerked her chin at Sumner who still appeared perfectly composed, "have to do with *me*?"

Between being attacked by a demon and saving the life of a vampire I had extremely confusing feelings for, I was all out of patience for the night. "He saved your life," I said flatly. "So stop being rude to him. You're embarrassing me."

"He *what*? What did he do? What did you let him do to me?" she demanded, getting even more agitated.

"You were in danger of dying after a demon attack," Sumner said, sauntering over. "The demon that inhabited the man who now lies dead on your floor." He looked up at Nana, who was standing in the middle of the stairs. She was clutching her robe closed at the throat as though she expected him to jump on her at any moment. "You drank my blood," he continued, giving her a mocking smile. "Quite a lot of it, actually."

"I-I *what*?" Nana looked from Sumner to me, her eyes wide with horror. "Katy, tell me that's not true. He's lying, isn't he? You wouldn't let me drink vampire blood, would you?"

"It was either that or lose you," I said. "And I wasn't ready to do that yet."

"Just as she was not willing to lose me," Sumner put in. "Which was why she allowed me to drink from her. Among...other things."

"*What* other things?" Nana said ominously.

I felt my cheeks heating—it was just like the time she'd caught me making out with my high school boyfriend on the couch with my blouse unbuttoned. Only much, *much* worse.

"Don't listen to Sumner. He's crazy," I protested.

"Only crazy for you, sweetheart." He took my hands in his and kissed them gently, keeping his eyes locked with mine.

"Stop it!" I snatched my hands away, or tried to but Sumner wouldn't let me go.

"Just a moment, darling," he murmured. With a few quick movements he broke the handcuffs that still bound me, snapping the steel as though he was breaking a stale breadstick. Then he dropped the pieces on the floor and dusted his hands together. "There."

"Thanks," I muttered, rubbing my wrists. The one that the demon had cut and Sumner had fed from was completely healed, I noticed. Maybe that was what all the licking had been about. Or maybe he was just trying to drive me crazy—like he was right now.

Nana was watching our entire exchange with growing agitation. "What were you doing wearing those cuffs in the first place, young lady? How long have you two been carrying on?"

"We're *not* carrying on," I said just as Sumner answered,

"Almost a month now."

Nana put her hands on her hips. "I didn't raise you like this. You have shamed me and shamed the line of witches that bred you."

"Nana!" I protested.

"Kaitlyn has nothing to be ashamed of." Sumner's eyes flashed dangerously. "She banished and killed a very dangerous demon tonight."

I pointed a finger at him. "You stay out of this!"

"I would but I already seem to be in the middle of it." He shrugged, grinning at Nana infuriatingly. "Forgive me, I know you dislike my kind but I can't help it if your granddaughter and I have fallen in love."

"*What?*" Nana nearly shrieked. "Kaitlyn Elizabeth Richards, what is he talking about?"

"I told you, don't listen to him." I crossed my arms over my chest. "He knows you don't like him—he's baiting you."

"And it's working rather well too." Sumner's grin widened, showing a substantial amount of fang.

"God, can't you *stop?*" I demanded. Frustrated almost beyond words, I continued using the bond. *What's wrong with you? You saved her life. If you'd just give her a minute and not act like such a jackass she might even stop hating you.*

"You're wrong, Kaitlyn, she'll never stop hating me," Sumner answered aloud. His eyes were suddenly serious. "Just as you're never going to admit that you love me."

"I-I don't..." The words stuck in my throat.

Sumner shook his head. "See? Even now you can't admit it, though I can feel it clearly through the bond we share."

Nana turned on me, frowning. "I can't believe this. Can't believe you actually formed a bond with him after I warned you not to. After you *promised* you wouldn't. I *knew* –"

"I wouldn't worry about it too much." Sumner interrupted. "The bond isn't likely to last for long."

"What are you talking about?" Nana demanded, glaring at him. "Blood bonds are practically forever."

"Not this one."

"What do you mean by that?" I asked him. A cold finger of fear traced its way down my spine. "Are you planning to break it somehow? But you can't, unless—"

"Never mind what he's planning." Nana narrowed her eyes. "Holden Sumner, I don't know why you were invited in here in the first place but I revoke your invitation to my house."

"Nana!" I exclaimed, aghast. "*Don't.*"

"It doesn't matter." Sumner made her a deep, sweeping bow. "I have to be leaving anyway. Now that the demon is gone, I have promises I must keep." He turned and sauntered to the door, for all the world as though leaving was his own choice. Before stepping over the threshold, he turned back once more and looked at Nana. "Don't worry about your granddaughter – she'll be free of me soon."

"Sumner –" I began but he shook his head.

"If I never see you again, Kaitlyn – and I very well may not – remember that I love you."

And then he was gone, getting the last word yet again.

Damn vampire.

Chapter Twenty

“Let’s go over this one more time. Bleaks came to your grandmother’s house, cuffed you, attacked you, discharged his gun, admitted to being the Witch Killer and then you managed to stab him in the back, killing him. Have I got that right?” Detective Travers eyed me suspiciously over the skinny square rims of her reading glasses.

“Yeah,” I said tiredly. “Pretty much.”

We were sitting at Nana’s kitchen table, away from most of the chaos of the crime scene while Travers interviewed me. I knew she was doing me a courtesy, taking me away from it all and listening to my side of it and I was grateful. Grateful but so damn tired and emotionally spent I could hardly function.

Nana was somewhere at the other end of the house being interviewed by someone else. She still wasn’t showing any signs of vampirism, which was a big relief. However we very definitely not talking. I was still angry with her for the way she’d treated Sumner—angry and embarrassed and ashamed that I hadn’t tried to stand up for him more. But damn it, he hadn’t even *tried* with her. It was as if he knew she was dead set against him—no pun intended—so he didn’t even bother trying to make a good impression. It was irritating and exasperating but still no excuse for letting Nana kick him out after he’d put himself at risk to save her life.

So I was plenty pissed at Nana, but not as pissed as she was at me. That was because she’d found the cooler of blood at the foot of her bed. I’d had to explain that I had let her drink enough of Sumner’s blood that I had feared she might turn. The fact that I had made the choice to let him save her knowing she might become a vampire had been more than she could bear. As far as Nana was concerned, I had been gambling with her soul—and that she could not forgive. At least not right away. Maybe not ever.

Which meant I was on the outs with pretty much everyone who mattered to me. Even Detective Travers who was staring at me with that skeptical look in her shrewd green eyes.

“What are you not telling me, Richards?” she asked. “What else is going on?”

Looking at her, I tried to decide if I should tell her everything. I sighed. “What the hell. My life is already almost completely screwed up, I might as well finish the job.”

She frowned. “What are you talking about?”

I ran a hand through my hair, which was tangled and matted with blood. “I’m going to tell you something Travers and you’re probably going to hate me afterward. There’s something that you ought to know—something you already knew only someone made you forget it...”

And then I told her *everything*. How Sumner had gotten himself arrested just so he could get into my house and get alone time with me. The demon he'd been stalking. The fact that my powers didn't work on him because of our blood connection. And even the fact that he'd erased her memory of his murder of Jason Drews. I ended with the real story of what had happened in Nana's house that night.

When I was finished, I waited for her to tell me off or cuff me and bring me in. Or probably both. Instead she just sat there staring at me as though she was trying to absorb the information I'd dumped on her.

"Look," I said after a full minute had passed. "I understand that what I did—what I let Sumner do—was wrong. *Egregiously* wrong. So I'll understand if you want to strip me of my S.E. license and haul my ass down to the station. In fact, we can go right now. It's not like I've got any big plans for the rest of the night." I tried to laugh but it came out sounding more like a sob.

Travers sighed. "I'm not going to do any of that."

"You're not?" I looked at her in surprise. "Aren't you mad at me?"

She shook her head slowly. "You know, I should be. But no...no I'm not."

"I get it," I said grimly. "You're not mad, you're just *hurt*. Well you can get in line behind my Nana for that one."

Travers raised her eyebrows. "She's good at guilt trips, huh?"

"Let's put it this way," I said. "If her guilt trip was a road trip you'd end up in fucking Peru by the time she was done."

Travers snorted. "I take it she's not too pleased about the whole Sumner thing."

"Not at all. Even though he saved her life." I sighed. "*Especially* since he saved her life."

"At the risk of turning her into what she hates more than anything else in the whole world," she pointed out.

"Well, yes," I agreed grudgingly. "But I guess I didn't realize how *much* she hated vamps until tonight." I looked down at my hands. "It was kind of embarrassing. I mean, I've gotten to know Sumner over the past couple of weeks—really *know* him. As more than a vampire—as a person. But Nana still acts like she caught me doing something unspeakable with someone completely unacceptable."

Travers nodded sympathetically. "Sounds like how my folks reacted when I came out to them."

"Really?" I looked up at her.

"Uh-huh. You should have seen their faces when I brought Cheryl home for the holidays. I had told them I was dating again after the divorce went through and that I had found someone I really cared about. Unfortunately they thought I meant I'd finally found a nice guy—which my ex most definitely was *not*—to settle down with. My mom nearly fainted dead away when I introduced Cheryl as my girlfriend and my dad had to leave the house and go out back to punch a tree or something."

"God." I put a hand to my mouth. "Sounds like a nightmare."

"Oh yeah." She laughed grimly. "It was certainly a Christmas to remember. I felt so bad for Cheryl who was putting up with their shit and so mad at them for being such assholes."

"Exactly!" I slapped the kitchen table with my palm. "That's *exactly* how it was tonight with Nana and Sumner."

"Uh-huh." Travers raised an eyebrow at me. "So how long have you been in love with him?"

"What?" I frowned at her. "What are you talking about? I'm not—"

She put up a hand to stop me. "Don't even bother to lie to me. Or yourself either for that matter, Richards."

"I'm not," I protested.

"You are." She counted the points on her fingers. "You said you got to know him as a person. Then you formed a bond with him."

"Only to defeat the demon," I pointed out.

"Uh-huh. But then you formed *another* bond with him to save his life. Even though you knew it was pretty much permanent and impossible to break."

"Unless one of us dies." I looked at my hands again, troubled.

"Hey." Travers touched my arm. "What is it?"

"Nothing, just...something Sumner said before he left."

"Which was?"

"He told Nana not to worry about me being tied to him because it wouldn't be for long. But there's almost no way to break a blood bond with a vampire unless..."

"Unless what?" Travers looked at me intently.

I sighed. "Unless one of us dies. But that doesn't make any sense."

She frowned. "You think you're in danger? Is he threatening you?"

"No, of course not." I shook my head impatiently. "But I can't imagine he'd kill himself either. He's not exactly the suicidal type. Besides, the minute he leaves this plane of existence, he'll be tied to the demon for who knows how long. It's in his best interest to stay alive for as long as he can— which is pretty much forever for a vampire, as long as nobody, uh, interferes."

"So maybe he thinks somebody's going to 'interfere'. Did he say where he was going?"

"No. Just said he had promises to keep."

"Promises? What promises?"

"I don't know." I frowned. "You know, when he told me how he became a vampire he said something about having to make a pretty steep bargain in order to convince the female vamp who turned him to make him like her."

Travers nodded. "Could be that he made a deal in order to get his revenge and now the chickens are coming home to roost."

"Whatever that means," I said, rolling my eyes.

"It *means* you'd better get your head out of your ass and find him before it's too late."

I looked at her, not believing what I was hearing. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me." Travers tapped the tabletop for emphasis. "It sounds like he thinks he's going to his death. You saved him once tonight because you couldn't stand to lose him. Are you really going to sit by and let him go out of your life forever because your Nana doesn't approve?"

I stared at her blankly. "I can't believe you're saying this. You're advising me to pursue a relationship with a *vampire*?"

"No, I'm advising you to pursue a relationship with someone you love." She scowled. "And don't think I'm going soft on vamps because I'm not. But I know what it's like to feel marginalized and shamed because you care for someone that everyone else in your life thinks you have no business being with."

"I appreciate the pep talk," I said dryly. "But coming out as a vamp lover isn't exactly the same as coming out as gay. In fact, Nana would probably have an easier time accepting it if I *was* gay. She'd rather I brought home a female lover than a vampire any day of the week."

"Screw that," Travers said fiercely. "You can't let other people's opinions stand in the way of your happiness, Richards, or you're *never going to be happy*. And that's no way to live your life."

I nodded my head slowly. "You know, you're right. I mean, I'm not saying I'm in love with Sumner or anything. But we *do* have some unresolved issues."

She punched me lightly on the arm. "So go resolve them."

"What about the investigation here?"

"Don't worry about it—I'm not charging you with a crime. You might have to come down to the station and answer some questions but that's probably the extent of it."

"I killed an officer though," I said flatly.

"An officer nobody could stand," Travers pointed out. "You know, I always *knew* there was something off about Bleaks."

"It was the demon inside him doing the killing," I reminded her.

"Yes, but you *did* say it picked hosts that were ripe for its particular brand of evil. Tell me the last time Bleaks looked at you that you didn't feel like he was thinking of doing something sick and perverted."

I thought of our conversation where Bleaks had asked about witches dancing naked under the moon and having orgies. He hadn't been possessed then—he was just being his usual charming self. "Yeah, that's true," I admitted.

“Exactly. And once I get checking into his alibis for the other witch murders I’m pretty sure your innocence will speak for itself. I can think of one right off the bat where Bleaks had called in sick for two days in a row. I’m betting he wasn’t spending that time home in bed.”

I shivered. “I’m sure he wasn’t.”

“So you should go,” Travers repeated. “Go on. Follow your heart or some sentimental shit like that.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “And leave Nana here alone?”

“She’s got the rest of your coven to support her, doesn’t she? And it’s not like you two are buddy-buddy right now.”

“We *could* use a little cooling off time,” I admitted. “I don’t even know where Sumner went though. But...”

“But what?”

I frowned, probing at the new bond I had with Sumner. “Well, I don’t know where he went but I *am* pretty sure he’s left town.” I gave her an anxious glance. “I hope that’s not a problem.”

Travers made a waving gesture with one hand. “Nah. I’m not bringing him into this. Vamps don’t leave prints or DNA so it’s not like we’ll find evidence of him in the crime scene. As far as I’m concerned, the *first* version of your story is what’s going on the official record.”

I reached across the table and squeezed her forearm gratefully. “Thanks, Travers. And thanks for not wanting to kill me when I told you the truth.”

“I’m just glad you told me,” she said seriously. “I consider you a friend, Kaitlyn. I hope you know you can always be honest with me.”

“Even about breaking the law?” I gave her a half smile.

“Even about that.” She smiled back. “And don’t be so surprised that I’m not pissed at you. You cleared two cases for me tonight—big ones. The Witch Killer and Jason Drews are sewn up tight. I can afford to be generous.”

“Thanks, Travers. That means a lot to me.” To my surprise I suddenly had to sniff back tears. “Oh God, not again. This is the second time I’ve cried to tonight.”

She raised an eyebrow. “The first time being?”

“When I thought Sumner was dead,” I admitted. “Damn it, I really do need to clear things up with him.”

“So go do it.”

“But I don’t know where he went.”

“What about the blood bond?” she asked. “Can’t you use that?”

“What—as some kind of internal relationship tracking device?”

She shrugged. “Why not? MapQuest for the heart.”

Why not indeed? The more I thought about it, the more sense it made. I nodded. "You know, it might work. At least I ought to try."

Travers squeezed my arm and stood up. "Yes, you should."

I stood up as well. "You know, I still can't believe you. You're the last person I would have thought who would encourage me to go after a vampire."

She frowned. "It's like I said – it's not what he is, it's *who* he is and what he means to you. And I can tell from the way you talk he means a lot. A *hell* of a lot."

"Maybe," I said uneasily, wondering what Travers could see that I couldn't about my relationship with Sumner. "Well...I guess I should get going."

"You do that." Travers surprised me by pulling me into a brief hug. "Take care of yourself," she whispered before letting me go.

Her concern touched me. "Thanks, Travers. I will."

"I'm sure." She smiled. "You want to just slip out? I can run interference for you."

I sighed. "No, I have to tell Nana I'm going. She's not going to like it but I can't just disappear on her."

Travers nodded. "All right then but don't let her change your mind."

"I won't," I promised and went to find Nana.

She was sitting ramrod straight at the dining room table and lecturing the detective that had been sent to question her. "And another thing, young man –"

"I hate to interrupt," I said, interrupting.

The young detective looked up. "Oh, no problem," he said hastily. "We were just wrapping things up here anyway." He nodded at Nana and left quickly, obviously relieved to make a clean getaway.

"Nana," I said hesitantly.

"Yes?" She raised an eyebrow at me and waited. Obviously she wasn't going to make this easy. Great. Well, I might as well just say it.

"I'm leaving," I told her. "For a couple days probably – maybe more like a week. I'll be back when I can."

She gave me a level stare. "You're going after him, aren't you?"

"Yes," I said because there was no point in lying. "I am."

"And there's nothing I can do or say to stop you?"

"Nothing," I said. "Sumner and I have unfinished business, Nana. I need to take care of it."

Her faded eyes narrowed. "Mmm-hmm. I know what kind of 'business' you want to get up to with him all right."

I felt my cheeks heating but I stood my ground. "What I do with Sumner doesn't concern you."

"It does because it affects me," she protested. "How can I hold up my head when you're carrying on with a *vampire*?"

"I said it doesn't concern you. I'm not asking *you* to date him—just be civil to him."

"Never." Nana lifted her chin. "I won't have anything to do with him and neither will you."

I could feel my temper getting away from me and I took a deep breath, trying to control it. "I'm not nine years old anymore, Nana. This is my decision to make and I've made it. I'm going after Sumner."

Her eyes flashed. "We'll just see about that."

I frowned. "What is *that* supposed to mean?"

"Never you mind. Just go on—do what you have to do. But don't expect to bring that vampire back through my door ever again."

"He saved your life, you know," I said angrily. "And you treated him like dirt."

"I've already told you what I think of how you let him 'save' me." She squared her shoulders. "I think you'd better go now, Kaitlyn."

"What? Are you kicking me out? Rescinding my invitation the way you did Sumner's?"

"I'm just saying you should go ahead and go. And when you come to your senses—and you *will*—come back to me."

I shook my head at her self delusion. I didn't exactly know what I wanted with Sumner but I was fairly sure I wanted him in my life in some capacity. I certainly wasn't going to cut him off and forget about him just because Nana wanted me to.

"Fine," I said. "I'm going." I headed for the door but Nana called my name.

"Katy-child," she said quietly.

I turned, half hoping she had changed her mind. But the look of grim determination was still on her face. "Be careful," she said.

I sighed and promised I would but I didn't know if it was a promise I could keep. Wherever Sumner had gone, he had apparently believed he was going into danger. How careful could I be if I was following him into it? But it wasn't really my bodily safety I was worried about.

Though I would never tell Nana, I was more concerned with protecting my heart.

Chapter Twenty-One

As a GPS device, the blood bond between Sumner and me worked surprisingly well. After leaving Nana's house I packed a few things, got in the car and drove north. Somehow I knew I was going the right direction. It wasn't as if I had him on a screen – a little green dot I could follow with arrows marking the way. But I could *feel* him and I could tell if I was getting off track. Mostly I stayed on I-75, the long interstate that runs all the way from Florida to Maine. It felt right and I knew that Sumner was headed in that direction too, though he was pretty far ahead of me.

I could have asked him through our bond, I suppose, but I didn't think he would answer. After our last exchange at Nana's house, his end of our link had been completely quiet. It was almost as though he'd put up a kind of wall of silence between us, maybe because he thought I regretted the bond. Was he trying to make himself unobtrusive as possible? Or was he angry with me for letting him walk out while I stayed with Nana? I didn't know and I wasn't about to ask. If he wasn't going to talk to me, I wasn't going to talk to him. At least, not until we could meet face to face.

After the night I'd had, I was exhausted so I didn't mind stopping at a motel when dawn came. Mainly because I knew Sumner would be doing the same thing. No matter how old and powerful he was, there was no way he could be out in direct sunlight. I took a hot shower and wondered, as I tossed and turned on the cheap motel mattress, where he was and where he was headed. Was he thinking of me? What would I say to him once I caught up to him?

I fell into an uneasy sleep pondering these questions and woke just as the sun was setting feeling unrefreshed and anxious. It was cold in my room and I realized that I had left the mild winter of Sarasota behind without thinking to pack any sweaters or other warm clothes. Crap.

But it wasn't just the cold weather that was getting me down. I couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. That Sumner was in danger somehow. That he was heading intentionally into a hazardous situation and there was nothing I could do to stop him.

Well, if you can't beat them... Hauling myself out of bed I took another shower and got out of there, only stopping at a convenience station along the way for some substandard coffee to warm me up. I also threw in a packet of beef jerky. Not very romantic food, I know but the pure protein gave me energy and kept me going.

The road unspooled under my tires, mile after mile whizzing by. I left Florida behind and passed through Georgia. South Carolina and North Carolina too. I was beginning to think that I was following Sumner to his origins. To the place where he had been made a vampire three hundred years before. So I was surprised when my

internal GPS led me not to Pennsylvania, but to the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia, in the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

It was only an hour or two until dawn when I found where Sumner had gone. On a winding road leading off the Blue Ridge Parkway was a tiny motel that consisted of one large building with several smaller, individual units off to either side. *Blue Peaks Lodge* said a faded neon sign that flashed periodically. Under that was a smaller, painted sign that read *Heated Pool and A Fireplace in Every Room!* How nice. I had an idea I would be taking advantage of the fireplace though most definitely *not* the pool. Unless it was heated to hot tub level. But it didn't matter what amenities the little motel offered—it had what I was most interested in—Sumner. *Here*, said the voice in my gut—the one I'd been following for the past two nights. *He's here.*

Sure enough, when I pulled into the graveled parking lot, I saw Sumner's silver-gray Mercedes parked beside an old beat-up Jeep. I pulled my little car in beside his and got out, shivering in the chilly air blowing off the mountain. I'd bought myself a sweatshirt on one of my short bathroom breaks at a truck stop but the winter wind cut right through it. I wrapped my arms around myself and bumped the car door shut with my hip. Then, head lowered against the gale and my hair whipping around my face, I headed for the main part of the lodge.

I was prepared to ask if Sumner was there and describe him if necessary but there was no one at the front desk or in the back room either, when I looked. I did, however, hear low voices coming from a room to the side. Over an arching doorway the words *Blue Peaks Lounge* were painted in flowing black script. I frowned. *Some kind of bar?* The voices were coming from behind a thick wooden door that was cracked open about an inch. I tugged at it carefully and to my relief it swung silently on its hinges. Walking as quietly as I could, I went through the archway and into the dim room beyond.

There was indeed a bar to one side but no one was tending it and the rows of bottles behind it stood silent and unused. The focal point of the large room seemed to be a huge natural stone fireplace on the far wall that threw flickering shadows on the ceiling. Dotted around the hardwood floor were hand-woven rugs of Native American design. It was good that the fire was big since the lamps scattered around the room were small and didn't give much light.

A group of chairs and a single love seat covered in dark brown leather were gathered in a semicircle around the fire and several people were sitting there, speaking in low voices. One of them was Sumner. The others were difficult to see in the shadows but I could make out one woman and two men. They were sitting on the chairs while Sumner had the love seat, which was positioned directly in front of the fire, all to himself.

Despite the rustic informality of the lounge, an air of tension pervaded the conversation and Sumner seemed to be the source of it. The other three were focused intently on him to the exclusion of everything else. It was so tense, in fact, that I froze where I was, balanced on the balls of my feet, unwilling to interrupt what seemed to be some kind of important proceedings.

"I have looked into you," the woman said to Sumner. In the firelight her profile was sharp and delicate and somehow cruel. "You have failed in the task you were sworn to do."

"I know," Sumner said in a low voice. "I have no right to continue this existence."

"That you do not," she said sharply. "The only reason I have not killed you yet stands behind you in the doorway."

This seemed to be my cue. Apparently the woman—or vampire as I was beginning to think she was—had noticed me no matter how focused on Sumner she appeared to be.

I walked forward and Sumner looked up at me with no surprise at all in his pale eyes. "Kaitlyn," he said softly. "You came."

I put a hand on my hip. "You knew I would—it's not like you couldn't feel me following you. You should have said something if you didn't want me here."

He looked away. "I didn't think you would want me to use our bond for communication. I thought you wished to distance yourself from me."

"I thought about it," I admitted. "But I decided we had some unfinished business."

"I'm glad," he murmured. "Though all my business is shortly to come to an end."

"What are you talking about?" I asked but he only shook his head.

"So this is the one. The human female you are bonded to." It was the woman talking. Up close I could see that she had high cheekbones and long, straight black hair that she wore loose around her slender shoulders. Her eyes were large and dark and bottomless in the firelight. I found it impossible to place her age—she might have been twenty or two thousand with eyes like that.

I was right about her being a vampire, though. Her fangs, when she smiled, were long and white and incredibly sharp and those bottomless eyes were cold and predatory, like a shark's. There was an air of menace around her like some deadly perfume—it made the hair at the back of my neck stand up and sent a shiver through me. *Old, this one is so very old.* I tried to get a sense of her—who she was, what she wanted—but I couldn't. She was neither good nor evil—she was past that somehow. She was simply ancient.

"Yes, this is the one, Onatah." Sumner bowed his head to her respectfully. "We have a blood bond—a strong one. But she will be freed from it by my passing."

"It is just as well then." She nodded regally. "Very well, you may say your farewells to her but then you must ready yourself to meet your fate."

"I thank you," he said formally. Then, suddenly he was standing in front of me. "Come," he said, taking my arm and drawing me a little way away from the enclave at the fireplace. "I don't have much time."

"Sumner," I said, looking up at him. "What is she talking about? What does she mean, 'meet your fate'?"

"She means I must say goodbye to you, Kaitlyn." He stroked my cheek, looking down into my eyes. "Something I very much do not wish to do."

For some reason his touch bothered me and I pulled away from it. But his words were more unsettling than the feel of his hand on my cheek. "I-I don't understand," I whispered and for some reason it felt as if someone were squeezing my heart. Surely Sumner wasn't talking about what I *thought* he was talking about – was he?

"You will," he said grimly. "Although I wish you would not watch as my sentence is carried out. I would rather you remember me as I am now."

"Your sentence? What are you talking about?"

He shook his head. "Never mind. I don't want to waste time talking about it. Will you let me kiss you goodbye?"

"Goodbye?" I echoed stupidly. Where was he going? Involuntarily my eyes wandered to the chair where the woman he had called Onatah was sitting. In the firelight she was beautiful and deadly and completely inhuman – a coiled snake waiting to strike.

"Kaitlyn," Sumner murmured gently. "You know what I mean. My death awaits me. I will go to it willingly if I can only taste your lips once more."

I opened my mouth to reply but he bent me over his arm and covered my lips with his. Again the feel of him touching me seemed wrong. I wanted to jerk away from him but then the kiss overwhelmed me and seemed to melt my uncertainty. It was hot and sweet and breathless and while it lasted I felt the bond between us open up and a great tidal wave of love and desire and need flowing from Sumner to me.

He really does care for me. The realization hit me with surprising force. I had suspected it before but now Sumner was pulling out all the stops – letting me see how he felt with nothing between us to shield his emotions. He flooded my body with desire, making me feel hot and cold at the same time. Making me want him so much I felt weak and shaky.

Of course I care for you, he whispered inside my mind. *I will never stop caring. Never stop loving you, Kaitlyn. Remember that and remember me.*

Then he released me, his lips leaving mine reluctantly.

"Sumner?" I whispered, genuinely shaken by the mix of emotions inside me. Part of me screamed that I didn't want him to touch me ever again and part of me – the hungry part that thrived on touch – never wanted him to stop. And then there was the fact that he was saying a very final sounding goodbye to me.

"Kaitlyn," he murmured. "I'm glad you came. Glad I got to see you once more before the end."

"Dawn approaches," Onatah said. "You have bid your human farewell, Holden. Are you ready to meet your fate?"

"I am," Sumner said. "I will submit myself to your justice." He put an arm around my shoulders and began walking me back toward the arching doorway. "Come, Kaitlyn, you should go now."

"Go? But I just got here." My head was spinning and I was still trying to absorb what he was saying. I didn't want to go where he was taking me but somehow my feet kept moving and before I knew it we were standing outside the lounge door.

"That doesn't matter, sweetheart. You have to go."

"Why, so that...that woman can kill you?" I demanded. "That's what she's going to do, isn't it? Why, Sumner?"

"Because I deserve it," he said simply. "I told you I was no white knight, Kaitlyn."

"I don't care about that," I said fiercely. "What happened in the past should stay in the past. I'm not just going to leave you here to be killed. Who does she think she is, anyway? What gives her the right to pass judgment on you?"

Sumner put a finger to my lips and I pulled away from his touch instinctively. "Be careful how you speak of her. Onatah is the one who made me and she is very, *very* dangerous." He frowned. "Which is why you need to leave. *Now*."

"No." I glared back at him. "I'm not leaving unless you come with me. Screw this, Sumner. I never pegged you as the type to lie down and die."

His eyes flashed. "I'm not. But in this I have no choice. I *must* submit myself to Onatah's justice."

"That's bullshit!" I didn't understand why I was so angry but I couldn't help myself. The idea that he was going to end his existence just as I was getting to know him...getting to care for him...it was unthinkable. "I'm not going," I said.

"Oh yes, you are." Sumner took me by the shoulders and looked down into my eyes intently. "Get in your car and go back home," he said in a commanding voice. "Forget me and be happy, Kaitlyn."

I realized that he was trying to glamour me. And it was working.

"All right," I heard myself saying woodenly. "I'll go now."

"Good." He gave me one last, long look and I could have sworn I saw tears in his pale eyes. "Be careful, sweetheart."

"I will," I said, nodding like someone had attached a string to my head and was pulling it. Then I turned away from him and headed toward the front door of the lodge.

"Goodbye," Sumner whispered and then I heard the thick wooden door of the lounge close with a soft *clunk*.

I was out in the freezing parking lot and trying to open the door of my car before I knew what was happening. I had never been glamourised before—unless you counted the time I'd allowed Sumner to lower my inhibitions—and at first I didn't know what to do. It was as though my body was moving independently of my mind—doing things I didn't really want to do.

Have to stop. Have to go back. But my numb hands kept fumbling through my keys, searching for the right one to slip into the lock anyway. I had a sudden inspiration. While my right hand kept going through the jangling keys, I slipped my left hand slowly up my chest and grasped the silver locket that held Fiona's hair.

"You cared for him too," I whispered. "Help me now. I need to save him."

As I had when I was faced with the demon, I felt a warm flow of power from somewhere outside myself. Suddenly my right hand opened and the keys dropped to the gravel with a muted *clink*. Though the icy wind was whipping the parking lot, I felt suddenly warm. It was as though I had been frozen by the glamour but Fiona's magic had warmed me up, thawed me out so that I could save Sumner.

I hoped.

Leaving my keys where they were, I raced back toward the lodge entrance, my shoes crunching on the gravel. I ran through the building and burst into the dimly lit lounge just in time to see Sumner kneeling on the floor at Onatah's feet.

"Bare your neck," she was saying. "I, who brought you into the world of blood shall be the one to remove you from it."

My heart skipped a beat. "Stop!" I yelled, running forward as Sumner opened the collar of his black dress shirt and bared his pale throat.

"What is it, human?" Onatah gave me a very unfriendly look and the two men she was with came to stand on either side of me. Both of them were built like tanks and had the same high cheekbones and long, straight black hair as Onatah but they seemed to be human. Hmm—body guards that doubled as midnight snacks, no doubt. But I didn't care about that now.

"Look," I said, trying to pay no attention to the hot but menacing guys on either side of me. "I can see I'm interrupting some kind of rite or ritual and I'm very sorry. But...you're not really going to...to..." I gestured at Sumner's bared throat, unable to finish.

"Kill him?" She raised one perfectly arched black eyebrow at me. "I most certainly am. He has been weighed in the balance and found wanting."

"What? What does that even mean?" I wanted to get closer to Sumner, who was still kneeling on the floor, but the two goons on either side of me were blocking my way. I solved the problem by climbing over the back of the love seat and settling myself beside him. Onatah gave me a disapproving frown, which I returned with a blank face. She looked at Sumner. "I thought you glamour'd her."

"I thought so too." He frowned at me. "Kaitlyn—"

"Save it," I told him. "Your power doesn't work on me any more than mine works on you—not permanently anyway. I'm not leaving you here to face this alone."

"Well, well. She's a loyal little thing, isn't she?" Onatah sounded slightly amused, as though I were a pet dog that refused to be kept away from its master.

"Loyalty is one of her finer attributes. Though I wish at times it were not," Sumner murmured, frowning at me.

Ignoring him, I looked up at Onatah. "I'm not leaving. Whatever Sumner did or didn't do or whatever reason you're using to kill him, I'm here to tell you it's not good enough."

She raised an eyebrow at me. "That you dare to question me at all proves you are either extremely brave or extremely stupid."

"Probably both," I said evenly. "But that doesn't matter. What matters is that you have no right to judge Sumner."

Onatah frowned. "Such insolence. I *do* have the right because I am the one who turned Holden into what he is now. When I did—when the sacrifice was made in order that he should be a vampire—he promised that his one goal would be to hunt down and destroy the evil spirit that had been plaguing our people for centuries."

"But he *did*," I said.

Sumner shook his head. "No, Kaitlyn, *you* did. You are the one who bound the demon and you're the one that killed its host body."

"Well...yeah. But I couldn't have done it without you," I pointed out. "If you hadn't been holding it, keeping it in the circle, I never would have had a chance."

"It matters not," Onatah interrupted. "The deed was not done by Holden's hand. So the sacrifice that was made to turn him has not been repaid."

"Sacrifice?" I looked at Sumner. "What sacrifice?"

He looked into the fire. Its flickering light turned his pale eyes to pure silver. "In Iroquois tradition when a person is made into a vampire, he or she is given the blood of a virgin."

I frowned. "So?"

Sumner looked at me. "All their blood. Their life. We drain them dry—do you understand, Kaitlyn?"

"Oh." I sat back and folded my freezing hands in my lap. The cold floor was really taking a toll on my knees despite the woven rug I was kneeling on. "So you take a life in order to make the transformation."

He nodded. "Essentially. An innocent life. And the price for the life I took was the death of the demon."

"But someone else paid that price," Onatah said. "So now Holden must die."

"But you can't! Can't kill him," I protested, feeling sick.

She frowned. "Oh? And why not?"

My heart was racing as the words tumbled out of me. "The-the demon did a spell before we banished it. The minute Sumner leaves this plane of existence he'll be tied to it for eternity," I said, hoping it was a good enough reason to save him. "You can't kill him knowing that you're sending him to a fate like that. It would be eternal torment."

"That is a harsh punishment indeed." Onatah nodded thoughtfully. "But it is Holden's to deal with. He knew the penalties when he accepted the sacrifice."

"But...but..." I felt tears rising to my eyes.

"Is that the only reason you have, human?" Onatah gave me a cool look, as though my tears disgusted her. "I have other matters to attend to. This has already taken up too much of my time."

"I-I'm bonded to him," I said, thinking fast. "Very *strongly* bonded."

"A bond I am sure you'll be happy to break," she said dismissively.

"No!" I exclaimed. "As a witch, part of my power is tied up with his. If you kill him, it could...could adversely affect me. I might even die with him and then you'd be responsible for taking an innocent life yourself."

She raised an eyebrow at me. "You are innocent?"

I swallowed hard. "I'm not a virgin, if that's what you mean. But I have only ever practiced white magic. I strive to do good, to put positive energy into the universe. That's as close to innocence as you're going to get these days."

Onatah frowned. "I don't much care for witches but I know Holden has a special place in his heart for them. Because of his long dead wife, I suppose."

"He protected me," I said. "Put his life on the line for me. He even saved my grandmother's life, though she wasn't very grateful for it." I cast him a sidelong glance. He was watching me quietly, his eyes trained on my face. I took a deep breath and looked Onatah in her bottomless obsidian eyes. "If you're going to kill him, you'll have to kill me too."

I don't know what made me say the words but they felt right leaving my mouth and the moment they were out I knew they were true. I didn't know when Sumner had become so important to me but he was. As crazy as it sounds, I was literally ready to die for him.

Sumner shook his head. "Kaitlyn," he murmured. "Don't."

"I have to." I looked up at him and realized he looked blurry. Angrily I swiped at my eyes. "I-I can't lose you. Not now. Not like this."

"So dramatic, you humans." Onatah sighed and shook her head. "Very well, here is what I will do. For as long as you live and your life is tied to Holden's, I will postpone his sentence." She looked at Sumner. "But the moment she dies, you must return to me so that justice can be done."

He nodded gravely. "I understand, Onatah. And I thank you for your grace and forbearance."

"It is a reprieve *only*," she stressed. "I will be seeing you again at the end of this little human's life."

"Indeed you will."

"Good. We understand each other." She nodded regally at both of us. "You may go."

I wanted to ask more questions, to clarify things a little, but Sumner was already up and tugging me to my feet. "Come on, Kaitlyn. We've been dismissed."

"But..." I protested as we left the Blue Peaks Lounge.

"But nothing. Come."

He led me out of the lobby and into the dark, chilly night. As soon as I could, I pulled my hand out of his. That wrong feeling had been growing in me while we touched and it was a relief to be free of him. I started to protest that I should go but he reached into his jeans and fished out a key. "I've taken a room here though I never expected to use it," he murmured, nodding at one of the smaller free standing rooms. "We'll need it now since dawn is only an hour away."

The room turned out to be a nice one. There was a king sized-bed covered in a dark red and gold spread and another patterned rug in front of it that matched. The promised fireplace was across from the bed though there was no fire in it. A large window on one wall probably gave a view of the mountain but it was shielded with thick drapes that matched the bedspread. I wondered if they were light tight and then decided I was thinking too much like a vampire for comfort.

Sumner took my hands in his. "You're freezing," he said, rubbing them briskly to warm me up.

"I'm fine." I pulled my hands away and he frowned.

"Why do you keep doing that?"

"Doing what?" I asked, looked away.

"You're acting like you did before we got to know each other. Jumping every time I touch you."

"Am I?" I shrugged. "Well we've had a pretty tense night. I'm keyed up—jumpy."

"If you say so. I was just trying to warm you up."

"I'm okay. I bought a sweatshirt to keep warm."

"So I see." One corner of his full mouth quirked up as he surveyed my black sweatshirt. *Virginia is for Lovers* was printed on the front with a big red heart. Pretty cheesy.

"Ha-ha. Very funny," I said. "It was cheap and warm and I was in a hurry. Also it's too damn cold up here."

"This is nothing compared to how cold it gets farther north," he pointed out. "You're just used to Florida." He sat on the bed and then patted the place beside him. "Come, sit. We need to talk."

"Yes we do." I crossed my arms over my chest and remained standing. "How dare you try to glamour me?"

Sumner frowned. "It was for your own good."

"And what if it had worked? You'd be dead right now."

“And if *your* ploy hadn’t worked we could *both* be dead right now,” he said. “Onatah is extremely dangerous. Her name means ‘spirit of the earth’ but the People of the Flint also call her the spirit of death.”

I stabbed a finger at him. “You need to trust me more – especially if we’re going to be tied together the rest of our lives.”

“The rest of *your* life, anyway,” he said gently. “And you’re right, I should give you more credit. I’m sorry.”

His words troubled me. Not the apology – that was actually nice. But what he’d said about us being together the rest of *my* life. A human life to a vampire is a drop in the bucket. When you can live for millennia, seventy or eighty or even ninety years is nothing. But that was all Onatah had given him. It was, as she said, a reprieve and nothing more.

“Kaitlyn?” Sumner said questioningly and I realized that I’d been standing there silent for almost a minute. “Do you accept my apology?” he asked.

“I guess so.” I sighed. “Look, I need some time alone. Does this place have a bathtub?”

He gestured at a small wooden door to one side of the fireplace. “Through there. Take your time. Is there anything you want me to get from your car before the dawn comes?”

“I do have a duffle bag out there,” I said. “Uh, the keys are on the ground beside the car. I dropped them when I ran back in.”

He smiled. “That’s the second time you’ve come to my rescue.”

“You saved my life a couple of times too,” I pointed out. “I guess that makes us even.”

“A joining of equals,” he said – the words we’d spoken during hand fasting ceremony before we formed our physical bond. Just remembering that – and what came after it – made me blush.

“Just get my bag if you don’t mind,” I said. “I’ll be in the tub.”

“Very well.” He started for the door but then he turned back. “Why did you come for me tonight, Kaitlyn? Why did you offer to die by my side to save me?”

I shifted uncomfortably. “Like I said, you’ve saved my life before too.”

“It wasn’t just that and you know it.” He came over and took my hands again. This time I let him hold them though it made me intensely uncomfortable. “Look me in the eyes and tell me why,” he said. “I need to hear it.”

I felt like he was burning a hole in my soul with his intense gaze. “Sumner, please. I need...need some time alone.” I gave him a pleading look. “Just give me some time to think, all right?”

He nodded slowly. “All right. I’ll give you some time. But you’re not getting away from me again before we talk – really talk about what’s going on between us.”

“Agreed,” I said, pulling my hands away as unobtrusively as I could. “Now could you go get my bag before the sun comes up and turns you into a crispy critter? I really need it—my bathrobe is in there.”

“All right.” He headed for the door again and I was relieved to see that this time he kept going. Good, I needed time to myself. Time to think and sort out the feelings that were threatening to swamp me. Time to think about the future. Time to figure out what was going on when he touched me.

Gratefully, I escaped to the bathroom.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The bathroom was much nicer than it had any right to be, considering that the Blue Peaks Lodge wasn't exactly a four-star establishment. It actually had a deep claw-foot tub—the kind you only read about in southern gothic novels—and plenty of hot water to go with it. There was even a little bottle of scented bubble bath sitting on the sink. I used the entire thing, making sure the bath was full of thick, creamy suds.

I piled my hair up on top of my head and sank into the hot bath right up to my chin. Then I took a deep breath and tried to let all the tension of the night ease out of me. But even as my body relaxed, my mind wouldn't slow down. It was a jumble of thoughts and emotions.

Sumner had said he wanted to know the real reason I had come for him. *Well, that's easy. It's because I care for him.* That sounded right and it helped put my mind at least partially at ease. Sumner and I had been through a lot together. We'd saved each others lives and had some pretty mind-blowing sex. It was natural to have some sort of emotional attachment. I carefully avoided the L word, even to myself—that was going too far. But emotional attachment, caring, fondness, those were all okay. *I am very fond of Sumner.* There—I had admitted it and I was fine with it. Immediately I felt better and much more emotionally mature. Okay, on to the next problem.

What could I do about the fact that Sumner's lifespan was now limited by my own? The answer had been there, in the back of my mind from the moment I had first examined the problem. Now I let it come forward. If Sumner's time on this earth was going to match mine then my time had to be extended. How? *A blood covenant.*

I shivered. It was the ultimate bond—the one I'd been fighting against from the moment I'd met him. Sex and blood at the same time. Letting him bite me while he fucked me would tie our lives together in a way nothing else would. The bond that formed from that union would freeze me in time physically. I would stop aging and would live as long as Sumner did—in effect, forever as long as he didn't wander out in the sun or get staked or shot with a silver bullet. But a bond like that would make us dependant on each other. I would be the only human Sumner could drink from and if he didn't drink from me on a regular basis, I would get sick. We would be stuck together for eternity. Was I willing to go that far?

I tried to consider the idea objectively—actually, there *did* seem to be a lot of pros. I ticked them off mentally. Sumner challenged me in ways other men didn't. He fulfilled the part of me that needed to be touched and did it very nicely at that. Certainly I'd never had a better or more considerate lover. But beyond the supernaturally hot nookie, there were other things to consider. For instance, my powers didn't work on him so I didn't have to worry about being the stronger one in the relationship and having my

partner resent me for it. And let's not forget how *fond* of him I had become. Really, when I thought about it, Sumner was the perfect man for me.

On the con side, he *was* a vampire. Not to mention that a permanent and eternal bonding with him would probably cause Nana to disown me—if she hadn't already. Also, how well did I *really* know him? *Well enough to offer my life for his*. I pushed the thought away. In point of fact, we had been working together, or as Nana would put it, *carrying on* for less than a month. That alone was enough to give me pause. Maybe I ought to wait a little bit—hold back some before I made such an important and lasting decision. After all, a blood covenant was forever. Yes, I should wait. I should *definitely* wait.

It was a practical resolution on my part but I still felt that I needed to strengthen the tie between Sumner and myself. Just because I wasn't quite ready to form a blood covenant with him yet didn't mean I wanted to let him walk completely out of my life. I needed to let him know I cared without taking the big plunge.

I snapped my fingers, sending bubbles flying. *A physical bond*. Of course—the physical bond we'd formed before had been dissolved by the demon's banishment, just as I had intended it to be. Sumner and I had a blood bond now, which was lasting and quite permanent, but it lacked the passion of a physical bond. Forming a new one would tie us more tightly together—though not *too* tightly—and augment the blood bond as well.

It was the perfect solution. And then in a year or so when we had gotten to know each other better—*much* better—we could contemplate taking that final step and forming a blood covenant. It just made sense—like living with someone before you married them to be sure their annoying little habits didn't drive you crazy.

I was out of the bath and toweling off, feeling extremely pleased with myself, when the third problem reared its head. I was anticipating making love with Sumner, thinking of what an amazing lover he was, when a little voice in my head said, *what about the touching thing?*

Well, yes. What *about* that? Why hadn't I wanted to let Sumner touch me earlier? Why had it felt so...so *wrong*?

I was just nervous. It was like I told him – we've had a tense night.

Of course, that was it. That *had* to be it, I told myself uncertainly. It was better to put the whole thing out of my mind and just concentrate on the matter at hand—forming a new physical bond with the man I intended to spend the rest of my life with. No, not my life—*his* life, I reminded myself. Eventually, anyway. But one thing at a time.

I wrapped the towel firmly around myself and walked out into the bedroom to tell him.

* * * * *

Sumner had already gotten ready for bed. There was a small fire blazing in the fireplace and he was lounging back against the headboard of the bed wearing only the black silk sleep pants I'd seen him in before. The sight of his bare muscular chest made my mouth water despite the slight unease that tried to creep into the back of my mind.

I came to stand at the foot of the bed and he smiled. "You look lovely. Tired but lovely."

"I think I have a little energy left." Taking a deep breath, I dropped the towel. "If you're interested."

He gave me a slow smile. "I am always interested in you, sweetheart. Come here."

Feeling more than a little nervous, I dropped to all fours on the bed and crawled up the mattress to him in what I hoped was a sinuous, sexy way. Sumner's eyes widened when he saw me stalking him like a tigress but he didn't say anything, only beckoned me to come closer. Which I did, even though it became more and more difficult as I got nearer to him. Was the feeling of wrongness stronger than before? I pushed the half-formed notion quickly out of my head.

"Beautiful," he murmured at last, when I was directly in front of him. I could smell his warm, spicy scent and his body looked like something an ancient Greek sculptor might have dreamed up. So why did I suddenly not want him to touch me? I told myself firmly to stop being silly. Of *course* I wanted him to touch me. That was the whole reason I was naked on the bed with him – right?

"Well?" I said in what I hoped was a low, throaty purr. "What are you waiting for?" It was suddenly hard to be this close to him, to be so close I could feel the faint warmth from his bare chest against my own naked skin but I made myself hold my ground.

Sumner was sitting as still as the statue I'd just mentally compared him to, his head cocked to one side, watching me with a listening expression on his face. At my words he came to life. "Nothing," he said. "I just wanted to be sure."

"Sure of what?" I asked, confused.

"Sure of you, Kaitlyn." He stroked a strand of hair away from my face and I couldn't help myself – I flinched away from the light touch as though he'd offered to slap me instead of caress me.

Sumner raised an eyebrow. "Still feeling jumpy?"

"No. I mean yes. A little." I took a deep breath. "But I want this, I do. I want *you*, Sumner."

"You want to form another physical bond with me." It wasn't a question.

"No fair looking inside my head," I said, irritated. See, here was one of those annoying little personal habits I would have to get used to – Sumner's ability to get into my mind. Of course, technically I could get into his too but *I* had too much respect for his privacy to go snooping around in his skull.

"I wasn't looking inside your head," Sumner said quietly. "So you can stop being angry at me. I'm just stating the obvious—you want to form a bond that will strengthen the one we already have."

"What if I just want to make love?" I challenged him. "What about that?"

Sumner reached out a hand to me and again I flinched away before I could stop myself. "No," he said thoughtfully. "I don't think you do."

"Of course I do," I insisted though I didn't know who I was trying to fool—him or myself. "Come on, Sumner—you're the one who's always saying you can't get enough. Or is it a case of you only want something you can't have?"

"If that was the case I would *certainly* never stop wanting you," he said dryly. "Since you insist on always withholding at least part of yourself no matter what I do or say."

"What is that supposed to mean?" I sat back and crossed my arms over my chest, glad to be able to put a little distance between us and cover myself—at least partially. "Are you saying I'm emotionally unavailable?"

"Well, you're not exactly the most open person I've ever met." Sumner smiled. "Though I'm sure the reward will be worth the effort when you finally surrender yourself to me."

"That's what I'm trying to do now," I said, beyond exasperated.

Sumner surveyed me with a maddening detachment. "Is that so, sweetheart? So you're certain you want me to make love to you? To *fuck* you?"

I shivered at the look in his eyes. They were half-lidded and filled with lust. "That—that's exactly what I want," I said, wishing my voice sounded more certain.

"Like this?" Sumner was suddenly on top of me, pinning me to the gold and red bedspread, his muscular body heavy against my smaller frame. We were skin to skin, his pale eyes searching mine. "Like this, Kaitlyn?" he said again, his voice a low, lustful growl.

A feeling of wrongness so strong it was almost nausea swept over me. He was over me—*on* me. *Touching* me skin to skin. I had to get him off, had to get away!

"No!" I gasped. "No, please. I can't. I *can't*."

Suddenly Sumner was on the far side of the bed, not touching me, not even close to me. "Take it easy, sweetheart," he said softly. "Breathe. Just breathe."

I sat up and put my head on my knees. "What...what just happened? What's wrong with me?"

He frowned. "I don't know. I'm sorry if I frightened you—I was just making a point."

I turned my head to the side so I could glare at him. "What point?"

He shrugged. "That you don't really want to make love, though I wish you did."

"But I *do*," I protested. "Or I thought I did, anyway." I still didn't know what was wrong with me.

Sumner shook his head. "Do you realize that you have never willingly touched me? That whenever we come together it is always for some greater purpose?" He sounded half wistful, half angry. "Just once I wish you would come to me because you *want* to."

"But I *do* want to," I said and was surprised to find that it was true. I really *did* want him, my mind did, anyway. But for some reason my body didn't. What was going on?

Sumner frowned. "I wish I could believe you."

"Believe *this*," I said and went to him again. I intended to kiss him—in the back of my mind I remembered how I had felt when he'd kissed me 'goodbye'. It had felt wrong at first and then, after I surrendered to the kiss—to Sumner—it had begun to feel okay. I just had to get over that initial feeling of wrongness, I told myself. This strange aversion that was making physical contact hard for me suddenly.

"Well?" Sumner raised an eyebrow and I realized I was just sitting there frozen beside him, unable to make a move.

"I...I'm trying," I said.

"Trying to do this?" Leaning forward he brushed my lips with his, a feather-soft kiss that should have my heart pound with pleasure. Instead I felt it pounding with terror.

I pulled away, shaking. "I'm sorry," I gasped.

"I didn't mean to frighten you." His voice was soft and concerned.

"I know you didn't. This doesn't have anything to do with you—it's me. Why am I frightened?" For a moment there I'd felt as if I was having a panic attack. I couldn't breathe, I'd broken out in a cold sweat and I felt sick and disoriented. Sumner's touch had never affected me like that before. What was wrong with me?

He waited patiently, watching me and not saying a thing as I tried to get a grip on myself.

"I'm sorry," I said at last. "I don't know why this is happening. It's almost like I've suddenly developed some kind of allergy or aversion to you. It's like—" I stopped. *No. No, surely not. She wouldn't.*

"Like what?" Sumner looked at me intently. "I am trying to stay out of your thoughts, Kaitlyn, but you are making it extraordinarily difficult."

"Wait." I held out a hand. "Just...wait."

Jumping up from the bed I went to rummage in the duffel bag he'd brought in for me. I pulled on my bathrobe first and then I grabbed my cell phone. Stalking into the steamy bathroom again, I shut the door and dialed Nana.

She answered on the first ring. "Hello?"

"What did you do to me?" I asked, my voice shaking. "What did you *do*?"

"I protected you," she said as though it was the most reasonable thing in the world.

“By putting a spell on me? A *compulsion*?”

“If you’re feeling the effects of my spell then you’ve been trying to do something you have no business doing.” Nana’s voice was cool. “Just stay away from that vampire and you won’t have a problem.”

“What if I don’t want to stay away from him?” I could hear the anger in my voice and I did nothing to hide it. “How dare you do this to me?”

“Kaitlyn, do you remember what I did when I caught you playing with matches when you were a little girl?” she asked.

“You spanked me and put all the matches up where I couldn’t reach them,” I said impatiently.

“Exactly. I did that out of love—I didn’t want to see you get hurt.”

“So you decided to put *Sumner* out of my reach? I can’t believe you, Nana! I’m not the scared little girl you took in all those years ago. I’m an adult—I have the right to make this decision for myself.”

“I don’t care how old you are, I can’t sit by and watch you hurt yourself,” she snapped. “If I saw you about to get hit by a bus, don’t you think I’d push you out of the way?”

“This is ridiculous! *Sumner* is *not* a box of matches or a runaway bus,” I shouted. “I’m not going to get hurt!”

“Not now, you’re not. I’ve seen to that.” The finality in her tone made me feel sick.

“Look,” I said, taking a deep breath. “Just...break the spell. Break it and we’ll forget all about this. I’ll come home and help you in the shop just like always and I swear you’ll never even have to see him.”

“There’s no breaking it. I’ve burned the poppet.”

“You...you what?” All the strength ran out of my legs and I had to sit down on the edge of the tub.

“I’ve burned it,” she repeated.

I could see her in my mind’s eye, carving a little doll from pure white wax, a doll with something of me in it. Perhaps a fingernail clipping or an eyelash but more likely several of my long brown hairs. A doll like that—a poppet—could give her immense power over me. For good or evil. But if it was destroyed with the spell still on it...

“Please, Nana,” I said. “Please tell me you didn’t.”

“I did. It’s nothing but ash and wax. The spell is sealed, Kaitlyn—there is no breaking it.”

“Do you realize what you’ve done?” My voice was hoarse. “*Sumner* and I have a blood bond, Nana. Your compulsion has bound me away from the man I’m going to share my life with.”

“No you’re not,” she said sharply. “Don’t you worry about that, Katy-girl. I’m working on a way to get you free of him.”

“Can’t you understand? I don’t *want* to be free of him. *I love him.*”

The minute the words left my mouth I knew they were true. Forget all this *fondness* bullshit—Sumner was my other half and now I would never be able to touch him again. Never be able to hold him, to feel his skin against mine without being overcome by revulsion and wrongness...

“No you don’t,” Nana snapped, interrupting my train of thought. “If you did, if you *really* loved him and he was good for you, my spell wouldn’t work. Don’t you see, Katy? I *planned* it this way. I didn’t just slap any old compulsion on you—I was careful when I wove my magic. The reason you can’t touch him is because you don’t trust him—not deep down where it counts. I wanted you to see that he isn’t the one for you.”

“Yes he is,” I whispered, trying to keep my voice from breaking. “You’re wrong, Nana. Wrong about Sumner and wrong to do this to me.”

“In time you’ll see that I’m right. This is the best thing.” Her voice had taken on that self-satisfied pseudo-maternal tone that never used to bother me. Now it made me want to scream.

“I’m never going to forgive you for this,” I told her. “Never.”

“Katy-child—”

But I didn’t want to hear anything else she had to say. I hung up.

Chapter Twenty-Three

It had been a long, long, *long* night. I'd been driving non-stop for hours only to find myself at Sumner's impending execution. Having at least managed to delay that, now I found that I couldn't have him after all. Nana's spell was permanent – she couldn't take it off even if she'd wanted to – which she clearly didn't. So even though I had saved his life, I had lost Sumner as finally as if he had actually died.

I thought about that as I stared dully at the black and white tiled floor. To be able to see him but not to touch him. To know that we were bound together in the most intimate way and yet not be able to stand the feel of his hands on my body, his lips on mine – it was too much. Unbearable. I felt as though I'd been holding back tears all night but now I couldn't fight them anymore. I broke down and sobbed.

I don't know how long I sat on the edge of the tub crying but it was long enough that Sumner eventually knocked on the door.

"Kaitlyn?" he said softly. "May I come in?"

I blotted my eyes on my fuzzy, dark blue bathrobe. "You might as well. For all the good it's going to do you."

Sumner came in and sat beside me on the edge of the tub, being careful not to touch me. "Explain it to me," he said. "What is a compulsion exactly?"

I sighed. Of course he would have heard everything. "It's a binding spell. You use it to bring people together or keep them apart. Like if a man comes to you and says he thinks his wife is straying – you can work a compulsion to keep them together, to make her want only him." I sniffed and Sumner handed me a tissue from the box on the sink. "Thanks," I said and dabbed at my nose. "It can work the other way too. Say a woman comes to you and says her ex is after her. He's abusive and she's afraid. You can work a compulsion that keeps him away from her. Better than a restraining order any day."

"And I'm assuming that's the kind we're dealing with here."

"Pretty much." I ran a hand through my hair, which was probably a mess by now. "Nana's decided I shouldn't be with you so she's made it her business to be sure I can't be." I felt the tears welling up in my eyes again and tried unsuccessfully to hold them back. "Th-the worst thing about it is that I finally realize what an idiot I've been."

"How so?" he asked quietly.

"All this time I've been telling myself that I didn't care about you – about us. I..." I gave him a sidelong glance. "I guess I thought if I didn't admit how I felt, even to myself, I couldn't get hurt. I was holding part of myself back – like you said."

"And now?"

I looked down at my hands, unable to meet his eyes. "Now I realize what I'm going to be missing."

"Is that your way of saying you love me?"

"You know I do," I mumbled. "I'm sure everyone in the whole damn lodge does, the way I was yelling just now."

"Then *say* it." He ducked his head to meet my eyes. "Please, Kaitlyn. I need to hear it."

"Why?" I looked up at him and blotted my eyes on my bathrobe again. "Why, when it doesn't make any difference?"

"Of course it makes a difference."

"But you can't touch me anymore," I pointed out. "And I can't touch you. Not without feeling like I'm having a damn panic attack."

"Is that all our relationship meant to you?" Sumner asked bluntly. "Fucking? Sex?"

"Well, no. But—"

"And do you care for me less now that we can no longer touch?"

"No," I whispered. "I think I care *more*. Because I finally admitted to myself that I care at all. That...that I love you." It was still hard to say the words but they felt true and right. I did love Sumner with all my heart—for all the good it did me.

"Thank you, Kaitlyn," he said softly. "You don't know how I have longed to hear you say those words." He smiled at me tentatively. "Will you think me strange if I say I am glad to have finally won your heart even if I cannot touch your body?"

"Frankly, yes," I said, sniffing. "You're a vampire—you're all about touching and blood and sex."

"There *are* other things. I do enjoy the pleasure of your company even when we aren't ravishing each other," he said dryly.

I tried to laugh but it turned into a sob. "That's very nice and gentlemanly of you, Sumner, but a non-touching relationship isn't going to work for me. I *need* it. I was damn near starving before you and I...did what we did." I sighed. "Nana knows that too. She's hoping I'll get hungry enough to look at some other guy."

"Someone who can touch you. And give you what you need."

"But I don't want anyone else." I looked up at him. "Just you."

Sumner nodded. "And I feel the same for you, sweetheart." Getting up, he motioned me to follow him back to the bedroom, which I did, reluctantly. Sumner settled on the bed and patted the place beside him. I sat there, being very, very careful not to touch him.

"Now what?" I said, wrapping my arms around myself tightly and giving him a sidelong glance.

"Well, we both agree that we want to be together. That we love each other." His pale eyes held mine for a long moment. "So we won't give up."

"Won't give up?" I echoed. "But what can we do?"

"That is the question we must answer." He looked at me intently. "Tell me, does it bother you to have me near you? When does the aversion kick in, so to speak?"

I took a deep breath and evaluated. "No, having you near isn't what bothers me, I don't think," I said slowly. "It's having you near when we're both naked. Or half-naked, or whatever."

"So bare skin is the problem. What if I touch you like this?" He settled his hand lightly on my shoulder, which was covered by my fuzzy blue bathrobe.

I started to jump away and then realized it was all right. I could feel the warmth of his hand but not the texture of his skin against mine. So I felt fine or at least not wrong or panicky. "That's...okay," I said tentatively.

He raised an eyebrow. "Meaning you can stand it or that it doesn't bother you at all?"

"It doesn't bother me at all," I said. "Actually...it's kind of nice."

Sumner smiled. "I think so too." Moving too fast for me to see, he was out of the bed and back in it, this time wearing a black, long sleeved silk shirt that matched his sleep pants. "Now then," he said, patting his chest. "Come here."

I looked at him doubtfully. "I don't know..."

"Kaitlyn," he murmured. "If bare skin is the problem, we can get around it easily enough. Come to me now, I want to hold you."

There was nothing in the world that I wanted more right at that moment than to be held and comforted. Moving slowly and carefully, I put my head against the broad plane of his silk-clad chest. I could feel the hard muscles under my cheek and the warmth of his skin through the black shirt but nothing else. I was incredibly relieved when the feeling of wrongness didn't flow over me at the contact. In fact, all I felt was warm and comforted as I leaned against the man I loved.

"All right?" Sumner asked softly and I nodded against his chest.

"Yes. All right for now, anyway."

"Good." He sighed as I settled more comfortably against him. "You know, Kaitlyn, I haven't felt the way I do for you since I lost Sarah. I thought that part of me was dead...until I saw you standing there behind the counter in your grandmother's shop."

I snorted sleepily. "Love at first sight, huh?"

"Yes, it was," Sumner said seriously. "I knew then I would stop at nothing to have you."

"Even getting me involved in your hunt for a serial-killer demon," I said.

"Even that." Sumner laughed softly. "Though even if I hadn't had such a good excuse I would still have pursued you."

"I'm glad you did," I said looking up at him. "Except now that you've got me, you can't do anything with me."

Sumner squeezed me gently. "That's a worry for another day. Sleep, sweetheart. Tomorrow we'll think about how to break the spell."

I think I tried to nod again but I was suddenly too sleepy. The long, exhausting night finally caught up with me and I found myself leaning more and more against Sumner, trusting him to keep me safe without triggering the spell.

Trust, I thought as I drifted off to sleep. *I really do trust him. Who would have thought – me trusting a vampire.* The strange thought gave me an idea. Something I wanted to pursue but I was too tired, too far gone into sleep...

Oh well, later. I would think of it later. Closing my eyes, I let sleep claim me.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The corridors were filled with smoke and the heat at my back was like a huge hand, pushing me. I ran as fast as I could but I could hear the fire roaring behind me, wanting to devour me.

"Kaitlyn? Kaitlyn, come to me!"

I looked around. Someone was calling my name. The deep voice was familiar but who was it? Suddenly I saw I had reached the end of the long dark corridor. It ended in a window – an open window many feet above the ground.

"Kaitlyn," he called again and I looked down to see a tiny figure far below me on the ground. It was Sumner and he was holding out his arms to me.

"Sumner?" I asked through numb lips.

"Yes, sweetheart, it's me." And then he said something that made my heart stand still in my chest. "Jump."

"What?" I looked down at him incredulously. He was so far away I could hardly see him. Surely a jump like that would kill me!

"Jump," Sumner said again. "Now, Kaitlyn. The fire's getting closer."

I looked behind me and saw that he was right. The fire was roaring down the dark hallway, turning the walls orange with its hellish light. God, I had to get away! But the only way out was down. So very far down into Sumner's waiting arms.

I turned my head back to him. "I can't," I cried, my voice breaking. "I-I'm afraid."

"I know you are," he called. "But you can do this. I'll catch you and keep you safe, I promise. Trust me, Kaitlyn. Trust me..."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

I woke up with a start, those words still echoing in my head. I was lying on my side and Sumner was curled around me, cupping my body with his own. The fire in the fireplace had burned down to embers and the drapes on the window kept out the gray light of the wintry day so it was still quite dim in the room. Sumner had been very

Careful that our skin wasn't touching in any way so I felt nothing but comfort and warmth at our contact.

"Are you all right?" he murmured in my ear and I realized he was just lying there, holding me while I slept. Aww, how romantic. Cue the cheesy music. But despite my inner monologue, I couldn't help feeling good. It was nice to be with someone who cared so much even if I hated to admit it.

"Just a bad dream," I told him. "I'm okay."

"Go back to sleep, sweetheart," he whispered. "Don't worry, I'll keep you safe."

His words, so much like the ones he had spoken in my dream, soothed me. I closed my eyes and did as he suggested.

* * * * *

It wasn't until we were driving home the next night that I finally realized what my subconscious was trying to tell me.

"Trust!" I said excitedly, turning to Sumner. "Trust is the key!"

"Mmm?" He looked at me inquiringly. We were driving in his Mercedes. Sumner had hired someone else to drive my car back to Sarasota so we could ride together. I appreciated the fact that he had actually found a trustworthy man and paid him to do the task instead of just grabbing the first person he saw and glamouring him or her.

"Trust," I said again. "When Nana admitted to laying the compulsion on me she said it wouldn't have worked if I really trusted you."

"And do you?" He raised an eyebrow at me.

I shook my head. "I don't know—I'd like to think so. But trust is...hard for me. I think it started with my mom."

Sumner frowned. "What did she do to you?"

I sighed. "It's more like what she *didn't* do. She was an addict. Alcohol, cocaine, heroine, crack—you name it, my mom never met a drug she didn't like. By the time I was five or six I was dressing myself and getting to the school bus on my own every day. I learned to cook and clean for the same reason—mom was usually passed out on the couch so if there was anything that needed to be done, I did it."

Sumner reached out a hand to me, then apparently remembered the compulsion and pulled back before he touched me. "That's very sad, sweetheart."

I nodded. "Yeah but I could have had it worse. At least she didn't actively abuse me. And a few years later Nana came and took me away from her." I tried to laugh and couldn't quite manage it. "It took my mom a week to even realize I was gone, you know?"

"Being abandoned and betrayed by the one person who should love you most in the world is terrible. No wonder you have trouble handing someone else your heart to hold."

I gave a little laugh. "You have such a poetic way with words, Sumner."

He raised an eyebrow. "You dislike my turn of phrase?"

"On the contrary," I said, deepening my voice to imitate him. "I like it immensely...sweetheart."

Sumner laughed out loud. "Point taken. I'll try to be less flowery in the future."

"No, don't," I said seriously. "Don't change. I like it. I like *you*. I just wish..." I gave him a sidelong glance. "I just wish I could show you how much."

"Getting hungry again?" he asked and I knew he wasn't talking about my physical appetite.

"Yes," I said simply. "I shouldn't be, though. Before you and I got together I had gone without for so long I thought I was used to it."

"You shouldn't have to get used to starving," Sumner pointed out.

"No, I know I shouldn't." I felt inside myself to the place where I drew my power from. In the brief time that Sumner and I had been together it had turned from a desert to a rain forest, lush and blossoming. Now all the greenery was wilting for lack of nourishment. I needed to be touched. And I wanted Sumner to be the one to do the touching. But how?

Closing my eyes, I thought of what Nana had said. *The reason you can't touch him is because you don't trust him – not deep down where it counts...*

That was it. I needed to prove to Sumner and more importantly to myself that I *did* trust him. With my life and with my heart as well as my body. But how could I do that?

Sumner had been silent a long time, just letting me think. When I turned to him again he said, "Well?"

"I have an idea," I said hesitantly. "But...it might sound strange and...and a little bit kinky."

Both his eyebrows went up. "Kinky? Well, well – count me in."

"I haven't even told you what I have in mind yet," I pointed out.

He shrugged. "Whatever it is, I'm sure it will be interesting. Besides, I'm intrigued. It will be interesting to know what you think of as 'kinky'."

"It's not funny, Sumner," I warned him, my cheeks getting hot. "It's...God, it's bound to be incredibly embarrassing."

"Kaitlyn, you're a beautiful woman and you have nothing to be embarrassed about. Whatever you have in mind, we'll do it and there will be no shame between us. All right?" He reached out to squeeze my thigh and I sighed as I felt the warmth of his touch through the denim of my jeans.

"All right," I whispered. But I couldn't help wondering if I could possibly pull this off. And if my plan would break the compulsion...or drive me mad trying.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Are you sure about this?” Sumner eyed the set-up in my bedroom doubtfully. The bed was the same place it had been when I performed the hand-fasting and bonding ceremony that now seemed so long ago. But there were a few important changes.

Tied to the posts of my bed were two long, black satin ropes. I had purchased them specially from a store called Bare Essentials that sold “intimate adult items”, a ridiculous euphemism in my opinion. I mean, why not just say sex toys? But this was a high-end establishment that catered to the wealthy swingers of Sarasota. It costs a lot to let your freak flag fly on the gold coast—if you purchased it from Bare Essentials, anyway.

The ropes were necessary to my plan. But they were also what was putting the worried look on my lover’s face.

“I’m sure,” I said, wishing I sounded more certain. “Look, the materials Nana used to lay the compulsion on me are long gone. That means the only way to get rid of the spell is to break it ourselves.”

“I understand that,” he said nodding. “What I *don’t* understand is how it will help for me to tie you down and rape you—especially if you don’t want to be touched.”

“Don’t say that,” I said. “This is completely consensual. I *do* want you to touch me—very much.” In fact over the past few days as I had worked on my plan—and worked up the courage to put it into place—I had been getting hungrier and hungrier so to speak. Now the deep place of power inside me was crying out to be touched, to be taken. I might have delayed a few more days if it wasn’t for that but I needed this to work—needed it to work badly.

“You do here.” Sumner tapped his forehead. “But the rest of your body rejects my touch. I don’t want to hurt you, Kaitlyn. Don’t want to do anything you don’t want me to do. On any level.”

“I appreciate that,” I said. “But this is it, Sumner—our only shot. We have to take a chance to break this thing now.”

He frowned. “Is your hunger that great?”

“I need you.” I faced him, letting him look into me and see my need, my hunger to be touched. “I need your hands on me,” I said softly, my cheeks getting hot as I talked. “Need to feel you filling me. And you know that’s not easy for me to say.”

“I know.” He brushed a strand of hair from my face and tucked it behind my ear, being careful not to touch my skin. “But I can’t help thinking how beautiful you are when you speak of your need.”

"Thank you," I whispered, looking down. "But I need to *do* something about it. Not just talk about it."

"Very well. Then we will. But there is something I wish you to do for me first."

I frowned. "What?"

"Put this on." Sumner held out a small black bag with the word *Intimates* written across it in gold script.

"What is this?" I asked suspiciously.

"Consider it...protection of sorts. Just put it on."

"All right," I grumbled, taking the bag and heading for the bathroom. "But it better not be something weird."

He raised an eyebrow at me. "*Weirder* than tying you down and having my way with you?"

I frowned. "You know what I mean."

"Yes, sweetheart, I do."

I sighed. "You shouldn't have gotten me a gift. I didn't get anything for you, you know."

One corner of his mouth quirked up. "Seeing you wear it will be gift enough."

"All right." I sighed. He had me now. No matter what was in the little bag marked *Intimates* I was going to have to wear it. Damn vampire.

Sumner caught my thought and laughed softly. "Put it on, Kaitlyn. I promise this is a gift for both of us."

"Fine," I mumbled. Thinking that there were some things I would never understand about him, I went into the bathroom and closed the door.

I don't know what I was expecting when I opened the black lingerie bag. A red push-up bra? Satin panties? Instead what came out was made of sheer black fabric that almost reminded me of nylons. "What the hell *is* this?" I mumbled to myself as I unfolded it.

After taking off all my clothes, I wiggled into it and found that it covered me from my neck to my ankles. The long sleeves came down to my wrists. Basically it was a sheer black cat suit—clearly it was meant to cover all of me without hiding anything. My nipples were fully visible through the black stretchy see-through fabric as was the mound of my pussy. What the hell was Sumner thinking?

"Well?" he said from outside the bathroom door.

"Hold on." I was still debating about letting him see me in the see through cat suit. It was true that he'd seem me naked on several occasions but somehow I felt more nude in the sheer black suit than I ever had when I was simply bare. It was so provocative. So *naughty*. Leave it to Sumner to find something like this. Why was I not surprised? "I don't know about this," I said through the door.

"Just come out," he said coaxingly. "Let me see you."

I could see what he was trying to do. The thin nylon of the suit would allow me to feel him “touching” me even with no direct skin contact. “I don’t think this is going to work,” I told him. “The whole point of this is for me to surrender to you completely. For you to touch my bare skin while we make love.”

“No, the point of this exercise is to prove that you trust me,” he countered. “So trust me now, Kaitlyn. I promise I have a good reason for what I am asking of you.”

Well, I couldn’t argue with that. Reluctantly, I opened the door and stepped out into the bedroom.

Sumner’s pale eyes flickered over me like hungry flames. “Beautiful,” he murmured and I could tell that he meant it.

“Embarrassing is more like it,” I complained. “And I don’t see *you* wearing an outfit. If I’m dressed up like Catwoman the least you can do is dress up like Batman.”

“I’m not wearing an outfit because I don’t need one,” he said, ignoring my attempt at humor. “In fact, I don’t need any clothing at all.” He shed his jeans and shirt and black leather jacket as he spoke and then he stood before me naked and utterly gorgeous and held out his arms. “Come here, Kaitlyn. You’re beautiful and I’m aching to touch you.”

I walked over to him, bracing myself for the shock of wrongness at our contact. But to my surprise and relief I felt nothing but pleasure when he took me in his arms. I wished I could put my arms around his neck and kiss him but I didn’t want to press my luck. Too bad the cat suit hadn’t come with a matching ski mask. Har-har.

“Stop joking,” Sumner murmured and I realized he had caught my last thought. “I realize you use humor as a defense mechanism sometimes but you have nothing to be defensive about.”

“I feel silly,” I said, looking down.

“You *look* ravishing.” Sumner turned me toward the tall oval mirror that stood to one side of my bed. “Look at yourself, Kaitlyn,” he murmured. “Look at these beautiful curves.” His hands ran lightly down my sides, emphasizing my waist and hips. “Your full breasts,” he continued, reaching around me to cup them. I gasped and bit back a moan as he pinched my nipples lightly, causing them to stand erect beneath the sheer black fabric. “And your sweet, soft little pussy,” Sumner whispered. His right hand slid down my trembling abdomen to cup my mound.

There was a seam that ran right up the middle of the suit, almost like a thong. It ran right between my pussy lips, parting them slightly. Sumner traced it delicately with his fingertips, pressing lightly against the black line, spreading me open, rubbing it against my aching clit until I gasped.

“Wet already,” he said in my ear as I watched him touch me, pressing his fingers inside to rub my swollen folds through the sheer black nylon. His fingertips were shiny with my moisture as he stroked me. “Have I ever told you how much it arouses me that you get so wet, sweetheart?”

My cheeks were hot but somehow I couldn't ask him to stop. "I...it's always kind of embarrassed me," I admitted.

"It shouldn't," he said softly. "It's your body's way of asking for what it needs."

"What...what's that?" I asked breathlessly, completely lost in the moment.

"To be touched," he murmured, spreading my legs a little wider so that he could slide his fingers deeper into my pussy. I moaned as I felt him pressing into me. The black fabric was amazingly stretchy. "To be tasted," he whispered in my ear. "Which is what I'm going to do to you now."

"Through the suit?" I protested.

"At first," he said. I saw what he intended to do now. He was going to get me so hot and bothered I was right on the edge before he attempted to break the compulsion. Actually, it was a really good idea. I had been mentally bracing myself for the feeling of wrongness and unpleasantness I was sure I would feel as we made love. Now I could feel free to give in to him, to trust him completely without having to worry about that. Only one thing concerned me.

"Sumner," I whispered, because I could barely get the words out while he was touching me so intimately. "This feels amazing but...but in order to break the compulsion you're going to have to come inside me with nothing between us."

"I know that, sweetheart." Sumner smiled at me, revealing gleaming fangs. "And when I'm sure you're ready I'll remove what stands between us."

I shivered at the mental image of those sharp white fangs shredding the black fabric that covered my body like a second skin. For some reason it was an intensely erotic thought—almost primal. The idea of him ripping my clothing off with his teeth before he plunged his cock hilt deep inside my wet pussy and fucked me. God, I was going to go crazy if he didn't do it soon!

"Slowly, sweetheart," Sumner murmured and I knew he had caught my impatience through our bond. "I refuse to rush our pleasure."

"I appreciate that," I said as he led me to the bed and made sure I was comfortably propped up against the pillows. "But you're driving me crazy."

He gave me a lazy smile. "That's the idea."

"You're sadistic, you know that?" I told him as he tied my wrists to the bedposts.

"In more ways than you know." He arched an eyebrow at me. "But you're about to find out."

"Sumner!" I protested but he was already kissing his way down my body. He lapped delicately at my breasts and nipped lightly at my nipples through the black material. I gasped and jumped at the delicious tingle of pleasure-pain and he smiled up at me.

"So responsive, Kaitlyn," he murmured. "Tell me, does the suit detract from your pleasure in any way?"

"No," I admitted. To be honest, in a twisted way, wearing the sheer cat suit magnified my pleasure. It was incredibly hot to be completely naked and open for him without being totally bare. I couldn't explain the naughty appeal, even to myself. It was kind of like being back in high school, where you let your date feel under your shirt but over your bra or under your skirt but never under the panties or some other combination of breaking the rules without *actually* breaking them. It was hot. And so was I—hot and getting hotter all the time as Sumner moved slowly down my body.

"I'm intrigued," he said, looking up at me as he placed soft, biting kisses around my belly button. "Did you actually play such naughty games in school?"

I realized the bond must be opened wide—he really was catching all my thoughts. "I wasn't supposed to," I admitted, gasping as he nipped lightly at my inner thigh. "The need to be touched didn't mature until my powers did—when I was around twenty-one. But everyone messes around in high school—not that I got away with much." Nana had seen to that.

"I'm sure you didn't," he said, giving me a lazy smile. "All the more reason for us to have some fun now. Spread your legs for me, Kaitlyn." He stroked lightly along my outer pussy lips, his eyes hooded with lust. "I need to taste you now."

Moaning, I did as he said. God, he was driving me *insane*. I wanted to reach down and bury my hands in his thick black hair but even if I had been able to touch him, the satin ties were holding me in place. I had never felt so helpless or so hot. I only hoped I could stand what was coming next without going crazy with need.

"Your hunger is very great—greater than it was when I first did this to you. When I first tasted you," Sumner murmured, looking up from between my thighs. He spread my pussy lips open, pushing the black seam to one side to reveal the throbbing pearl of my clit. "Why do you think that is?"

"I don't know," I gasped as he blew lightly across my heated flesh. "Maybe because I got used to being touched again. Or maybe because—"

"Because we're meant to be together," he growled softly. "And your body recognizes me as the one you need. Just as mine recognizes you." Leaning down, he placed a tender, teasing kiss on my aching clit. "God, you're beautiful. Just look how wet you are, Kaitlyn. How the fabric clings to you."

It was true, my honey had saturated the black nylon, making it cling to my mound and inner folds in a way that was both obscene and strangely beautiful. I had almost bought a blindfold at the same time as the satin ties that were currently restraining my wrists but now I was glad I hadn't. I couldn't stop staring at the way Sumner was lapping my spread cunt, his tongue laving my exposed inner pussy with a need too great to be denied. The pleasure was spiraling inside me, building higher and higher until I felt like I was going to explode.

"You taste so good," he murmured, looking up, his full lips shiny with my juices. "And you feel so hot and wet and perfect against my mouth. Can you come, Kaitlyn? Can you come while I eat your pussy?"

“God yes,” I moaned. “Yes, but don’t stop.”

I won’t, he sent through the bond. But be warned, sweetheart. The minute I feel you coming I’m going to rip this fabric apart and bury my cock deep in your sweet, wet pussy.

The mental image he sent as well as his tongue lashing my open cunt was too much. Moaning, I bucked up against him, pulling hard on the ropes that bound me as the pleasure washed over me.

“Sumner!” I moaned as he rode out my orgasm, still licking and sucking as I came.

And then I felt him shredding the sheer black fabric, his fangs slicing through the stretchy material with ease and speed. Suddenly I felt incredibly vulnerable. Would I feel the wrongness? Would the compulsion overcome the pleasure Sumner had given me and force me to beg him to stop?

No. I won’t do that. No matter how wrong it feels. Besides, it won’t feel wrong. I trust him. I Trust Him. I closed my eyes as Sumner mounted me, holding on to that thought. I was open to him, vulnerable as I had never been to any man before. He was stronger than me, faster than me, more powerful than I would ever be but I didn’t care. I put my life in his hands and more than my life – my heart.

“And I promise you won’t regret it, sweetheart,” Sumner whispered. Then he spread my legs and fucked into me, filling me in one long, hard thrust.

I moaned and threw my head back against the pillows. The pleasure was there, the delicious feeling of being completely filled, the wonderful sensation of having his bare cock deep inside my unprotected pussy. But the wrongness was there too. It was small, just barely niggling at the corners of my consciousness but I could feel it growing. *No, have to ignore it. Have to drown it out!*

“Sumner,” I rasped, pressing my hips up to meet his driving thrusts. “Harder. Faster. *More.*”

He obliged me at once. Cupping my hips in his hands, he split my thighs wide and pounded into me. I moaned as the head of his cock battered the mouth of my womb, almost unable to bear the intensity of his fucking, and yet I wanted more. Needed more to drown out the growing wrongness.

“Please!” I gasped. “God, more!”

Sumner’s eyes were pale-on-red. “Don’t want to hurt you,” he growled. “I’m being too rough as it is.”

“No you’re not,” I protested even though I knew he was telling nothing but the truth. “Please, Sumner – *fuck me.*”

With a low roar he redoubled his efforts. I moaned and grasped the black ropes, trying to be open, trying to withstand his rough, luscious fucking. But inside my mind was racing. *This isn’t working. What’s wrong? I’ve made myself vulnerable, I’m trusting him completely. The spell should be broken by now.*

But was I? Was I really?

Despite the wrongness, I could feel my pleasure growing as well. I was climbing toward a second orgasm but I didn't think it would be enough to break Nana's compulsion. Suddenly, though, I knew what would.

My heart nearly stuttered to a stop inside me. *I can't. Not yet. Not now.* But it was the only way and my only chance. I *had* to do it. There was no choice.

"Sumner," I moaned as he pounded into me. "Sumner, bite me. Bite me and come in me at the same time."

"What?" He actually slowed his thrusting a bit as he looked down at me in disbelief. "Kaitlyn, no. You don't want—"

"Yes, I do," I insisted. "I want to be with you forever. I-I give you my heart for eternity, Sumner. Do it."

"Sweetheart." His pale-on-red eyes were suddenly filled with emotion. "I felt you thinking about this before but I thought you wanted to wait. Are you truly certain?"

For an answer, I turned my head to one side, baring my throat to him. An offering. A sacrifice. A promise for the future.

Still he hesitated. I could feel him looking into me, using our bond to probe my true thoughts and I laid myself open to him. *I love you*, I told him fiercely. *I don't need to wait to know that's true now and forever. Do it, Sumner. Bite me.*

"I love you," he whispered. Then with a final thrust, he pressed his cock deep into my pussy. And at the same time he buried his fangs in my neck.

I gasped as I felt a bolt of pain and pleasure wash over me. *God, too much, too much...* And yet I had to stand it though I thought the intensity of it might drive me mad. Sumner held me tight as his cum pumped into me and my blood flowed into him, forming a circle as ancient as time itself, forging an unbreakable bond between us.

It was enough and more than enough.

I cried out in joy as I felt the compulsion fall away like a rusty, broken chain. It could bind me no longer. I was free to love Sumner, free to be with him forever. Free to give him my heart completely and without reservation. It was as though some kind of explosion was taking place deep inside me—no, deep inside *us*—for Sumner and I were joined now, joined for eternity.

The blood covenant was sealed.

* * * * *

It was a long time before I came back to myself but when I did, I realized Sumner had untied me and was holding me tight. He was stroking my hair and there was a concerned look on his face.

"You're crying," he murmured when I looked up at him.

"Am I?" I put up a hand to feel my cheek. Sure enough, my fingertips came away wet.

"I hurt you," he said but I shook my head.

"No you didn't. I just...I've never felt anything like that before. It was so intense and now..." I shook my head, trying to think how to put it. "It's like being naked with you for the first time all over again. Only this time it's my soul that's naked. My heart. Does that make sense?"

One corner of his full mouth quirked up and he kissed me lightly on the lips. "Perfect sense, sweetheart. I feel the same."

"It's strange," I said tentatively, feeling inside myself for the psychic bond that had been forged between us. "Strange but...I like it."

"It's a good thing you do since there is no getting out of it," Sumner said dryly.

"I don't want to get out of it." I snuggled happily in his arms. "And you better not either. You're stuck with me now."

"Kaitlyn," he said seriously, looking into my eyes. "There is absolutely no one I would rather be 'stuck' with than you. I want you to know that."

"I do," I said and I did. I could feel the flow of his emotions, taste the flavor of his thoughts. It was a union so complete we were almost one person and yet I still retained my own opinions and free will. I knew that Sumner felt the same and was content with the situation and that made me feel even happier. All the irritation I'd felt with our previous bonds was gone. It was as though they had chafed me because they were incomplete. Now I felt warm and contented and whole.

I laughed and Sumner looked at me. "Care to share the joke?"

"You know it already," I said, smiling up at him. "There's no joke—I'm just so happy."

He smiled back. "I know. But I wanted to hear you say it. If we get into the habit of always communicating silently instead of talking out loud we're going to seem like a very odd couple."

"Like we can get any odder," I pointed out. "A vampire who has a blood covenant with a witch."

"A *Wiccan*," he corrected me, grinning. "And I don't care how odd we may seem to anyone else, Kaitlyn. What we have is worth any amount of censure."

I frowned. "Well, I know one person who's certain to be handing out 'censure' as you put it. Nana is going to be none too pleased that we managed to get around her spell." Not that I cared. I had told her I would never forgive her for her actions and I meant it.

"Now, sweetheart," Sumner murmured, obviously catching my thought. "Your grandmother loves you. She was doing what she thought was right to keep you safe."

"I don't care," I said stubbornly. "I'm not ready to forgive her."

"Not now you're not," Sumner said casually. "But I dare say you might be after another hundred years or so."

"A hundred years?" I sat up and stared at him. "What are you talking about?"

He shrugged. "Well, your grandmother took quite a lot of my blood. And though she didn't turn, she came close. There are lasting effects to such a close call. Longevity being one of them."

"Wow." I shook my head at the idea. "So you're saying that Nana's going to be around for another *century*?"

"At least," Sumner promised. "Though I don't know if she'll consider it a blessing or a curse."

"A curse, I'm sure," I said, frowning. "She'd consider anything she got from a vampire that way."

"Well, she has time to change her mind. And you have time to change yours."

I shook my head. "Why do you care? She tried to keep us apart forever, I would've thought you would hate her."

"I could never hate anyone who loved and protected you as she has done," Sumner said seriously. "Even when she acted against me, she thought she was doing it for your own good."

"Well I'm glad *you're* so willing to forgive her," I grumbled, crossing my arms over my chest. "I know I'm not. And I don't know if I ever will be."

"That's all right." Sumner pulled me back down to the bed and held me tight. "You have eternity to change your mind."

I smiled. "I do, don't I?"

He nodded. "Mmm-hmm. So besides holding a grudge, what would you like to do with the rest of your life?"

I felt my pulse start to quicken as I stared into his eyes. "Maybe I'd like another gift."

He raised an eyebrow. "Greedy little thing, aren't you? But I suppose your first gift *is* rather, ah, torn up." He eyed the shreds of black nylon still framing my nakedness and I shivered at the lust in his pale eyes.

"And that's your fault," I reminded him. "So for my next gift, I'd like to make love again. More slowly this time."

"And more gently." Sumner laid a whisper-soft kiss on my lips, making me moan. "I want you," he murmured. "I love you, Kaitlyn. I will always love you."

I wanted to repeat the words back to him but he was already taking my mouth in another hot kiss. I twined my fingers in his hair and pressed closer to his body, knowing that he already knew. We were together forever and no one and nothing could change that.

The End

About the Author

Evangeline Anderson is a registered MRI tech who would rather be writing. And she is nerdy enough to have a bumper sticker that says “I’d rather be writing.” Honk if you see her! She is thirty-something and lives in Florida with a husband, a son and two cats. She had been writing erotic fiction for her own gratification for a number of years before it occurred to her to try to get paid for it. To her delight, she found that it was actually possible to get money for having a dirty mind and she has been writing paranormal and sci-fi erotica steadily ever since.

Evangeline welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorasave.com.

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