

# Once Bitten, Forever Burned

By

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# **Devon's Redemption**

# By Eve Langlais

Bitten and cursed, can he find redemption in her arms?

Bethany lost her one and only love to a war overseas. As if that wasn't bad enough, a brutal attack and claiming by a Lycan makes her life a living hell. She lives only for revenge until the day love comes back into her life and promises to rescue her from her misery. However, the mate who forced her isn't about to let her go.

Devon died on the battlefield only to be reborn as a creature of the night. He fights to stay away from his one true love, but when he caves to his desire and sees her again, he discovers redemption is possible even for one who walks in darkness.

#### **Prologue**

The blood seeped slowly from his wounded body, leeching his life under a foreign sky. He could do nothing to stop the flow, his body prone and useless, yet still far too aware of how his life force soaked into the sandy soil.

Staring up at the stars, he cursed the reasons that brought him here, so far from home, to suffer such an ignoble end. In his youthful ignorance, he'd entertained such dreams of glory and honor, of doing his duty for his country. What a joke. All he'd done was become another stupid casualty in a war that could not be won using the tactics taught during his weeks at boot camp.

As he gasped for air, the death rattle he'd become familiar with during his oversea tenure sounding in his lungs, he thought with regret of what he'd left behind—his love and a chance at a family. Bethany's face appeared in his mind's eye, her exotic tanned skin proclaiming her mixed heritage along with her dark eyes that gleamed with adoration whenever she looked upon him. And her lips, oh God, her lips, always curved in a sweet smile of welcome. He could remember only too clearly how her luxurious dark hair draped over her well rounded breasts when she rode him, a

light sheen of sweat coating her luscious body. Ideal in all ways, he'd planned to ask her to marry him when his tour ended and he returned home. However, instead of giving her a ring, he'd be giving her grief because he knew the news of his death would hit her hard. And even though he knew it was cruel, his jealous nature couldn't even now contemplate her moving on with another man.

She's mine.

Contemplating once more the stars that glittered faintly before his dying vision, he heard the carrion eaters as they approached on stealthy feet. Too weak to even shudder, he tried not to think and recall other bodies he'd stumbled across during his scouting, their bones picked clean of their humanity.

Even worse, he heard the gasping fear of one of his brothers in arms as death came for him first. Cruz, best friend and the bravest man he knew, screamed, an unholy sound that shattered the night sky. Too quickly—and perhaps mercifully—the cry was cut off, leaving only the slurping sounds of the carrion feeder feasting.

Anticipation of the coming horror made him swallow. He didn't want to lose his pride and cry in fear at his impending doom—and agony. He prayed, to the god who'd

forsaken him, to die before the creatures of the battlefield started in on his flesh.

A vain hope.

He never saw the beast that scurried on silent feet to his side. A single gasp was all he managed before sharp teeth bit into his neck while hellish red eyes bored into his. To his horror, he recognized the signs of humanity in that horrific visage. A humanity gone monstrously wrong.

Shutting his eyes tight against the nightmare changed nothing. The gush of hot blood, pumping wetly from the punctured artery, signaled the swift approach of his death. At least he didn't need to fear he'd scream his terror. His throat was locked, the shriek of pain and abject fear echoing only in his mind.

As the world and consciousness receded, he had only one thought that he selfishly prayed Bethany would hear.

I love you. Never forget me.

# Chapter One

Ten years later...

"He'll be fine. Just keep him from scratching and make sure you give him the medication I prescribed three times a day."

"Oh, thank you, doctor. We would have been ever so lost without our Fluffy."

Bethany smiled at the frazzled woman as she scooped up her terrier and scurried out the front door. The case of the itchy dog was her last appointment of the day, but she dithered, tidying things that didn't need tidying and filing paperwork that her receptionist would have taken care of in the morning. Eventually, though, she ran out of tasks to do and excuses to stay late. Locking up, she sat on the front step of her practice, knowing she needed to head home, but dreading it. To think the thing she'd dreamed of all her life, owning her own veterinary practice, had landed her in the hell currently known as her life. If only I'd locked that door six years ago instead of answering, would I have escaped my fate?

The tinny sound of her cell phone ringing made her sigh. She dug around in her hand bag and pulled it out

without even glancing at the number calling. Why? She already knew who rang. Checking up on her more devotedly than a parole officer, but at least an officer of the court would have proven more polite about it.

"I'm just finishing up," she answered without even saying hello, long past any attempt at niceties.

"I'm hungry," was the plaintive reply.

What she wanted to retort was, "Well, then cook something." After all, the kitchen brimmed with supplies—she should know since grocery shopping was one of her many chores. Holding onto her acerbic response, she instead replied, "I'll pick something up on the way home." She knew better than to antagonize him, not that it took much to get him going. Tyson would just find something else to harp on if the mood struck him.

Dawdling was no longer an option after she hung up, not if she wanted to spare her ribs from his fists. She hit a KFC on her way home—more like her prison—the greasy smell of the food making her stomach churn. Bucket of chicken tucked under one arm, she took a deep breath before entering the house, which, despite fervent praying, had yet to burn to the ground. She quickly made her way to the kitchen and fixed a plate of food. Grabbing a beer, she carried it and

the plate to the living room where the television blared. She placed the meal and beverage on the table beside the empty chair. Glad to avoid him for even a few more moments, she headed for the bedroom and a change of clothes. She walked in and stopped dead.

"Did you bring me my dinner?" Tyson asked belligerently even as the head of his newest girlfriend bobbed between his legs.

Used to his lack of propriety, and glad she wouldn't have to suffer his pawing tonight, Bethany just nodded her head. She ignored the slurping sounds as she swiped a change of clothes off her dresser and left.

Changing in the bathroom, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. She stared at her face, looking for the signs of abuse, both mental and physical, that should mark her. As usual, the same old her stared back and she wanted to cry. The only scars her body wore hid under her clothing, masking the truth from the world. But, she knew. *How could I ever forget?* 

What had she done to deserve this life? She'd known happiness once upon a time. Then it had all changed, none of it for the better.

Regret, though wouldn't bring back the happiness, and life, forever lost. She was a survivor even if she'd lost her heart ten years ago when the men in uniform appeared at her mother's door with the news. As for what had happened six years ago, it couldn't equal the pain she lived with every day, surviving with only half of her soul. The only reason she still lived was for revenge. Tyson had sullied her body with his touch and his taint. For that alone, she would one day kill him.

And I'll enjoy every bloody moment.

\* \* \* \*

Thursday at the animal clinic was her late night for appointments. Although her last appointment for eight-thirty cancelled, Bethany hung around, as usual avoiding going home to *him*. At least he'd stopped showing up at the clinic, keeping tabs on her. She had his many girlfriends to thank for that. They kept him busy fucking, which thankfully reduced the amount of groping she had to endure.

However, busy fornicating or not, Tyson always had to know where she was and what she did. He kept close watch on her, even if she couldn't understand why. He had plenty of bitches to choose from. Why he insisted on keeping her around baffled her. Bethany hated him, and knew he couldn't stand her. They were both miserable, and yet, he just wouldn't let her go. If it hadn't been for his superior strength and cunning, she would have killed him a long time ago. Running away wouldn't work—her beating after her last attempt made that clear, and tempered her actions with caution. Tyson in a rage wasn't something to mess with, and to her eternal shame, scared her. Much as she hated her life, she feared death more. If I die, I can't kill him for what he's done.

But hope clung to her tenaciously that someday, somehow, she'd find a way to free herself of him.

Taking out the garbage, just another chore to delay the inevitable, a tingle went up her spine. She paused and sniffed the air. Nothing untoward came to her and, yet, the skin on the nape of her neck tickled. *Danger*, her instincts screamed. Bethany closed her eyes and let her enhanced senses roam.

I'm not alone.

She didn't let such a thing as fear send her scurrying.

Apart from Tyson and his bully boys, not much could scare her—or hurt. Scanning the area behind her practice, her sharp gaze didn't reach far in the darkness, not with the glare

of the light above the door. Useless thing, it only illuminated a small area. A few steps, taken away from the building, put most of the blinding glow behind her. Bethany peered again into the gloom, scanning the empty parking lot and the shadows of the trees that bordered it. Not a flicker of motion betrayed a presence, but she knew without a doubt that someone watched. It made her skin prickle.

Don't tell me Tyson is back to his old games? Sending his lackeys to spy on me?

Pissed, she called out, "I know you're out there. You might as well show yourself."

Nothing, not even a whisper of a breeze, answered her, but that thrumming sense of awareness still gripped her. Oddly enough, time seemed to slow, and Bethany experienced the oddest feeling that she stood on the threshold of something, a momentous event that would change her life. Shaking her head at her fanciful thoughts, she called out again, "If you're spying for him, then you can tell him I'm on my way home now."

Finally, a figure stepped from the shadow of the trees. Tall and broad shouldered, he seemed to glide toward her. Bethany shivered because there was something unnatural about his movement. *Not human*, whispered her psyche.

As the watcher neared the light pooled around her, Bethany's eyes widened in shock, and she took a step back.

No, it can't be.

Dizziness overtook her and her knees trembled. An urge to run gripped her as he approached, but her body froze like the prey she hunted on full moons. She couldn't even speak. Her throat locked in shock as he arrived to stand in front of her, his familiar features tinged with sadness.

"Hello, Bethany."

At the sound of his gravelly voice, a voice she heard in her dreams—and nightmares—her knees buckled, her eyes rolled up in shock, and she collapsed.

## Chapter Two

Devon caught Bethany before she hit the ground and cursed his stupidity in having let her see him, but he'd been unable to stop himself, drawn to her like metal to a magnet. Sweeping her up into his arms, he stared down into her face, virtually unchanged in the ten years since he'd last seen her, and more beautiful than he remembered. The temptation to kiss her full lips made him groan and his cock swelled for the first time since his death. A part of him rejoiced to discover he wasn't impotent. He apparently just needed the right woman to arouse him, the only woman he'd ever loved.

And can never have.

Carrying her into the building that housed her veterinary practice, it gladdened him to know she'd pursued her dream and achieved it. At least one of them had gotten something positive out of life.

Depositing her in a chair in the waiting room, he recognized the smartest move required him to leave, but from the moment he'd laid eyes on her, right and wrong became lost in selfish need. *God might have damned me, but I still love and want her.* Those feelings made him stand at the back of the

room and wait for her to regain consciousness. Probably stupid and destructive of him, but then again, leaving and wondering how she fared would torture him even worse.

Her dark lashes fluttered as she opened her eyes, confusion, for a moment, clouding them. Then remembrance lit them. Unerringly, her gaze found him and he heard her gasp. "You're supposed to be dead."

"Who says I'm not?" he replied cryptically. How to explain that while he looked alive, in truth, he had died ten years ago? What she saw now wore the face of her old lover, but hid a monster. Not that he abhorred his new lifestyle. There was a guilty pleasure and rush from feeding from the unworthy humans who abused their precious lives. How could he not rejoice in his strength and superhuman senses? In truth, the only thing he regretted since his death and monstrous rebirth was losing her.

Still seated, Bethany reached out a hand and he obliged her. He approached and dropped to his knees in front of her, unable to deny her unvoiced request. Trembling fingers traced the shape of his face, lingering over his lips. It took a lot of restraint on his part not to open his mouth and lick her finger, taste the sweetness he could sense lying under her skin. She smells so damned good, even tainted with the aroma of

fur. A byproduct of her work with canines and felines, he assumed. But still, something about her seemed different than the other humans he'd encountered, more primal. Fanciful thinking, probably, on his part because he well knew Bethany's human nature. Her very mortality was what had kept him away for so long.

Tears brimmed in her eyes and her voice quavered. "I don't understand. They said you were dead. I was there when they buried you."

An empty casket, since they'd never found a body. "I did die." Painfully so, and his rebirth as something no longer human had hurt even more. However, it all paled in comparison to the devastation of losing Bethany. Ten years had passed and he still wanted her. Ached with the loss of not seeing or touching her.

"That makes no sense. You're here now. Or are you trying to make me believe you're a ghost?"

"I'm not a ghost."

"I can see that," she snapped, then, as if unable to help herself, she stroked his hair. "Where have you been? Why didn't you come back to me?"

The pain in her voice hurt him more than the shrapnel that had initially felled him. What have I done? He

needed to leave—now. Coming here had been a selfish decision on his part. He had no right to her anymore. She deserved better, deserved a life, a human life. However, the agony in her expression held him and bound him to her tighter than any chains. "I couldn't come back then, and I can't stay now. Something happened to me while I was overseas. Something bad." Now there was an understatement.

"Bad? What could be worse than being told you were dead? Do you know how many tears I cried, and yet, all this time, you lived."

"I never meant to hurt you," he whispered, and he gave in to the temptation to touch her. He brushed his cool knuckles down the side of her face and his heart tightened painfully as she closed her eyes and leaned into his touch. A single tear wound its way down her cheek.

"Where have you been hiding? Why did you come back? Why now after all this time?" Her eyes fluttered open and her gaze met his, her lashes damp with brimming tears.

Devon withdrew his hand and clenched it at his side. This close to her, the need to gather her in his arms just about overwhelmed him. Her questions stabbed him with guilt, especially since he couldn't answer them. "I shouldn't

have returned, but I had to see you one last time. To make sure you were okay. Safe."

She laughed bitterly. "Too late."

He frowned at her. "Is everything all right? Has somebody hurt you?" A deadly rage swept through him at the thought of someone harming a hair on her head. *I'll eat the bastard alive*.

Her eyes snapped with fire and her lips tightened with ire. "Please don't pretend you care. If you truly loved me, you would have come back to me. Just what was more important to you that you couldn't even call?"

"I can't say, but believe me when I say I never stopped loving you." And never would.

"Liar." She pushed at Devon and he stood up, backing away from her and the anger she radiated. "You need to go. You're right. You shouldn't have come back. There's nothing for you here anymore. Too much has happened and I'm not the woman you remember." Again, she laughed, a hint of hysteria coloring the sound and, even odder, despair.

Devon wanted to question her some more—she's hiding something from me—but a phone rang. With a look of weary resignation, she pulled out a cell phone and walked away from him to answer.

"I'm just leaving," she snapped without even greeting the caller.

Devon straightened at her barely civil tone. With his improved hearing, he caught the other side of the conversation.

"Don't get lippy with me, bitch. Get your ass home now if you know what's good for you."

"I'm on my way as soon as I lock up." Bethany flipped the phone closed and turned to face him, her expression blank. "It was nice seeing you again. Have a good life." And with those words, she tried to walk away from him.

Oh, hell no. His jealous nature wouldn't allow her to leave. Not without answering a few more questions. "Was that your husband?" Devon dug his nails into his palm. The idea of his sweet Bethany being married to what sounded like a brute made him see red and brought his dark monster to the surface.

"No, he's not my husband, but he owns me just the same." Her words made no sense, but there was no mistaking the bitterness underlying them.

Hugging herself, she looked so lost that it would have taken a stronger man than him to resist. He didn't even

bother trying and gave in to selfish need. With quick strides, he went to her and pulled her into his arms.

"What are you doing?" she asked, her voice uncertain, so unlike the spitfire he remembered. Despite her hesitance, her body bespoke excitement. Her breathing hitched and her blood pounded through her sweet flesh at his closeness.

He didn't answer, but showed her instead, slanting his lips over hers, tasting her, her wildly exotic and unique flavor. And in that moment, he knew, despite all his good intentions, he could never leave her again.

She will be mine. Forever, if I have a say.

\* \* \* \*

Bethany knew she should push Devon away.

Allowing him to get close to her would only end up with him getting hurt, but the sweet pleasure of being in his arms melted away all her reason. His lips, firm against hers, ignited a fire she hadn't felt since he'd left her so long ago. She found herself clinging to him, her fingers digging into the hard muscle of his shoulders. He devoured her, his strangely cool tongue thrusting into her mouth to duel with hers and sending a jolt of arousal through her. His hands slid down her

back to cup her bottom, and he pulled her into his body, the hardness of his erection pressing against her lower belly. His scent tickled her nose. After such a long absence, it seemed alien to her, but she inhaled it anyway, losing herself in his essence made up of cologne, soap, and something she couldn't quite name, but which called to her wild side. Called to her inner beast and made it stir in the buried part of her mind.

Moaning against his mouth, a sound that seemed to enflame him because he kissed her even more intently, she pressed herself tightly against him. She might have stood there forever, lost in the pleasure he evoked, if she hadn't nicked her tongue on one of his teeth, the metallic taste of her blood flavoring both their mouths.

With a curse, he pushed away from her and turned to give her his back.

Bethany licked her lips, the tingling in them and her body not disappearing even though he stood several feet away. She wanted to throw herself back in his arms. Kiss him and make love to him until she forgot their years apart. Forgot the pain of her existence.

Complete insanity. The voice of reason reared its ugly head. She couldn't get involved with Devon. He'd get hurt.

Tyson would tear him apart if he even knew Devon still lived. How could she have forgotten for a moment her alpha's psychotic tendencies?

Besides, even if Tyson weren't an issue, could she really stand to see the love in Devon's eyes turn to repugnance as he realized just how sullied she'd become both with the Lycan taint that made her huntress, and the filth of her body from the numerous rapes? One alone was enough to bear. Both...she couldn't face it.

"I've got to go." Bethany snatched up her purse from the long counter and fled, an exit marred when she needed to pause, waiting for him to follow her out so she could lock up.

Devon stood in the darkness, staring intently at her as she dead-bolted the door to her practice. His face revealed nothing of his feelings, but his eyes...dear God. Desire smoldered in his dark blue eyes. Taking a deep breath, she did what had to be done, even as her heart cracked. "I can't see you again. It's too dangerous."

"Funny, I was going to say the same thing."

Her heart sank at his words because despite the danger his interest would put him in, a part of her desperately wanted to throw herself in his arms and have him take her away to forget the last ten years. Rescue her from the nightmare of her life. A foolish pipe dream.

"Goodbye Devon." Bethany walked away briskly, heading to her car, unseeing for the tears in her eyes. If only he could have come back ten years ago, or even six, before her living nightmare became inescapable. Now, it was too late for them, and especially too late for her. She wouldn't allow him to be drawn into her living hell. She loved him too much for that.

# **Chapter Three**

Devon knew the smart thing to do involved walking away and never looking back. Bethany had made it clear with words she didn't want him to stay, but her kiss told a different story. And the brief taste of her blood... Pure ambrosia. Sweet, as expected, with a musky undertone that surprised him. Her flavor differed from anyone he'd tasted since he'd turned, and not just her unique bouquet, but her scent as well. If he hadn't known better, he would have said she belonged to a group other than human—pure madness and wishful thinking on his part.

Regardless of her mortality and best intentions, he had to see her again. Needed to. Her smooth tanned skin called to him and the thought of any other man, especially the brute on the phone, touching her, made him growl. Screw doing the right thing. He'd done that ten years ago when he'd left her to fight a war he didn't believe in. He'd done the proper thing in keeping himself, the abomination he'd become, away. And yet, even after all this time, he still ached for her, and even worse, he could sense she hurt, as well.

That would change. I'm back, baby, and my new goal in life—or is that un-life—is to make you happy.

First things first, though. He needed more information, starting with where she lived and with whom. However, even before he could tackle that, he needed to set up a base of operations, a safe place where he could go to ground during the daylight hours. The night hours he'd dedicate to courting his lady and praying to a God who'd turned a deaf ear on him ten years ago that she wouldn't run and scream when he eventually told her the truth.

\* \* \* \*

Trouble hit within seconds of her walking in the door. With a bestial growl, Tyson came bounding out of the living room, his head cocked as he sniffed the air. A dangerous glint lit his eyes as he stalked around her, smelling her.

Bethany closed her eyes. There was no doubting Tyson could smell Devon on her. She should have known better. Lycans missed nothing with their enhanced senses, especially scent.

An iron grip clamped around her forearms and, with a shake, he shouted, "Who dares touch what is mine?"

"No one." Stubborn still even after all this time, she lied to his face, even knowing the futility and punishment that would follow her denial.

"Liar." With his more than human strength, he picked her up and threw her like a weightless ragdoll to crash hard against the wall. Bethany grunted at the impact and slid down the wall to land on the floor.

Breathing heavily through his nose, Tyson stalked over to her and picked her up, his fingers digging into her upper arms, bruising them as he shook her again. "I can smell him on you. Cheating slut. How dare you betray me and with one of *them*. Filthy bitch." His fist pulled back and she braced herself. It still didn't stop the pain when the blow connected. Or the one after.

She tuned his vile curses out and shut herself in the room she'd created in her mind to hide in when Tyson went into one of his rages, or decided to partake of her body. While her exterior bore the brunt of his anger, she diverted her mind by pondering something he'd said. Actually, more the way he'd said it. What did he mean when he said I'd betrayed him with one of them? Devon is human. Or was he? He'd alluded he'd changed, and she remembered his scent with its alien

element, a strange odor she'd never smelled before. He's obviously not a Lycan like me, but what else could he be?

Until Tyson's comment a moment ago, she'd never suspected other species might exist. Then again, it wasn't like Tyson would bother telling her. The woman he'd forced as mate hung low on his list of people he confided in.

Despite Tyson's attempt to keep her ignorant, if she assumed other beings existed—straddling the thin line of humanity—then, what could Devon possibly be?

Not that it mattered. Tyson, with his superior strength, would kill Devon in a heartbeat, and she couldn't allow that to happen. Although, if we could somehow kill Tyson, then maybe I could tell Devon what I've become. If he's changed as well, perhaps he would understand. Forgive me for what I've become. Forgive the filth Tyson has subjected me to.

Madness to even think it, but she couldn't prevent the blossoming hope. She also realized while she contemplated the possibilities that Tyson had finished beating her. She came out of the secret room in her mind to the screaming aches and pain of her abused body. Opening one eye—the other swollen shut—she noticed Tyson was still there, pacing in agitation.

As if sensing her gaze, he stopped and turned to face her, his brutish features twisted in rage. "Get in the bedroom."

"No," she managed to choke out, her voice raspy.

Tyson's face darkened. "Fine then, bitch. Have it your way. I'll take you here out in the open and remind you of who owns your sorry ass."

Panic fluttered in her breast. Bethany didn't want him to touch her, sully her. Not now. Not when there was a glimmer of chance she could have Devon again. However, she lacked the strength to stop him. Unlike the pain of her beating, the futility of her situation brought tears to her eyes.

Tyson saw her weakness and laughed. "Cocky bitch.

We'll see how much your wanna-be lover wants you after I've had my way with you. Now move."

A commotion at the front door distracted Tyson from his purpose and Bethany used his inattention to haul herself out of sight. Other members of the pack entered, rowdy and drunk, their arms slung around some women, and lucky her, they'd brought an extra pair of drunken sluts for Tyson. Panting in pain and fear around the corner, she prayed for deliverance. And finally, God heard her. Apparently, given

the choice between raping her bloody, unwilling body and a pair of giggling blondes, bimbos won. *Thank you*.

Dragging herself with trembling limbs, she made it to the bathroom and locked the door. The hot bath she submerged herself in hurt more than it soothed, but at least she was able to wipe the blood off. By the end of her soak, she could stand on trembling legs, her cracked ribs aching something fierce. She paused to peer into the mirror, and sighed at the sight. Usually, Tyson took care to only beat her where no one could see, but this time, his rage hadn't tempered the direction of his fists. She sported a rainbow of bruises on her visage, crowned with one eye swollen shut, and a fat lip adorned with a bloody split. But, she still looked better than she had a moment ago, and in a few days, not a trace of her injuries would remain. Her body had already begun healing. Swift healing was the only added bonus of her curse, but the extra energy required to heal this level of injury made her hungry.

She eased out of the bathroom upright and unsteady. The sounds of revelry from the living room made her sidle as quick as she could with gritted teeth to the bedroom and lock the door. Hands trembling, she dressed as her stomach

growled. Lightheadedness made her sway and blurred her vision as her body sucked up her reserves to heal.

What do I do? Should I fix myself a snack in the kitchen and go to bed, hoping Tyson won't come after me again? Or, and I can't believe I'm even thinking this, do I leave?

Excitement warred with fear at the thought. She'd always imagined she'd have to kill Tyson before she could escape, but in truth, in six years, when had the opportunity arisen? The man slept with one eye open. Escape was impossible. Every time she'd run, he'd dragged her back and shown her with his fists why she should never leave again.

Tonight, nothing had actually changed, and yet, since seeing Devon, everything had. If he wasn't human like Tyson implied, then maybe they had a chance.

Or Tyson will kill him and I'll have nothing left to live for.

Yet, staying would gain her nothing as well. If she left, she took a chance for sure because perhaps Devon would reject her when he knew her sordid secrets. I'll never know until I try. I'm tired of living in pain and fear. It's time I did something.

Reality crashed in as she realized she didn't even know how to contact Devon, or if she'd even see him again. He'd taken ten years, after all, to come back. What made her think he wouldn't just disappear again? She wasn't the same

sweet girl he'd left. Her body and mind bore the scars of an abusive life. Could he forgive her for the taint on her body and soul?

And could they escape together?

One thing was for sure, she couldn't do it tonight. Weak as a newborn pup, injured and with no way of contacting Devon, she'd doom herself to failure if she tried. But delaying her decision didn't please her either. Nor could she stay hiding in the bedroom forever. Tyson was sure to come stumbling back at one point with one or two bedmates. Add to that, her stomach still rumbled.

Bethany unlocked the door and peered out. Smelling and seeing no one, she crept on silent feet into the kitchen to grab some protein and sugar in the form of cold chicken and juice. She brought her snack back and huddled on the blanket she pulled from the closet. It wouldn't be the first time she slept on the floor. Actually, she spent most of her nights there, the cold surface more comfortable than any soft mattress with Tyson on it.

Curling in on herself, she fell into a restless sleep, and prayed with all her might that on the morrow, her life would finally change for the better.

## **Chapter Four**

Across town...

Devon pressed a buzzer outside an ornate pair of gates. He could have easily leapt the fence surrounding the place, but such disrespect would surely have repercussions. Even a young one like himself, or so they called him because he'd yet to hit the century mark, knew better. Vampires, as he'd learned through his various years trekking from place to place, relied heavily on manners and protocol. They didn't take kindly to seeing those rules bent or broken, and usually pressed their point with savage violence.

A tinny voice emerged from the mounted intercom. "State your business."

"Devon of no clan. I seek permission to visit and shelter."

Devon stood still as a pair of cameras whirred, rotating their angles to take in his appearance and whether he'd arrived alone. There was no paranoia as great as that of a vampire. With a click, the gate slid open and Devon entered into the compound. He strode quickly up the drive, sensing more than seeing the guards that patrolled the edges of the

driveway. When the main house appeared out of the gloom, its majestic size did not impress him. Those of his kind were attracted to statures of wealth. As he went up the steps to the oversized double doors, a pair of shadows glided forth. Devon stopped and allowed them to pat down his body for weapons. He had no need of any. He was the deadliest weapon he needed.

The shadows, vampires like himself, but built like linebackers, finished their inspection and melted back into the dark. The door swung open and Devon entered. To his surprise, there was no one to greet him.

At a loss as to how to proceed, he looked around the vast entryway and found it elegantly dressed with white marble floors, white paneling, and sconce lighting. A pair of archways flanked the area, and further ahead was a curving staircase skirted by a hallway leading further into the house.

Intuition, almost unerring since his change, guided him left. He entered an oversized living room area, dimly lit and opulent with brocade couches and chairs. With surer steps, he made his way to the wing chairs facing a low burning fireplace. Age and power radiated from the depths of one seat. Devon, his back ramrod straight and his arms

clasped behind him in a military pose never forgotten, waited for the master of this area to acknowledge him.

"Sit." A low voice ordered him, and Devon's skin rippled in awe at the strength of the old one.

Devon sat before he dared to look the other vamp in the face. Washed-out eyes of pale gray peered back at him from a face lined in parchment thin skin. "My lord, I've come to announce myself, and to request a haven for rest."

"You've also brought the stench of dog in with you. Don't tell me you're cavorting with beasts?"

Devon's brow wrinkled. "I'm not sure I understand. I did visit an old friend who runs an animal hospital."

"You tread on dangerous ground, young one. Your friend is more than she seems. I don't suppose you'd heed a recommendation to steer clear?"

Devon didn't understand the warning, nor did he care. He wouldn't walk away from Bethany again. "No, my lord. I tried that for ten years. I don't think I can walk away a second time."

The master vamp chuckled. "Ah, the ignorance of youth and the fiery power of love. Do not say I did not warn you. But I guess this place could use some excitement."

Permission for haven granted."

Devon lowered his head in acknowledgement, and stored the cryptic message for pondering later. "Thank you, my lord."

"Don't thank me, young one. You may well wish I'd tossed you out of my territory before the week is done if you continue in your pursuit of your paramour." The master vampire waved a hand in dismissal and Devon rose from his seat. He exited back out into the hall and discovered a liveried servant waiting to show him to his quarters.

Unlike the legends, vampires did not sleep in coffins or basements. Why, when money could buy the finest shutters to close and lock against the deathly rays that came with daytime? Ensconced in darkness, Devon lay on the plush bed and couldn't help thinking of Bethany.

Despite her feeble protests, he knew he could win her back. She still loved him no matter who the other man in her life was. Tomorrow night, he'd go to her and begin his wooing.

What a hardship, using his body to convince her delectable one that they were meant to be together. He couldn't wait.

Bethany couldn't concentrate on her work, not when she kept expecting the door to open and admit Devon. It didn't help she kept having to dodge questions about her battered face. Her receptionist was a member of her pack so knew better than to ask, but her clients all exclaimed over her and she fought not to blush as she fabricated a lie about falling down some stairs. Their knowing eyes saw beneath to the truth, even if they kept their thoughts to themselves.

The daylight hours waxed and waned, yet Devon didn't appear. The brief spark of hope, lit the night before, sputtered and died. Disgusted with herself for pining after a man who'd proven in the past he didn't care, she didn't bother delaying her departure. Actually, tonight, she'd welcome the pain of Tyson's fists if it helped to alleviate the pain of abandonment. Of being unloved.

She should have known better than to hope and dream. Once bitten, forever burned, damned to live a daily hell. As she wiped the tears, she lied to herself. It's for the best. I can never escape and I was foolish to even think I could. Besides, I could never drag Devon into my personal misery, not knowing how much Tyson could hurt him.

Bethany locked up just as the sun set. Depressed, she sat on the front stoop of her practice and watched as the rays colored the encroaching night in reds, purples and oranges. It seemed so unfair that beauty could exist when her life was so ugly.

It made her wonder why she bothered. Her dream of one day avenging herself on Tyson seemed ridiculous given his strength and penchant for violence. One on one, she couldn't hope to prevail. She lacked the skills for a knife fight, her one attempt at stabbing Tyson resulting in a nightmare of pain she preferred to forget. She would have bought a gun, but that required time and money. Tyson allowed her almost none. He controlled her assets, and most of her clients tended to pay via credit card or Interac, not cash.

Twilight fell and, still, she didn't move. Even worse, she ignored the ringing of her phone. It buzzed angrily at her hip. In a fit of rage, she grabbed it and threw it as far and hard as she could. Her cell phone hit the pavement, its plastic casing smashing. It also silenced its annoying ring. Shoulders shaking in silent grief, she leaned forward and cupped her face.

And then, Devon finally arrived.

She knew it without even seeing him. Her psyche sensed him first, a dark presence approaching on silent feet. She inhaled deep and caught the whiff of "otherness" that she'd scented the night before, even stronger now that she looked for it, along with the faint—and surprising—tang of blood.

Anticipation tightened her nipples and heat coiled low in her stomach. She was about to step off a cliff, or so it felt as she stood and waited for him to appear. He strode from the gloom as if an apparition, one moment the space before her empty, the next filled with his presence.

"You came," she whispered, her eyes drinking in the sight of him. He wore just a black shirt, the top button undone, tucked into a pair of blue jeans. His hair looked mussed, but his eyes, how they shone for her with a hunger that made her cleft moisten in response. A reflection of the light made them almost appear as if they glowed red.

"I couldn't stay away. I needed to see you." His low tenured admission sent a shiver through her.

Expectancy made her feel as if she floated when she stepped down the stairs and walked to him. "I'm glad you came, even if this is wrong."

"How can it be wrong when I love you?" He closed the last few paces separating them, his arms wrapping around her to draw her into the coolness of his body.

"Just knowing me is dangerous," she murmured as she stood on tiptoe and rubbed her cheek against his bristled jaw.

"Funny, I could say the same of me. But do you know what?" His hand slid up into the hair at the back of her head and tilted her head back, allowing his gaze to bore into her. "I don't care."

His lips dipped to touch hers, a soft, sensual embrace that sent tingles racing through her body. Arms thick with brawn wrapped around her tightly, pressing against her still healing ribs. Bethany hissed, unable to stop herself.

Devon lifted his head and released her from his arms. "You're hurt." His fingers caught her chin and tilted her face. "I thought it was shadows," he murmured. "Please tell me these aren't bruises covering your face?"

Bethany couldn't meet his gaze. Devon growled, and Bethany shivered even though she knew his anger was directed elsewhere. He lifted her shirt, and she didn't stop him. Shame made her drop her face as heat rose to her cheeks.

"Who did this?" His demand emerged low and tight with rage.

How to tell him that her alpha, her supposed mate, was the one who abused her? How to explain that, according to her new species, she belonged to another man? A man who doubled as a beast and could do whatever he damned well liked to her because she was a beast too?

## **Chapter Five**

"It's nothing," she muttered, unwilling to meet his gaze.

Devon's jaw clenched as he looked at her version of nothing. Focusing outwardly on her instead of inwardly on his selfish desires, he could see the yellow and green mottled bruises that appeared a few days old on her face, even though she'd appeared blemish free the day before. He tugged the hem of her shirt up. She didn't even bother trying to stop him, and he wanted to scream in rage when he saw the marks that covered her torso. He spun her and saw the bruising continued on to her back. Worse, he could see faint lines, scars of past injuries, traversing her flesh.

"I'm asking you again, who did this to you?" It took a lot of effort to keep his voice low and controlled, to not let his monstrous side emerge.

Pulling from him, she tugged down her shirt before hugging her arms around her body. "Please, can't we just go away?" Her voice trembled and tears glistened. "Please, if you love me, trust me when I say it's best if we just run and never look back."

"Run?" His brows shot up with incredulity. "What has you so scared you would leave your life and practice?" In other words, who would he kill before the night ended?

"I can't explain it yet. Please, don't make me." She looked so miserable, so frightened, that it tore something inside of him and his fury unleashed.

"You will explain," Devon just about shouted. At her flinch, contriteness at his harsh bark engulfed him. He moved to put his arms around her, but she shied away.

"We shouldn't be doing this," she whispered. "I was foolish to think we could. It's too dangerous."

"I won't let anyone hurt you," Devon promised, anger and anguish making it hard for him to hold on to his human semblance.

Bethany laughed bitterly. "It's not me I'm scared for. It's you. He'll kill you."

"I'd like to see him try." Devon's wry answer didn't penetrate the fear he could smell flowing off her in thick waves.

"You don't understand. Tyson isn't a normal person. He can hurt you, really hurt you. I couldn't bear that."

"I'm not as weak as you think me." Far from it, although, she had no way of knowing that yet.

"Neither am I. Oh God, there's no easy way of saying this. I'm—" She wrung her hands and took a few shuddering breaths. Her shoulders straightened and she raised her face to look him in the eye. "Tyson did something to me."

"He raped you?" It took every ounce of control he owned to ask that question in a calm voice.

"Among other things." Her very posture made him ache as she reacted with shame to the partial admission. "But that's not the worst of what he did. I'm not human any more, Devon."

He shrugged. "Welcome to the club. Neither am I."

His trite answer didn't surprise her as much as he expected, although, her admission rocked him to the core. What is she, if not human? He inhaled deep, filtering her aroma as the words of the master came back to tickle his mind. Understanding, though, remained just out of reach.

"What are you?" she asked, raising her gaze to meet his, curiosity tempering her fright.

Warning prickled at his nape, a premonition of danger soon to come. Protective instinct swamped him. He needed to get Bethany to safety. "I'll tell you, but first, we need to get out of here. It's not safe."

Her eyes widened and the scent of her fear spiked. "Oh God, he's coming. You need to leave. Quick, before he finds you."

"Not without you I'm not," Devon promised. Not waiting to hear her protests as she thought to save him, he scooped her up into his arms and ran. Faster than a man, almost as fast as a car, his superhuman strength and stamina allowed him to move at blurring speeds, her weight in his arms as nothing.

Even more remarkable, after her first exclamation of surprise, she clung tight, her fear receding, replaced with exhilaration that she expressed aloud with a pleased giggle. New to the city, he brought her to the only place he could think of, the master vamp's lair.

The gates swung open as he slowed before them, and Devon didn't pause to question how they knew he approached, not when he could sense the burgeoning questions ready to spill from Bethany's lips.

No one came forth to stop him as he carried her into the house, the doors already gaping wide open. They shut as he sped up the stairs, her lush form still clutched in his arms.

"Are you going to put me down?" she asked with a laugh. "I can walk, you know?"

"Personally, I'd prefer to keep you in my arms forever," he replied in complete seriousness. He made it to the room loaned to him. Once there, he finally set her on her feet, enjoying the feel of her supple body against his. He flung his hand back to swing the door shut, without actually touching it.

Her eyes widened. "Did you just do that?"

He nodded. The moment of truth imminent, he found himself tongue tied. What if his state of being disgusted her and she ran from him? Could she love the monster he'd become?

"What are you?" She beheld him with curiosity and not a trace of trepidation. That would soon change.

"I'm a vampire." The words slipped from his lips and he waited, his body tight with anxiety for her reaction.

She giggled, throwing him completely off kilter. "Seriously?" He nodded, and her expression sobered. "Did this happen when you went to war?"

"Yes. My squad got into a skirmish with some of the rebel forces. We were winning actually, or so we thought as we chased them. We never knew about the mines they'd buried. I didn't step on one myself. The concussion and shrapnel from someone who did felled me."

Bethany moved back until her legs hit the bed and she sat down. She clasped her hands in her lap and regarded him with eyes gone dark. "You didn't die though?"

Devon raked a hand through his hair as he remembered back to that moment where he'd laid prone, waiting for death. "I thought I was going to die. I couldn't move, but I could feel myself bleeding to death, and all I could think of was how I wished I'd never left you." Bethany's breath hitched, but Devon forged ahead, wanting, no, needing to finally explain why he'd abandoned her. To make her understand why he'd thought her better off without him. "Night fell, and I could hear the carrion feeders coming. I waited, unable to move, for them to start on me. I prayed to die before that happened. I prayed even harder when I heard my brother in arms, Cruz, scream as they got to him first." One of several brothers forged in blood who had joined him in his inhuman status.

"But it wasn't a desert scavenger."

Devon shook his head. "Oh, it was a scavenger of sorts. A vampire, several of them, actually, but gone feral. They lived only for the blood and violence. I never understood why they chose me, Cruz, and a few others to turn. They forced us to drink from their flesh, our first taste

of blood. The rest of the survivors, they tore apart, feeding from their flesh even as they screamed for mercy. Then they left us, never to be seen again as we writhed in agony to be reborn as something new, a creature of the dark with a raging bloodlust."

"How did you survive?"

Devon couldn't help a short bark of cynical laughter. "I don't know if you'd call what we did survival. More like instinct. The change happened within hours and hurt so bad. We screamed like little girls for our mothers. We sobbed and cried for death. We could feel the change coursing through our systems, burning out our humanity and replacing it with something stronger, something nefarious."

"Do-do you feed on humans then?"

Devon wouldn't allow shame to grab him. His diet might appear monstrous to humans, but that couldn't be helped, not if he wanted to survive, and even given his vampiric state, he very much wanted to live. "Yes, and I'll admit, that first night especially, my brothers and I didn't care who we fed on, so great was our frenzy to taste blood." Because blood equalled strength and power. So much power.

"And after?"

Devon shrugged. "Instinct drove us to ground before the sun came up. But the next day, we hunted, and the day after... Once we came to our senses, or at least understood what had happened, some of us split up. Cruz and I stayed together for a while, moving from town to town, feeding on the beggars we found, and the human predators who came out at night. Eventually, a master vamp found us on his territory and brought us in. He taught us about the new society we'd inadvertently joined. Since then, I've roamed from lair to lair, looking for the right place to settle down in."

"Why didn't you come home?"

He read the unspoken question in her eyes—why hadn't he returned to her? Incredulity made him sharper than he wanted. "Didn't you hear what I said? I'm a vampire. I feed on humans. How could I return to you as a monster?"

She stood and approached him, her hands clasping his tight. "I would have loved you anyway. Vampire, monster, none of it matters to me. I love you, Devon. I always have, and it would take more than that for me to stop."

Devon drew her into him until she rested her cheek against his chest. He hugged her tight, his eyes closed in wonderment that she could still love him, and chagrin for waiting so long to find out.

She pushed from his arms. "My turn for confession," she said with forced brightness. "You're not the only one who went through a life altering change. About six years ago, not long after I opened my practice, I was just about to shut up for the night when I heard something scratching at the door."

Fists clenched, he forced himself to stay where he was, to not go to her while she found the words to confess her own secret. She paced around the room, her shoulders hunched and tight as she struggled to tell him. It made Devon ache because he could already see where her tale was going. It both angered and saddened him to know she'd suffered. To know that if he'd returned sooner, he might have put a stop to what she was about to tell him.

"I opened the door and a man staggered in. He was seriously injured. The blood." She swallowed. "It was everywhere and gushing so quickly. I didn't have time to call for help. I just went to work on him, treating him like I would one of my animals. In retrospect, I wish I hadn't been so good at my job. I stopped the bleeding and bandaged him." She whirled to face him, her lips trembling. "I didn't know what he was. What he would do. I couldn't defend myself against him. I wasn't strong enough."

Devon took a step toward her. "It's not your fault."

"Whose fault is it then?" she cried, backing up. "He woke up while I was still stitching him. He was strong, oh God, so strong, and crazed with pain. Even though he was grievously injured, he overcame me. He pushed me to the floor and—and…" Her eyes shut, but did nothing to halt the tears that flowed unchecked down her cheeks. "He hurt me, oh lord, did it hurt, so much that I barely noticed when he bit me. I passed out from the pain. When I woke, I was in his house, in his bed. I tried to escape, but he caught me even before I got to the door. He hurt me, again and again," she whispered as her eyes, with a haunted cast, stared into blank space in remembrance. "He told me I was no longer human. I didn't believe him at first. Not until the first full moon."

What breath Devon held, left him in a rush as the truth hit him. "You're a werewolf?"

Finally, her gaze focused enough to meet his. "Lycanthrope is the preferred term according to the packs. No matter the word, I turn into a wolf on the full moon. So, you see, being a vampire isn't so bad. At least you get to live a life of your choosing. Me, I've spent six years in hell, mated by force to a man I despise who treats me no better than a dog."

Devon didn't let her escape his arms this time when he went to her. He held her shuddering body against his, his rage tucked away for later. *I will kill the one who hurt her*. But first, he had to prove to Bethany how sorry he was. How much he still loved her despite what had happened.

"Never again," he vowed aloud. "I won't let him hurt you anymore."

"But—"

He silenced her protest with his lips, the saltiness of her tears making him ache for the terror and pain she'd suffered. Even if it took a lifetime, he would make this up to her. Perhaps together, in each other's arms, they could find redemption, and peace.

Her lips trembled under his, and he caressed them softly, showing her, reminding her, that gentleness still existed. With a soft moan, her arms crept up around his neck and she clung to him. He slipped his tongue into the warm recess of her mouth, tangling it wetly with hers. His hands slid down her back to cup her bottom. He squeezed her full ass, the sharp scent of her arousal flavoring the air.

Scooping her up, he held her for a moment, savoring the feel of her in his arms before striding over to the bed.

Tenderly, he laid her on the sheets, their kiss breaking off.

Her dark eyes fluttered open, smoky with a passion he thought he'd never see again.

"I want to make love to you," he admitted. "But, given what you've gone through, I can wait until you're ready."

Her lips curved into a smile. "I'd rather not. I know you'd never hurt me. I still remember how making love to you felt. Remind me, please. Show me how beautiful lovemaking can be."

"My precious love," he murmured, stroking the soft skin of her cheek, careful to avoid her bruises. Her eyes closed as he caressed her, his lips following the path of his fingers, brushing her silky skin down to her neck. His questing tongue found her racing pulse, and he licked it. "Don't worry, I won't hurt you." His hunger strained to say differently, the temptation to bite her great, but not as great as his need to cherish her.

Lying on the bed alongside her, his hands dropped to the hem of her shirt. He tugged it up, and she sat up to help him remove it. Her breasts still held high and firm, ripe peaches for the tasting covered in a practical cotton bra. His fingers found the clasp and undid it, letting her breasts pop free, her nipples already hard in desire. She lay back down, and he let his hands skim over the bounty displayed. He was conscious of her bruising, and kept his touches light. However, he couldn't resist the temptation of her straining peaks. He took one of her burgeoning buds into his mouth, pulling on it. Her mewling cries of pleasure increased his arousal, but he intentionally kept his pace slow, determined to make her enjoyment last, to erase her memories of violence with new ones of gentleness and desire. When her hips began to arch, her core straining toward him, he let his hands drift down to rub at her through the fabric of her pants. Heat radiated from her cleft along with a hint of moisture even through the barrier of cloth.

"Touch me, Devon. Please." Her soft plea had him unbuttoning her slacks. He straddled her thighs and pulled the pants, bunched with her panties, down, unable to resist laying a kiss on the soft skin of her thighs as he denuded her.

On her back, she squirmed, arousal flushing her with heat. She looked so perfect, so beautiful. *She is mine*.

A fevered urgency invaded him, and he had to force himself to take it slow as he parted her thighs, the velvety sweetness of her core calling to him. Nestled between her legs, he blew on her sex, the answering quiver releasing even more moistness to glisten on her lips. He didn't allow himself a taste, yet. Instead, he ran a finger around her pussy, tickling her moist lips, then parting them. She moaned and drew her knees up, exposing herself to him, her trust in him a thing of beauty.

Drawn to her sweetness like a bee to nectar, he flicked his tongue out to taste her, a long, wet lick from top to bottom. It proved his undoing. The honey in his mouth made him hunger for more. He latched onto her sex and bathed her with his tongue and mouth, licking, sucking, and nibbling her clit and lips as she bucked and cried. Then, she screamed as she came for him, her quivering release squeezing his inserted tongue.

When her climaxing shudders died down, he moved off her and stripped, his cock harder than he ever remembered after such a long absence. He didn't throw himself on her like he longed to. He lay beside her instead.

Bethany turned on her side and regarded him, her eyelids heavy with sated lust. "Thank you," she whispered before she kissed him. She rolled partway on top of him to deepen the embrace and he wrapped his arms around her lushness. But he couldn't behave forever. It wasn't long before his hands roamed her body, relearning every exquisite

inch of her, fondling her full buttocks, skimming up under her rounded breasts.

All of his movement stopped, though, when she reached for him and clasped a hand around the base of him. Up and down she stroked as Devon closed his eyes, trying to hold on instead of spewing all over her hand. It had been so long for him.

She moved, and his eyes shot open to see her straddling him, her hand still gripping his cock. Then, she did something they'd only begun to experiment with before his departure. She masturbated using the head of his prick as her toy. Back and forth, she dragged his sensitized cock head over her clit and damp sex. Devon held his breath as he watched her, transfixed by the erotic image of Bethany, with her bottom lip clamped between her pearly teeth, gyrating her hips as she brought herself to the edge again.

Then impaled herself on him.

Devon yelled as his hips surged up, and into the velvety heat of her channel. She fell forward, her hands slapping his chest. Her fingers dug into his skin as she used his body to brace herself and start moving, a slow rotation of her pelvis that ground her clit against him and drove him deliciously deep into her. Over and over she rocked, her

breathing coming in short pants while Devon held on by the slimmest thread, determined to not let go until she came apart on top of him.

He placed his hands on her hips, helping her to keep her rhythm as her climax approached. Bending his head upwards, he just managed to latch onto a nipple, his mouth tugging on it hard. With a drawn out moan of pleasure, she came, quivering waves that rocked her sex and spasmed around his cock. The tightening ring of flesh around his prick milked him, and Devon shouted as his own release spurted from him in a seemingly never ending wave of bliss.

Bethany collapsed on him, her chest heaving with exertion, her skin slick with sweat. He loved it. He loved her. Wrapping his arms around her, he clasped her to him tight and kissed the top of her head. "I love you, Bethany," he murmured.

"I've always loved you, Devon. Only you, forever," she whispered back before falling asleep, safe in the cradle of his arms.

## **Chapter Six**

Bethany woke suddenly, a stifled cry on the tip of her tongue. The remnants of a nightmare where Tyson chased her, his face twisted in rage, clung tenaciously. She shivered, and the arms around her tightened.

"You're safe," Devon whispered against her hair.

Bethany wanted to believe him so badly. Wanted to believe the nightmare at Tyson's hands was over, but doubt, an insidious enemy, made her think the retribution for her actions was yet to come. *Tyson won't let me go that easily*.

"What are you thinking?" he asked, brushing her neck with his lips.

She gave him the truth. "I'm afraid this won't last."

"I've told you, Bethany. I won't allow him to hurt you anymore. You belong to me now, and I will protect you with my life. Or should I say unlife?" He faked an evil chuckle and she giggled.

"Where are we?" she asked, trying to change the direction of her thoughts.

"The master of this area kindly granted me haven while I courted you. We're in his house and safe. Only an idiot would dare attack him."

And she knew just the idiot too. "Won't he be angry you've brought me here?"

Devon shrugged. "If he doesn't like it, then we'll leave tomorrow night. I don't care where I am so long as you're with me."

"I love you," she whispered.

"You are my redemption," he whispered back. "My reason for living. My only love."

The sensual slide of his mouth on the back of her neck woke her desire, sending a bolt of heat right down to her cleft. She wiggled her bottom back against him and found him already hard and ready for her. His hands glided up her rib cage to grasp her breasts, his fingers squeezing their fullness while his thumb brushed across the taut peaks. She raised her thigh to tuck it over his, drawing his body further between her legs. The hardness of his shaft rested against her damp core, teasing her with its closeness.

She reached down and grasped the tip of him, rubbing the slick spot on the head. Devon nipped the skin of her nape in response and she shivered in longing. Hunger, an

erotic need to have him inside her, gripped her. She guided him into her sex, forging a sensual joining where their bodies melded into one. The sound of their soft sighs and heavy breathing filled the room.

Bethany loved the feel of him thrusting into her. The way he held her as if he cherished her above everything. His pace quickened and her channel squeezed tight around his shaft, suctioning him tight. Her fingers found the swollen nub of her clit, and she rubbed as she pushed back against him. Her body coiled as her climax built, then shattered, engulfing her in blissful waves of pleasure. He continued to pump into her as she floated on a cloud of ecstasy, joining her moments later with a grunt and final thrust.

Without words—they needed none because they both knew how the other felt—they fell asleep, spooned together like the lovers they'd always been in their hearts.

\* \* \* \*

Bethany's eyes shot open, her heart racing. She listened, certain something had woken her, but only a thick silence blanketed the room. Heavy-duty blinds were drawn across the windows and the pitch black made it hard to

discern the time of day. She snuggled back against Devon, his cooler skin helping to tone the feverish burn of hers as her body completed the healing of her injuries. Closing her eyes, she tried to find slumber, but it eluded her. A nagging unease prickled her skin. *Danger*, whispered her subconscious.

Bethany slipped from the bed and found her clothes by feel. While she could see better than a human in the dark, she still required an iota of light to do so, but she didn't want to turn on a lamp and disturb Devon. Dressed, hopefully with none of her clothes inside out, she slipped from the room, and then paused in uncertainty out in the hall. When they'd come upstairs last night, she'd gotten a swift impression of opulence and size. Looking at the long corridor stretching in either direction, she revised that to stupidly rich and huge.

She wondered at the vampire whose home they were in. Did it upset the master vampire to know Devon had brought her back to his mansion? And what of the vampires themselves? Were there many of them in existence? Obviously, sunlight hurt them, but what about holy items and garlic? How much of what she knew from books and movies was truth, and how much legend? So many things she needed to learn if she and Devon were to share a life together.

As she mused this, she let her bare feet carry her to the top of the stairs, which she recalled from the previous night when Devon had carried her up. Like a princess in a fairy tale, he wants to be my knight in shining armor, but do I dare let him? Can I take the chance that his chivalry will kill him?

Soundlessly, she made her way down the winding staircase. The uneasiness that had woken her returned and just about sucked the breath out of her. A part of her wanted to run back to the dark comfort of Devon's arms. However, she refused to start her new life as a coward. Her rediscovered spine straightened and she crossed the silent vestibule to peek out the side panes flanking the front door.

What she saw chilled her straight through. Tyson sat on the hood of a car, the front end crumpled as if it had crashed through something, say, perhaps, one wrought iron gate? Bethany's stomach churned and she bit her fist so as to not moan, because that wasn't the worst of it. No, the worst sat on the top of the car, a pair of bloody heads without their bodies.

Bethany turned to the side, her stomach heaving up dry. Her lack of sustenance in the last twelve hours spared her the shame of actual vomit, but it did nothing to stop the horror or trembling that overtook her body. "Bethie!" Tyson's mocking voice came through the door all too clearly. "I know you're in there, bitch. Come out, come out, wherever you are." He sang the words with a maniacal glee that made her scuttle back on the floor, moving away from the locked door that even Tyson surely wouldn't dare broach. It did little to stem her fear.

She wondered where everyone else was. Surely a place this size had more than two guards. Or had Tyson killed them too? She clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle her sobs of fear. She just needed to stay silent, and hidden. When darkness fell, Devon would wake and they'd leave this place. She just needed to—

The booming on the door made her scream, the hand over her mouth not completely muffling the sound.

"Bethie, don't you know it's not nice to keep your mate waiting? Almost as bad as fucking a goddamned vampire, you fucking slut." Tyson stopped bellowing for a moment, but she could still hear his harsh, heavy breathing. "I'm going to make this real easy. I have no interest in your vampire lover. The only thing I want is you."

No. The word rang in her mind, but she lacked the strength to mutter it aloud.

It didn't matter; Tyson acted as if he heard it anyway. "No, you say? Well, see, here's how it's going to be. I'm going to count to five. If you don't come out by the time I'm done, then I'm going to light this here match and drop it on the gasoline, which, I might add, I've had the boys pour all around the house. By the way, don't expect any help. We've got the head vampire's guards dealing with a situation elsewhere on the property. I didn't want our happy reunion to get interrupted after all. And we both know your dead lover won't be getting up until the sun goes down. Now, the choice is yours, you ungrateful slut. Give your sorry ass up, or I'm going to set this place on fire and burn you all alive. Or is that dead again?" Tyson chuckled evilly. "So, come on, little bitch, make up your mind. Daylight's burning. One."

Bethany shook her head. No, I can't go out there. He'll kill me.

"Two."

But if I don't, Devon and anyone else who's in here will die because of me.

"Three."

I'm sorry, Devon. Please remember how much I love you. Bethany stood and shambled over to the door.

"Four."

She turned the deadbolt, the loud sound of it sliding back, making her wince. She kept expecting someone, anyone, to run out and tell her to stop. That she didn't have to die. But, the house slept like the dead. How apt.

She swung the door open as Tyson opened his mouth to say five. He beamed at her with too many teeth. "You are such a dumb fucking bitch," he spat as he yanked her out of the house.

But Bethany didn't hear or acknowledge him. She'd already locked her mind into her special place, that safe zone that didn't feel the punches and kicks aimed her way. She focused on Devon's last loving words and touches.

With her sacrifice to save him, maybe she'd finally find the redemption she longed for. And if the next life was kind, maybe they'd eventually find each other again.

## Chapter Seven

Devon woke early, a rare thing for a vampire his age, but a foreboding sense of something amiss dragged him from his slumber. Immediately, he noticed Bethany's absence. He sat bolt upright, his eyes scanning the gloomy room. Not finding her, he jumped from the bed and hurriedly pulled on a pair of slacks. Barefoot and shirtless, he dashed into the hall, almost colliding with a liveried servant.

"The master wishes to see you."

Devon almost told him to go to hell, but a hint of blood caught his nose. Familiar blood. Dread gripped him tight as he followed the servant down the hall into a majestically appointed bedroom. The master vamp stood, staring at something on the bed, a bloody and torn form that Devon's eyes refused to acknowledge.

"About time you woke, young one. While you slept, the dogs dared much."

"No." Devon breathed the word as he came to a standstill at the bedside. Grief and horror swamped him at the mangled mess on the sheets—not my sweet Bethany. He

dropped to his knees, his head bowed, and cold tears leaked as he sobbed, unable to believe she'd died while in his care.

The older vampire cleared his throat. "You know, in my day, we didn't cry when someone hurt us. We got even."

The taunting reminder made Devon growl. "He did this, her mate. But how? I thought she would be safe here."

"She should have been. They killed two of my guards," hissed the master. "And distracted the others by setting a fire at the far end of the property. They signed their own death warrants by breaking truce and coming onto my lands."

"I'm sorry. It's my fault for bringing her here. I should have found somewhere else."

"Nonsense. The dogs knew better than to chase her onto my property. I allowed them to live so long as they stayed in line. Now,"—the master's voice lowered menacingly—"they die."

The command and promised violence in the master's tone dragged Devon to stand upright, averting his eyes from the flesh that once housed his reason for being. *I'll join you shortly, my love. First, though, I shall avenge you.* 

"Where are they?" Devon demanded harshly, turning to face the old one, determination tightening his face and body.

"First, my son, you must feed and make yourself strong. The wolf has been busy and has many soldiers at his call. You will need to be even more resilient. Let me give you the strength you need to prevail. Taste of the power I have to offer and vanquish our common enemy."

The master offered up his wrist, his dark eyes glinting red as he waited. Devon paused because to take blood from a master was tantamount to swearing fealty. Not that he would live long enough to care. Devon dropped to one knee and grasped the offering, latching his teeth into the tender flesh of the forearm.

The rich bouquet of the master's blood rolled over his tongue and down his throat, lighting a tingling fire as power, more power than he'd ever imagined, flooded his system. When he eventually tore himself away, Devon practically pulsed with visible energy.

Devon stood, his eyes surely glowing, and the master smiled, a wicked smile that showed pointed teeth. "Welcome to the family, my new son. Now prepare yourself, for as soon as the sun kisses the horizon, we go to war." Striding from the master's room, Devon kept his eyes averted, unable to look at the bloody mess that used to be his love. Even with his early rising, it appeared by the drying state of the blood, and her waxen pallor, that several hours had passed since her attack and demise. Hours he'd laid in the deathlike sleep those young in the vampiric curse suffered. With age, he'd be able to remain awake during the daylight hours, under cover, of course. It killed a part of him to know she'd suffered, alone. I broke my promise to her. I promised she'd be safe, and instead, she suffered horribly and died.

There was only one thing left for him to do. Find the bastard who'd hurt her and tear him limb from limb. Then, once he'd achieved his vengeance, he could greet the rising dawn and his death because he could no longer live without Bethany. He refused to.

Devon prepared himself for battle as the sun set and night cloaked the land. He washed himself, the tears streaming in the shower, tears that started when he'd walked past the bed where Bethany's rich scent still lingered. He dressed all in black, an apt color for his mood, before heading downstairs. Milling in the front hall area were a group of vamps, dark, deadly-looking creatures who gave him a nod as he joined their ranks.

The master joined them only moments after Devon's arrival. "My children," intoned the old one with a grave voice. "The beasts have dared breach the sanctity of our home. We must not allow this trespass to stand. They have slain the love of your newest brother right on our very doorstep. For this, and for their temerity, they must all die!"

A rabid rage made Devon join the vampires as they growled, and their eyes shone a baleful red.

"Follow your new brother as he leads you to vengeance and victory. Show the upstart dogs who owns this town"

Adrenaline and rage coursed through him, making Devon eager to go, but he paused as the master touched his arm. Knowledge flowed via the contact and Devon suddenly knew exactly where to go.

"Come, my brothers," Devon ordered. "It is time for the hunt."

Out the front door they flowed, Devon in the lead. The master's household only contained a dozen vamps, two of which remained behind with the lord to guard him, but the rest followed Devon as he flew out into the night, his uncannily strong senses guiding him in the pursuit for the man who would die—painfully...

Bethany's lungs filled and immediately emptied as she spewed forth a chilling scream, only the first of many. Her body thrashed, her limbs moving without volition as spasms rocked her and fire rocketed through her veins. Her eyes stared unseeing as she convulsed, agony preventing any comprehension of her situation.

"Drink some more, my daughter. Drink and be reborn. Drink and seek thy vengeance."

Hot liquid splattered her cracked lips and she opened her mouth, the tangy fluid hitting her tongue. Craving hit her with the force of a freight train and she lunged upwards to grasp the offered bounty, her mouth latching on and sucking at the offered ambrosia. The more she swallowed, the more reason and control of her body returned. Agony receded as strength flowed through her limbs, along with power. When she reached the point of saturation, she let go of the offered flesh and sat up straight, her chest heaving. Focus came back to her in bits and pieces and she found herself in a majestic bed chamber with an older man standing at the bedside. He

smiled at her, revealing pointed teeth, which went well with his glowing red irises.

"Wh-who are you?" she stammered.

"I am master of this territory and now your progenitor, my new daughter."

His words should have chilled her, but, instead she found herself warming to them. A sense of odd belonging filled her. "Where's Devon?" she asked, her eyes casting about wildly for a sign of her lover.

"He avenges your death."

"But I'm not dead," she replied, her brow wrinkling. She looked down at herself and gasped at the bloody stains covering her. "Or am I?"

"Dead, and reborn. You are now one of us, my dear. It was the only way to save you, and I admit, I wasn't sure even the potency of my blood would be enough to bring you back from the deadly brink you hovered on. I've been waiting for hours now to see if the blood I fed you when I found you on the edge of death would be enough to reverse the Reaper's grip."

"I'm a vampire then?" She said the words aloud, and waited to experience the horror, the fear, but instead, she found...satisfaction. Not only would her new state break her

ties to Tyson and his pack, she was now like Devon. They could be together forever. "I have to tell Devon."

"Of course you do. But first, cleanse yourself and dress. If we are to go to battle, we should do so with the decorum that befits our kind."

"But—"

Her new master smiled at her with the indulgence of a doting parent. "Never fear. We will arrive in time. Now, make haste, my daughter."

A liveried servant arrived and showed her to a bathroom done in white marble. She showered as rapidly as she could, watching the red stained water sluice down the drain. She ran her hands over her body, amazement at the healing she'd undergone filling her with wonder. She should have died. She retained on a blurry remembrance of the pain from the sharp stabbing agony of shattered ribs. Could still faintly taste the metallic taste of her blood, fluid she'd coughed up in frothy bubbles. Her hands ran over her unblemished skin, recalling the searing agony as Tyson resorted to tearing into her with his claws, slashing her skin into bloody ribbons. She only vaguely recalled rescue finally arriving in the form of shouts and gunfire. Too late, she'd

mused at the time. *I thought for sure I would die,* her injuries too great for even her Lycan state to heal.

Instead, she'd finally gotten a miracle, a second chance, and she didn't intend to waste it. She found clothes when she exited the shower, a white, flowing pleated skirt and a peasant style blouse. Sandals completed the outfit if she ignored the fact they'd neglected to give her undergarments. Swirling in a circle, she caught her reflection and smiled. She'd have no need of extra impeding layers once she found Devon.

Hold on, my love. I'm coming. After all, I deserve vengeance most of all.

## Chapter Eight

Burning with rage—and aching with misery—Devon located the house where Tyson resided, the strong animal stench he now recognized as Lycan heavy in the air. What made his jaw tighten, though, was the smell of Bethany, the lingering traces of her bloody beating still flavoring the air. Frustration made him growl when he discovered his prey wasn't present, and he ignored the other vamps sent with him as he stalked around the house, searching for something, anything to show him where the bastard who'd killed his precious Bethany had escaped to. The glow of the moon, its fullness peeking out from behind the clouds, bathed his skin. Devon lifted his face to the pale radiance and grinned, a wicked smile of understanding.

He gathered his squad of killers and off they ran again, this time seeking the various wild spots that interspersed the city. After several false starts, they hit the jackpot. The stench of dog filled the area leading into the forest.

"The leader is mine," ordered Devon, his teeth elongating as the hunger for blood rode him. "Now, spread out, and kill them all."

Silent as wraiths, the vampires melted into the shadows of the trees, death personified. Devon tread his own path, his senses following the trail of Tyson, their leader, the fetid smell familiar because he'd scented it before faintly on Bethany.

Baying arose in the forest around him. Meant to be eerie perhaps to humans, it made Devon chuckle because he could read the fear in its tenebrous sound. Even better were the howls cut off into whimpering cries, squealing whines as justice found the bastards who'd dared hurt his love.

Devon didn't rush, he had no need to. No matter how fast the bastard named Tyson ran, Devon would catch him in the end. He rather enjoyed the anticipation of it, the final showdown where he'd avenge his beautiful Bethany. Then, when the sun rose, bathed in the blood of her killer, he'd join her in the afterlife.

He came across his quarry in a clearing comprised of stumps and trampled foliage. As cowards were wont, Tyson didn't stand alone; his bully crew flanked to the sides and behind him. And they weren't currently human. The wolves, the black-haired one in the lead, snarled at him with raised hackles.

Devon snarled right back, baring his pointed teeth. The confidence in the alpha wavered as shadows slipped from the trees and joined Devon as he marched across the dewy ground toward the object of his wrath. But the foolish dogs thought they had the numbers, and when their alpha barked a command, they flowed toward Devon and his vampire squad, furry legs blurring as they ran.

They came together in a noisy clash of snapping teeth, snarls, and thuds. In the heat of battle, there was no time for reflection, only survival as fists connected with fur, teeth gnashed and tore, blood sprayed. And the hunger, the dark bloodlust, awoke.

The tide of the battle went from ferocious attack to whining retreat as the wolves, the more cowardly ones first, began to break off, attempting to limp into the woods.

Devon and his brothers showed no quarter.

The alpha, who'd stayed behind, watching with his equally cowardly betas, seeing their numbers getting decimated, turned tail to run. They didn't get far.

From the woods strode an ethereal beauty, gowned in flowing white with lustrous dark hair flowing past bared shoulders.

"Bethany," Devon whispered. Her dark eyes, tinged in red, flashed to meet his for a moment and time stood still as hope made his heart beat again.

The black wolf lunged at her, and Devon cried out in rage, then watched in wonder as his precious love laughed, the sharp point of her new teeth peeking from between her sensual lips.

"I won't be a victim anymore," she announced in a soft voice that, nevertheless, carried. "And now, you will know what it is to fear."

She stalked the wolf shape housing Tyson. He backed up from her, snarling and snapping at odds with his retreat. In a flash of movement, she grabbed him around the neck and crooned in his ear.

"Wicked little doggy. I want to speak to the man. Come out, come out, wherever you are Tyson," she taunted in a singsong voice.

The wolf struggled in her grip, but she proved relentless. Much as Devon longed to go to her, he held back.

Given the horror Tyson had subjected her to, she needed to do this on her own, needed this moment of revenge.

The body in her grip shifted, a wild contortion of reshaping limbs and disappearing fur that left in its place a stocky man.

"Bitch! You're supposed to be dead."

"Who says I'm not?" she laughed, a chilling sound that made Devon smile. "Thanks to you, I'm no longer a wolf. I'm something stronger and much nastier. Oh, and did I forget to mention how hungry I am? Congratulations, you're going to be my very first meal."

She sank her teeth into Tyson's neck, his thrashing body unable to dislodge her iron grip. Devon approached and knelt across from her. Her eyes, gone completely red as the dark hunger took her, met his as she sucked on Tyson's neck.

The moment was oddly erotic. Devon leaned forward and bit Tyson as well, his bite just below hers, and while not as ideally placed for feeding, it allowed his skin to rub against hers, making him feel as if they shared in the kill and the moment.

The body between them ceased its senseless struggle and went limp, the hot, gushing blood animating it, turning

sluggish. As if synchronized, they tore their mouths from the now dead flesh and stood, facing each other.

Devon grabbed her into his arms and swung her around. "How is it that you're here? I thought you were dead."

"The master saved me."

"I've always wanted a daughter," said the lord from behind him.

Devon, his arm still clamped around Bethany, whirled to face the old one whose eyes glittered ruby in the dark. "You turned her? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I feared it wouldn't work. Her wounds were grievous and her Lycan blood made it difficult. I thought it best not to raise your hopes."

"Thank you." Devon's voice rang with sincerity, and the master nodded his head.

"I ever was a fool for love. I shall leave you now. Be sure to return before the dawn."

Bethany wiggled free and ran to the master vampire. She flung her arms around him and kissed his cheek. "Thank you."

She released him. The lord snorted, but Devon could see the pleased look in his eyes before the master departed, the speed of his passage too rapid for the eye.

Bethany whirled back to face him and grinned, a saucy smile like she used to wear back in their younger years. "I don't know about you, but I'm feeling really hungry for something right about now."

"More blood?" Devon teased. His body hardened at the seductive lilt of her lips.

"Maybe." She moved in a blur, and knelt before him, rubbing her face against his groin. Devon laced his fingers through her hair and stared down at her. She didn't return his stare too busy pulling apart his pants to grasp his cock.

"Here?" he asked, his hands splaying out to encompass the bloody battlefield.

"No one ever told me fighting could be so arousing," she answered, kissing the top of his cock. She licked him, her tongue running from tip to root, then back. Devon exhaled and threw his head back. His fingers found the crown of her head and slid into the silkiness of her hair.

Bethany took him into her mouth, sucking him deep and hard, the sharp edges of her new teeth dragging on his tender skin. Back and forth, she took him into the moist cavern of her mouth, her cheeks hollowing as she suctioned him. All too quickly, his balls tightened, but he held back.

Yanking his shaft from her mouth, he groaned as he withdrew from her tight mouth with a wet, popping sound. He pulled her up and kissed her passionately, his tongue swirling into her mouth to duel wetly with hers. But his impatience and joy at her survival couldn't wait. He whirled her around and placed a hand in the middle of her back to bend her over. His other hand yanked at her skirt, pulling it up over her buttocks, her very bare buttocks.

Whether it was the sight of her lack of panties or the knowledge she'd come to battle without them that excited him, he didn't care to differentiate. All he knew was he wanted her.

His fingers slid between her thighs and encountered the slickness of her cleft. Wetting his digits first, he rubbed them against her clit, teasing her nub until she rocked back against him with soft cries.

Readied for him, he thrust his cock into her, sheathing her in one swift and claiming motion. Her pussy fit around his shaft like a velvety glove. Damp and tight, her channel squeezed him as he worked himself in and out of her, his fingers clutching at her rounded ass.

"Harder," she moaned. "Please, Devon. I need you."

Complying with her wishes, he increased his pace, slamming himself into her welcoming flesh with almost dizzying speed. Her keening cries of pleasure goaded him onwards, faster. Relief, desire, and a hunger to claim her swirled, raising the intensity of the moment. When he reached the trembling apex of his climax, he bent over her and sank his teeth into her nape, tasting her.

She screamed as she came, her pelvic muscles fisting and milking his cock as she shuddered with the force of her orgasm. Devon held on tight, the pain of ecstasy making him spurt into her quivering body.

Before their trembling legs could collapse, Devon sat down on the ground and tugged Bethany onto his lap.

He hugged her tight before finding her lips for a soft kiss.

"I love you," he whispered. "And now that you've been bitten, I can show you how much. I can't wait to make you forever burn for my touch and love."

## **Epilogue**

Life as a vampire meant a lot of changes. For one,
Bethany had to give up her veterinary practice, but the
tradeoff—eternity with Devon—seemed well worth the price.
Besides, she'd found new work in the form of treating the
master's subjects, not all of whom were vampires. It seemed
Lycans weren't the only shape-shifters around, just the
noisiest and most populous.

She'd expected to find difficulty adapting to her new lifestyle of sleeping all day and drinking blood at night. To her surprise, the hunt for prey with her lover at her side proved exciting, and, at times, erotic. She and Devon had now baptized more than one alley in the city in their impatience to have each other.

All in all, she could say, usually with a stupid grin, that she was happy. Ecstatically so. And each day, her love for Devon flourished and his evident affection for her shone. The master liked to shake his head at them and tell them to get a room, but she could hear the fondness in his tone. He'd adopted her as a daughter, and strangely, she looked upon him as a father.

Over six years ago, she'd thought once bitten, forever burned. As it turned out, she just needed the right type of bite. It still blew her away to know that because she'd lost her humanity, she'd found redemption and would live forever in the arms of her one true love. Oh, and forever burn at his seductive touch, of course.

The End of Devon's Redemption

## **About Eve Langlais**

Eve Langlais is a Canadian in her late-thirties who's happily married with three children. She resides in a small town in Ontario where she works from home as a webmistress and customer service rep. She enjoys spending time with her family, playing video games, reading tawdry romance novels, and writing even naughtier ones. She claims her stories come from the voices clamoring inside her head. Discover what else her twisted mind has devised at <a href="https://www.EveLanglais.com">www.EveLanglais.com</a>.

#### Cruz's Salvation

# By Stacey Kennedy

Cruz understands torment. A mortal turned vampire in the war, he has suffered untold loneliness and despair. That is until he meets Kiara—a werewolf he's forbidden to love.

Though Kiara needs Cruz, and wants him forever, werewolves and vampires are bitter enemies. To make matters worse, her Alpha and father suspects that Kiara pines for a mate. Mistaking her sadness for the longing she feels for Cruz, he sets out to give her all the happiness he can provide.

Together, Kiara and Cruz will have to fight against the rules placed upon them to hold onto their love. But an unwanted visitor creates a complication neither of them planned for. Milo, Kiara's chosen mate, has come to stake his claim. Now, not only are lives at risk, but hearts are threatened and dreams hang in the balance.

## Chapter One

Trees swayed in the wind. An owl hooted through the night sky while the half-moon created dim lighting over the lush garden. Cruz didn't need the light to offer him a view of the werewolf lurking through the path of the garden. His vampire abilities made her rounded curves beneath her pink baby doll dress visible to him. Her long auburn hair rested above the rounded cheeks of her bottom. Creamy white skin stood out in the dark night. Cruz groaned at the sight of her.

If only she'd turn around and acknowledge him. Kiara enjoyed teasing him, and Cruz didn't mind Cruz, much. She reached down and plucked a red rose from the garden, turned so he could see her face, and raised the flower to her nose. Heat rushed through Cruz, filling his groin with need. Her lips parted as she inhaled and her eyes fluttered closed. Kiara held the capacity to cripple him with simple moves. Everything about her screamed seductress, yet, her innocence made her unaware of the power she possessed.

Kiara opened her eyes, glanced his way a moment, and smiled before she continued to walk along the path. Cruz groaned again, unable to stop the sound echoing from his mouth. Every step she took, he followed, weaving his way along the path but staying back enough to let her tease him.

Striding toward the pond beneath the shadows of the lone cypress tree, Kiara stopped and spun around. "Some would say stalking is a criminal act." Her voice emerged playful, the sweet sound a trait he'd become fond of.

Cruz chuckled, quickening his steps to catch up to her. He plucked a red rose on his way. The thorn dug into his finger, but he paid the sting no attention. Now facing him, her midnight blue eyes shone with the wonderful soul he'd fallen in love with. Her dress fit snug along her body except for the skirt, which flared out. Not something he liked. Cruz wanted to see the curves of her thighs, the lines of her pussy for his own pleasure. Kiara had offered him one luxury. She hadn't worn a bra, leaving her taut nipples to peer out against the pink fabric, only to taunt him. "Some would say being out in the middle of the night alone is a dangerous act."

Kiara smiled, a grin to make him burn with desire. "There may be vampires lurking about."

Cruz closed the distance between them; the heat of her body intensified with each step he took. He inhaled, smelling the rich, earthy scent of her mingled with vanilla. "Vampires who crave to drink your blood." A visible shudder ran through Kiara. Her eyes hooded and her lips parted, sending a whisper of air to escape. "But will he drink me dry?"

Cruz grinned, raised the rose to her cheek, and trailed the petals along her tanned flesh. "There's no doubt he'd taste you, but he'd only sample your blood. He'd be too preoccupied drinking up other parts of your moistened body." Life had given him something he wondered if he deserved. He could have rotted away in the ground as death took him, but a vampire had given him another chance at life. He hadn't met his maker, seen who turned him, and had lived for years wondering who gave him the gift of immorality. Answers he'd never found, and ones he cared no longer about. He had Kiara.

Leaning toward her, Kiara's smile blossomed before he took her lips. A kiss of longing. Many nights had passed since he'd been treated to the gloriousness of her mouth. Too long. His tongue twirled with hers in languorous swipes and the taste of her sent a wave of heat to erupt in his cold form.

Cruz groaned, pulling away from her, and placed his forehead on hers. In the present world, the rules of werewolf packs and vampire society declared their relationship needed to stay hidden. Vampires and werewolves did not co-mix. Six months ago, a meeting between the strained enemies had brought them together. An instantaneous spark erupted between them. He'd sought her out, and they'd met in secret ever since. "I've missed you, my wolf."

"Me too." Kiara sighed.

Raising his head, he cupped her cheeks, his thumbs brushed against her soft skin. "Have you been well?"

Tears glittered in her eyes. "Well enough."

He understood her simple words. If only he could bend the rules. Make the other supernaturals see love overrode power. Kiara's status as an Alpha's daughter meant her bloodline among the wolves was a cherished one. Her father would never agree to her heart belonging to a vampire. "How long do you think we have tonight?" Cruz suspected in no time someone would come looking for her, as they always did.

"Half an hour." The sadness shone through her pretty eyes.

Cruz wished he had the strength to erase the prejudices, but he held no control. The world had sealed their fate. If Kiara spoke of their love, she'd face an unkind life. Being the Alpha's daughter, she'd not be killed for her actions, but she would forever be marked as a traitor. Cruz

loved her enough to make sure she'd never suffer such cruelty. "If we only have a half an hour, I won't waste my time. I've craved you, Kiara. Thought about you every moment I have been away. Your body, your scent—it's driven me to near insanity." Leaning in, he took her lips again, more forceful now.

Kiara inhaled with a sharp breath, sank against him, and raised her delicate hands to his shoulders. Her fingernails dug into his skin. Cruz experienced the same urgency. As their mouths worked together, Cruz's cock tightened, throbbed in response to having her so near.

As if reading him, Kiara tore her mouth from his. "Please, Cruz, make love to me."

He closed his eyes, fighting against himself to remove the look of pleading on her face from his mind. His body screamed to accept, break through her innocence and claim her, yet his respect for her couldn't be undone. He'd not take her in their current predicament. She deserved to be loved in every sense of the word and until he held the ability to love her forever, he'd not indulge himself.

"Cruz," Kiara whispered, making him realize he'd had his eyes closed for some time now.

Opening them, the beauty of Kiara made him growl. More so, her heated gaze staring back at him, begging him to take her. "Please don't look at me that way."

A tear escaped her eye, trailing down her cheek, and Cruz smoothed the dampness away with his thumb. "I've waited long enough—I want you."

Cruz sighed, releasing his desirable thoughts in hopes his mind held more power over him than his cock. "I know you do and it's killing me just the same. Do you know when you look at me like you are now, I want to spread your thighs and find a home there?"

"I'm not stopping you. In fact, I'm begging you to."
Her teary eyes dried, and a stern look crossed her face. "Why won't you?"

"Because you deserve to be marveled at for hours on end before your innocence is given away, my wolf. And I can't offer such things now." Each word tore at his heart, made him sick, and angered him enough to make him want to rage against the ones who made their love impossible.

Tears formed in her eyes again, and her chin quivered. "I hate the conflict between vampires and werewolves. I hate how it keeps us apart. Is the battle between our kind ever going to end?" "I hope one day everyone will put their biases aside and we can live in peace." He doubted the acceptance would ever happen. The two had no reason to join each other, their differences spun into existence at the beginning of time. Cruz could see no chance of it changing. Yet, he wouldn't tell Kiara as much. He didn't want to break her heart.

Kiara pressed her body tighter against his, forcing him away from his thoughts. "Give me something, anything to keep with me for the next nights I'm without you. Something to remind me of you and the way you make me feel."

He smiled, brushing away the rest of her tears, quite sure he could give her what she looked for. "I'll give you a climax to last in your mind so you won't forget." Scooping her up, he strode toward a tree trunk nestled beside the pond.

At the tree trunk, he lowered Kiara down onto the flat surface, placing her bottom on the stump, and knelt down in front of her. He ran his hands up her thighs, widening them, moving her dress up to expose what he longed to see. Kiara angled herself back, rising her hips up in invitation. Once her skirt rested at her waist, Cruz groaned at seeing her dark, trimmed curls and soft, pinkish flesh glistening with moisture.

Reaching up, he took Kiara by the hips and brought her bottom to the edge of the tree trunk. "I can smell you from here." His voice sounded lustful even to his own ears. "Your luscious scent is doing wicked things to my body, Kiara." Running his hand up her leg, he felt her juices along her inner thighs. The man inside of him roared in satisfaction that he caused such a reaction in her.

"Touch me. I need you so much."

Cruz ran his fingers through her curls, feeling her shudder beneath his touch. "Is here where you want me to touch you?" Avoiding her sweet spot to increase her need, he fondled her, wanting her to writhe for him.

"Lower," she gasped. "Feel how moist I am for you."

Dipping lower, he ran his finger through her damp center, swirling her arousal to moisten his finger before he moved up to her little nub. Kiara's head fell back and she moaned.

"I ache for you there." Her tone was raspy, almost a growl from her wolf within.

"I'll ease your ache, my wolf." Swirling his index finger, he brought the nub out from behind its hood and pinched the sensitive skin between his fingers, earning him a full quiver of her body. Kiara's head snapped back, a burn formed in her eyes, which, if he let it, could make him come. Since tonight had nothing to do about his pleasure, he forced his gaze away from her and focused on his finger moving in wicked ways along her sensitive flesh.

In near the same moment, Kiara grabbed his head and brought his gaze back to hers. "Enough teasing. Make me come for you. Taste the evidence of my pleasure so you will have my flavor on your tongue to satisfy you."

Cruz didn't need a further invitation. He leaned in and placed his mouth against her center, lapped up the evidence of her need before he'd increase the moisture there. Her scent engulfed him, sweet, woman, wolf—it made heat course through him to rest in his groin.

He trailed the flat of his tongue along her smooth flesh until he reached her clit. There, he swirled and flicked out to stir Kiara. Her hands tightened around his head, forcing him to use more pressure. She wrapped her legs around his body, caging him between her thighs. He didn't mind one bit; he'd stay here for as long as she wanted. Forever, if she allowed him.

"I'm going to come for you." Her fingers ran through his hair; her breath panted. "I'm going to come so hard." Cruz might have responded if he hadn't been too focused on her taste. Her sweet, hot skin burned only for him. Her naughty words engulfed flames through his body, firing straight to his rock hard cock. For a virgin, Kiara had no hesitation with enticing him with her voice and he loved her openness. Of course, they'd played together for months now. Maybe, at first, she'd held apprehension. Now, she was been completely open with him about her wants.

As he flicked harder, teased her clit to awaken her desires, Kiara ground her hips, pushed her pussy against his mouth. Her breath faltered, grew deeper, and her legs trembled at Cruz's side.

He knew how to please his little wolf. Knew she'd come only by his mouth, but he wanted her to climax hard. Bringing his hand up, he snuck up under his chin and touched her entrance. Kiara outright quaked. He teased a little, tempted her, waited for her to beg for his embrace.

In mere minutes of stroking her warm, damp folds, she squirmed and whimpered. Cruz lowered his mouth to her clit, took the little nub between his teeth, and at the same moment he sucked, he pushed his finger through her slick opening.

Kiara's nails dug into his scalp, her body vibrated, and she moaned, a sound of bliss that washed over him. In and out, he worked his finger through her center, felt the ridges of her inner walls milk his digit.

"Yes, Cruz, fill me up." Kiara shot her hips forward, thrusting in time with his finger, making him pinch harder on her clit to hold her still.

He craved to replace his finger with his cock to feel her contracting around him, strangled by her warmth, but he paid his wants no attention. It was about her. Only her. *Always her*.

Removing his finger, he inserted another to coat his skin with her juices before he placed both into her tight entrance. Kiara gasped, and Cruz felt the stretch of her muscles trying to accept his wide fingers. He'd never used two before on her, too worried he'd hurt her. Now, though, he needed her to have more—craved to see her brought to another state of pleasure she'd never known. Within a few strokes, her pussy relaxed, no longer squeezed him so tight, and allowed his movements to come easier.

Cruz released his teeth around her clit, flicked the nub again, and Kiara wriggled. Gasping, she dropped her hands from his head and gripped the side of the tree trunk. He witnessed her dig her nails into the old wood, making it splinter.

He had her right where he wanted her. Angling his fingers, he positioned them to find her sweet spot. He waited for her to acknowledge he discovered the area of profound pleasure. When her pussy clamped down on his fingers and vibrated, he didn't need to search any further.

Glancing up at her, Kiara's gaze stayed trained on his. A woman basking in the loss of mind to unadulterated desire stared back at him; pupils dilated, mouth opened and panting in heavy breaths. Face flushed red, her body tense and rigid, expectant. "Ready to come, my wolf?"

"God, yes."

Cruz grinned to show his promise he wouldn't let her down. Withdrawing his fingers to the tips, he thrust them back inside of her, slamming his palm against her clit. Kiara's eyes grew wide, her cheeks burned, and her mouth formed an O. He kept his gaze on hers as he delivered hard thrusts into her. He didn't doubt she could handle the force, and suspected she'd reel in his intentions.

Minutes later, her pussy contracted around his fingers, declaring the rise of her climax. She tightened so much so his movements became forced, but nothing would stop him now. Lowering down, he let his fangs release from his gums. He'd seen to her pleasure and ensured her satisfaction, and now he'd take something for himself too.

Hunger. A primal need of blood flamed in Cruz. His fangs pushed against his gums, demanding to release. As Kiara became lost in the throes of her orgasm, Cruz turned his head and bit into the smooth skin of her inner thigh. The rush of blood filled his mouth and he drank with greed. Kiara's sounds of pleasure soared through the night sky and he felt her tremble hard around him.

Not until her screams melted into soft whimpers did he stop feeding from her. He licked the puncture wounds to seal them and cleaned up any trail of blood along her thigh. Glancing up, he found Kiara smiling.

"Every time, you seem to show me more."

Cruz grinned in return. "There's so much to show you, sweetheart." If only he had the chance to. He'd pleasured her with his mouth and fingers. The single allowance he gave himself. If he had the opportunity to put his cock between her thighs, he'd make his she-wolf see stars.

Just as Cruz withdrew his fingers, Kiara's smile vanished and her body tensed. She looked over his shoulder,

worry staining her face before she snapped her gaze back to his. "You must go. My father, he's coming."

Cruz's jaw clenched. Although he knew this moment was inevitable, it didn't ease his anger at the unfairness. Before he left, he'd take a bit of her with him. Kiara attempted to push him away and stand, but Cruz held her thighs tight, keeping them open. He leaned in, and, with a deep lick, he drank in the evidence from her climax to titillate his tongue.

Kiara's gaze focused on the forest behind them, her eyes wide and scared. Cruz took the taste of her into his mouth to savor. He stood, and grasped her face in his grip. "Return tomorrow night if you can. I'll be here."

He leaned in and gave her a hard kiss to show his despair in leaving. He wanted to stay right here and kill anyone who told him otherwise. But these choices were hers to make. He'd never kill her father. She'd never forgive him for such cruelty. Tearing his mouth from hers, she held his gaze, and the same injustice showed on her expression.

With a last look at her, Cruz couldn't find words to say goodbye, and as he always did, he ran, traveled through the opposite side of the forest far away from the woman he loved. Her taste on his tongue would keep him sated until tomorrow night. As the wind brushed against his skin, his frustration grew and his demanding cock only added to his irritation.

He had no control over the situation and needed to get shit off his chest, needed to find a voice of reason to find a solution in the hell of his tormented heart. Only one person would understand what he went through—another vampire who'd suffered such trials Cruz faced now.

Devon. His brother in blood, turned with him in the same pointless war they'd fought and lost.

## Chapter Two

Kiara righted her dress, and tried to settle from the lingering effects of her orgasm. She forced herself to no longer be aroused. She drew in a couple deep breaths, pleased to find she calmed. Without wasting a single moment, she ran over to beside the pond, where she'd placed perfume when she first arrived. Reaching down, she grabbed the bottle and quickly sprayed between her thighs. At least it would mask the evidence of her climax—werewolves' scent made secrets impossible.

She tried to ignore the memory of Cruz's dark eyes staring at her when he did those naughty things to her, attempted not to think of his stylish dark hair that sat atop a handsome face. Even tried not to be aware of his tall, lean physique with toned muscles. Yes, she forced all these thoughts from her mind.

The sound of a paw cracking a twig drew her attention toward the edge of the forest. She quickly deposited the fragrance behind her, dropping it to the ground. Her father, proud Alpha, stepped out of the tree line and approached her with a pair of jeans in his teeth. His shift

came instantaneous and he stood nude. Kiara kept her gaze on his face while he dressed in the jeans he carried.

"What are you doing here, Kiara?" Adric's strong presence, dark hair dangling over his left eyebrow, all meant safety to Kiara. He took a long, deep breath. His charcoal eyes burned with a clear threat. "And why do I smell one of them?"

Them meant vampire, exactly why Kiara couldn't tell her father her secret. "Not sure. I scented him, too, but haven't been bothered at all." She did her best to give an innocent smile. "I needed some fresh air—all the male testosterone can be a bit much." Living as the Alpha's daughter meant no free time to herself, always surrounded by an entire pack of wolves. Since women weren't involved in day-to-day business of an Alpha, men remained her constant companions.

Her father chuckled. "It can be overwhelming, can't it?" His smile faded and his eyes saddened. "If your mother was around—"

"Don't start," Kiara interrupted him. Childbirth had killed her mother, and her father had been her only family. Sure, he wasn't emotional like a mom, but he did his best and she loved him. "I'm never without anything. You've given me all I ever needed." A strange expression crossed her father's face. One she couldn't identify. "What's the matter?"

Adric glanced down to the ground, shifted on his feet as if uncomfortable. "I appreciate your kind words, but I suspect you are lying to me." His gaze returned to hers. "Are you truly not without?"

Kiara tried to make sense out of her father's words, but failed. Instead of mulling it over, trying to piece together what she didn't understand, she voiced her confusion. "Of course I'm not." She snorted, incredulous. "Why would you think such a thing?"

Adric took her hand, lead her back over to the tree trunk, where mere minutes ago, Cruz had her spread wide with his mouth on her intimate places. The memory sent a rush of heat to pool between her thighs and as she sat, her father examined her.

"Are you feeling all right?"

Kiara suspected her blush burned bright. "Yes, sorry, I'm fine." Clamping down on the images raging in her mind since her father's wolf scents obviously picked up on her heightened thoughts, she refocused herself. "Please go on. What's wrong?"

Her father drew in a long, deep breath, and knelt down next to her. Kiara crossed her legs, uncomfortable with him being there considering the earlier events. He reached out and took her hand so soft and gentle, unlike his typical Alpha nature. "Are you lonely?"

Off all the things she thought he wanted to talk with her about, his question hadn't even crossed her mind. She laughed, maybe in a bit of nerves. "Lonely?"

"Yes." Her father found nothing amusing, his expression stern and serious. "Months ago, I saw how happy you'd become. For once, I witnessed you had found something in your life you were missing."

Kiara's heart raced. Had he known? Did he suspect she had met someone? She tried to remain nonchalant and chuckled. "I have no idea what you're talking about. I haven't been any different."

"No." Her father raised an eyebrow, not fooled. "A change in you occurred. I still haven't quite figured out what transformed, but I saw a glimmer in your eyes I'd never seen before."

Kiara squeezed her father's hand, hoping to find a way to rest his mind of these questions and thoughts. She

wished she could tell her father about Cruz, yet he'd never understand. "Maybe I'm just growing into my own."

Adric shrugged, and looked away from her to their held hands. "At first, I thought it was something like that, but then you changed. You've grown so unhappy. So longing." His gaze came to hers, determined. "Do not try and deny it."

He had backed her into a corner. Her father knew her, loved her. Not only as her Alpha would he sense the torment she'd suffered about how she longed for Cruz, but he would know just by being her father. Kiara sighed, a long, heavy breath expelling all the feelings she'd been fighting against. "I won't deny it."

"Then tell me." Adric's expression was so open, willing honesty from her. "What has gone astray? What troubles you, Kiara?"

If only she could tell him. Admit she loved a vampire and that her heart felt empty every minute they were apart. However, none of these things she could disclose. He'd rage if he heard the reality. "Maybe I am a little lonesome." What else was there to say? He needed an answer and this had been as close to the truth as she could go.

Adric's eyes lowered in sadness. "I suspected so much." He reached up and cupped her cheek. "You've grown

into a beautiful woman, Kiara. Sometimes I wonder how you've turned out so well being surrounded by all these men." He laughed, a soft sound that escaped through his nose. "How you're so sweet and kind when you've only been raised by me."

Kiara leaned into her father's hand. How she loved him. "Because you are sweet and wonderful. I never needed anything more."

Adric smiled, a grin only produced from her father; filled with trust, adoration, and conviction. "A generous offering from you, but it's time I really prove it to you. I've decided to ease the pain you suffer." He dropped his hand and stood.

Kiara watched her father in confusion. Her mind swirled trying to piece together what he meant. When nothing but mumbled thoughts ran through her mind, she shook her head to gain clarity. "How do you intend to ease my suffering?"

He offered his hand to her. "Come with me and I'll show you."

"Okay," Kiara responded, unsure.

Adric led her through the forest, a long walk back to the house that took well over forty minutes. Silence crept around them as Kiara ran scenarios through her mind of how he could ease her pain. How could he fix the fact she loved a man forbidden to her, least of all, without knowing of it? She couldn't imagine anything would fix the emptiness in her heart.

Reaching the edge of the forest, her father's country mansion shone through the night. Lit up in a grand-scale, the country estate looked beautiful with its natural wood trim and wraparound porch. Kiara inhaled, scenting many werewolves skulking about the grounds. Not a surprise, the home always had at least twenty of her father's guard for protection.

At the front door, Adric ushered Kiara in and closed the door behind him. He strode down the hall, into the sitting room, and as Kiara followed, another scent she didn't recognized filled her nose. Male werewolf. One, though, she'd never met before.

She entered the quaint room and found the source. A stealthy werewolf sat on the leather sofa, ankle resting on his knee with an arrogant smile on his face. He smelled of Alpha, powerful and strong, and the confident note in his eyes declared he led a wolf pack. Handsome, no doubt about it, with his dark styled hair, thick muscular body and a face

women would swoon over. Not Kiara, though. Her heart belonged to Cruz.

"Take a seat, Kiara," her father told her. With hesitation, Kiara sat in the sofa across from the werewolf. She looked back to her father as he said, "I'd like you to meet Milo."

Remembering her manners, Kiara smiled, glancing Milo's way again. "Hello, it's a pleasure to meet you."

Milo inclined his head. His gaze stayed trained on hers, in a way to make her feel uncomfortable. Why did he look at her with such a territorial hint in his eyes? "The pleasure is all mine, Kiara." And why did his voice roll with lust and his nostrils flare, talking in her scent?

What was going on? Kiara looked to her father for answers. He merely sighed and sat in the chair between Milo and her. She glanced back to Milo, who continued to stare right through her. Finally, after a long moment, she laughed the awkwardness away, looking to her father. "Sorry, I'm not quite sure if I'm supposed to say something here."

Her father paused. Not a good sign. "You're twentyfour now, and I hoped a mate would show himself to you. Prayed I wouldn't need to intervene to ensure your happiness, but I believe waiting for him is no longer an option."

"What?" Kiara gasped in total understanding now.

"I won't have you pining any longer," Adric commanded. "I've seen the signs, watched you mope around, barely a spark of life in your eyes. As your Alpha and your father, it's my duty to see you're given what you need."

Kiara's heart sank. No, he read her all wrong. He thought she pined for her werewolf mate, which did happen every now and again. The need to mate grew so intense the werewolf mourned until they found them, but she didn't suffer this want. "Father," she barked. "You have it all wrong."

"Do I?" Adric countered. "Explain to me then why you've been behaving so dissolute?"

Kiara opened her mouth to tell him, but couldn't let the words fall from her lips. He'd never forgive her if he knew. "I-I..."

"As I thought," Adric replied with a confirmed nod of his head. "You're a quiet wolf, Kiara. I know you'd never ask this of me, and I'm not even sure you understand what you're going through. But I've seen this type of behavior before. I recognize you are pining, and I won't allow it to destroy you."

"But I don't want a mate," was all Kiara's panic would allow her to say.

"You may not believe this," her father continued, "but, Kiara, werewolves don't know they are pining, and you are so young, I think you aren't recognizing the signs."

Now, faced with the situation, she could see how her father came to this conclusion. Without knowing she was lonely because she missed Cruz, she could see why he assumed she craved her mate. Kiara glanced to Milo, understanding his role here now. "So, Milo…" She couldn't even finish her words.

"Milo," her father filled in what she couldn't bear to say, "is Alpha of Maine, and has also been in search of his mate for years." He glanced to Milo. "How many years now?"

"Too many." Milo replied, with the same arrogant smile.

Kiara wouldn't fault him for the confidence. All Alphas held a strong air about them. They weren't Alpha for nothing; the trait had been born into them and was the exact reason that made them leaders. Nevertheless, she didn't want

him; she wanted Cruz. "I-I..." Again, she couldn't find words to express herself. How could she say no? She couldn't. Her father attempted to take care of her, give her what he thought she needed, but he didn't know the whole truth.

Adric cleared his throat, stood from his chair, and approached her, kneeling at her feet. "I'm sorry I didn't recognize the signs sooner. You shouldn't have suffered such agony for as long as you have. I'm to blame for misreading you, wanting to keep you my little girl and not share you with the world." He gestured toward Milo. "He's a kind, fair Alpha. The allegiance of your bond will only strengthen our packs."

"But Father?" Kiara snapped, needing a way out, searching for a reason to stop this insanity.

Adric shook his head, ignoring her apprehension. "You'll find happiness with him, Kiara. He'll provide protection for you."

"I don't love him," Kiara growled, feeling out of control. The room spun a little, throwing her off her axis, and heat flushed her skin.

"It's not always about love," Adric replied in a soft tone. "Your mother and I weren't destined mates."

She'd never heard this before. "You weren't?"

"No. Our arrangement had been made to bring two packs together who long fought." Adric tapped her nose with his finger and smiled. "And, look, you were born from the arrangement. I grew to love your mother, appreciate her, and we were happy before her death. You'll find the same happiness with Milo."

"But..." Kiara had to stop this from happening. She just didn't know how. "But..."

Adric stood, peering down upon her. "I know you're confused right now, and we're not going to rush anything. Get to know Milo. We'll arrange for the moon ceremony to bond you in a week's time." He gave a firm, unyielding nod. "That will allow enough time for you to grow comfortable with him before you must..."

Kiara's cheeks burned at the mention of sex in front of her father. To ensure the mate bond, the exchange needed to happen. Before she had a chance to become more horrified, Milo stepped in behind Adric. "I have given my word to be gentle with her and allow her a week to grow accustomed to me. You have nothing to worry of."

Now, Adric flushed. "Y-y-es," he stumbled, looking away from Kiara. "Well...I...all right. I'll leave you two now to get to know one another." He glanced back to Kiara,

leaned down, and kissed her cheek. "I only want what is best for you, Kiara. You know that, don't you?"

Tears glittered in her eyes at the travesty, yet she couldn't fault her father. He loved her enough to find her happiness, even if he had been mistaken what her reasons were behind her sorrow.

Kiara's gaze stayed glued on her father, not wanting to acknowledge Milo. A finger on her chin forced her to do otherwise and as she looked back. Milo now knelt where her father had been. "Are you afraid of me?"

"No," Kiara responded.

Milo smiled, a damned self-righteous grin. "I'm glad to hear it, because you have nothing to fear. I want to make you happy, do you understand?" He ran his knuckles across her cheek, and Kiara's blood ran cold.

Yes, she did understand, but she didn't want Milo. She wanted Cruz to touch her. Sweat formed on her body as she stared into Milo's eyes, her hands got clammy, and panic coursed through her. No, she couldn't agree to belong to him. Jumping up, pushing him away, she shouted, "No, I cannot accept you. I'm sorry."

Milo gave her a measured look, his eyes wide with shock. "Why?"

"What is wrong, Kiara? Milo is a fine werewolf." Adric looked Milo over, examining him. "The women in the pack told me they found him handsome." Glancing back to Kiara, he gave her a hard look. "Why do you not approve of him?"

Kiara wanted to tell him, blurt the truth all out so he understood why she couldn't agree, but words failed her now. Tears made her vision blurry. "I cannot say why; I just don't want him," she shouted. "I need to get out of here." She ran for the door, but her father's grip on her wrist stopped her.

"Kiara?" Her father's Alpha-deep tone commanded her to stop, but also held a note of confusion.

"No, I can't do this. I have to go. I have to leave." She pulled with all her might to get her hand out of her father's tight hold. "Let me go."

Adric studied her for a moment, and sighed before he let go. As she ran from the house, all she heard behind her was her father's quiet words. "Do not worry; she's young and frightened. We'll give her some time and she'll accept you."

No, she almost screamed back to them. I'll never accept him. Running fast, she slammed into the front door, threw it open, and shifted, shredding her clothes around her as her paws hit the ground. She didn't want Milo. What would

happen to Cruz? Her heart belonged to him. He had to have an answer to keep this from happening, and she prayed to the moon above that he did.

## **Chapter Three**

Deep in the forest, Cruz paced back and forth in his simple log cabin. He'd bought this piece of land in the woods months ago and built his home, not only to live closer to Kiara, but to provide him with a locked basement, which gave him a safe haven for when he rested during the day hours. Secluded from the outside world, he doubted a mortal would stray so far to discover his location.

A brush of wind sounded loud outside the front door before it opened to his friend Devon, who stood with concern tightening his face and narrowing his dark blue eyes. "What's going on?"

Cruz understood the harshness of his tone. Nowadays, life had become too complicated, and they contacted each other only when something went astray. But time apart held no meaning to them; their friendship and brotherhood of the blood had been forged long ago. They'd fought a war together as mortals, died together at the teeth of scavengers, and now, lived as immortals. Cruz closed the distance between them and offered his hand. "Thank you for coming."

Devon shook his hand before he approached the couch and plopped down into the soft seat. "Not a problem, my friend. Bethany is at home, resting."

"Your troubles are all sorted out?" Devon had problems of his own as of late, and if Cruz's heart wasn't so bothered, he'd never had contacted him. Right now, he needed a friend and had to let off some steam.

Devon nodded, his lips quirking in happiness. "It's been all dealt with. *Permanently.*" Devon's smiled hardened, and for a moment, his eyes glinted red at the implied violence of his statement.

Cruz might have indulged and asked more about his friend's past situation, since he suspected it was one hell of a fine story if his expression said anything. But as long as Devon had his woman, nothing else much mattered. Besides, selfishness resided in Cruz's heart too strong to wonder about anything else but himself. "Glad to hear you've found peace, my friend."

"So, do you plan on continuing with the small talk, or are you going tell me what's going on?" Devon asked, examining Cruz.

He sighed, sat down beside him on the couch, and ran his hands over his face. "I think I'm going mad."

"Head over heels in love, are you?" Devon laughed.

Lowering his head, Cruz nodded. "It's coming to a point where if I don't find a solution, I'm going to lose my mind. I cannot be without Kiara any longer. I'm tormented. The hiding away, the sneaking around. I want her here, with me."

"I understand the feeling," Devon replied in a somber tone.

Yes, their situations were much the same. Both in love with werewolves, the difference being that Devon had his. "What am I to do?" Cruz begged.

"Ask her to leave with you. Find somewhere to hide her, get her away from her pack—that's the simplest answer."

Cruz shook his head. "If only life was so easy." All the things Devon suggested were thoughts he'd run through his head a thousand times, but one thing remained a problem. "She's the Alpha's daughter."

Devon's eyebrows rose; a knowing look crossed his face. "Ahh, I see the problem."

Of course, he would. Kiara was bound to her pack in more ways than just a normal female werewolf. If she up and went missing, her father, along with the pack of wolves he led, would hunt her down to discover her whereabouts. There was no hiding, and they'd stay on the run forever. Not a life he wanted for her. "I've thought of every option, any way to make this happen, but I cannot see a way out." Cruz dropped his head into his hands in frustration.

Devon placed his hand on Cruz's shoulder, drawing his gaze back to him. "It's been a long time, my friend, since you've been so troubled over a woman." Devon cocked his head. "In fact, I can't remember ever seeing you so distressed."

Cruz never had been. Yes, he had lovers, thousands over his immortal life, and even a few before as a mortal. None compared to what he felt for Kiara. "She's...different."

Devon smiled. "Now that's something I can understand." Silence filled the space for a moment while Devon studied him. Finally, he broke the stillness. "You've got few options here. You cannot just leave with her. So, I think if you look into yourself, you'll find the answer you're searching for."

Did he know? Deep down, he recognized he did know the answer, but could he bring himself to admit what had to happen? His love for Kiara was *as is*. He didn't want her to change for him. However, to keep her, only one choice remained. "Either turn her or leave her."

Devon nodded. "If you turn her, she'd no longer hold the connection to her pack. They'd never find her."

Cruz sighed. What would Kiara think of all this? To never see her father again, her pack—to become another supernatural creature. He wasn't sure, and he felt nervous to ask her. What if she said no? Could his heart bare such rejection? "How do I ask her to leave everything she knows?"

"Maybe you mean more to her than anything else," Devon countered. "Trust me, we as men know nothing of what a woman is thinking."

Clearly, Devon spoke from his own experience, yet it didn't resolve the torment suffocating Cruz. "I cannot remove her from her life, no matter what I may want for myself. She's a wolf—her pack is her heart. Stealing the connection from her would steal her heart. Not something I'm willing to do."

Devon frowned. "Then I'm afraid you must let her go. Move on from here. Come with Bethany and me. Start over."

The thought sent pain to form in Cruz's stomach. No, he couldn't imagine leaving Kiara, but in the face of the reality, what was the alternative? Her happiness remained the important factor. He wouldn't put her in the situation

where'd she have to choose. Devon was right. The time to leave had come.

Just as he opened his mouth to agree with Devon, a sound—quite a distance away—caught his attention.

"You hear that?" Devon cocked his head, evidently hearing the same noise.

Cruz nodded. "Wolf." The thumping of paws sounded loud and fast. Something else drifted through along with the indicator of a visitor. A scent. He jumped up off his couch and ran for the door. He whipped it open to step out into the night. "Kiara."

\* \* \* \*

Kiara's paws and muscles ached from the run. She ran hard, faster than she ever had before, to get away from the fate behind her. Only Cruz stayed on her mind. She needed him to remove the panic from her. Needed him to tell her she had a way out. To find sense in the world she felt she held no control over.

As she broke through the forest and into the clearing where his cabin appeared, she saw Cruz standing alongside another vampire. She didn't recognize the stranger with the piercing blue gaze, but didn't much care. *Cruz*. She needed to get to him. Nearly at the front steps, she shifted, not minding one bit she stood stark naked. She lunged into Cruz's arms and he embraced her tight.

"Kiara, what's wrong?" Cruz's voice was tight and concerned.

She lifted her head from his chest, barely able to find the strength to tell him the truth. "The worse thing ever. I'm going to be mated."

Cruz tensed and his eyes glowed with rage.

The vampire beside him cleared his throat. Kiara glanced over to him to see his eyes were focused on her face. Clearly, he tried his best not to notice her nudeness. He gave her a small smile. "Hi, I'm Devon and you must be Kiara. It's a pleasure to meet you, but I see you all have more pressing matters here than an introduction." He looked to Cruz. "Contact me after this all smooth's over, my friend. And if you need a place…" Devon trailed off as he and Cruz shared a look of understanding.

A breeze passed over Kiara's body as the vampire left with rapid speed.

Cruz kept his arms around Kiara as he pulled her into the house, and closed the door with his foot. He took her over to the couch, placed her on the seat, and sat next to her. "You are to be mated?"

Kiara had trouble forming words; her throat was so tight with emotion. "My father has been worried for me because I've been sad—"

"Why have you been sad?" Cruz interrupted, an unhappy look on his face.

"Because I love you," Kiara sobbed. "I hate being apart. It's unfair, and the world is cruel. I hate not having you near me."

Cruz smiled, the saddest smile she'd ever seen. "Nor do I." His grin faded and sheer agony flashed in his gaze. "How long do you have before the bonding ceremony will take place?"

"A week." Kiara gulped. Sickness rolled through her stomach. This couldn't be happening. Couldn't be real. She wanted Cruz forever. His expression didn't match the words he said. A distance resided in his eyes. "I need you to fight, do something. Tell me some way to stop this."

Cruz looked away from her for a long moment before he glanced back with a pained expression. "I have no suggestion that will be good for you." "Anything is good as long as we're together." She pleaded for him to offer something, some way out.

Cruz shook his head, and all of Kiara's hopes and dreams plummeted. Why was he not fighting? Offering an answer to make sure the mate bond didn't happen? The more she mulled it over, the more rage bubbled up and showed its ugly face. Shifting away from him, she glared. "You're willing to just let me go?"

"Kiara," Cruz said in a soft tone.

The one word declared her worst fears. He didn't care. Kiara lurched from the couch, fists tight at her side. "Have you been using me?"

"No," Cruz whispered, looking at the ground.

His reactions didn't make any sense. She'd come here thinking he'd fight for her. Find a solution in all this mess. Not find a coward who'd let her walk away from him. "Then what are you afraid of?"

Cruz raised his head; his eyes burned with anger Kiara had never seen from him. Deadly. "I'm not afraid of anything."

"Why then?" Kiara whispered. Her chin trembled and tears filled her eyes. "Why will you just let me go? Do you not love me enough?"

In one swift movement, Cruz lunged at her and Kiara found herself on the other side of the room, pushed against a wall with an angry Cruz staring down at her. "I am tormented, Kiara. Hearing this makes me want to slaughter anyone who touches you, but I'm faced with the knowledge it's not my right. I'm using every ounce of my strength not to think selfishly in hopes that my restraint will aid in your happiness."

"I don't want your restraint." Kiara's voice trembled as tears dampened her cheeks. "I want you to fight for me—for us."

Conflicting emotions crossed Cruz's face before his eyes focused. Gathering her in his arms, he crushed his lips against hers. What his reaction meant, she couldn't quite figure out, nor did she care. She wanted one thing. Her body demanded her thoughts to silence—instead, burn with desire for what she'd wanted for so long—Cruz naked, between her thighs, and finding a home there.

## **Chapter Four**

Cruz couldn't get enough of Kiara, feel enough of her. He ran his hands along her sides, to her breasts, along her neck. Felt everywhere to memorize her. Selfishness drove him now. He might not have forever with her, but he had now, and he wouldn't waste his chance no matter how wrong claiming her was. Kiara moaned against his mouth as his tongue swiped against hers. Hard, rough kisses to leave no misunderstanding the desperation she felt, as did he.

Pushing her harder against the wall, he pinned her, declaring to the world she belonged to him. Kiara whimpered and ground her body against his, squirming her stomach against his groin. Cruz groaned, leaning in deeper, opening his mouth wider to suck her tongue into his mouth. Reaching up, he cupped her neck in his hands, felt her pulse racing. His fangs pressed against his gums to come free and Cruz did nothing to stop them. He wanted Kiara to see how aroused she made him now.

Kiara ran her tongue across one of his fangs, earning a deep shudder from him. Her mouth was so sweet. Her body molded right against Cruz's, designed to fit him. Pulling away from her, he panted. "Do you know what you do to me, Kiara?"

She grinned, a devilish smile warming him right to his hard groin. "I can feel what I do to you." Leaning up toward him, she flicked her tongue out, piercing the soft tissue with the sharp edge of his fang. Blood dripped and Cruz sucked her tongue into his mouth, drawing the blood—a thick, rich taste to fuel him.

Kiara allowed him to sample her for only a moment before she pulled her tongue back as the small wound healed. "I'll give you more of what you want," she purred, "but first, I want something else in my mouth."

Cruz tensed as Kiara slid her way down his body. She kept her gaze steady on his as she undid his belt buckle; a sexy smile formed on her face, enticing him. In no time, she had him free of his pants; his cock bobbed in front of her face. So close to him, she inhaled. "This is the first time you've allowed me to see you."

He fought for the strength to speak now, failed, and simply nodded in return. He'd never let her touch him because his control would flee. As Kiara wrapped her hand around him, stroked the tip of his erection, Cruz knew he had

made the right decision. His head fell back and he groaned, a sound to speak of the desires he suffered.

When he felt her tongue lick out, connecting with the arousal that formed at the tip, Cruz snapped his head back down and could have come. Seeing Kiara on her knees, her lips resting at the head of his cock, he almost lost his mind.

Opening her mouth, Kiara took him in balls deep. Cruz's eyes rolled back into his head and he moaned. For a woman with no experience, she sure held talent. Her tongue swirled along his shaft as she sucked him. Cruz opened his eyes to see Kiara's head bobbing.

His cock, slick with her saliva, slid in and out of her mouth. Each time she drew him in, Cruz groaned, and every time she withdrew, he hissed. Her long hair draped over her shoulders and as much as he enjoyed watching her, marveled in the sensation of her lips on him, if she continued, he wouldn't last. He wasn't prepared for this to end here.

He cupped her cheeks in his hands, and with a deep suck, she released him from her mouth. Her hand clamped around him as she stroked, leaving Cruz to tremble in his stance.

"I've dreamed of doing this to you."

Cruz chuckled, a deep, throaty sound. "As have I." Months of dreaming—fantasizing—jerking off to the thought. Nothing, though, compared to the real thing. No amount of thoughts could have possibly prepared him for the sight of her on his cock. Still damp with her saliva, she worked along his shaft, stroking with a tight embrace to render him no longer mindful of thoughts.

But he'd not come. Shoved deep in her pussy, feeling her orgasm milk him when he exploded was where he wanted to lay. Bending down, he kissed her—long, endearing, desperate kisses he'd craved to do for so long—powerful kisses to lead to him being deep in her wet warmth.

Kiara whimpered, desirable sounds that hardened Cruz's groin even more so. He stepped out of his pants, not only to rid himself from his clothes, but to ease the hardness of his groin making him uncomfortable. Her little hand kept stroking, teasing the tip with hard pressure.

Cruz needed her now. He pulled on her face, inviting her to stand. Once she did, he wrapped his arms around her and she drew her legs up around his waist. His mouth came back to hers. Harsh breaths poured out from her lungs, and if he needed to breathe, he would have joined her. Her tongue moved as it had on his shaft, and Cruz growled, tasting her,

teased by her. His cock was tormented with the want to be deep inside of her.

Rushing down the hall, he hurried into the bedroom. At the bed, Cruz lowered her down. She stared back at him with heated eyes. The control he'd held over himself these past months fled him. "I want you to know I don't want to hurt you, but the pain you will endure will mean you belong to me, and I intend to make your pleasure far exceed the ache you may feel." Reaching out, he cupped her warmth. "Here."

"Take me, Cruz. Make me worthless to Milo."

He didn't need to be asked again. He rid himself of his shirt, watching as the luscious body of a splendid woman lay before him, curves in all the right places, perky breasts with dark, taut nipples awaiting his mouth. As his gaze traveled lower, dark, trimmed curls gave sight of a perfect pussy he intended to break in and call his own. "I wish I had hours to prepare you, make you writhe in need for me, but I'm afraid your father will come looking for you soon and you'll have to go."

"I know." Sadness filled her eyes. Cruz attempted to ignore the tinge of pain he felt at seeing it. Now wasn't the time to mourn anything. He'd not waste the enjoyment of her giving herself to him, the only time he had left with her

wishing for impossible things. The world carved their fate—the unforgiving battle between the species made their love impossible. For now, he had her, had tonight, and he'd not worry about things he couldn't change.

Climbing onto the bed, he crawled toward her, and Kiara spread her creamy thighs, welcoming him. As he closed in on her body, Cruz reached down to feel her warmth, needing to confirm she was ready for him. His fingers trailed against moistness more than ready. Bringing his hand back up, he ran both under her head and cradled her, dropping his heavy weight against hers to offer her a safe feeling.

Kiara's breath shortened and her body tensed. Cruz lowered his mouth and kissed her again. He forced her mind away from the expectant pain and enticed her to lose herself in the feelings of arousal. He rested his cock near her slick opening to allow her to accept him there. Cruz swirled his hips, running his hard length along her pussy until he felt the wetness grow.

Backing away from her, he glanced into the eyes of the werewolf he loved. He couldn't even think of this being the last time he'd see her. The only time he'd experience her underneath him. Her body was so warm, so soft, and all contrast against his hard planes. "Breath in, my wolf." Kiara did as he asked, and Cruz didn't hesitate in hopes he'd move quick enough to ease her pain. He pushed through her opening, met by her hymen stopping him. He wanted to kiss her again, show her she'd be fine, but he couldn't bear not to look at her. Her eyes were pinched tight, pain registered on her face, and Cruz hated knowing it would only get worse.

Not wanting to prolong her agony, he pushed past the thin skin with a heavy thrust and Kiara screamed. Cruz squeezed her neck in his hands and hushed her, waited for her to get past the distress. "Exhale, my wolf. Release the pain."

She did so and opened her eyes a moment later; a tear slid down her cheek. Cruz leaned forward and kissed the wetness away. It tore at him to hurt her, yet the pain acknowledged he'd been the first to take her. Elation soared through him. No man had ever been here before, and possession settled in. No one but him would ever feel how tight, how wonderfully wet, Kiara was, and would ever see the love in her eyes he saw now. He planned to keep her—he just needed to figure out how.

Pain rushed through Kiara in a way she'd never experienced before, a sharp sting that stayed while Cruz's erection filled her. When he withdrew, she hissed against the torture her body suffered. At the same time, though, the pain acknowledged they were really doing this. He'd taken her virginity. No one else had been given the right, and no matter what happened, the memory would stay with her always.

Cruz's gaze came back to Kiara's and something new in the depths of his eyes lived there. Something she'd never seen before and something she couldn't quite place. "Are you in a lot of pain?" he asked in a strained voice.

"A little bit," Kiara admitted.

With a gentle stroke, Cruz slid back into her pussy and Kiara's muscles strained. Too tight. Too full. The pain erupted in her body, making her jaw clench. Once fully seated, Cruz leaned down and kissed her. Not rough like before. More of a showing his love—long, drawn out kisses to send desire burning within her.

His intention worked. With his hands cradling her head, the sting lessened and her muscles stretched to accommodate him. Clearly, he experienced the release of her body since he moved again, long, fluid strokes brining no pain. Lowering his head, he nuzzled her neck and groaned. His warm breath tickled her skin, causing goose bumps to form there. Cruz licked out, kissed her in her sensitive places to bring forth a wave of heat to rush through her.

Kiara's breath whooshed from her lungs as Cruz picked up the pace. At her neck, he continued to lick, swirl his tongue to awaken every nerve in her body. With it, came faster thrusts, still gentle, yet moving with rapid speed. Kiara's eyes closed; she ran her hands from his shoulders down to his buttocks, squeezing his firm ass.

Cruz growled, and gave a heavy thrust. Surprised not to find pain, Kiara mirrored his sounds, a mere beg for more. Removing his hands from the back of her head, he perched himself up on his hands, glancing down at her. Kiara got a splendid view of all muscle. Hard lines of his chest, rippling abs, she couldn't help herself but feel all of him, and trailed her hands along his body.

Sexy.

Her move seemed to arouse him. His eyebrows furrowed, and a focused look came upon his face. It was a sight she'd never seen before, and one she'd want to see again. The burn in his eyes did more to her than his cock ever

could. Yet, with the thick erection pumping in her right now, her sensations only increased.

Deeper, he penetrated her. Harder, he thrust.

Kiara angled her back, pushing her breasts high as her pussy contracted. Cruz groaned and quickened his speed. Sounds of two bodies slapped through the room, and the wetness between her thighs grew. It was something she'd never felt before and with his molten eyes on her, each thrust proved to only deepen the sensation.

Her teeth gritted, and her screams sounded rough as the unknown feeling washed through her. "Give into it," Cruz demanded, ramming her now.

Too intense. Kiara fought against the hold it had over her, desperate for a release from the strain building inside of her. "Oh God," she shouted, unable to think, breathe, focus. Cruz thrust in harder, loud, sharp slams against her. His pelvis slammed against her clit, only building the sensation to a higher level. Kiara closed her eyes against the rise of such pleasure, pleasure she'd never imagined. Deeper than a feeling she thought possible.

And that's when Cruz went vampire.

A speed no mortal or no werewolf would be capable of. Thrusts that held no beginning and no end, leaving Kiara to scream against it.

She whipped her head from side to side, roaring against the hold freezing her. In mere minutes, Kiara grasped Cruz's shoulders, dug her nails in his skin, and erupted. Light sparked before her eyes, and her pussy convulsed, sending shuddering waves of pleasure to ascend her sky high.

Vaguely, she heard Cruz groaning as her pussy massaged his, but so lost in her orgasm, she was unable to process a single thought. Only when she felt the air breeze by her, and gained any muscle strength back, did she realize Cruz had flipped positions. Now, straddling his waist, she opened her eyes and found Cruz looking sexier than ever. His eyes traveled the length of her as he ran his hand down the center of her breasts and along her stomach.

He grinned, the sexiest damn smile she'd ever seen. "Ready for another?"

"Damn right I am." Kiara rocked her hips, a little awkwardly at first, not knowing how to move, the position so foreign to her.

Cruz raised his hands to her hips to assist her, and in no time, Kiara felt comfortable in her movements. Keeping her hands on his chest, she reeled in how deep he lingered in the position, touching her very center. Her head fell back and Cruz groaned, indicating he liked the view.

Kiara would appease his wants and decided to give him a show. She brought her head back down and continued to ride him, circle her hips, thrust them back and forth, but now raised her hands to her breasts. She fondled them and pinched her nipples in a way to tease him.

Cruz's eyes burned. His gaze stayed on her show a little while before she saw his jaw clench. As he looked back to her eyes, the corners of his mouth turned up and his cock throbbed inside of her.

Stilling her movements, he lifted her above him, keeping the tip of his erection inside of her. "My wolf, enjoy your strength now because when I'm done with you, walking will be a challenge."

Before she had a chance to respond, Cruz unleashed the desire she'd witnessed swelling inside of him. From underneath, he thrust into her with such speed, such force, Kiara had no other choice than to place her hands on his chest and believe he wasn't kidding.

No sound came from her mouth, breathing not possible now. Not even the acknowledgement Cruz was the

reason for her pleasure. Not until she felt Cruz pull her nipple into his mouth and sink his fangs into her skin to draw blood did she have any sense of the now. All pleasure. Hard core ecstasy.

He took in the first draw of blood and Kiara's pussy clamped against him. Didn't vibrate like before, but strangled his cock, and she screamed. She fought against the wave of elation starting at her nipple where he drank to soar down to her pussy. Her womb tightened, and her muscles tensed as the never-ending climax built to extremes.

Kiara heard herself curse, felt the break of tension to erupt into an orgasm leaving her to quiver and shudder, scream out with the intensity of her release. Cruz roared through his own release and bit deeper against her nipple, forcing another scream out of Kiara as her climax rolled through her again.

A lick against her breast tickled her sensitive skin and she gasped, knowing he'd sealed the wound, but her nerves buds were too awakened to handle any more pleasure he gave her. Dropping down on his chest, she panted, totally spent.

Minutes drew long as Kiara attempted to recover. Her muscles held no strength, her body exhausted, and thoughts stayed well away from her mind. As she drew in another long, deep breath, Cruz stiffened and Kiara found the strength to move. She rose up above him, looking down. Love shone in his eyes, but something else did too, concern.

"We've got company," he growled.

Kiara couldn't get sense back into her mind. She had trouble recovering from the mindless state she'd just been in. She gave her head a shake to clear the fog, and followed Cruz's gaze.

There, standing in the doorway, was Milo. Rage oozed off him. "Your father sent me to find you," he snarled. "But now, I wish I'd never come. Not only has my future mate given a gift away meant for me, but she's done so with a fucking bloodsucker."

Kiara heard herself curse again, but for a whole other reason.

## **Chapter Five**

Death stared Cruz in the face, but not his own. Kiara held his concern. It had been one thing for Kiara to lose her virginity; another thing entirely for her to give her virginity to a vampire. Only one choice remained.

Cruz gave Kiara a little push, issuing her go to the corner of the room. "Stay there and do not move." His focus stayed on the werewolf at the door, who readied himself for the fight ahead, all tense and alert.

Cruz couldn't just injure Milo. The werewolf had to die.

With full force of his vampire speed, Cruz lunged at Milo, plowing into him, sending them both back into the hallway. Mid-flight, Milo's mortal form shifted to fur, and as they landed, he snuck out from under Cruz and ran into the living room. Not to hide—Cruz never doubted that. He needed the space to form his attack. Cruz jumped up and rushed in behind him.

If he thought Milo would be an easy fight, Cruz would've just been proven wrong. The Alpha stood proud in front of him. A large wolf, and with his lip pulled up in a

snarl exposing white teeth, Milo wouldn't just lie down and die.

The wind breezed past Cruz as he shot forward, grabbed onto Milo's neck, and sent them both flying in the air to crash against the far wall of the cabin. He heard Kiara screaming from the bedroom, but was pleased she had listened to him and stayed in the room. He wanted her to stay put and stay safe. And he suspected if he never said anything, she'd be in here fighting Milo herself. Something he didn't want.

Wresting against Milo, Cruz kept his arms around his neck, trying to hold Milo still. If he could get a good hold, he'd snap his neck and the fight would end. But the wolf proved powerful, and with the continuous bites he offered, Cruz had a hard time holding him.

He needed another approach. Pushing Milo away, he lurched to his feet to examine his opponent. Milo's snarl deepened as he paced in front of Cruz. "You have a choice, wolf. You can leave now and the matter is forgotten."

Milo growled, a deep rumble Cruz felt vibrate along the floor.

"Your choice has been made, has it?" Cruz steadied himself, prepared for Milo's response.

Milo barked.

"So be it." Cruz rushed forward, and grabbed onto Milo's paw. The werewolf bit down on his wrist, but Cruz ignored the sting of the bite and threw him against the wall.

Milo yelped as he smacked against the window of the cabin, shattering the glass to the floor. Cruz heard bones break, ribs, he suspected. But the werewolf lurched back to his feet, snarling. Milo's breathing had become more labored, shorter breaths and the strain of his body making it obvious.

"Yield," Cruz shouted. Vampires and Werewolves held hostility toward each other, but he had no problem with any of them. Destroying Milo was the last thing he wanted to do. He might have fought in the war, killed many mortals. Now, he lived in peace and didn't enjoy the thought of taking a life.

Milo growled before he pounced forward. Decision made. Milo gave Cruz no alternative. If he chose death, Cruz would find salvation in it. Protect Kiara at all costs. Furniture in his living room went soaring through the air as Cruz fought back with every skill he'd learned over the years, not only as a vampire, but as a mortal fighting alongside his fellow soldiers.

Grabbing a paw again, Cruz needed to disable Milo if he wanted to end the fight. Right now, snapping his neck remained impossible. The powerful werewolf held too much strength, would squirm out of his hold. Cruz could handle the bites, but only so much of his blood could spill before he weakened. Grasping Milo's paw with both hands, ignoring the deep bite to his forearm, he broke Milo's leg with a steady snap.

Milo howled, dropping to the ground. Cruz jumped up, and licked the wound along his arms to heal the two puncture wounds caused by Milo's bite. Once sealed, he lunged at Milo again, but his broken leg didn't hinder him.

He lurched forward, limping, but nonetheless flew toward him, pummeling his wolf form into Cruz and sending them soaring back over the coffee table, turning it up on the side.

Cruz attempted to gain the upper hand, squeezing around Milo's chest to crush him, but Milo had moves of his own and snuck his head around, biting down on Cruz's neck. He groaned as sharp incisors slashed into his skin, and Cruz felt his warm blood pour down his skin.

Not a good position. Cruz tried to squirm out, get away from his hold, but Milo held him still, growling. Cruz punched out, using all his force to slam hard hits against the werewolf's head, yet the move did him no good.

Milo's teeth sank in deeper, wrapping around his jugular, a moment away from ripping out his neck. Cruz needed to get away, and needed to do so now. His only question, how?

Rage burned to the surface. If he died here, so would Kiara. He couldn't allow that to happen. Kiara gave him strength; his love for her mattered more than his own wellbeing. He needed to win here, not to save his own life, but to save hers.

With a roar, he latched onto Milo's neck, aware the werewolf ripped into his neck, inch by inch moving deeper into his skin, only moments away from forcing Cruz to meet his demise. Pushing past the pain, Cruz squeezed with every ounce of strength he received from the thoughts of Kiara and, with a crack, Milo's neck snapped. A thud, followed by silence, ended the battle and withdrew Milo as a threat to Kiara.

Cruz groaned, not needing to release a deep breath, but did so anyway to expel the adrenaline coursing through his veins. His neck burned and he only waited a few short moments before he felt his healing take place. The amount of blood lessened as it coagulated and his skin sealed, closing up the wounds Milo had caused. Just as Cruz reeled in the loss of pain, accepted the restored health and reprieve that had come upon him, a scent filled the air.

Wolf.

Before Cruz had a chance to respond, a hand wrapped around his throat and he found himself up against the wall. His legs dangled down an inch from the ground as he stared into the face of someone he didn't expect to find here and one he couldn't kill. No matter how much the situation might declare him to.

\* \* \* \*

Silence sounded around Kiara. Panic gripped her. For a good ten minutes, crashing of breaking furniture, vicious growls, howls of pain, and even Cruz groaning in agony a few times. What happened? Who died? She held no doubt someone had.

Her body ached from when Cruz had thrown her against the room, but she understood his move. It protected her. She wouldn't fault him for looking out for her. Pushing up off the floor, she held onto the bed and her body shook,

trembled in fear for what awaited her in the living room. If Cruz had died, not only would he be gone, but she'd be dead too. She'd signed her death warrant the moment she'd fallen in love with him. What she'd done was unforgivable in the wolf pack.

Kiara forced herself to keep moving. Put one foot in front of the other until she met the hallway. Her breath caught in her lungs as her mind played with images of the worst kind.

At the end of the hallway, the silence ceased as a deep groan, followed by a growl, replaced it. Kiara's heart skipped a beat and she stopped dead. She listened hard, waiting to hear another sound for her to clarify what happened. When nothing came, Kiara ordered her feet to walk and entered the living room.

The sight was too hard for her to process. She scanned the surroundings a few times over. All of the furniture had been crumbled to pieces; blood splattered the walls. Kiara gulped. The most ghastly sight she'd ever seen. She blinked, focusing herself to find Cruz. Her gaze searched the floor, and a wolf's paw caught her attention. She stepped further into the room, needing to be sure, and just behind the table on his side, Milo lay dead.

"Cruz!" Kiara screamed.

Before she had the chance to look up, and with sense returning to her mind, a scent drifted through. One she recognized. Just as her awareness filtered in, her father's stern voice sounded around her. "Go and hide, Kiara. It's not safe for you."

Startled, she spun around to see that her father had Cruz by the neck up against the wall. The horror of the situation doubled. "Let him go, Father."

Adric's head snapped toward her, confusion held in the dark depths of his eyes. "And just why would I do that, Kiara?" Suspicion flashed across his face while he examined her.

Kiara tried to tell him, tried to find the words to make him understand, but she failed, and miserably so. Instead of saying a word, she stood there, mouth parted, and she could only imagine her eyes held guilt.

Adric's eyes widened, he paled, and understanding smacked onto his expression. "You haven't? Please tell me, Kiara, you haven't done what my mind is leading me to believe?"

Seeing the traitorous look on his face made guilt clench her stomach. A wave of disappointment made her unable to hold his gaze. She glanced to the floor and heard Cruz tumble to the ground as her father released him.

Kiara wanted to run to him, to ensure Cruz hadn't been injured, but she saw him rise to his feet and relief flooded her. She dared to look to him, needed his strength to guide her here with her father. What would happen now? How could her father forgive her?

Cruz didn't look at her, his focus held on her father. Not threatening in any way, more just like her father's face—utterly confused. Milo had been an entirely different situation. She'd not mourn his death. It meant she and Cruz still lived. They couldn't erase her father from the situation. He'd become knee deep in their problem, all her secrets exposed, and she had no idea how to resolve her situation to form a good outcome.

"Once bitten, forever burned," her father growled. "Their souls are dead, Kiara, and they burn in hell."

"That's not true." Kiara's voice trembled in defense. "Cruz has a warm soul. He's generous, kind, and loving. If only you'd get to know him—"

"Get to know him," Adric roared, cutting her off. "Vampires are our enemies. They have killed thousands of us."

"I know," Kiara whispered, tears forming in her eyes, still unable to make eye contact with him. What he said wasn't a lie, but she could have pointed out werewolves had killed just as many. However, she couldn't bring herself to throw the awareness in his face. She never wanted this. Never imagined she'd disappoint him.

"You have corrupted her," Adric snarled. Clearly, the harsh statement had been directed at Cruz.

"No, I have loved her," Cruz sneered.

"A vampire capable of love," her father scoffed. "Impossible."

"It's not impossible," Kiara shouted, glancing away from the ground to him. "It's true. I love him now and I'll love him forever."

Rage formed on Adric's face, causing a vein to bulge in the center of his forehead. She'd seen the look before, but she also knew him well. Kiara needed her father to see her side, needed for him to understand. She ran to him and grasped his arms. He stood firm in his stance. "Cruz makes me happy, Father. Happier than I've ever been. I know how wrong you think this is, but my heart tells me it's right to stay with him. Do you want me to live a life I don't want?"

Adric held her stare for long moments until the look softened and he sighed. "No, I wouldn't want that for you."

"Then forget your prejudices. Stop thinking as an Alpha and of these stupid rules our world lives by. Only think as my father. Cruz is wonderful and I've loved him for months now."

Adric's eyes widened and shock registered in their depths. "Months?"

"Yes, months. We've been in hiding, keeping our love a secret. It's why I've been sad. I haven't been pining for my mate. I've been mourning the time I'm away from him."

Adric glanced to Cruz then looked back to Kiara a few times over. The silence grew thick in the room. Finally, he sighed, a tired sound. He raised a hand to her cheek and sadness darkened his eyes. "I'd say I'm disappointed you never told me, but I know why you kept this to yourself." He sighed again and despair shone on his face. "Do you know what it will mean if you choose this life and stay with him?"

Kiara gulped. She had a full understanding, and her heart ached at the thought. "I won't be able to see you again."

Adric nodded. Sorrow wafted off him. "That's right."

Suddenly, Cruz shot from the other side of the room and tore Kiara from her father's grip, spinning her to face him. "Kiara, you must think this over. This is not a decision to take lightly. I've thought of this, considered it an option, and I don't want this for you."

Confusion swirled in her mind. She glanced at her father, who looked shocked by Cruz's words. She glanced back to Cruz, not understanding what he meant. "You don't want me?"

Cruz snorted. "You know I want you, but you'll lose your family. I, of anyone, understand the pain this can cause. Consider what you will lose for us to stay together. Is it worth it?"

Kiara could never admit this aloud in front of her father. She didn't want to break his heart. As much as she'd miss her father, her happiness lay in the hands of Cruz now. Her life was enriched by him. If she lost him, she wouldn't be able to go on. She didn't want to lose her father, but life had given her no other choice. Where her father had been the backbone in her life, the man who molded her into the woman she was, Cruz would take her and deepen her life—frame her happiness forever.

Adric sighed at her silence, drawing her focus to him. "We've got a bit of a mess here." He looked to the dead Milo on the ground, clearly given whatever answer he searched for since he paid no cause to Cruz's remark and moved along. Kiara was stunned to see acceptance in his eyes, and focus. "Milo is an Alpha. Answers for his death will have to be given."

She understood Cruz's hesitation, but her heart belonged to him and, although she loved her father, would miss him—the love she carried for Cruz held strong.

Adric glanced away from Milo and looked to Cruz with stern eyes. "When you turn her, you need to make her bleed along the floor. Be sure to leave enough of her blood here to make it appear as if she has been killed."

"What?" Kiara gasped. Was he really so accepting? Yes, Kiara knew she'd never see her father again, but she thought it would mean run away and hide. She never thought he'd willingly agree to let Cruz turn her into a vampire. Did his love for her stretch that far?

"It's the only way, Kiara," Adric declared. "For this to happen, I will have to come up with a reason why my daughter is no longer with us. The pack will not believe that you're missing and I'm not looking for you." He sighed and his jaw clenched. "My only resolve is to allow Cruz to turn you. If you want this life, then you will have to accept it fully. It'll break your bond to the pack, your scent will no longer be

the same, and no one will be the wiser. Enough of Cruz's blood remains here now that my wolves will acknowledge a vampire stayed here, destroyed Milo, and also killed you."

"You're truly okay with this? You're going to do this for me?" Kiara couldn't believe her ears. Tears rushed down her cheeks. She plowed into him and hugged him tight.

"I'll do this because I love you, Kiara. I made a promise to always ensure you are well and happy. No matter what you are, you'll always be my daughter. And if being with the vamp..." He cleared his throat. "Cruz, will make you happy, what kind of father would I be to deny you?" Adric leaned against her and inhaled as if to memorize her scent.

Kiara couldn't believe he had agreed and accepted their love, but as the thought rose, she chastised herself. Her father loved her. Had always loved her. And her happiness remained the most important to him. He agreed because she asked it of him. She should have realized that a long time ago, and felt foolish for thinking otherwise.

Leaning away from her, he smiled. "You will have an hour here to do what you have to." He gulped. "Be sure to not stay around any longer. You cannot leave here a wolf. My pack will track you. I'll return with my guard soon and will plant the idea I followed your scent here."

Kiara hugged him with every ounce of her strength, and he embraced her right back. The last time she'd see her father for who knew how long. She hoped at some point she could return, find a way to keep contact with him. But her heart told her it'd be a long time before that day—or night—would come. Maybe if she wasn't an immortal, leaving him would seem harder, but with forever ahead of her—as all supernaturals had—she hoped she didn't have to wait centuries to see him again.

Her father leaned down and kissed the top of her head. "Your mother would be proud of what you've become, Kiara." Kiara sobbed in response. "And I'm proud of you."

"I love you," Kiara cried against his chest.

Adric leaned back and smiled. "I know you do." He kissed both of her cheeks. A deep sigh came from Adric's mouth as he glanced back to Kiara. His eyes filled with tears. "I hope this life brings you happiness." Her father smiled, a grin for her to hold in her memory forever. "If an allegiance is formed between our species, promise me you'll return home and visit."

"I promise."

Adric stepped away, and Cruz gathered Kiara up in his arms. He strode toward the open front door, and once

there, he stopped, glancing over his shoulder to Cruz. "Protect her."

"I'll do better, I'll keep her safe, heart and soul, and I'll cherish her until I'm no longer given the right to."

A tear fell down her father's cheek. Kiara wanted to run to him, force him to end the unforgiving fight between the species, but knew she held no power to do so. The world couldn't change by him, or her. The truth was, her father had raised her, had given her a lifetime of happiness, but now, she had Cruz. Her father wiped the tear along his cheek, left the cabin, and shut the door.

Kiara's breath gasped out as her heart clenched with sadness. Her father, a man she cherished, one no one compared to...until Cruz. She loved her father, would love him every day she longed to see him again, but she had a life to live. And that life was with Cruz.

"One day," Cruz said in a soft tone, drawing Kiara's teary gaze to him, "you'll see him again."

Kiara had a hard time believing his words were possible, yet she never believed she'd have Cruz either, or that her father would accept them. Accept the love she'd found, fought against, but now rejoiced in. Still, though, it didn't make his departure any easier. Only one thought remained on her mind and in her heart. "I hope so."

Cruz brushed his fingers across her cheek and waited a full minute before he spoke next. "Are you ready, my wolf?"

Ready to die is what he should have said. "I'm ready to be with you forever."

Cruz's fangs released from his gums and he angled her head to the side. "And I'll love you forever." He sank his fangs into her neck, creating a large gash, and Kiara said goodbye to her old life as Cruz backed away for a moment, letting her blood gush down her neck to drip to the floor just as her father asked. She willing let death take her to accept the new her, because her new life held Cruz, and her happiness laid in the dreams of their future.

## **Epilogue**

The rush of blood pooled in Kiara's throat before she swallowed with a groan. Bloodlust had hit hard for the first month after Cruz had turned her. Now, it'd been more manageable. Traveling through Ireland and most of Europe kept them busy, but they'd become fond of Belfast and made a home here, though Kiara's father still stayed on her mind. Worries over what had happened the night with Milo had been a constant strain.

Kiara angled the man's head farther, opening the wound on his neck to offer more blood to flow into her mouth. She heard Cruz talking on the phone behind her to Devon, but paid him no attention, too involved in her feast. After a few more deep gulps, Kiara felt sedated and drew away, licking the wounds on the man's neck to close them.

Glancing back to him, she stepped away from the shadows created by the dark alleyway. "You may go now," she told him, still holding him entranced. "And you remember none of what took place."

The man, a middle-aged drunk on his way home from the night at the pub, stumbled away toward the road and said nothing more. Her gaze focused on Cruz as he ended the call with warm goodbyes, turned toward Kiara, and smiled. "Feeling better?"

"Much." Kiara tried to feed from strong men, drunks, or something of the sort—still adjusting to her new fangs and the lack of werewolf in her now. She missed her shift, the wolf inside of her, but having Cruz meant more than her werewolf culture. As her mind swept away with romantic thoughts, she forced herself to remember the phone call. More pressing matters captivated her thoughts, and now with the feeding over, she couldn't wait to hear what Devon said. "What did he tell you?"

Cruz smiled and cupped her cheeks in his hands. "No troubles came from the incident with Milo. Devon said he heard through the channels that your father did as he told us and the matter had been put to rest."

The news was so good she had a hard time believing it. "So, he's fine?"

"Yes," Cruz whispered. "Don't worry, Kiara. Your father is perfectly well."

Relief settled Kiara's worries. Who knew if her father's plan worked or just erupted a war between the packs since Milo had been an Alpha and in her father's territory?

Even as it sat now, the killing would only spin more hate between the species since Milo's pack would harbor rage against the loss of their leader. Kiara realized, no matter what they did, the fight would always continue. "It's never going to end, is it?"

Cruz's eyes saddened and he frowned. "I wish I could tell you soon the prejudices will end and you'll see your father again." He sighed, so deep. "But I'd be lying."

Kiara wished she had the power to end the longstanding battle. The longer it took for whatever the supernatural beings needed to work out, the longer it'd be for her to see her father again. She planned to. No matter what she'd become now. He'd still love her, accept her, even though she denied her wolf roots to be with Cruz and now needed blood to survive. Because he would always remain her father and loved her regardless. His actions had proven that. He'd given her his acceptance to become a vampire, knowing the hate he held for them. The acknowledgment gave Kiara a sense of happiness she never thought she'd find.

Kiara might know what Cruz said was true—the animosity forged through the centuries had no end in sight—but she held a more optimistic approach because she'd seen it happen with herself. She'd loved a vampire and had gotten

her father to accept one too. Closing her body against his, Cruz trailed his thumb across her cheek. "There will be more, you know."

Cruz arched an eyebrow. "More of what?"

"More, just like us—who will fight for what's right, and for love. Maybe one day, there'll be enough of us who want to stop the prejudices, to form an allegiance, and to live in a new world."

Cruz smiled, a grin that warmed her heart. "My sweet vampire, I have no doubt you have enough love in your little body to change even the most stubborn werewolves one at a time."

The End of Cruz's Salvation

## **About Stacey Kennedy**

Stacey Kennedy is an avid lover of the paranormal romance, urban fantasy and erotic romance genres. If she isn't plugging away at her next novel, tending to her two little ones, she's got her nose deep in a good book. She lives in Ontario, Canada with her husband. Be sure to drop her a line at www.staceykennedy.com, she loves to hear from her readers.