

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



TAWNY
TAYLOR

Torrid TWILIGHT'S
POSSESSION
HUNGER

Torrid Hunger

Tawny Taylor

Book 4 in the Twilight's Possession series.

Two vampires, dominant, dangerous, darkly seductive. And one woman who holds the key to sweet, luscious life for both.

Kaden, king of the Sons of the Twilight, possesses more power than most men could imagine, yet is imprisoned by his position and a crushing burden of guilt. Pierce, the strong dominant who can make submissives weep with pleasure, but is constantly reaching for the one thing that lies just beyond his grasp – Kaden. Pulling them together is The Hunger, a yearly ritual that drives the Sons to seek out a mortal woman for the blood-bond. Both men burn with a relentless need to sate all their appetites for blood...and sex...and for each other.

When the search for a cure for a friend's mysterious ailment brings Eden to Kaden's door, a deal is struck – seven days and nights of dark, sexual pleasure with Kaden and Pierce in exchange for the rare drug. But unbreakable threads of emotion tie them tighter together. And when it's over, none of them will be the same.

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Torrid Hunger

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TORRID HUNGER

Tawny Taylor

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*We are the protectors of our king, a secret brotherhood of warriors.
We are strong, loyal and dedicated, the sworn keepers of the Secrets.
We are defenders of justice, guardians of the Sons of the Twilight.
We show no mercy to the enemy.*

Chapter One

"I had rather excel others in the knowledge of what is excellent, than in the extent of my power and dominion." — Alexander the Great

Nobody but a fool would believe that being king of a people whose very existence depended upon constant acts of violence would be a jolly walk in the park. Kaden Setara, king of the Sons of the Twilight, had not been a fool. At least, not often. Yet even he hadn't guessed what great sacrifice he would face every day, hour, minute and second of his life before he had accepted the crown.

Now, decades later, he had a hundred times more enemies than friends, and every day they searched for a vulnerability, a chink in his armor.

There was a chink. Him. Pierce Barcola.

Not even Pierce knew it. No one did.

Pierce was tall. Athletic. Strong. With a face Kaden couldn't help staring at. Those striking features had burned into Kaden's memory a long time ago. Never dimming. Always there to fuel his fantasies, day and night.

Kaden feigned indifference as he strolled past the object of his eternal wanting, currently engaged in a Shibari scene with a pretty little submissive.

Pierce was a true master of the technique. Kaden had watched him use those ropes as extensions of himself, his will, body and spirit, to draw out his submissive's pleasure until he or she was nearly weeping, begging to be bound in his ropes forever. Such a cruel Master Pierce was, though. He never took the same submissive twice.

Kaden often wondered why. Since the practice required such a great level of trust, it had to be difficult to find new submissives willing to give up what they'd become accustomed to—safe words, escape clauses. Pierce's scenes were never negotiated. There were never safe words. No limits. The submissives he chose had only his promise that he would respect the trust they freely handed him.

It was deeply moving to watch a man who was so powerful, who held the life of another in his hands, act with such authority, confidence and deference.

The woman Pierce had bound this time was pleasing to look at. She stood on one foot, arms pulled straight back and secured to one ankle, her knee bent. A rope strung through a ring attached to the ceiling helped support her weight, but she still needed to hold the pose and maintain her balance. The strain pulled every muscle in her body tight, creating a living, breathing work of art.

Asymmetrical positioning. Impressive. A magnificent display. Pierce was giving this skilled submissive a great challenge. Only those with the highest level of control and balance could handle such a position.

Even more remarkable, it was clear by the expression on her face that she was enjoying it thoroughly. But it wasn't the ecstasy on her lovely face that made Kaden's balls heavy, his cock thicken, lengthen. It was the look on Pierce's face.

What dark demon was Pierce exorcising as he tied each knot?

When Pierce glanced his way, Kaden was forced to wrench his gaze away and move on. He paused to watch a humiliation scene featuring one of his favorite submissives playing the role of a pony for a sleek, tall Domme. The submissive, a young, lithe man, was nude, on all fours, a tail swishing back and forth across the firm buttocks Kaden had paddled last week. The memory of that smooth skin flushing pink sent a flood of heat pulsing through his already-warming limbs.

Tonight he needed a challenge. A submissive with the highest tolerance and very few hard limits. It was the Hunger fueling this need. His body was tight. His nerves strung taut. He would give pleasure tonight—dark, hard pleasure—so that tomorrow he could join his Triad and feed safely.

He found the perfect submissive at the rear of the dungeon, kneeling quietly, head lowered, spine arched, perfect globe breasts pushed out. Even her nipples seemed ready for him. Pink tips jutting out, begging to be pinched and suckled.

He motioned to his brother behind him, without turning around. *This one.* Then, his choice made, the purpose for his visit to the dungeon completed, he headed toward the exit.

While he dressed and selected the gear he would use in the scene, the submissive would be searched for weapons and poison. If she was deemed safe—not always a given—she would be taken to his personal dungeon. In exchange for her submission, she would receive the pleasure only a king could give.

Feeling the prickly heat of Pierce's stare on his back, Kaden left the dungeon without stealing the glance he ached for so desperately.

He's gone.

A woman moaned. Guilty, Pierce snapped his attention back to his submissive. Damn, his focus was shot to hell, his concentration obliterated. Happened every time the king came into the dungeon.

That didn't make it right, or acceptable.

Here before him was a woman who had trusted him, expecting to receive her reward in return. Was he failing her?

He checked her body, reading every line—muscle, sinew, bone. The pupils of her eyes and the flush of her skin. Her pink nipples protruding from her bound breasts, sensitized by the binding.

Yes, her arousal had diminished slightly.

Shit. He would start over if he had to. His concentration would not waver again.

With care, he loosened each knot and gently dragged the rope over her skin, watching her every response, right down to the goose bumps puckering over her arms and legs. It pleased him how responsive she was.

When she was completely unbound, he repositioned her on her knees and started again. First the rope circling her chest, directly below her breasts. Then the one above. A third lower on her stomach. With each knot tied, he felt the tension inside his muscles unwind, as if all his pressures and frustrations were slipping down his arms, through his fingers and into the rope. Like always, the strain took the form of a pulsing beat, like a low, distant drumbeat thrumming along his nerves.

Soon he would have relief.

Slowly, he bound her, knot by knot.

Slowly, he built her pleasure, knot by knot.

And slowly his body and spirit calmed, knot by knot.

Her pleasure was his peace. Growing, building to a crest. At the peak, nothing else existed. Nobody else. Her orgasm was his release.

She was silent as she came, but he knew the moment she relinquished to the burning need he carefully ignited in her body. Her legs and stomach visibly tightened. Her breaths grew rapid and shallow. Her lips pulled back slightly, giving her soft features a slightly harder look. And in an eye blink, it was gone, and a deep flush tinted her skin. She relaxed, and the expression on her face changed.

Ecstasy. He had his peace at last.

If only it would last.

Normally the heady intoxication would linger for a while, long after the final knot was untied. But not this time. Not with the Hunger burning through his veins.

Tomorrow he needed to take the binding. It would be a week of carnal release and healing. He would share an emotional, spiritual and physical bond with one Son of the Twilight and one mortal woman. And in those precious few days he would feed, sate his heightened carnal urges and renew his body.

Every year he looked forward to the binding. But not this time. The man he had shared that crucial week with since his first couldn't be with him this year. He would need to find a new partner.

A new partner...if only he could share those seven nights with his king.

* * * * *

"I can't believe you're doing this."

Eden York threw her best friend a casual shrug then tossed her hairbrush into her overnight bag and zipped it shut. "Quit pretending it's a big deal. I'm not sacrificing my life for chrissake. I'm just running an errand for a friend."

"An *errand*?" Yasmin scoffed, which she did quite often, too often. "An errand is picking up a friend's dry cleaning, which I did for you yesterday. It is not chasing down some lunatic to buy illegal drugs."

"You make it sound ten times worse than it is." Determined to go through with the plan she'd hatched last night, Eden pushed past her friend, who was obviously equally determined to stop her, and headed out to the living room, her overnight bag slung over her shoulder. The apartment's exit was in sight, and by God she was heading through it. "I'm not driving into the ghetto to buy crack."

"Sure, but it's still dangerous."

"How so? This guy is an upstanding citizen. He's no murderer, drug dealer or gangster." Eden checked the clock on the mantle for the third time. It was after six already, and she had a long drive ahead of her. She needed to get going.

Yasmin stepped in front of her, exactly what Eden didn't need her to do. "Do you really know that for sure?"

"Good grief, you've always been a drama queen, but this is ridiculous. Nate wouldn't have given me the guy's name if he thought I would be in danger by meeting with him. He's my friend."

"Desperate people can do desperate things." Yasmin was a walking, talking example of that little bit of wisdom, but Eden would never think to throw that in her face.

Eden gave her an air-kiss instead. "I love you but I've got to go. I'll call you tonight."

"Not good enough. Call me twice—no, make that three times. First thing when you get there, tomorrow morning, and again when you get ready to head home." Yasmin sighed and finally stepped out of the way. "There's no convincing you to change your mind."

"Not when a friend's life is on the line, no." Eden gave her worried friend a hug before extending her arms. "I'd do the same for you. Hell, I'd sleep with the devil if it would save your life."

"See, that's the difference between me and Nate. I wouldn't let you."

"And I wouldn't let you stop me, just like I wouldn't let him stop me."

Shaking her head, Yasmin folded her arms over her chest. "You're too nice, Eden. Hasn't anybody told you what happens to nice people?"

"Sure. My mother, my father, my grandma, my aunt, a few teachers and at least one stranger. But I have just enough bad girl in me to keep from dying young." She pulled open the apartment door, stepping into the hallway. "I'll be back tomorrow. Try not to worry."

Yasmin grimaced as she followed Eden through the doorway. "You know me, that'll be impossible."

"Then put all that nervous energy to use." Eden poked her worrywart of a best friend on the upper arm. "I expect the next chapter of a certain book to be finished when I get back. If it's not, there'll be hell to pay."

"If you promise me you'll be careful, I'll write *two* chapters."

"By tomorrow night?"

"Sure."

"Done." Ready to face a bazillionaire with a stockpile of the medicine Nate needed to save his life, Eden sealed the deal with a handshake and headed to her car. Finally, she was on her way.

On went the stereo, and down the road she drove, following the directions Nate had given her.

Kaden Setara. That was the man she was about to meet. According to Nate, the guy was rich, powerful and a little on the eccentric side, some kind of business mogul who kept to himself.

Actually, the expression, *kept to himself*, was an understatement, if what she had learned was true. It was more what she hadn't learned that made her so curious and leery. The man was a complete mystery, which made this little excursion even more exciting—and scary. Eden had done some checking on the internet and found absolutely nothing, even on the most reliable sites she'd used in the past. It was weird. How was it possible a man with that kind of money didn't own anything, not even a bank account, telephone or home?

As she drove, she tried to imagine what kind of person this mysterious man was. More importantly, she wondered how difficult it would be to convince him to sell her the medicine for Nate. Nate had warned her it wasn't going to be simple or easy, but she hadn't been too discouraged. Daily she proved she knew how to convince people to do things they didn't want to. From the first week she started at her job, she'd been the top seller. It was a gift, it seemed, that came naturally, and more than anything, she was grateful for that talent now. It would serve a much more meaningful purpose than just helping her pad her bank account by selling portrait packages to parents of toddlers.

Long ago she'd learned *the secret* to sales—the key to manipulating anyone was discovering a vital need. But what could a bazillionaire like Kaden Setara need?

Chapter Two

Some four hours later, Eden was finally close to her destination, but she was no closer to coming up with a solid plan on how to approach Kaden Setara. She had a few ideas. Option A—bribery, B—guilt and C—the obvious. But she wasn't sure if any of them were worth a second thought. For instance, bribery wasn't going to work if he was truly rich. The pittance she had to offer would be more like a slap in the face than a respectable payment.

Then there was Option B—guilt. If she told him who Nate De Vries was, what a wonderful man he was, and what good he'd done for so many people, maybe there would be some hope. As she well knew, guilt could be a very powerful motivator...for the kind of person predisposed to feel guilt. Not everyone did. At this point, she couldn't be sure Kaden Setara was one of them.

Of course, there was also Option C—the obvious, which she'd alluded to as a joke last night. Sex. She'd never used sex to manipulate a man, had never thought she'd even consider it, but she wasn't going to dismiss the possibility just yet.

Facts were facts. She was a woman. Kaden Setara was a man. Most men liked sex. A lot. In fact, very few men refused an offer of sex, even when there were strings attached—women had been using that Achilles' heel since the beginning of time to get what they wanted. A friend's life was surely worth doing the deed. And who knew, maybe she'd even enjoy it. She liked sex.

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't come up with any other options. Assuming he wouldn't volunteer to sell her the medicine, as Nate had said, she only had bribery, guilt and sex in her arsenal. She hoped one of them would work.

She wasn't feeling particularly confident as she pulled up to what looked more like a castle than a home. She figured she would try her options in alphabetical order, using guilt to convince him to accept her less-than-impressive bribery if necessary. And if those failed, she'd pull out the big gun.

At the front gate, she put her car into park and unfastened a few buttons on her blouse so that the swell of her breasts and a tiny touch of black lace were visible—it couldn't hurt. After a quick makeup check in the mirror, she hit the call button on the intercom. She looked straight at the security camera and filled her head with naughty thoughts, hoping she would produce a convincing come-hither expression.

There was a beep and then a voice, "Can I help you?"

She leaned out the window. "My name is Eden York. I'm here to see Mr. Setara."

After a couple of seconds, a response came back, "Mr. Setara isn't available."

Darn. Eden's heart sank a smidge. So much for the direct approach, not that she'd expected it to work. Hoped, yes. Anticipated, nope. To a guy like Kaden Setara, she was a nobody. He probably had lots of pesky nobodies knocking on his door every day, some of them prettier than she.

Disappointed, frustrated, but not even remotely ready to give up, she forced a smile and said cheerfully, "Thank you anyway." She shifted the car into reverse and backed out of the driveway.

Okay then. The direct approach wasn't going to work. She would have to do better. She hit a button on her cell.

* * * * *

"Who is she?" Kaden studied the security film as his favorite slave blotted the water off his shoulders.

The woman who'd pulled up to the house was pretty, with wide-set eyes and a little nose, full, lush lips and strawberry blonde hair. Whether it was the Hunger or simple lust, he couldn't stop staring at her, or imagining those lips circling his aching shaft.

Behind him, his brother Marek, the head of security and his most trusted advisor answered, "She said her name is Eden York. We ran the car's plates and it's registered to a woman by that name, but we haven't confirmed her identity yet."

"Find out who she is immediately."

His brother nodded. "We're on it."

Kaden caught the slave's wrist, forcing the servant to move the towel down the center of his body. The Hunger was making him tight and hard and he needed to fuck again. The sight of that woman's long slender neck had only made things worse. He could almost see the pulse thrumming under her smooth skin. "I want to know what she wants."

"We'll get to the bottom of it right away."

The bottom. Kaden smiled at the expression, his gaze slipping to his slave's firm buttocks, thinking the flesh needed a few hard strikes. With his hand. No, a paddle.

As if his slave knew what his Master was thinking, he dragged the towel lower, cupping Kaden's heavy balls in his hands, and Kaden's burning blood spiked hotter.

Yes, you may serve me now.

"Did you hear back from Compton?" After Kaden burned off some tension, he and his partner in the Triad, Van Compton, would need to hunt. It wasn't easy finding a mortal woman who could disappear from her life—friends, work, family—for an entire week without being missed. He had maybe twenty-four hours to locate one.

For a brief moment, he imagined Eden York kneeling at his feet, surrendering to him. It was a very pleasant image.

Marek hesitated. "No, we haven't heard from him. We've left several messages."

Unease crept up Kaden's spine. "Hmmm." Compton had taken the blood-bond with Kaden every year. He was reliable, trustworthy and, most notably, punctual, most likely because the Hunger would drive him to Kaden. "Something's wrong. Terribly wrong." Just like that, the burning in his blood chilled. He pushed the slave away and shrugged into a robe.

"We have a couple of men checking his place. But just in case we can't locate him in time, I think you should consider finding another partner. With things so uncertain—"

"Yes, of course." Hiding his worry for his longtime friend, Kaden tied the belt around his waist and turned to face his brother. "The question is, who? You know how vulnerable we get during the blood-bond. With so many enemies, I can't trust just anyone."

"I have someone in mind," Marek offered somewhat reluctantly.

"Who?"

"Pierce Barcola."

The image of Barcola's face flashed through Kaden's mind and instantly his body went hard again. "Are you sure we can trust him?"

"He's checked out."

"What about the rumors that he's tight with members of the White Hawk Alliance?"

"As far as we've learned, they're only rumors. The same about the rumors he was seen at Carpe Nocturne."

"But if they're rumors, that begs the question, who started them? And why?"

"Haven't figured that out yet."

Uneasy, Kaden moved to the closet to pick out some clothes. "Find out what—if anything—has happened to Compton, and only bring Barcola to me if Compton's...unavailable."

Marek nodded. "I'm sure he's just out of town and was forced to take another partner."

They exchanged a tense glance.

"Yes, I'm sure that's it." Kaden pulled a pair of pants from the closet and hung them on the mahogany clothes valet stand next to him. "Go."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"I told you to stop calling me that, dammit." He clapped his brother on the back. "And by the way, thank you. For always watching my back."

Marek smiled. "If you can't trust your brother, you can't trust anyone."

* * * * *

Pierce loosened the final knot, minute shivers of pleasure quivering along his nerve endings as the rope slid down the submissive's body. Like every time before, he felt at complete peace now, his mind, body and spirit still and relaxed.

It seemed their encounter had the same effect on the submissive. She tipped her head in gratitude and shuffled away.

"Pierce Barcola," someone said from somewhere behind him.

Pierce turned to see who had called his name and was shocked to find it was Marek Setara, brother to his king. "Yes?"

As Marek approached, Pierce watched him. Both brothers had thickly muscled bodies, wavy hair and dark eyes. But their faces weren't as similar. Both were strikingly handsome, with straight noses, nicely formed mouths and hard-edged cheekbones and jaws. But the younger brother's face lacked the lines of wisdom that made his older sibling's so remarkable.

"Can we talk somewhere privately?" Marek asked, tipping his head and speaking low.

"Sure." Pierce motioned toward the public dungeon's exit, intending to take his unexpected visitor into a private room for what appeared to be a sensitive conversation. Neither he nor Marek spoke until they were closed in the private room he leased.

Marek moved away from the door. "I have a request from your king and my brother."

A request from the king? Now this was unexpected. "Yes?"

"He's in need of the blood-bond and has asked me to approach you on his behalf."

Even more unexpected.

Pierce didn't respond right away. He wasn't about to refuse. Not only was he burning from the Hunger as the king had to be, but also burning with desire *for* his king.

Still, he couldn't appear too eager.

Finding and taking a partner for the blood-bond was one of his favorite challenges, and much more enjoyable than the hunt. Having the brother to the king make a formal request took some of the enjoyment out of it, but he wasn't going to let that ruin it completely.

Pierce turned his back to Marek, blocking the king's messenger's view of his face for a few moments. He lifted one end of a rope he had left lying on a bench and began looping it around his forearm. "He asked you to speak to me on his behalf. It surprises me that the king doesn't care to handle such delicate matters himself."

"He has many more pressing issues," Marek grumbled.

Glad to hear an edge in Marek's voice, Pierce turned around. "Of course he has pressing concerns. The man is king. But so do I, and still I allow myself the pleasure of selecting and...seducing...my partners for each blood-bond."

Marek lifted one brow, but that was the only hint of emotion he displayed. "I see."

Pierce hung the rope on an empty peg fixed to the wall and then started straightening the other items hanging nearby. "If our king would like to take the blood-bond with me, I will need to speak to him beforehand. In private. Will he agree?"

"Most likely."

Pleased, Pierce turned around and folded his arms over his chest. "Then tell him to meet me here at —"

"That's not possible," Marek interrupted. "As you must realize, the king's security is of primary concern. You will need to come with me, back to the palace dungeon."

Pierce shook his head. "No. I take a *partner* for the blood-bond, not a *Master*. We play on neutral territory. I am not His Majesty's slave."

"You must realize what you're asking." Marek's jaw ticked. "Are you trying to lure your king into a trap?"

"No, of course not. I wouldn't wish him harm. I have great respect and admiration for him and have always been a faithful servant. But I refuse to take the blood-bond with a man who will not treat me and respect me as an equal."

Marek's eyes narrowed. "I don't see that being an issue."

This time, Pierce felt his own brow rise. "He sent you here to *fetch* me. That is not how a Son of the Twilight normally takes a partner."

After a moment of tense silence, Marek nodded. "I will arrange the meeting. Before sunset. He needs to hunt tonight."

"So do I. Five o'clock?"

"That gives me only two hours to secure this place."

"True, but that also means there's less time for his enemies to plan an attack."

Silence.

Marek finally acquiesced. "He'll be here."

"Five o'clock then. I will prepare."

Pierce didn't allow himself to smile until Marek had left.

He was about to take the blood-bond with the one man he had always hoped but never expected to bond with. At last he would have the chance to convince Kaden Setara that he would need to take the blood-bond with no other Son of the Twilight again.

He formulated a plan as he drove home.

* * * * *

"It isn't possible to secure that building in such a short timeframe. I won't be safe." Sitting at his desk, Kaden waved away his assistant, motioning for her to shut the door after she left. Once he was alone with his brother, he let his anger show, slamming his flattened hands on the desk top. "What is he trying to do? Serve me to my enemies on a platter?"

Standing just inside the door, Marek waited until Kaden motioned him in before stepping closer. "I don't believe that's what he's after. We've checked him out thoroughly and there isn't any reason to believe he's not loyal."

"Despite his lineage?"

"Yes. Unlike his parents, he fought for us in the rebellion." Marek slid into the chair opposite Kaden's and rested his elbows on his knees, leaning forward. "To tell you the truth, I see his point. My blood-bond was arranged, but being the brother to a king, I wasn't surprised. Having me go and 'fetch' him for you wasn't the most respectful way to handle the situation."

"Sure, but if he was reasonable, he'd understand —"

"Would you?"

Kaden leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

No, he wouldn't understand, not if he were the average Son of the Twilight. Unlike him and his brother, most Sons of the Twilight saw the blood-bond as a very private, emotional matter, not something to be arranged with the cool detachment one might use when distributing invitations to a business meeting.

Long ago he'd learned it would be different for him. Like every alliance in his life, this one—an act that was absolutely vital to his life—would not be driven by emotion, or whim, or even desire or need, but by politics. He would never, could never, make a love match.

Nor would he ever have a love match in marriage, it seemed.

Once again, despite his best efforts, the object of his deepest, most secret affection had eluded him. He had met Synne Halvorson months ago and hadn't been able to stop thinking about her since. She was everything he would want or need in a bride. Gentle but strong. Sweet. Docile. Beautiful. Submissive. Nurturing. Loyal. And she was the eldest daughter of one of the most powerful kings among their people.

Kaden wanted her. Hell, he needed her. With the daughter came her father's military and political support.

But he would not have her, nor would his people have what they deserved. For her father had refused his offer for the third time, choosing instead to strike an alliance with the king of another tribe, one who would benefit should Kaden's enemies succeed in removing him from the throne.

Not only did the man's maneuver put Kaden at a disadvantage politically, but it had broken his heart to think everything might be lost.

There were moments, very few, where things like this saddened him. But most days he was content being the king and living with every minute dictated by the needs of his people. He was many things, not all good. He had numerous vices and had committed many sins, but self-pity wasn't one of them.

"No other Son would have made it so complicated," Kaden grumbled.

His brother motioned toward Kaden's computer. "I'm sure I don't need to remind you why Barcola is the best choice."

Kaden glanced at the photo of Pierce Barcola, displayed on his laptop's screen. "No, you don't need to remind me. I agree he could be useful to us."

Marek sat back and cupped his hands behind his neck, elbows raised, arms crossed at the wrist, cushioning his head. "This is the perfect opportunity to find out what he's really all about. I know you're upset about Compton..."

Compton. Fuck.

The rest of what Marek said just drifted around Kaden's head, not penetrating through the thoughts whirling within it.

Compton was dead and no one knew how or why. Kaden's spirits were already low. This devastating loss only added to his silent misery. Dammit, he wanted answers. Needed answers.

Sons of the Twilight didn't have heart attacks or strokes, they didn't get cancer or catch fatal infections. Nor did they get killed in car accidents or falls from heights. Sons of the Twilight only died one of two ways—murder or starvation.

He had to know which had killed his lover, his most trusted friend.

Chapter Three

Eden sighed as yet another car drove past. This stakeout stuff was way more boring than she'd ever imagined, even with a steady flow of vehicles rolling in and out of the property's gated entry. It seemed that Kaden Setara had a lot of visitors but never left his fortress of a house himself. What kind of life was that?

Of course, there was the possibility that he'd been a passenger in one of the vehicles coming in and going out. Most of them had tinted windows, and so it was hard to tell how many passengers they carried. But her gut feeling was he was still there, in the house she could barely see from the road thanks to the towering brick walls and thickly wooded lot.

If he didn't come out soon, she was going to have to come up with yet another plan. She'd been at this for so long now, she was numb. Yesterday she sat here all afternoon and evening until she'd given up out of sheer exhaustion. A little before eleven she checked into a local hotel for some much-needed sleep, grabbed a quick bite and then returned before sunrise, hoping she'd have better luck in the morning.

What would she do if this didn't work?

She'd been sitting there all day, hoping to catch him leaving for work and hoping to follow him, thinking she might catch him in a parking lot or a Starbucks or something and get a chance to talk to him. She'd consumed three diet bars and an iced tea and she was still starving. Her head was pounding from caffeine withdrawal. Her hope was plummeting.

She glanced at the clock. It was quarter to five in the evening. She'd give it another fifteen minutes and then she'd call it a night and come back in the morning.

"Come on, Kaden Setara, you mole. Crawl out of your hole." Hoping to stave off her hunger for a little while longer, she rooted in her purse for the pack of gum. As she glanced down, something flashed in her peripheral vision. Sunlight striking metal. Another car was leaving Castle Kaden. This could be it. A car hadn't exited without entering first, until now.

"Hot damn, tell me this is him." Her heart kick-starting into overdrive, she shifted her car out of park and prepared to pull out once the vehicle passed her.

She watched in her rearview mirror as the black Lexus SUV with tinted windows turn onto the street and headed her way. As it passed, she saw him through the half-open window, or so she hoped. If it wasn't him, he had a twin brother.

Once the SUV had traveled down the road a bit, she pulled out to follow.

She had absolutely no experience tailing somebody. She hoped the driver wouldn't notice her. . Traffic was moderate, heavy enough that her car wasn't the only vehicle

besides the Lexus on the road but light enough to make it easy for her to keep an eye on him. They made several turns and she did her best not to appear too obvious. Finally the SUV turned down a secondary street lined on both sides by industrial buildings. She resisted the urge to turn and instead intentionally drove by the street, deciding she'd let him get a little head start before she followed. That way it wouldn't be so obvious she'd tailed him. After pulling a U-turn in a gas station, she drove back down the road and turned onto the narrow service street.

Thankfully, she could still see the SUV up ahead. Seconds later, it turned into a driveway that skirted the side of a building. She slowed, drove past to make sure the SUV wasn't turning around, and once she saw that it had parked, she quickly turned her vehicle around and drove down the driveway for the building next door. Anxious now, she parked and started walking toward the SUV, currently hidden by the warehouse.

When she turned the corner, coming around the back of the building, she was greeted by not one or two but three huge men dressed in all black. One fraction of a second they were walking toward her, and before she had a chance to fully comprehend what was happening, she was being hauled off her feet. She didn't even have time to scream before they had her bound and gagged.

She was in deep shit.

* * * * *

"My king." Pierce gave Kaden a proper greeting, waiting on bended knee until he responded.

"Leave us." Kaden waited until his brother left the room before motioning to Pierce. "Join me." Watching the man's every move, Kaden walked to a comfortable-looking leather couch positioned along one wall and sat. "You know the purpose of this visit."

Seated a respectable distance away, Pierce's body was relaxed, a well-formed arm thrown over the back of the couch. Kaden couldn't help noticing how Pierce's black knit pullover fit just snugly enough to emphasize the full lines of his muscled chest and shoulders. "Yes, I do, Your Majesty."

Maintaining a cool demeanor, despite the desire licking through his body like flames, Kaden set one ankle across his bent knee. "Out of respect, I agreed to this arrangement. We have known of each other for a long time, although distantly. I believe we share a mutual respect as men and Doms. I've watched you and find your rope work inspiring, but that does not mean I wish to relinquish control to you or any Son for that matter. I must be, at all times, king. Even during the blood-bond. Especially during the blood-bond."

"I have no wish to challenge your position, my king." Pierce straightened, leaning toward Kaden. "You do understand what an insult it is to be fetched by a servant for the blood-bond. The Sons of the Twilight don't bond in such matter." He leaned closer, and the clean, fresh scent of his skin filled Kaden's nostrils. "We're born to hunt. Our

prey. Each other. It's in our souls, our blood. I merely wished to exercise a primal drive." Nearer still he moved, until the heat from his body warmed Kaden's skin. "I long to hunt."

"As do I," Kaden confessed, shocked by the words, not because he thought them but because he'd spoken the thought aloud. His muscles were pulling tight from the soles of his feet to the very top of his scalp. Preparing for the chase. The battle for position and power.

This man was not like his former partner. He was strong and dominant and confident enough to challenge a king. To treat him as a man, an equal.

For the first time in eons, Kaden felt alive and free. Released from the burden of endless negotiations and political maneuvering. At this moment, he wasn't king. He was a Son of the Twilight following his primal drives.

This was going to be a blood-bond like none he'd had before. It was going to be exciting, thrilling, not merely satisfying. The timing, considering everything that had happened recently, couldn't be better.

Slowly he smiled, angled to face Pierce fully and shifted forward, moving into the small area of space between their bodies. "I haven't pursued a partner in many years. I find the need is one that can't be denied forever."

Pierce held his ground but he didn't make a move forward either. His eyes narrowed slightly, almost imperceptibly. "It shouldn't be."

A beat of charged silence fell between them.

In the next instant, the potent scent of male need filled Kaden's nose, and driven by an overpowering urge, he lunged forward, bracing his outstretched arms on either side of Pierce's head, hands flattened against the couch's back. Without thinking, he pressed his mouth to Pierce's.

The kiss wasn't soft or sweet. It was hard, it was deliciously masculine and it was thoroughly intoxicating. Pierce's tongue stroked and tangled with his as they explored the sweet depths of each others' mouths. Low male groans, like the warning growl of a dog, rumbled in the air around them.

Pierce's hands skimmed over Kaden's chest, the slight pressure pure ecstasy against his hard nipples. And then Pierce shoved hard, catching Kaden by surprise, and sending him falling backward. His shoulders hit the back of the couch just as Pierce hurled forward, covering him with his hard, hot body. "Don't make the mistake of thinking I'm going to sweetly drop to my knees, my king. If I get there—if—it will be because you forced me there."

A challenge.

Kaden thrust his hands up, catching Pierce's head between them, but Pierce forced them out and angled down for another kiss. He devoured and took, the frenzied thrusts of his tongue belying his brave words. Kaden knew then, Pierce was also crippled with need, a need nearly as desperate as his own.

Taking advantage of Pierce's wavering control, Kaden shoved him aside and rolled over, jumping to his feet. Pierce was caught off-guard, but not for long. Within a fraction of a second, they were locked in a wrestling hold, fighting for power and domination, the instincts of the feral beasts within them driving their every movement.

His brother Marek had selected more wisely than he had ever imagined. He had found the perfect partner for the blood-bond. Not because it would spark a political alliance, or even because it was a safe match.

Pierce would stir his desires as no partner ever had.

Now all they needed was their third, a mortal woman.

* * * * *

"I'm telling you the truth." Tied to a wooden bench, positioned in the back of a dimly lit warehouse, her wrists bound behind her back, ankles tied to the bench's legs, Eden let her head fall forward. Again, she repeated, "I was following Mr. Setara because I need to get some medicine for a friend of mine."

"You're lying." The biggest of the behemoths who had kidnapped her at least an hour ago dug his fingers in her hair and pulled, forcing her head up. "Mr. Setara doesn't have any medicine. Why would you think he does? He's no doctor."

"I know that." Rage and terror whipped through her body at the pain. Her eyes burned and she blinked as she stared down at the concrete floor. She wouldn't look at him, at any of them. She'd made the mistake of a lifetime and now she had absolutely no clue how to undo it.

She was so furious at the way she'd been treated, she wanted to call them all every name in the book, pound their faces with her fist—or better yet with something much bigger and harder—and kick them in the balls until they were singing soprano. But the instinct to survive wouldn't let her. Something inside her kept telling her to stay calm, to wait, think, watch. "I swear, I'm telling the truth. Please, you've got to believe me. There's no reason for me to lie."

The big, mean one glanced at the other man.

"Honest to God," she said, "I don't have a dangerous bone in my body...well, I'm not dangerous to anyone else, only myself."

The big one scowled. "I say we search her and see if she has any weapons."

"By all means." Eden nodded. Now that he'd released her hair, her head was the only part she could move. "Pat me down. I promise you won't find anything. I couldn't harm a mouse, let alone a man."

"Fine." The big one bent down, starting at her feet. He pulled off her shoes and socks before smoothing his hands up her blue-jean-covered calves. Up they went, over her shins, knees, up the back of her thighs until he couldn't search any higher because of her position. Next, totally ignoring all sense of decency, he ran his hands up the front of her thighs and between them. She could have died when he rubbed there. Thankfully

he moved on quickly, up over her belly, chest, breasts—another awkward moment—shoulders, back. Finally he had her open her mouth. What sort of weapon might she hide in there? “Didn’t find anything.”

“Of course you didn’t,” she said, forcing the sarcasm from her voice. “That’s because I’m telling the truth.”

“Who sent you?” The other man asked for the bazillionth time.

“A friend named Nate De Vries. He said Mr. Setara could give me some kind of medicine.”

“Why would he say that? Mr. Setara isn’t a doctor.”

Darn it! She’d hoped they were finally moving forward, and now they were back to this? “I know he’s not a doctor. We’ve already covered this ground.”

“Then why would your friend believe he would have this medicine?”

“I have no idea. I figured it was some kind of unconventional tonic and Mr. Setara was a witch doctor or pagan healer or...something.”

The men gave each other a look then left, exiting through a door she guessed led into the front part of the building.

Now it was time to act.

The second the door swung closed, Eden started jerking against her restraints, frantically trying to break free. The rope cut into her wrists and ankles, the burning agony making her eyes water. Still she didn’t stop, couldn’t stop. Adrenaline surged through her body, making every muscle in her arms and legs tight. Waves of nervous energy pulsed through them, yet despite frantic fighting and strength she didn’t know she possessed, she didn’t break free.

The door swung open.

One man walked in this time. Only one.

Mr. Setara.

It was him, she recognized him from the picture Nate had shown her. She’d have her chance to talk to him.

Oh thank God! A sob tore up her throat, temporarily blocking it.

Silent, eyes sharp, stunning face completely unreadable, he circled her like a predator preparing to strike. More than ever, she felt small and weak and vulnerable. Absolutely at his mercy. Strangely, she wasn’t as terrified as she had been, probably because he was unbelievably gorgeous, unlike his goons. Impossibly so. Strange tingly prickles pinched her nape when he stopped somewhere behind her.

“You’ve gone to a great deal of trouble to speak with me.” His voice was rich and smooth and utterly devastating. “Why?”

Eden cleared her throat. “A friend told me you could help him.”

“And who is this friend?”

“His name is Nate De Vries.”

Nothing.

The soft scuff of his shoes traveling over the concrete floor seemed ten times louder than it should, thanks to the heavy silence and her over-wound nerves. He was moving around her left side. Her skin tingled, left arm, left side of her face, even the left side of her scalp. It was as if he were emitting some kind of electrical current, static, and she could feel it.

She clenched her hands and turned her head to watch him as he slowly stepped around the bench she was sitting on. Once again, he stopped directly in front of her. Her gaze swept up his body, bouncing from one remarkable landmark to another. Thickly muscled thighs wrapped in black pants. Flat stomach, broad chest and thick arms covered in a lightweight black sweater. Chin. Mouth. Eyes. Dark hair with just enough curl to lend his otherwise completely intimidating look a touch of softness.

She inhaled, exhaled. "I'm sorry if I went about this all wrong, but it's not like I didn't try a more upfront approach first. Your security guards turned me away when I went to your home—"

"You know where I live. Who told you?" His eyes narrowed and something scary flashed in them, but otherwise he showed no signs of emotion.

"Nate did. He gave me your address and showed me a hazy photograph of you so I'd recognize you."

More silence. Clearly, it was a big deal that her friend had access to this man's address.

"What is it your friend wants from me?"

"Something called Eclipse?"

A flare of emotion lit in his eyes, and she knew in an instant that Mr. Setara was hiding something. Just as quickly, the glimmer blinked out and his mien turned cool and emotionless again. "I know nothing about this 'Eclipse'."

He had to be lying. Why?

"I guess Nate was mistaken then?"

"You said his last name was De Vries?" Mr. Setara tucked his arms behind his back. "Do you have a photograph of your friend?"

"No. I didn't think to bring one." That was the truth, one she was glad for at the moment. Nate had never once suggested he didn't want Kaden Setara to see a photo of him, but she had a feeling it would be a bad thing.

However, she could think of a very simple way for this man to find one if he wanted—her MySpace and Facebook pages were filled with pictures of herself and her friends. Fool that she was, she'd never realized how potentially dangerous that could be. Until now.

A knock at the door made her flinch.

Kaden gave her one last look then left.

If only she had access to a computer right now.

* * * * *

The sun had just dipped below the horizon and the western sky was painted in glorious shades of salmon and purple. Outside on the brick patio, the cool air soothed Kaden's burning skin, but only its surface. The Hunger had him in a relentless grip now, and no matter what relief he sought, nothing eased the agony for long. He needed Pierce. Now.

The French door opened behind him, and he straightened, hoping it was time to take the blood-bond. Instead of Pierce, his brother Marek stepped out onto the bricks, a large envelope in his hand. He handed it to Kaden. "She's telling the truth."

Kaden skimmed the page. "Who is this friend, Nate De Vries?"

"He's a Son all right. His name was Taite. Clayton Taite. Dangerous son of a bitch. He was arrested for treason just after the turn of the twentieth century and supposedly executed almost fifty years ago. I don't know how he escaped or who was executed in his place. I'm guessing he's been living as a mortal all these years."

"Treason?"

"Yeah. He was implicated in several plots to have you assassinated since your coronation. The bastard has one obvious tie to the White Hawk Alliance, his father, who was a founding member before he was executed. Intelligence has just come in that an even more radical group spun off the Alliance sometime after Taite was arrested, and we're thinking he might be a key player."

Kaden stared at the photograph of his would-be killer. He didn't look any more threatening than any of his other known enemies, and yet the paper claimed he was one of the most deadly, cunning men to call himself a Son of the Twilight. "Passing as a mortal means he's needed a steady supply of Eclipse all these years—a steady supply of *clean* Eclipse. Either he had a stockpile of the old stuff—manufactured before the current problem came up—or someone else has the formula and was making it but isn't any longer."

"Hmmm." Kaden had a feeling this man might be the key to open a lot of doors, and answer a lot of questions. "How soon can we find him?"

"We're already on it. You know, it's not safe to let his friend in there go free until we get him into custody..." Marek gave Kaden a knowing look. "If she knows something, you'll be able to get it out of her..."

"Yep, I'm following you. Couldn't be better timing. I need to hunt. Call the boys and have her brought here. They can leave her in my dungeon."

"Already done."

A minute rattle behind him signaled another visitor joining them. Kaden glanced over his shoulder, catching Pierce stepping out onto the patio. Their gazes locked. Pierce's lips curled into a wicked smile and instantly a blazing fire burned in Kaden's belly.

Pierce's tongue swept along his lower lip. "Are you talking about that little blonde I just saw being escorted to the dungeon? I don't think she'll mind the ropes much."

Kaden couldn't help returning his partner's smile. They had their third, a lush woman with a body that tempted him in too many ways to count. "Prepare her." He gave Pierce a questioning glance. "Are we in agreement?"

Pierce's gaze didn't waver. "Most definitely."

Chapter Four

Eden had been happy to run this little errand for her good friend Nate. Had been, past tense.

After what Nate had told her, she'd expected it to be a challenge. Maybe even a little risky. But she'd been so sure Nate wouldn't have let her try to meet with this man if he'd had any notion it would be dangerous. How wrong she'd been to make such an assumption.

She'd never in a million years thought things would go so wrong so fast. A short drive and a pathetic attempt at being a PI, and she was now a hostage.

To say she was shocked was an understatement.

To say she was petrified was an understatement.

To say she was pissed was also an understatement. A gigantic one.

Who the hell did Mr. Kaden "Too important to talk to peons or abide by the law" Setara think he was, holding her against her will?

She'd voiced her opinion at the top of her lungs a few times until her throat was raw and her voice hoarse. Thus she now found herself not only bound but also gagged. And instead of sitting in a musty warehouse, she was lying in a bondage dungeon, flat on her back, arms and legs tethered to metal poles.

The indignity.

To keep the tears at bay, she had to remind herself that it could be worse. Much worse. She'd been spared a strip search. She hadn't been hurt, not even a little scratch or bruise. The men who had transported her to this place had actually been careful not to harm her, even though they were certainly strong enough to beat her to a pulp. They hadn't even cussed at her, and she'd probably deserved at least that much.

Yes, things could be much worse. She could've been beaten up, raped and left for dead somewhere in a ditch.

She took a slow, deep breath.

How likely was it that Kaden had taken such care to have her safely transported only to harm her? Right? Right.

Then again, who knew the mind of a madman?

A shudder swept up her spine. This waiting and wondering was killing her.

She had no idea how much time had passed. Minutes? Hours? Couldn't be too long. Her stomach was just beginning to rumble. She was hungry but not starved. With her low blood sugar, she tended to get really, really weak and shaky if she didn't eat every four hours, so she guessed it hadn't been more than a couple of hours tops. Yet time

dragged, which made it all the easier for her imagination to conjure up shocking, terrifying images.

It's going to be okay. Kaden Setara isn't a deviant monster. He's just... Her gaze swept across the room, lurching from one piece of bondage furniture to another. Kinky. I hope. Oh God, I hope.

Kinky. A very different kind of image flashed in her mind and her heart did a bizarre little hop in her chest. There must have been a reason why he'd had his evil henchmen bring her here. Perhaps he was thinking...hmmm...was he setting her up for Option C?

Then again, he might have had her brought here because there were so many convenient restraints in this room, not because he'd wanted to put them to their more common use.

Good grief, Kaden, would you just get here and end the agony, for God's sake?

As if someone had heard her silent plea, heavy footsteps sounded outside the door. The lock clicked. The door swung open.

She stretched her neck, trying to see who had come into the room. Why did those behemoths have to tie her so she couldn't see the door?

The footsteps came closer, closer still. A slow, casual gait. Sure and steady. The person stopped. She arched her neck, rolling her head back as far as she could, and finally caught a glimpse of who had entered.

It was him. Kaden.

Studying him upside down, she stared at his face, trying to read him. She got nothing, just like earlier. The man had a poker face Erick Lindgren couldn't read.

He stepped closer and stooped down and she watched, focusing especially on his eyes. There was something there, a tension she couldn't decipher. The rest of his face was calm, relaxed, as if he were standing on a beach, watching the tide roll in.

Gently, he unfastened the leather gag and pulled it from her mouth. She rolled her head to the side and shrugged her shoulder, trying to wipe her face. Her cheeks were damp with tears, her nose drippy, and her face moist where the gag had once been.

"No, Eden." He caught her chin and pulled, forcing her to turn her head toward him instead. From a pocket, he produced a handkerchief and squatted beside her. Sweetly, he blotted her chin. "Let me help you."

She wanted to believe he'd help her—with more than just wiping her nose. Her head did believe him for some insane reason. Her body definitely didn't. She was shaking all over, muscles so tight they felt as if they were tied into knots. "Why are you keeping me here?"

"Because we need each other."

He needed her?

"Or rather, we need something from each other." He gently pressed the handkerchief to her mouth.

"What something?" She was absolutely petrified by many of the possibilities, but that didn't stop her from asking. She searched his face for any hint of what he was thinking. He was impossible to read. A mask of perfectly formed features that held not even a tiny bit of emotion.

"You need Eclipse. I might be able to get it for you." He lifted the handkerchief and traced her bottom lip with his thumb. "But you'll have to pay for it."

Naturally. And based on the intimacy of his touch, she had a good idea what sort of payment he was expecting. But at least he wasn't denying the medicine existed anymore. "How much will it cost?" she asked, hoping he'd clarify exactly what he was looking for. "I have money."

"I don't want money." He ran his fingertip along her jaw. "You will stay here with me for one week and do whatever I ask."

"Whatever?" She was lying on the floor, bound spread-eagle. That one word could encompass a great many things.

"Yes, whatever." His fingers curled around her neck, holding but not strangling. The position, coupled with the setting, suggested he was looking for a new bondage playmate.

"Stuff commonly done in rooms like this? Bondage?" she asked.

"Precisely." His hold tightened, but still not enough to scare her. His fingers pressed into the back of her neck, while his thumb rested gently against the front, leaving her able to breathe but breathless anyway.

"Are you suggesting I become your sex slave for a week?" Just saying those words made her heart gallop. This man was walking, talking seduction.

The corners of his mouth curled up. "You could say that."

"So, there will be...penetration."

"Most definitely."

Her face flared so hot, she wouldn't be surprised if it blistered. No man had ever made such a suggestion before, not so bluntly. Kaden was willing to strike a deal, but he wanted sex for one week. And not just any sex, but kinky sex. Was this something he did on a regular basis—asking desperate women who came to him for help to pay him back with sex? And if so, why? It wasn't like he couldn't get women. He was so freaking gorgeous, women had to be dropping on their knees wherever he went. Then again, if today was any indication, maybe he didn't get out much.

"When would you give me the drug and how much?"

"I'll give you a bottle every night, a month's worth, the largest bottle the final night, so that you'll have a full year's supply by the time you leave."

A year's worth. Okay. Think.

She closed her eyes to shut out the distraction of his face. It was virtually impossible to use her brain when she was staring into those dark eyes of his.

If she wanted the Eclipse, sex would be the price she'd have to pay. Could she do that?

And then there was this whole other issue—the bondage. She'd seen some pictures, porn, but that was it. What if it hurt? What if she couldn't take the pain? In the photographs she'd seen, the women looked as if they were genuinely being tortured. Red-faced, eyes full of tears, faces masks of agony. She'd always believed that was an act, to sell pictures.

Maybe it wasn't.

This was so confusing. Trading sex for something she wanted made her feel a little uncomfortable, not a good feeling. And yet, on the other hand, it made her feel oddly empowered, knowing that she did possess something compelling enough that this man was willing to give her what she wanted in exchange.

If only there was another way.

She decided to test him. She opened her eyes. "What if I agreed, but with conditions—"

"No conditions."

"One night," she offered anyway.

"One week. I can't—I won't—compromise."

"This Eclipse must be something special, hard to find."

"You could say that." One side of his mouth lifted. "You won't find it at your local pharmacy."

She pretty much knew that, but dammit, did he have to be so smug about it?

"Do you need an answer right now?" she asked.

"No, I can give you some time." He ran the back of his hand down her cheek. Her skin tingled. Her heart pittered and pattered. "Don't make me wait too long."

"I won't." Once again she found herself staring into the darkest, most fascinating eyes she had ever seen. Up close, they were a deep midnight blue, almost black, with tiny silver streaks shooting out from the pupils and a narrow, almost imperceptible band of the same color circling the pupils. Bizarre. Unique. Just like the rest of the man.

He straightened. "I'll be back in a little while."

"You know where to find me," she half joked, surprising herself by making light of the situation.

His responding smile was charming, playful. "This is going to be a week you won't want to forget." Before she could respond—not that she knew what to say—he left.

* * * * *

"I gave her a little bit of time," Kaden explained as he circled Pierce. "She needs to believe it was her choice."

Pierce's smile was knowing. "They always do." He pivoted when Kaden moved around his back, tracking every step.

Kaden was enjoying the energy between them, the push and pull, subtle play for power. This binding would be nothing like any he had experienced before, and that was without the very unique and compelling challenge that lay in his dungeon right now, contemplating her next move.

A ripple of wanting pulsed through his body, and he let his instinct take over, moving forward to crowd Pierce. As he expected, Pierce didn't back away. He held his ground and tipped his head up in challenge, meeting Kaden's gaze with a steady, level eye.

"Hungry?" Pierce asked.

"Very."

"We need to feed."

"In a little while," Kaden said, bristling. The Hunger was making him irritable. He could see himself overreacting, but he couldn't stop it.

Pierce leaned closer. "You need to feed."

"I said later, dammit. I don't need you telling me what to do." Kaden shoved him once, twice, three times. Hard. Until Pierce was struggling to keep his feet beneath him. His back slammed against the wall, and Kaden threw his hands forward, trapping Pierce's head between his outstretched arms. "I'm not so weak I can't handle a little hunger."

"I'm not suggesting you're weak, Kaden." Pierce tipped his head forward and brushed his mouth over Kaden's.

Kaden ran his tongue along the seam of Pierce's lips, and when they parted, he thrust it inside, devouring the man's decadent flavor.

Hands slid around the sides of his waist, stopping to pull him closer until his pelvis was pressed firmly against Pierce's and the throbbing bulge in his pants was grinding against the hard one in Pierce's trousers. Cock to cock. Stomach to stomach. Mouth to mouth.

The kiss turned fiery, carnal, raw and urgent. Tongues twisted and stroked as hands grabbed and pulled. The sound of rending cloth filled the room, a loud accent to the sighs and moans and whispers falling between them. The sounds of their desire was a symphony and, just as their need grew, the tempo and volume built louder, faster, stronger.

Pierce broke the kiss. "Feed from me."

"No." Kaden jerked his head to the side, offering his neck. "You."

Pierce groaned. "I can't...refuse."

The first bite was on Kaden's neck, and it made him buck against Pierce, throw his head back, and cry out in absolute ecstasy. Cum streamed up his shaft and exploded

from his cock as wild, overwhelming heat rushed up his chest. His pleasure pulsed through him in waves, the first surge smashing him like a tsunami.

Holy shit, he'd never come like that, without a single stroke to his cock. Not a lick or a touch or a thrust into a tight ass. No doubt, this was going to be one week he wouldn't want to forget either.

Chapter Five

Eden was ready to give her answer.

It hadn't taken long to decide. A quick reminder of what Nate had done for her a couple of years ago was all it took.

She'd had countless friends in her lifetime, good, reliable, trustworthy friends, but never one like Nate. It happened a couple years after they'd met. At the time, they were more acquaintances than friends, both working for a small manufacturing company. Long story short, she'd screwed up in a big way, causing the company to fail to ship parts to one of their largest customers. The shortage caused the customer's assembly line to shut down, and her company had to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars in penalties. Naturally, because of her position in scheduling, her neck was on the chopping block. But then Nate stepped in, accepted the blame, and saved her job. Granted, about a year later, she left that position, but she did it on her time and having a new opportunity lined up. Completely on her own, with no family to turn to for help, she would have been in deep trouble if she'd been fired that day.

Such a selfless and kind act. It was the start of a very good friendship. And yet it also left a weight on her shoulders.

She was not the kind to accept a favor, especially one as huge as that, without finding a way to repay. Even when the one who'd been so kind had made it clear he hadn't expected her to do anything in return—including take this trip. For over two years she'd been searching for the right chance and time to pay him back.

This would most definitely wipe the slate clean.

Resolved, she found the tension was slowly unwinding from her muscles. Her mind was slowing, her breathing easier. There was most definitely a sense of peace in making a choice.

Naturally the minute she heard the door swing open, that peace evaporated, like a droplet of water falling on hot asphalt. Sizzle, gone. And just like that, she was pulling in short gasps of air, all the while trying to pretend like she wasn't absolutely petrified.

This is for Nate. I owe him.

She knew Kaden was in the room before he stepped into her field of vision. Somehow her body recognized him. Little uncomfortable prickles crept over her skin and her face warmed. But she sensed something different. He wasn't the only one in the room this time. A second set of footsteps followed. Who was the other person? God, what had she gotten herself into? She hoped she wasn't going to regret this.

Kaden stepped closer, entering the outer fringe of her field of vision. "You've made your decision."

That wasn't a question, but she responded as if it was. "Yes I have."

"You will be staying with us," he stated.

"Us?"

One, two, three footsteps sounded on the hard floor and then another man was standing by his side, a gloriously handsome man with nearly as striking a face as Kaden's.

She assumed he was the other part of the "us" Kaden had mentioned.

"Um, hi." Nerves making her itchy to lighten the mood, she thought about making a comment about shaking his hand but being too tied up, but decided against it. His serious mien suggested he wouldn't appreciate the joke.

The man nodded, sharp gaze focused on her face. "My name is Pierce."

That was most definitely a fitting name for this man. Pierce. As in sharp. Penetrating. Invading. All of those words described him, the way he looked at her, the way he just...was.

Somehow she found her tongue and put it to use. "You never mentioned another man, Kaden."

"It's an insignificant detail," Kaden answered. "You agreed to stay for one week and do as I say, whether it's with me or someone else."

"Insignificant? It isn't to me. I mean, we're talking about..." She jerked against the bindings. "Goddammit, it's impossible having a conversation like this, tied to the fucking floor. I'm not going to run away." *At least not yet.* "So why won't you untie me?"

"I was waiting for you to ask," he answered.

"Holy hell. Haven't I? Didn't I? Of course I did." When he shook his head, she practically growled, "I'm asking now. Untie me."

He lifted his brows.

"What?" she snapped. "You said I hadn't asked. So I did."

"You didn't *ask*. That was a demand."

She bit her tongue. The bastard.

This is for Nate. Nate needs the medicine. Dammit, I hate games!

She closed her eyes and concentrated on her breathing. In. Out. Innnnn. Outtttt. Once she was certain she wouldn't say something that would get her kicked out empty-handed, she said through gritted teeth, "Would you *please* untie me?"

"Yes, I will." He motioned to Pierce then dropped into a squat at her shoulders. While Pierce released the bindings around her ankles, Kaden unfastened the ones at her wrists. As soon as the last one was off, she jumped to her feet.

Now this was better.

"Let me make something clear here." She crossed her arms over her chest and took several steps away from her captors. "I haven't agreed to anything yet."

Kaden stepped forward. Naturally he wasn't about to respect her feelings and let her have a little space. "You will. You've already decided."

She hated the smug tone in his voice. Hated the way he completely disregarded her feelings. Hated the way he was taking advantage of the situation. Despised him so much she couldn't help clamping her jaw so tight the muscles in her face cramped.

"Say it," he prodded, stepping closer still. "I want to hear you speak the words."

Like hell she would. She pushed her chin up and stood her ground, even though she was quickly becoming a shaking mess inside. Long ago she'd learned that courage wasn't about not feeling fear, but how she acted when she was afraid. "How much Eclipse will I get? It better be a truckload."

Almost imperceptibly, he stiffened. His eyes narrowed and a muscle in his cheek pulled tight. "I won't talk about that right now."

Had she found a vulnerability? "Why not?"

Silence.

Interesting.

Perhaps his buddy Pierce didn't know about their deal?

"You will stay," he enunciated. Clearly this was an invitation he didn't expect her to refuse, even if the terms weren't even remotely satisfactory.

The problem was, he was right. She wouldn't refuse, although she wished she could. A friend's life, especially a very special friend like Nate, was worth any sacrifice. "If I agree, will you expect me to...do the same things with Pierce as you?"

Kaden nodded. "More or less."

Still having a hard time wrapping her head around this scenario, she turned toward Pierce.

She would have sex with both of these men. For the next week.

Pierce, looking a little impatient, shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

Quite suddenly, she realized Pierce was still holding the restraints he'd removed from her ankles. "Are you going tie me up again?"

Kaden answered, "That depends."

She whipped around toward Kaden. "Depends on what?"

"On whether you want us to," Pierce said.

"That's a silly thing to say." She took a few side steps away from Pierce. "Of course I don't want you to—if you're giving me the choice, which I thought you weren't willing to do. You pretty much stated the bondage stuff was part of the deal. But since you're asking, I didn't like it at all."

"Are you sure?" Kaden kicked a foot up on a bench and rested an arm over his bent knee.

She nodded. "Quite sure."

"Absolutely certain?" Pierce asked, shifting the restraints from one hand to another.

"One hundred and ten percent positive." What a bizarre conversation. She coughed nervously. "You two have the strangest sense of humor."

The guys swapped questioning looks and then Kaden said, "We're not kidding."

She took a few more steps away from them both. "Kaden, why would you think I'd ask you to tie me up after I just begged you to release me?"

This time it was Pierce who spoke, "Women ask me that all the time. Men too."

For the third time she took a good look around, imagining what kinds of things people did in this room. Doms tying submissives up, striking them with whips, tormenting them with clamps and sex toys. Submissives pleading for mercy, crying out in pain. Suddenly something clicked in her head.

Maybe it wasn't such an unusual thing, to have a submissive beg to be released one moment then ask to be restrained the next. And maybe they weren't just asking if she'd like them to tie her up, they were asking if she was okay with the bondage. *Asking*, instead of just assuming she'd go along with it as part of their do-anything-we-say arrangement. It was a kindness she hadn't expected, a welcome one. Yes, she had agreed to do whatever he asked, for Nate's sake, but if it wasn't necessary, then why would she go that far with this?

She stepped behind a bench, putting the piece of furniture between herself and the two men. "Ah, okay. I get it now. It's very nice of you to reconsider that part of our arrangement, very kind and understanding. I really appreciate it. Since you're asking, I'm not into bondage. At all. So now that we've cleared that up, I'm hoping we can all agree on another way to...amuse ourselves for the next week. I'm open to suggestions."

"Hmmm." A little spark glittered in Kaden's eyes. "Another way? That could be interesting. What 'other ways' did you have in mind?"

She decided to start with something safe, hoping they'd play along. Granted, Kaden had been clear he was expecting some form of sex, and so far he didn't seem to be nixing that part of the deal, but perhaps it could come later? Like the last night. "I could start by cooking you two a nice dinner."

The two men exchanged grins.

Kaden shook his head. "We don't eat much."

What men – particularly the size of these two – didn't eat?

"Okay, you're not hungry now. Maybe I'll cook later. How about we go for a walk?" She had a feeling a stroll wasn't going to cut it. The blank look on Pierce's face was one big sign. "Afterward, I could give you a massage. I'm a certified massage therapist," she lied. She'd taken a couple of classes at community college but she'd never graduated from the program. They didn't need to know that, though.

Pierce shrugged. "That might be a nice way to warm things up. It's a little frosty in here for my comfort."

Something flickered in Kaden's eyes. "Very well. A walk could be refreshing. Invigorating, even."

Invigorating?

She had a feeling his idea of a walk was a little more intense than she was used to, but nonetheless, she was glad to be out of this creepy room. "A walk it is then. After you." Flanked on either side by a gorgeous man, she followed them through an enormous Victorian home, filled with priceless antiques. Every room and hallway they passed through was decorated in deep jewel colors. Very masculine. Cozy and reserved. At the rear of a paneled study, two walls lined with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, they passed through a set of French doors, stepping out into a lush garden. Overhead, the trellis was draped in vines, cloaking the stone patio in deep inky shadows.

This was quite an atmosphere for seduction. The heady scents of flowers hung thick in the air, the distant call of an owl echoed in the distance, and the soft caress of the breeze tickled her arms. "This is really nice. Peaceful and secluded."

"I enjoy sitting out here in the evenings." Kaden took her hand, leading her toward the back of the patio. "This way. I want to show you something."

Genuinely enjoying the feel of her hand enfolded by his, she followed him down a fairly wide path, its breadth allowing all three of them to walk side by side. Ahead of them, the thick dark shadows of a forest drew closer.

The night was comfortable, neither too warm nor too chilly, despite the thick shade blanketing the woods. With every step, Eden felt her mind calming as she slowly accepted what was about to happen.

Tonight she would have sex with both these men.

Already her body was preparing. Her senses were sharpening, every scent, touch and sound intensifying. She glanced at Kaden. A beam of moonlight slicing between the branches overhead lit his profile. She wondered what his kisses would taste like, if he'd be a patient kisser or impatient. Would he seduce her with his mouth or simply possess her?

"Watch your step. A tree fell over and we haven't had it removed yet. We'll have to go around." Kaden led her off the path, into a darker area where not a single shimmer of silver moonlight glistened.

He stopped and she stood perfectly still, completely blind, eyes straining to make out some form in the thick blackness. It was as if someone had put a hood over her head, a black velvet hood. He released her hand and she was alone.

"Hey, where'd you go?" she asked.

"We're close," one of the guys whispered behind her, the smooth, seductive sound making a fresh coat of goose bumps blossom over her arms. "Find us."

She spun around toward the voice. "It's too dark. I can't see a thing. Not an inch in front of my nose. This isn't a nice game. I could fall. Or run into a tree."

"We won't let you." The voice was on her right side now. A little farther away.

She lunged toward it, arms outstretched. Her fingertips brushed against something. Hard man. Warm skin. An arm?

Wait, weren't they wearing long sleeves?

She stood very still, concentrating on breathing shallowly so she'd be as silent as possible, and listened. Over there, a bird was chirping. And there, an insect whirred. There, a twig snapped under a heavy foot. She whirled around and grappled at the dark to her left. Again, her fingertips brushed over something. Skin.

Had one or both of them taken off their shirts? If so, she was sort of sorry she couldn't see anything.

"How does it feel, getting in touch with the hunter inside you?" one of them whispered.

She jerked toward him and thrust her hands forward, catching a brief touch of man before he moved away again.

"Hunter? I'm feeling more like the prey right now."

"Don't listen to your head. Listen to your instinct. Humanity has been a predator since the dawn of time. It's there. Inside you. Only, I think you've lost touch with the darker side of your nature. You've forgotten how it feels to track your prey. To stalk. To use your senses as they were meant to be used."

This was the strangest, most surreal experience of her life. "I have no idea what you're getting at."

"We're getting at this." Instantly, two hard bodies pressed against her, materializing out of the darkness as if by magic. One molded against her front, the other her back. Fingers tangled in her hair and pulled, forcing her head backward. Two hands captured her face, cupping it gently. A soft mouth brushed across hers. "Only a predator can understand the needs of another." It was Pierce's voice. Pierce's mouth hovering over hers, sweet, hot temptation.

The combination of raw carnal energy charging the air and erotic sensations sweeping over her body was enough to make her whimper. Her heartbeat kicked up, the racing thrum pounding through her veins. Down her legs it vibrated, through her center and up to her scalp. A moan slipped between her lips. "Ohhhh."

His mouth brushed across hers again. The kiss was too short. Too soft.

"Please." She reached up, palms out, like a blind person. She found his face, slid her fingers along hard cheekbones, following their angled edges to his hairline. His hair, silk waves that were softer than she expected, tangled around her fingers. She curled them into the thick mass and pulled down, a silent plea for a real kiss.

Instead, his head dipped lower and he nuzzled her neck. Instantly a chill swept up her spine, and her back tightened. She felt his body stiffen and her heart thumped heavily in her chest in response. A soft moan rushed up her throat the precise moment his mouth made contact with her skin.

She couldn't remember ever feeling like this with a strange man before. She hadn't even been properly kissed and already a steady beat drummed between her legs. It was the darkness, the stars overhead. The animals and trees and shadows.

She was a part of the night. And Pierce and Kaden. All three of them.

She stood transfixed, staring into the darkness while two sets of hands ran up and down her body, stroking, touching, exploring, possessing. Pierce licked a slick, warm trail down the column of her neck and she shuddered. His teeth gently grazed her flesh and she sighed. His hands slid around her waist and pulled, forcing her body tighter against his hot, hard length.

God help her, she wanted these men. She wanted them now. Wanted their hands on her burning flesh. Wanted their weight resting on top of her. Wanted their cocks filling her aching pussy.

Between shallow panting gulps, she whispered, "Why me?"

"Because you can give us this."

She felt a strange sensation, cold. Then hot, sharp pain raced up her neck. Terrified, she jerked, trying to flee from the agony, but there was no escaping it. The burning exploded in her head, making her see stars. She heard herself scream. Felt her knees give out.

And then, catching her by complete surprise, the most intense, excruciatingly glorious orgasm swept through her body. Her cry of ecstasy echoed through the forest.

Sweet blood streamed down Pierce's throat, sending pulsing energy through his weary body and throbbing need to his cock. Desperate to take his fill of both Eden's blood and body, he jerked her closer. Yet no matter how deeply he drank or how firmly her softening form molded to his, he could not get his fill of either.

Trembling from crippling hunger, he drew in another mouthful of her sweet, intoxicating blood. After he swallowed, the sound of his heartbeat, recently slow and wavering, grew steadier. Strength returned to his arms and legs. The overwhelming fatigue that had nearly overtaken him slowly lifted.

He pulled in a third mouthful of life-sustaining blood. Eden whimpered and clawed at his shoulders. He had her pinned between himself and a tree, but she didn't seem to mind. She straddled his leg, her hips grinding into his thigh, sending furious waves of heat blazing through his body.

"Ohmygod..." she whispered, shuddering against him. "How did you do that?"

"It's a secret." Meeting Kaden's gaze, Pierce stepped away from the dazed woman, grateful—though not surprised—that his king had let him take what he needed first. Eden whimpered. But when Kaden swept her hair aside and sank his fangs into her smooth skin, she writhed in ecstasy.

Lust simmered in Pierce's veins as he watched his blood-mate drink. While his venom had given Eden temporary relief from the carnal need burning in her body, he

hadn't received any yet. That would come after Kaden fed, and none too soon. His muscles were pulled so tight they felt as if they might snap. And the heat burning in his blood made him tremble and sweat. Kaden's eyes darkened when he pulled in a second mouthful of Eden's blood, stirring Pierce's lust to even more painful heights.

Driven by his need, he tore the back of Kaden's shirt down the center, revealing a stripe of smooth skin stretched over taut muscle. He hooked his fingers and dragged his nails down, following the line of Kaden's spine.

Kaden groaned.

The woman whispered, "Ohmygod."

Pierce pressed his length against Kaden's back, and slid his hands beneath the torn shirt, following the lines of Kaden's ribs around to his flat abdomen. While his hips rocked forward, grinding the painful bulge of his erection against Kaden's buttocks, Pierce's hands mapped the unseen territory he longed to explore. Stomach, chest, shoulders. He nuzzled Kaden's neck, inhaling deeply, drawing in the glorious perfume of man, woman and nature.

Kaden lifted his head, releasing Eden's neck. Over Kaden's shoulder, Pierce watched the bloodstained mark on her skin vanish instantly.

It was done. Kaden was now bound to him, and he to Kaden. Finally, his most secret desire had come true.

Driven by desire so potent he could no longer resist, Pierce pulled on Kaden's chin, coaxing him to turn around. With the woman still writhing against Kaden's back, he claimed Kaden's mouth. Their tongues stabbed and stroked while the woman's soft moans stirred his lust, and the scent of damp earth and sex teased his nostrils.

This was the moment he had waited for. Dreamed and fantasized about. This very instant, with his king touching him, kissing him, wanting him.

Senses that had slowly faded over the months were once again painfully sharp. He could hear the flap of wing as a bat scuttled through the air. Could smell the musk of Eden's need. Could feel the cool silk of Kaden's hair curling around his fingers. Could taste Kaden's sweet flavor dancing on his tongue.

He broke the kiss, turning his attention to Eden, who didn't realize yet how much she'd given them both. By the simple act of submitting to their needs, she had given them a chance at another twelve months of life. She would get her reward. The complete abandon she had yet to experience.

Kaden couldn't wait another minute. Not even a second. Thanks to years of watching Pierce, wanting him, but never allowing himself the luxury of fulfilling his dark fantasies, he was one giant knot of agonizing need. He was simply too weak now to resist. Too desperate to even put his thoughts into words. Instead, he used his hands, his lips and his eyes to communicate his emotions.

You are mine.

He hooked his fingers around the neckband of Pierce's sweater and tore the garment off his body, unveiling the glorious sight of muscle, bone and sinew, made more stunning as Pierce swept Eden into his arms and gently lowered her onto a bed of soft moss.

How fitting, this is where they would make their first coupling, outside beneath a blanket of stars, the creatures of the night their witnesses as they unleashed their carnal needs upon each other.

Eden lay on her back, eyes closed, mouth pursed and face a mask of intense need.

"It won't be much longer," Kaden whispered the promise, reminding himself his own need would be sated too. His cock was so hard, his balls so tight, his teeth gritted against the pain. This first time would be hard and fast. A frenzied release of tension. He could see that already.

But before he could have Pierce, he would give Eden her reward.

Kaden helped her out of her clothing, whispering whatever came to mind. The words tumbled from his lips while the clothes fell away until finally she was nude, her lush body open and ready for his taking.

When he turned to see what Pierce was doing, he found him sitting nearby, in a blade of silver-blue moonlight, the sculpted planes and bulges of his body highlighted by the light. He looked ethereal, otherworldly. A beautiful, dangerous creature of the night.

Pierce's hand closed around his thick rod, and the impulse to go to him, drop on his knees and beg for a taste leapt into Kaden's mind.

A soft, female's moan stopped him.

Eden.

He gave Pierce one last look, which Pierce answered with a nod of assent. Then he bent over Eden and took a hard pull on a turgid nipple.

Her back arched, lifting her chest higher, and the air around them grew ripe with her scent. He inhaled deeply, drawing in the aroma, and while he tasted each of her nipples, he explored the slick heat between her legs with a hand.

She was wet, tight. Hot. And gloriously responsive to his every touch.

When she shuddered beneath him, his balls tightened and another wave of desperate need swept through his entire body.

"Kaden? Take me. Take me now."

He could no more deny granting her demand than he could control the primal urges driving his every movement. She couldn't possibly realize how much power she wielded over him right then.

"Yes, my sweet Eden." He nudged her knees apart and set the head of his cock against her swollen folds.

"Now," she repeated.

He entered her in a slow, patient thrust, prolonging the pleasure as his cock was gradually engulfed in her tight heat. By the time he had buried himself completely, he was dizzy from need.

She held him like a tight fist, her inner walls rippling around him. As he withdrew, he felt hands on his back. Warm breath. Pierce reached around him, his body pressing into Kaden's, and slid his hands down Kaden's arms, stopping to rest directly over Kaden's hands, where they lay on Eden's knees. Pierce's scent filled the air, the drumbeat of his pulse pounded in Kaden's ear. The heat from Pierce's skin seeped into Kaden's body and thrummed through his center.

With Pierce nestled snugly against his back, Kaden fucked Eden. When Kaden stroked Eden's leg, so did Pierce. When Kaden kissed her neck, Pierce was right there, behind him, groaning with need. It was an intimacy he'd never known before, and it stirred his desire as nothing ever had.

Quickly the passion within him built. With every thrust, every caress, every moan and sigh. He was tucked between two writhing bodies, one male, the other female, one soft and wet and the other hard and hot, one receiving pleasure, the other giving. It was sweet ecstasy.

"Harder," Eden whispered as she drew her legs farther apart, allowing him to thrust deeper. When he quickened his pace, she moaned, lifted her arms and raked her fingernails down his chest. The stinging pain was like the strongest aphrodisiac. Instantly, a warm rush exploded through his body. He gritted his teeth and slammed into her, fucking her as roughly as he dared, and she encouraged him with cries of "Yes, oh yes," and, "Don't stop."

And while he was swept up in an erotic storm, Pierce whispered in his ear, "I won't lie on the ground and beg you to fuck me. You'll have to take me." He tested Kaden's anus with a finger. It slipped inside easily and almost immediately found Kaden's prostate.

Kaden saw stars and the carnal hunger within him took over. He could no longer think. He was driven by a force older than time, by dark instinct alone.

Take.

Claim.

He soared to the crest and tumbled over the pinnacle, Pierce's promise echoing in his head, "This week I will show you pleasure like you've never seen."

Chapter Six

Eden woke up feeling hazy-headed and achy, as if she'd partied too hard and did things she would regret for a long time. It had been ages since she'd felt like this. Rubbing her stiff neck, she pulled the covers off.

Shit, she was naked.

What the hell?

Hadn't she been walking in the woods with Pierce and Kaden a few minutes ago?

Confused, she stumbled out of bed, dragging the coverlet off and wrapping it around her. She headed straight for the window, drew back the curtains, and was blinded by brilliant sunlight.

It couldn't be morning already.

She spun around, bleary eyes sweeping the room. A clock. There. 10:52? Had to be morning. What happened to the last twelve hours or so?

Suddenly a little woozy, she plopped on her butt on the bed and dropped her head into her hands. "Ohhhh..."

What had happened last night and why was it all such a blur? She hadn't consumed a drop of alcohol...that she recalled.

What happened in the woods?

She walked with them. They stopped. It had been dark. They'd played a weird game of hide and go seek. And...and...?

She concentrated as hard as her mushy gray matter would let her, but she couldn't remember anything between that moment with Pierce and Kaden and the minute she'd woken up, here in this bedroom. She didn't remember coming back from the woods. Didn't even know how she'd gotten to bed, or whether she'd slept alone or shared it with Pierce or Kaden, or both of them.

She peered around, finding several pillows strewn around the king-sized bed. The sheets were pulled loose, twisted, tangled. Who knew, sure looked like a bed that had been well used.

Her stomach rumbled and she mentally prepared herself to abandon her cozy cave. She needed food and to pay a visit to the nearest bathroom. But first she wanted to put something on. Her clothes. A robe. Heck, a t-shirt would do. Her clothes were nowhere to be found, so she did the most logical thing—checked the room's closet for another option.

It was enormous, the kind an L.A. socialite wouldn't live without. Walk-in, with built-in drawers and shelves and shoe cubbies. All cedar from the smell of it. A home

for Prada and Gucci and Versace. And yet, there was not a stitch of clothing in there, hanging or folded. Not a single shoe. Not an old unused winter coat. Nothing.

"What a horrid waste," she grumbled, turning back toward the bedroom. The room instantly filled with bright light. Pierce appeared in the doorway, seemingly out of nowhere, and startled by both the light and the visitor, she gave a little screech of surprise. "You scared me." Instantly aware of the fact that she was naked, she jerked the covers tighter around herself.

"I'm sorry." His gaze wandered south, straight down the center of her body before turning back north again to find her eyes. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"Well, you did." She adjusted her makeshift toga when one side slipped down over her shoulder. Based on the location of some of the more prominent aches, not to mention the fact that her clothes were missing, she had to assume this man had not only seen her naked but had probably touched her, everywhere. She was by no means shy, innocent or ashamed of her body. Still, under the glowing light of at least a zillion watts, she couldn't convince her cheeks to stop burning, or her hands to fall to her sides. "My clothes are missing." It was obvious, and she was pretty sure he knew it, but she wanted to make it perfectly clear she was not only unsatisfied by her current predicament but wanted to change it. Immediately.

"Yes, they are," he agreed.

Not surprised by his response, she narrowed her eyes. "I'd like them back now."

"I'm sorry, but we had to dispose of them." Pierce made himself comfortable on the pretty settee positioned at the foot of the bed. He flung an arm over the back and kicked one foot up on the opposite bent knee. "They were ruined last night in the woods."

"Ruined?" she echoed, aware she was clutching the cover now as if her life depended on it.

"Yes, they were..." he smiled, "torn."

She didn't remember tearing her clothes.

She didn't remember a lot of things, which inspired her to ask, "Why did you guys drug me?"

"We didn't."

"If you didn't slip me something, why did I wake up this morning with cottonmouth, and why can't I remember what happened last night?"

Looking guilty as hell, he shook his head, "I don't know."

Liar! Now she was pissed. "This is bullshit. There was no reason to drug me. You bastards." She stomped toward him, arm raised. She was going to slap that smug look off his face. And then she was getting the hell out of there. She swung her arm. He caught her wrist in his fist. "Let go." When he didn't release her, she yelled, "Get the fuck away from me. I'm leaving. Game's over. I agreed to stay with you two and do what you asked, including fuck, which we must have done. But nobody mentioned drugs."

"Yes, we fucked." The corners of his mouth twitched then returned to their normal position. His expression faded away until his face was a blank mask, totally devoid of any emotion, including guilt. "But I promise, we didn't give you drugs. Like you said, we didn't have to. You were more than a willing participant..."

Her cheeks heated again as a minute flashback played through her mind, of being crushed against a tree and being kissed to oblivion. That had been one hell of a kiss. "Why don't I remember anything?"

"I'm guessing you're just exhausted."

"Oh, come on! From a little romp in the woods with you and Kaden?" At his slightly injured look, she added, "Not to insult your manliness or anything, but I've never been so exhausted from sex that I forgot everything."

"Well, you've never—" He clamped his lips closed and the corners turned up again, this time producing a half smile. "If you're feeling unwell, I'd be glad to call a doctor. You did sleep for eighteen hours—"

"No, I did not." Her gaze shot to the window then hopped over to the digital clock on the nightstand. "It's just after ten. The clock—"

"No, it's almost four-thirty p.m." He motioned to the room's corner. "That's wrong. The clock on the desk has the correct time."

She found the desk and checked the clock there. Unlike the one on the nightstand, it was one of those old-fashioned hand type. It even ticktocked. It said 4:28.

"Why are there two clocks in this room?" She headed to the window and yanked open the drapes again.

The sun was shining. Which way was east? West?

She jerked the curtains closed and turned around, expecting to find Pierce still sitting on the settee.

He was standing directly behind her.

She jumped. "Dammit, you're too fast. And sneaky. I need to go to the bathroom." Stepping around him, she headed for the door, coverlet dragging behind her. "And I'm starving. Whether it's ten in the morning or four in the afternoon, it's a wonder I haven't passed out from low sugar. I usually get shaky if I haven't eaten in a while."

"Does that mean you're going to stay?"

"For now. I'm still on the fence."

"I swear to you, we would never give you drugs or harm you." After she gave a little humph of disbelief, he motioned.

"The facilities are this way. Everything has been set out for you. Shampoo, soap, towels, that sort of thing." Pierce opened the door and indicated the way. "I'll have something for you to eat prepared immediately. What kinds of food do you like?"

"Oh, I'll eat just about anything. How about something solid but quick? A sandwich. Meat, cheese. Whatever you have. And some fruit. Oh, and I need my caffeine. Coffee. Cola. I don't care how I get it, I just need it. Thanks." She opened the

door, revealing one of the most lavish bathrooms she'd ever seen. Marble and tile and chrome, gleaming, sparkling. It topped the ones she'd seen on television. "Wow." She turned around. Pierce was gone. "That man moves way too fast and quietly for my comfort." She pushed the door closed and locked it.

Towels, washcloths and a thick robe had been set out. What treatment. Being a houseguest to the likes of Kaden Setara was like spending a week at a spa.

Despite her rumbling stomach, she took a long shower. She couldn't resist, thanks to the jets shooting steamy water at her worn-out body from every angle imaginable. Afterward, she donned the robe, which smelled as if it had been marinating in lilacs, her favorite flowers, and headed back out into the relative cold of the hallway.

Assuming she had no clothes waiting for her in the bedroom, she walked down the wide sweeping stairway to the foyer below. The first thing she checked was the massive clock standing in the corner.

Ten after five, coinciding with the clock on the desk. It was looking more and more as if Pierce had told her the truth—at least about the time. The question of the drugs was still not settled yet.

The marble tile floor was cool beneath her feet as she padded toward the kitchen. The sounds of cooking—the clatter of glass against stone, knives striking wood—were like a siren's call, beckoning her forward, down the hall that cut through the lower level of the house, past a closed door, a closet? Or maybe a room. Beyond, she found the formal dining room. The enormous rectangular table could probably seat twenty comfortably. Finally, the walls split before her, revealing a wide open space with a kitchen to one side and a cozy family room on the other. Straight ahead, a set of French doors led out onto a patio. The sparkle of blue water reflected on the glass. A swimming pool.

Too bad she didn't have her swimsuit.

"It's all ready. Did you have a nice shower?"

Pierce. Behind her?

She spun around. "Yes. Thanks." She glanced over her shoulder, catching sight of a plate sitting on the dinette table in the kitchen. She headed in that direction. "This place is a palace. My gosh, that bathroom."

"Yes, his...Kaden's home is magnificent. Mine isn't quite this large. But it's just me, so I don't need anything so massive."

Eden trailed an index finger over the top of an intricately carved chair. "Then are there others who live in this home? It's so huge and fancy, I couldn't imagine someone wanting something this big and formal if they lived alone."

"No. It's just Kaden. But it's his family's estate." Pierce pulled the chair out for her and once she was seated, pushed it in. "I haven't seen this part of the house before—the private rooms. I'm surprised it's decorated so formally. I would've thought Kaden would have had it redecorated the minute he inherited it."

"Maybe he likes it, then." Eden watched Pierce walk around the table and sit across from her.

"Yes, he must."

She motioned to the empty table in front of him. "Not eating?"

"No. I...ate earlier. I thought I'd keep you company, unless you prefer eating alone."

"No, that's fine. I'm not like Kaden. I don't like to be by myself. Especially here. This place is too big. Too much open space. Too quiet." They exchanged a smile that made her feel a little less uncomfortable and a little more at ease. After taking a bite, chewing and swallowing, she said, "This is absolutely scrumptious. Did you make it?"

"No. Kaden's cook did."

"Oh. He has a professional cook? Lucky guy." She glanced at the empty kitchen. "Well, I guess he or she is on break or running errands. Would you please give my regards to the cook for me?" She pointed at Pierce. "Now, while I inhale this delicious sandwich, I can't talk, at least not without looking like a pig. So why don't you tell me about yourself?"

Pierce leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. "There's nothing to talk about."

"Sure there is."

He shrugged. Typical male. Of course he was going to make her do ninety percent of the talking. She'd once had a boyfriend who was so close-lipped it drove her absolutely insane. His favorite thing to say was, "The average woman talks three times as much as the average guy. I'm on the low end of average." Needless to say, she eventually said one final word to Mr. Non-talkative—goodbye.

After consuming a couple of bites of sandwich while Pierce played the role of the super-hot, dark and silent mystery man, she broke the silence, "How about we start with something simple, like your last name?"

He narrowed his eyes at her as if she'd just asked for his social security number and his mother's maiden name. "Why would you need to know that?"

"Just curious. Why would you think I'd need to know it? I swear I don't have a criminal mind. I can't imagine a last name doing much for me."

After a beat, he answered. "It's Barcola."

"That's an unusual surname. Is it...Greek?"

"No, Spanish."

"Okay, now I see where you get—" she cut off the rest of the sentence, steering the conversation in a different direction. "How about telling me how you know Kaden?"

"We've been acquainted for many years."

"Acquainted? Not close friends?"

"No, we're not close friends."

"And yet you decided to go along with this arrangement with me."

He leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. "That's a little more complicated."

She ate a couple more bites of sandwich then asked, "Is it common for you to share women with acquaintances?"

"Yes, actually, it is common."

"Really?"

"Um-hmm."

"Why would you do that, share?"

"It has a lot to do with the type of lifestyle I live."

"What type is that? Are you a swinger?"

"No, I'm a Dom."

"Oh yes. Of course you are. But I didn't realize that meant you don't go for committed relationships."

"True. Some Doms do prefer to be in committed relationships. But not me."

"I see." She decided she needed a drink. After downing half a glass of water, she asked, "And Kaden's one too? A Dom?"

"Yes." He studied her for a moment. "Does that word *Dom* frighten you, Eden?"

"Scare me? I don't know. Not really." She picked up her sandwich then set it back down again without taking a bite. "But it makes me a little uncomfortable."

"Uncomfortable is good."

"That's a strange thing to say. Strange maybe for someone who isn't a Dom, I guess." She considered the idea of pain and discomfort while she ate a couple more bites of sandwich. "When I think about it, I guess you try to convince people that discomfort can be good. Right? Is that how it is?"

"No. They generally don't need convincing."

She shook what remained of her sandwich at him. "You see, that's why I wouldn't make a good submissive or slave or whatever you call the person being tied up."

He leaned forward. His gaze locked on hers, making the piece of food she'd just tried to swallow become lodged somewhere between her Adam's apple and her stomach. "Quite the opposite." His tongue swept across his lower lip, and she stared, transfixed. "I think you would make an excellent submissive."

She set her sandwich down and clasped her hands in her lap. She stared down at her plate while dozens of images played through her mind. "I can't imagine why you'd say that. I despise pain. I avoid it at all cost."

Pierce lifted her chin, forcing her to look him in the eyes. "Submission isn't necessarily about pain."

"Then tell me, what is it about? Because I don't understand it. I really don't."

"Close your eyes."

She gave him a questioning look then did as he suggested.

"Now imagine the sexiest scene you have ever watched, read about or imagined."

Her mind conjured up an image without a bit of trouble. It was one of her favorite fantasies, one that almost always played through her mind as she masturbated.

"What do you see? Who is there and what are they doing?"

She lifted her hand to her face, her fingertips brushing over her warm cheeks. "I can't tell you that."

"Why not?"

"Because it's embarrassing."

"Why would you feel embarrassed? Everyone fantasizes. And no fantasy is too strange or shocking for me. I've heard everything you could imagine. I've witnessed or played a part in scenes that involved every kind of kink—plushophilia, formicophilia, robot fetishism, klismaphilia..."

"I have no idea what any of those are."

"Stuffed animals, insects, the robot is pretty self explanatory, and the last one is deriving pleasure from receiving enemas."

She opened her eyes. How could she not? "Insects? Seriously?" At his nod, she asked, "How? No, don't tell me. I don't want to know. Compared to those, my little fantasy seems a little boring."

He leaned closer, looking as anxious as a man who was about to be told the secret to eternal life. "Tell me."

"It's nothing all that exciting. It's about a man who is very powerful, like a...god, this is embarrassing...a king, taking me prisoner and seducing me." When he said absolutely nothing, she felt compelled to fill the silence. "I love the Showtime series *The Tudors*. It's like soft porn. Henry VIII is so hot, and so bad. He makes me warm all over."

"It's very interesting, how your fantasy is playing out."

"Playing out? What makes you say that?" Feeling awkward, she shifted in her chair. She was no prude, but she never talked about this kind of thing, not even with her closest friends. "You're not a king. Neither is Kaden. And you two haven't taken me prisoner."

"No, you're right. But it's not too far off." Pierce extended an arm, motioning around the room. "Think about it. Kaden is a very powerful, rich man."

"I guess you have a point." She glanced around them. "From the looks of it, the man has enough money to be a king."

"And you are at his mercy, are you not?" At her nod, he continued, "We could play to your fantasy. It would be an adventure."

"As if this whole thing wasn't an adventure already?" Now too antsy to sit any longer, she stood and picked up her plate. "If you'll excuse me?" He stood too, grabbed her glass and followed her toward the sink. After she set the dirty dish on the counter, she turned around, not surprised to find him standing directly behind her, close enough to touch. She shimmied to one side. "I'm still very unsure about all of this. I mean, so far, I'm the one taking all the risk. And getting nothing but a really good sandwich and...well, evidently some experiences I don't recall."

"Then maybe this will help you be a little less unsure. Kaden asked me to give it to you." Pierce produced a small box from his pocket and set it on the counter. "It's a sign of his good will."

She scooped it up. The box wasn't wrapped, and it was an odd size. She had absolutely no clue what it might be. "Thanks." She pulled the top open and found a dark container inside, about the size of a soup can and made of black plastic. It looked like an oversized film container.

Curious, she flipped off the lid and discovered it was full of white pills. "Is this Eclipse?" She glanced up at Pierce, and met his very wide-eyed gaze.

"Yes. That's a lot of it too." He took the container from her flipped the lid closed and weighed it in his hand. "What do you know about Eclipse?"

"Nothing. I came to Kaden on behalf of a friend of mine. He said he'd heard about it from someone he knew. He's been sick. Really sick. It's like he's become allergic to sunlight or something. I guess he read about this stuff somewhere and thinks it'll make him better."

He handed the bottle back to her. "What's your friend's name?"

"Kaden asked me the same thing. It's Nate. Nate De Vries."

Pierce puzzled over her answer and then went to work, placing her dirty dishes in the empty dishwasher.

When he was finished, she lingered at the counter, watching him walk with that mesmerizing gait of his back across the large kitchen. He moved with the strength and raw power of a predator. A wild animal tracking its prey. She could almost imagine him prowling in the dark, using his sharp senses and hard, muscular body to gain on his quarry. In the next instant, she could imagine him dressed in rich Henrician garb, a human predator seducing an innocent maiden.

He was right. This was probably as close as she'd ever come to her darkest fantasy becoming real. She was a virtual prisoner. And whether it was intentional or not, Pierce was seducing her. Right now. Whenever he moved. Whenever he looked at her. Spoke a word. Licked his lips.

The man just oozed sexuality.

He was her dark Spanish king. Wicked and domineering. Powerful and sexual.

Maybe that was the way to take fullest advantage of this situation. This was a chance of a lifetime. To have her secret desire come true.

Finally trusting her semi-wobbly legs, she went to him. He was standing beside the French doors, gazing outside. She placed one hand on his shoulder. "Will you tell me about Kaden now?"

He turned, and within a heartbeat had her trapped between his hard body and the wall. "No. The time for talk is over." Standing over her as he was, he looked even bigger, stronger, more intimidating in a scary but also thrilling way. A spark glistened in his eyes as he reached for her, cupped her cheek. His thumb brushed over her lower lip, and she let her face relax. Her lips parted a tiny bit. He pushed, not exactly forcing his thumb into her mouth, but not asking either. She pulled it in and suckled, her gaze still locked to his.

The muscles along his jaw tightened and his eyes narrowed a tiny bit. She knew that look. It was the look of carnal desire. Of lust.

She was looking into the reflection of her own desperate wanting. "You're right," she whispered, kissing the pad of his thumb. "The time for talk is over."

Chapter Seven

Pierce's body was aflame. Kaden had wound his nerves into painful knots just by being near him this morning. Now his desire for Eden was stretching those tight nerves to their breaking point. Pierce needed a great many things at the moment—a long, hard fuck was at the top of the list. But more than anything, he needed more of Kaden's intoxicating venom pumping through his system, bringing with it energy, strength, life.

It wouldn't be much longer and they would all be together again.

Kaden had left him early, before sunrise, to see to his many responsibilities. Not unlike many mortal kings, most of his life, most of his hours, were devoted to his people. To their needs, wants and wishes.

No matter what anyone said, Pierce knew Kaden was a good king. A fair monarch and strong leader. No king would ever enjoy every Son of the Twilight's support. By nature, the Sons were a violent, rebellious group who resisted leadership at every turn. They had slaughtered many kings, and those who had managed to survive for any length of time grew weary of the constant struggle to remain on the throne and eventually stepped down, handing over the burden to an eldest son.

Sadly, this same group who detested their leaders needed them desperately.

More than anyone, Kaden deserved a blood-bond that would temporarily free him from the strains of his station. To allow him to just be a man instead of a king. A lover instead of a servant. A Son of the Twilight instead of a figurehead. Pierce was determined to give him that chance.

But first, he wished to introduce Eden to the dungeon. She was ready now.

"This way." Gently, he led her toward the corridor connecting the private part of the castle to the more public facilities, the ones that were open to visitors. He felt Eden fiddle with her robe as they passed the guards.

"This place is bigger than I thought," she said. "And what's with the guards?"

"This portion of the...property...is open to visitors. The guards are there to make sure nobody goes into Kaden's private quarters."

"Ah, kind of like the White House?"

"Yes."

"That's interesting." She paused, and he stopped to let her admire an old portrait hanging on the wall. "How odd, though, that a man as private as Kaden would open his home to visitors. Why would people want to come here? Is it an historical landmark or museum? This is a lovely painting."

"Yes, I would say it's both. The castle was originally built in Europe in the sixteenth century. Kaden's family had it dismantled and shipped to the United States, where it

was rebuilt on this piece of property. Some parts of the interior have been redesigned, the spaces repurposed to be more practical, but the structure remains as it was. Also you'll see many of the original artwork and furnishings remain on display as well. You won't find many genuine European castles in Michigan, so it tends to attract history and architecture buffs."

"This is really interesting. I'm a huge history buff. I've been to every living history festival and attraction in the state, but I had no clue there was a castle so close to home." Once again she stopped, this time to inspect an old wooden bench. "Look at the workmanship. Nobody carves furniture like this anymore."

"Kaden doesn't advertise. Enough people learn about the castle through word of mouth to keep a steady traffic moving in and out."

She sat on the bench and leaned her head back, eyes closed, flattened hands skimming over the worn seat's surface. "I almost wish all of the castle's inside was still designed as it was back in the fifteen hundreds." As he helped her stand and once again coaxed her to start walking, she added, "I'm serious, I'm a total history geek. I spend every weekend in September at the Renaissance festival, I make multiple trips to Greenfield Village throughout the year, and in college I did a summer internship at a colonial village out east. Of course, I dress up every time I go anywhere historical. You should see my closet. I have medieval gowns, Elizabethan, Flemish, colonial, Victorian..." She paused to study the engraved door leading into the dungeon. "Look at this door. I've never seen anything like it. It's gorgeous." She pointed at the carved figure of a man wearing a cape and crown. "So beautiful, and so well preserved."

Pierce pressed his hands to her shoulders, turning her toward him. "We're going inside. You must be silent. Don't speak a word."

"Are we sitting in on a meeting of some kind? I'm not exactly dressed —"

"Your attire is perfectly suitable for where we're going. Don't worry."

She gave him a puzzled look. "Okayyyy."

He opened the door.

"Oh!" She clapped her hand over her mouth, whispering between her fingers, "Sorry. This wasn't what I was expecting."

He took her arm. "Silence."

She nodded.

His gaze swept the room, halting in the far corner. Perfect. "Follow me."

After that little history lesson and stroll down Kaden's real, honest-to-god castle hall, the last place Eden had expected to find herself was in a bondage dungeon. But that was exactly where she was. A big, dark, *full* bondage dungeon. There were people everywhere, doing everything she could imagine and a few things she couldn't.

Despite the fact that none of them even glanced her way, she tugged self-consciously on her robe. Now Pierce's comment about her clothing made sense. Compared to most of the women in the room, she was overdressed.

Concentrating on not staring at anyone—it felt odd having such intimate activities be displayed so openly—she followed Pierce to the back corner of the room.

What was he expecting?

Instantly, she regretted having agreed to do anything—*anything!*—that this man asked. He was still a virtual stranger, and this world of whips and chains was so foreign to her, she felt a little ill. A shudder crept up her spine. She didn't hold it back, hoping her open fear would make him rethink this whole thing.

"You've never been in a dungeon," he whispered.

Did he expect her to respond? After all, he'd told her not to speak. Not a word. She lifted her brows in question and at his nod, she said as quietly as she could, "I'm sure you can tell."

He hooked his hand through a long coil of rope, taking it off the hook screwed into the wall. "Your pallor was a hint."

"Aren't most first-timers are a little pale?" She stared at the rope in his hands with some idea of what he intended to do with it.

Would it burn? Would he hurt her when he tied her up? How long would he make her stay bound?

This wasn't going to be good.

Her hands were shaking. She clenched them together and watched his every movement as he uncoiled the rope until it lay in a loose mass at his feet.

"Take off the robe," he demanded.

The command was no surprise but that didn't mean she was mentally prepared to strip naked in front of strangers. She didn't have any serious body issues, but she was still plenty aware of her imperfections, especially her boobs, butt and thighs. The first was almost non-existent, the second round but dimpled with cellulite and the last too thick for her liking. She was a typical pear shape, and even though she watched what she ate—most of the time—she could use a regular exercise routine.

She gave him a pleading look, which was answered by a blank stare. He didn't look angry. He didn't threaten her. That was reassuring. At least he wouldn't force her into doing something she didn't want to do.

But clearly, he expected her to keep her end of the bargain, and the deal was she would do *everything* he asked.

She closed her eyes and tried to shut herself off from everyone in the room. Maybe if she imagined she was in her bedroom at home, undressing for bed, she could do it. Her fingers clutched the soft material as if it were a lifeline.

I'm at home. No one is here to watch. The door is closed. The blinds drawn...

She tried to pull the material off, but she just couldn't. Her fingers wouldn't move. Her hands wouldn't do what her brain told them to.

"Relax," Pierce murmured in her ear. "Have you ever been hypnotized?"

"No...I mean, I don't think so." She blinked open her eyes as a little light bulb in her head started blinking like a strobe. "Wait a minute. Is that what you did last night? Did you hypnotize me? Is that why I can't remember what happened?"

"It's possible, although we didn't intentionally set out to."

"Oh." She wasn't sure if his response was reassuring or troubling.

"I want to help you relax so you'll enjoy this."

This. Since when did a person need to be hypnotized to enjoy something genuinely pleasurable? She didn't need to be hypnotized to appreciate a good meal or book or movie.

"What 'this' are you preparing me for?" More uncomfortable than ever, she took another look around the room. That woman over there, chained to the big cross, looked as if she was in agony—and not a good kind. And the man kneeling with that ball stuffed in his mouth didn't look like he was having fun either.

She wasn't sure she could even be hypnotized, but to hand over all control of her mind and body was absolutely terrifying.

"I can't make you do anything against your will. It's perfectly safe." He circled her slowly, his motions reminding her of a predator in the wild. "I'm certified in hypnotherapy. It's a tool I use in my practice."

"What practice?" she asked, figuring if she kept him talking, he'd be less likely to do something scary with that rope. Maybe if she got lucky, eventually he'd get tired of explaining and just give up.

"I'm a psychiatrist. I specialize in treating obsessive-compulsive disorders." He cupped her chin. "The 'this' I had in mind involves a rope and the ring hooked to the ceiling." He pointed up. "I promise you'll enjoy every minute you spend in this room with me, whether you're hypnotized or not."

Already, that promise had been broken, but she wasn't sure how to tell him that. Gently, she turned her head, trying to free her chin from his hold. He didn't release her.

Darn it. Why was he doing this to her? He had to see she wasn't enjoying it. She felt tight all over. Her heart was thumping too hard in her chest. She was breathing too quickly. None of those sensations were pleasant. He'd said himself she was pale.

She turned completely away from him. "I'm thinking this first time it might be better if I watched you tie somebody else up. I'm sure there are some women who would volunteer..." Practically desperate, she scoured the room with her eyes, looking for a woman who wasn't already chained, gagged or otherwise detained by somebody else.

No luck.

Pierce held her shoulders and eased her back around. "We're here for you, not me."

"Oh, if that's the case, I'd gladly decline this opportunity —"

"Yes, I'm sure you would. But I'm not convinced I should let you."

"Please."

His nostrils flared just a little. This time it was his turn to search the room. *Good. Let him get thoroughly frustrated with me. Let him find somebody else to tie up and whip.* As if on command, the sharp cracking sound of a whip snapped somewhere in the room. Instinctively, she jerked, her shoulders lifting and rolling forward.

"Wait here," he said.

Music to her ears. "I'd be glad to." She backed up against the wall where a nice heavy shadow would make her all but invisible, and watched him walk over to a man and woman standing on the opposite side of the room. They talked for a few seconds. The man nodded and next thing, Pierce was strolling back in her direction with the woman following behind.

Pierce stopped directly in front of Eden. "Don't speak to this woman. Not a word." After she nodded, he lifted the rope and looped it around the woman's chest.

She watched as Pierce tied knot after knot around the woman's torso, encasing her in a web of rope.

"I'm floating within myself and without at the same time," the woman said. "I can feel the ropes graze over my skin. It's good. So good. A gentle seduction." She sighed.

"Eden, kneel there. Close your eyes and listen," Pierce commanded, pointing next to the woman.

Eden slowly lowered herself onto her knees and once she was settled, she closed her eyes as he asked.

"A few more knots are tied down my center and I am feeling more helpless, more powerless. But I'm not frightened. A voice is speaking and I know it is my Master, but I wonder if it truly is him or if it is the voice in my own head saying let go, surrender."

"Feel what the slave is saying," Pierce murmured, his voice soothing and warm. "Put yourself in her place."

Eden concentrated, trying to imagine herself standing nude before Pierce, the rough rope sliding across her skin, the knots pressing against her breastbone, her stomach, her mound. Ropes circling her rib cage, encasing but not restricting.

"I can feel an energy surge as the ropes tighten around me," the woman said. "His voice grows louder and my entire body tingles with his words. That tingle vibrates within me. It's moving slowly through my body. I open my eyes and, in a hazy state, I see what appears to be a faint light connecting me to my Master. As he speaks I feel and see the light rotating between the two of us. It's my energy stream joining with his." Her voice husky, breathless, the woman continued. "I begin to change my breathing patterns in hopes of retaining control of my own energy. But the power of the voice is too strong. It pulls me back under, blending the two energy streams together and pushing them through my body from my feet to my head and back into the head of my

Master and through his feet. This sharing of energy connects us in such a way that he doesn't have to touch me for me to feel his touch. All he has to do is speak."

The slave sighed and Eden sighed with her.

She could feel the ropes now, wrapped snugly around her body, even though she knew they weren't there. Her body tingled all over. And when she lifted her heavy eyelids, she could see the faint light, flowing between her body and Pierce's, even though she wasn't the one in the ropes. And just like the slave, she started dragging in deeper breaths, fighting to hold back her energy but she couldn't. It flowed up through his head and down his body, return to her in a pulsing, hot wave.

The woman said, "I try to wake myself up enough to say no. But I can't find my voice. It's not mine to speak with. My body continues what it was told to do and I don't mind so much. The fear of the unknown has been absorbed by the cycling energy and all is well. I am safe. My reward is so close now, and yet I resist its pull, wanting this moment to last..."

Eden's body was hot, tight, thrumming with sensual energy and her pussy was about to pulse with a hard climax. She could feel the churning heat gathering force, like a storm cloud high above the earth, building, building.

The ropes wrapped around her made her breasts tender, her nipples hard and sensitive. The ones dipping between her legs rubbed against her burning pussy, driving her need. She could come. Release was right there. And yet she held back with the slave, allowing herself to relish this moment when her body was more energized and alive than it had ever been before.

The pulsing heat slowly crept out from her center. It was a glorious sensation. Too wonderful for words or even thoughts. It was. She was.

And then the slave made this little sound and whoosh, an inferno swept through her body. Her pussy convulsed around aching emptiness. Her muscles spasmed as ecstasy buzzed along her nerves from her pussy up to her scalp and down to the soles of her feet. She felt as if she were soaring through the air like a bird, diving and swooping on gusts of warm wind.

On and on the pleasure went and she was so grateful, so lost in that impossibly beautiful place the slave and Pierce had led her to. She was sad when the ecstasy faded and the voice coaxed her back into herself, into the dark shadow in the corner where she was a captive, waiting for her Master to free her again.

When she opened her eyes, she was nude. The slave was gone. And Pierce looked on the verge of losing control.

Chapter Eight

Kaden couldn't get back to Pierce and Eden fast enough. Every minute of the day he had thought of them. During meetings that should have required his full attention. During discussions with his staff. During briefings from his security team.

His mind just kept wandering back to that unbelievably intense moment in the woods last night. After the feeding. When Pierce's venom had burned in his veins.

It was the most magical moment of his life. He couldn't wait for the second dose.

Where were they now? What were they doing? Had Pierce fucked Eden again? Was she writhing in ecstasy beneath him, her supple body stretched out on a bondage table, his for the taking? Already Kaden's body was hard, stiff, hot, and those effects had been produced by mere thoughts. The workings of his imagination.

To actually see Pierce. To taste his kiss. And to feel Eden's touch. To hear her sigh of ecstasy as his fangs pierced her skin...

At this point, he was living for those things. Nothing else mattered. Not even the news his brother had for him.

Unable to put off his need for another second, he flattened his hands on his desk and stood. "I must go."

His brother stammered, "But I haven't—"

"Later."

"But this could mean—"

"I said later." He stepped around the desk, crowding his persistent brother. "I am king, but you know I am only a man. Of flesh and blood. I hunger. I burn, dammit!"

"Yes, of course." Marek dropped to his knee. "I'll take care of it, my king."

Instantly, Kaden was hit with sickening, gut-wrenching guilt. He hooked his hand under his brother's elbow and hauled him to his feet. "Forgive me. It's the Hunger."

"You don't have to explain. I'm a Son. I've been crippled by the Hunger too. Your vulnerability won't get to your enemies."

"Thank you." More grateful than ever before, Kaden pulled his younger brother into an embrace. "I don't know how I could tolerate a day in this hell without you."

"I won't ever let you find out if you could."

"Thank you."

His brother clapped him on the back and then stepped backward out of the embrace. "Go to them. Go now. Feed. Heal. Everything else can wait until tomorrow."

"You don't know what you did when you selected those two. Pierce is...magnificent. And Eden is perfect. I'm shocked by how completely they have

overtaken my mind. My thoughts. Even my dreams. I'm bewitched. Thoroughly. Completely. It's not good."

Marek looked pleased. "Yes, it is. You should enjoy the blood-bond. It was never meant to be an empty physical act."

"I know but..."

"You're thinking about...that *wretched* woman."

He nodded. "Yeah." It hadn't been so long ago that he'd lain next to his wife's soft body and woken every morning to the sight of her sweet face. He'd loved her. Had turned his heart and soul over to her. And she had cruelly used the gift he'd so graciously given against him.

He would never trust a woman blindly again. Not to such a profound depth. As king, he simply couldn't afford to.

"Why are you still here, staring out into space? When you have those two waiting?"

"You're right." Somewhat sobered, Kaden headed to the door. "I'm wasting time, standing around here telling you how amazing they are instead of showing *them* how amazing I think they are."

"Show them. And let them show you how wonderful you are. You deserve it, my brother. More than any Son I have ever known."

That genuine, heartfelt proclamation inspired Kaden to give his devoted brother one final hug before he headed toward the dungeon. He couldn't wait to see Pierce and Eden, couldn't wait to touch them. Taste them. Hear them whisper his name as he brought them to the throes of ecstasy.

For one week he would allow himself to let some of his defenses down. He would give pleasure and receive a small measure. But he wouldn't let things go too far. Yes, this temporary arrangement was for the best. He would get a small taste of joy, not enough to make him forget.

His first wife had taught him a very painful lesson not long ago. His heart would always send him down treacherous roads, which led to one end—his own destruction. Perhaps, considering his desire for Synne—for he knew now his feelings went beyond a wish for an alliance with her father and the peace and security that came with it—it had been good fortune that she had been promised to another man.

Kaden had no wish to tread down that perilous path again.

* * * * *

A hush fell over the dungeon and Eden knew Kaden had entered the room. Before she saw him with her eyes, or heard that low, sexy voice of his, she felt his presence. Her skin prickled all over, pulling into tight goose bumps. And a skittery chill swept up her spine.

She looked over her shoulder.

There he was. A magnificent man. Tall and dark. His body perfectly sculpted, the bulge of thick muscles so enticing she couldn't help staring.

Only one word came to mind as she watched him cross the room. Majestic. If she didn't know better she'd swear he was a king or prince. She supposed he was, in a way. Prince of a different kind of kingdom, ruler of a large, successful empire of some sort.

That had to be the reason for her body's intense reaction to him. He didn't even realize it but everything about him played into her secret fantasies.

God help her if he donned Henrician garb and swept her off her feet and onto his charging war horse! She was already pretty close to brain dead. That would do her in.

She was such a silly romantic. Of course no such thing would happen. This wasn't a romance novel. It wasn't a movie. It was reality. But damn if this reality didn't feel like fantasy.

"Kaden," Pierce whispered.

Eden's gaze shot to his face, and she caught the shimmer of need in Pierce's eyes as he stared at Kaden. It looked like she wasn't the only one in their cozy threesome who was over-the-moon infatuated with Kaden. Then again, as she gazed around the dungeon, noting that every single person in the room had turned to look at Kaden, it seemed that there were lots of people who had it bad for the man.

Sadly, that made her feel special. Proud. As if she held some power over them because she was *the chosen one*. She had never been with a man who had such a presence about him.

Kaden's gaze found hers and in a heartbeat they were locked together, across the crowded space. A current of energy seemed to zap along the invisible tether linking them. The other people didn't matter anymore. It was just Kaden and her and that bizarre link.

Her shoulder warmed as a large hand rested upon it.

And Pierce. Pierce was there too. Big and hard and hot.

Pierce stepped around her side just as Kaden moved within reach. She watched Kaden's gaze shift to Pierce. Something passed between them. A silent greeting. No, it was more than that. Their bodies stiffened. Their eyes became a little sharp. She almost felt as if she were standing next to two dogs that hadn't decided if they were going to bare teeth or wag their tails.

Pierce, she noticed, was the first to shift his gaze away.

Kaden gave her one thorough up-and-down look, reminding her that she was naked. The tip of his tongue swept across his lower lip. Eden couldn't help staring at his mouth. It was such a fine specimen. Perfect teeth, white and straight. Perfect lips that made her imagine all sorts of naughty things.

The outer corners lifted into a hint of a smile. Kaden cupped his hand under her elbow. It was such an innocent touch and yet so devastating. "I see you've been busy

while I've been away. I'd like to take our cozy little gathering to a more intimate setting."

She knew exactly what would happen next. Her body knew too. Already it was tightening, warming, getting wet and ready for the sweet invasion.

After shrugging back into her robe, she followed Pierce and Kaden out of the dungeon. She wasn't sad to bid that room farewell, although her first time had ended on a very good note, without a doubt. Back down the hallways that now looked familiar, they led her to the private part reserved just for Kaden and his closest friends and family.

Past the guards, who didn't react at all to the sight of her coming and leaving dressed in only a bathrobe, which made her wonder if it wasn't a common occurrence. And at that thought, a little sick feeling gripped her gut.

Other women had been trotting down this hallway in this very robe.

Almost made her want to strip it off right then and there.

Still silent, she followed Kaden's lead, around several corners, up a flight of stairs. Finally, they stopped in front of a set of twin doors. Kaden pushed one of them open, revealing the most exquisite bedroom Eden had ever seen. It was straight out of a movie or magazine, with an enormous four-poster bed draped in gorgeous fabrics. Rugs. A sitting area. The draperies. The room had a rich, expensive feel. The furnishings were all heavy, dark wood. Carved ornately.

Kaden went to what looked like a bar and lifted a decanter of what she assumed was red wine. He poured three glasses, handed one to Eden, the second to Pierce and finally lifted the third. "To tonight."

Eden touched her glass to his then Pierce's before taking a tiny sip. The wine was absolutely heavenly, just the right balance of spice and fruit. Now she understood why some people spent big money on expensive wines. What a difference.

Meeting Pierce's gaze over the rims of their glasses, she took a couple more sips before lowering her glass and turning to Kaden. "Kaden, your room is stunning. I mean, I'm speechless."

"This isn't my room. It was...my mother's."

"Your mother's." She wandered over to one wall, covered floor to ceiling with a painted mural, depicting what she guessed was Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. "How lucky she was to have such a lovely, peaceful space. Just look at this painting. I've never seen anything like it." She ran an index finger over the image of Adam's torso, almost expecting his skin to be warm, smooth, it was so lifelike. Naturally, it wasn't. Up close, she could see the brushstrokes that made him look so real from a distance. Whoever had painted the mural had been gifted.

"Thank you." Kaden stepped up behind her. "But I can't take any credit. That mural was commissioned by the original owner of this building, which once belonged to a count, a distant relative of my family's."

"Yes." Turning, she found Pierce standing by the bar, watching her with those sharp eyes of his. The intensity of his gaze sent a rush of heat through her body, reminding her of that incredible time they'd shared in the dungeon earlier. "Pierce told me the castle had been dismantled and shipped here from somewhere in Europe."

Kaden moved around her to stand against the wall. "Yes, it was. Some people might find my family a little eccentric, including me, but they decided they wanted to take their history with them when they moved here."

She smiled over her shoulder at him. "You seem pretty normal to me."

His eyes glimmered as he returned her smile. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"You should. I don't say that about just anyone." She couldn't help glancing at Pierce once more before turning again toward the mural. It was as if he called to her, his energy pulling her to him like a magnet. She felt his presence now, even though he was silent and still, and Kaden, the prince of her fantasies, was right there, next to her. Something was happening, changing. How? Why? "And who doesn't want to hold on to their history? If your family could afford to have a whole castle hauled here from some mountaintop in England or wherever, then why not have it brought here?"

"Anyway, all of the pieces in the house have been in my family for generations." Kaden ran his knuckle down the side of her face. But his touch wasn't what made her shudder.

It was Pierce, moving closer to her. Even though she was facing the wall, and Kaden was so close the heat from his body warmed her arm, she could feel Pierce coming nearer. Once again her skin prickled, the sensation not unlike that of a static-charged balloon being held above her arm. The tiny hairs on her nape and arms stood on end.

"But that's enough talk about my home," Kaden said. "I'd much rather do something else."

"Yes, I owe you both a massage, don't I?" Turning toward Pierce, she met his gaze once again.

Kaden gathered her hair over one shoulder, baring the other. A shudder skipped up her spine when he ran his tongue down the side of her neck, from the base of her earlobe to the dip behind her collarbone. "You are delicious."

There wasn't much to say to that compliment. "Thanks."

"And you smell even better. Like woman. And sex."

"Oh." Pierce's eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly and her cheeks warmed. So did a few other parts of her body. "Um, that's because..."

"Because what?" Pierce curled his fingers in the soft material of her robe and pulled, easing it off her shoulders. "You don't need this any longer."

No, she didn't. She definitely didn't need it to keep warm. The way Pierce had murmured those six words in her ear, with that sinful voice of his, was igniting little blazes through her whole body.

The robe slipped down, landing in a soft pile around her feet. Kaden pressed against her and slid his hands around her waist, fingers spread. They paused for a moment over her stomach before moving higher, to her breasts.

Standing between two men, facing the wall, she sucked in a little gasp when Kaden pinched her nipples. And she sighed when he flicked the tight, pink flesh with his fingertips. Little zaps of heat pulsed through her chest with every flick. And her heart thumped heavier with every zap.

His touches weren't gentle but they weren't cruelly harsh either. They were just what her body craved.

While Kaden explored her body with his hands, Pierce didn't move. He didn't touch her. He didn't kiss her. He just was. There. Beside her. Big and hot and strong. She wanted to kiss him, needed to kiss him. To explore the warm, sweet depth of his mouth with her tongue and welcome him to do the same. But when she tried to turn around to face him, he held her in place, his hands gliding down to her hips. "Don't move," Pierce whispered. He left one hand lightly resting on her hip.

Kaden nudged her legs apart with his knee. "Damn, your scent drives me crazy." He nibbled a tickly path from her earlobe to her collarbone. One of his hands slid down the outside of her thigh then traveled around to the inside. He hooked his fingers, his nails gently grating the sensitive flesh.

Quivering, she extended her arms, bracing herself against the wall. Instinctively, she arched her back, welcoming his invasion, wishing Pierce would do the same. "Yes. Touch me. Please."

"I will," Pierce whispered in her ear, as if he knew she was talking to him. "I promise. But not yet."

If not now, when?

A soft knock sounded at the door. Pierce had it open, only a couple of inches, before she had the chance to pick up the robe and cover herself. Less than a minute later, he closed the door and handed Kaden a folded piece of paper.

While she gathered the soft robe against her chest, Kaden stepped away from her, opened the message and read it. "I must leave now. For only a moment."

Exchanging a confused look with Pierce, she said, "O-okay."

"It won't take long." Kaden scooped her hand into his and kissed her fingertips. Then he left and she was alone with Pierce again. Now was her chance to try to figure out what was happening between them.

"Pierce?" she whispered, letting the robe fall to the floor again.

He shook his head as his gaze slowly wandered down her body then back up. "Not yet."

What kind of game was he playing, cruel bastard? After he'd whispered that sweet promise in her ear, after he'd taken her to the dungeon and shared that dark, magical

moment with her? She'd had her share of cruel lovers. She knew how to handle them. Somehow she had to make him as desperate for her touch as she was for his.

If she didn't have his thick, hard cock in her soon, she was going to lose her mind, go completely crazy.

This man had to have a weakness, a vulnerability. She simply had to find it.

Chapter Nine

Pierce's body was one hard knot of pounding, burning need, and yet he could not let go. Not yet. It had started as a game of seduction, innocent fun. But not any longer. Everything changed when Kaden left and now he could see how his tormenting was frustrating Eden. He was angry with himself for putting her through the aggravation, but that didn't change anything. He couldn't take her fast and hard like it seemed they both wanted. Not without Kaden, not when the Hunger had him burning so damn bad he didn't know if he might lose control.

Eden's control was on the verge of snapping. He could see the muscles in her neck and jaw pulling taut. Her arms. Shoulders. Thighs.

She was such a luscious woman, soft where she should be, hard where she shouldn't. She smelled incredible and tasted even better. He longed to dip his tongue into her pussy and drink every drop of her warm honey. More shocking than that, he burned to hold her as she slept, to cradle her head in the crook of his arm and watch her dream.

She was a dangerous woman. She couldn't have any idea what power she held over him. She couldn't find out. He had to maintain control, even if it meant denying them both some of the most pleasurable parts of the blood-bond.

He couldn't remember the last time he felt like this. He wanted to savor every minuscule sensation, every touch, moan, scent, sight, flavor for as long as he could. The thought of it fading, even slightly, made him ache inside.

He moved away from her, thinking he should leave until Kaden could return. It was best, for both of them, since it seemed some sort of powerful force was pulling at them. If he fucked her, he would bite her. He knew it. Just like he knew he would be intoxicated with the very first taste. That wouldn't be a problem if the Hunger wasn't churning within him so fiercely right now.

For the purpose of the blood-bond, tonight Kaden had to feed first, inject Eden with his venom and consume the blended venom flowing in her veins—the product of last night's feeding. If he bit her first instead, Kaden wouldn't receive the venom he needed to ease the Hunger. But dammit, he couldn't wait for that first taste. Decadent. Sweet. Spicy. Did he dare even kiss her without Kaden there to make sure he didn't lose control?

He curled his fingers around her upper arms and stared into her eyes. Yes, he did dare. He could kiss her.

She licked her lips.

Yes, yesyesyes.

He lowered his head, his gaze fixed on her plump mouth, the fast beat of her pulse echoing in his ears. Closer he moved, until the scent of her enveloped him, filling his nose.

No. He lurched away and cupped his hands over his mouth, hiding the fangs that surged into place.

It had been too many hours since they'd fed last. He couldn't. He wouldn't take the chance. What the hell was taking Kaden so long??

Pierce wheeled around and headed toward the door, intent on finding his missing partner. But Eden scampered around him and blocked his path to the exit.

"Where are you going?" Her expression was a mixture of shock, anger and confusion.

"To find Kaden. I'll be back in a minute. I promise." Once he knew his fangs weren't visible, he smiled and reached out to cup her cheek, but she knocked his hand away.

"No." She pressed her full length against his and ground her belly against his groin.

His erect cock thrummed.

His head clouded.

His blood burned.

Driven by feral instinct, he hauled her against him and kissed her. Her soft lips parted, welcoming his tongue into the intoxicating depth of her mouth. Her tongue boldly stroked his. This wasn't the woman he'd kissed last night. She was matching every thrust of his tongue with one of her own. And her hips, the wanton way she was using them...

He broke the kiss, only to be drawn in to kiss her again by the sight of her swollen lips and lust-filled eyes. He grabbed her shoulders and half carried, half dragged her to the bed. As soon as he felt the mattress hit the back of his legs, he turned around and threw her onto it.

But instead of lying on her back and opening her legs for him, she rolled over and scrambled up onto her knees. "I'm not that easy, Pierce. I'm not going to lie here like some sweet little virgin and wait for you to take me."

Damn, the fire burning in her eyes was making the blaze in his body that much more excruciating.

"You want me, but only on your terms. I say the hell with that." She cupped a breast with one hand and her mound with the other. "I think you've been playing with too many sweet, obedient submissives. I'm not sweet. I'm not obedient. And I'm not submissive."

"Like hell you're not." He watched as her slender fingers slipped between her labia, plunging into the tight pussy he wanted to fuck so badly but couldn't.

"Does a submissive do this without asking for permission?" Her eyes heavy-lidded, she lifted her fingers to her mouth and licked all that delicious cream off. Every bit of it. By the time she was through, his balls were so heavy he could barely move his legs.

"I've never tasted my own cream. It's good." Her lips curved up into a sex-kitten grin. "You like it, don't you? You like a woman who fights a little." Before he could answer, she pushed her fingers back inside herself. In and out she worked them while her thumb brushed over her clit.

He watched, mesmerized, bewitched, as she stroked herself to the verge of orgasm. Before she came, he threw himself on top of her, knocking her onto her back.

"That's not what you want," he said breathlessly as he gazed down into her pretty, flushed face. "You can fuck yourself all day long."

"You gave me no choice." She rocked her hips back and forth, rubbing against his pounding, aching cock. "Nobody else was volunteering to do the job."

His willpower snapped and he knew he couldn't wait to take her. Not one fraction of a second. "I am now." With one hand, he caught her wrists and held them up over her head. With the other, he unfastened his fly and jammed his pants down until his cock was finally free. After stroking her pussy a couple of times to spread some of her slick juices around her entry, he drew his hips back and then slammed them forward, driving his full length into her in one hard thrust.

She stiffened beneath him. "Ohmygod, yes!" She clawed at his chest the instant he released her wrists. He pushed a hand under her ass and lifted it. Deeper his cock plunged. She moaned and then beat on his chest with her fists. "Damn you! Damn you for making me wait for this. You're going to suffer."

He already was. His balls were so tight he could feel the tension in his teeth. His blood was pounding so hot and hard through his body he could hear every heavy thump in his ears. And his release was coming so fast he could practically taste it.

He needed to bite her. The scent of her pussy, her sweat, her desire, was driving him mad. But he had to wait for Kaden.

He buried his nose in her hair and fucked her like he'd never taken a woman before. Her soft body yielded to every rough invasion, opening to him and then clamping around his length, gripping him tight. Again and again, in he drove. With every inward stroke, he soared closer to release.

He didn't want it to end, but he couldn't stop it. The beast inside had taken over and he readily, eagerly surrendered to its greedy, ravenous demands. He fisted her hair and held her down, forcing her to lie flat and take his abuse. His lust blinded him. He couldn't see anything. Couldn't feel anything but her hot flesh wrapping around his, the searing heat of his impending climax, the glorious fullness of his cock as his cum coursed up his shaft and pulsed from his body.

Behind him, he heard a male's groan, and then beneath him, Eden's throaty cry as she found release. Hot liquid droplets splattered all over his back, forming a warm rivulet, dribbling toward his center and following the line of his spine.

Kaden's cum.

Kaden moved around to kneel beside Pierce, pulled on his chin and kissed him. Their tongues battled, stroked, tasted, explored and seduced, the kiss clouding Pierce's head before it had fully cleared. His softening cock hardened inside Eden's pussy, and it clenched like a fist around his length once more.

"Pierce," she whispered, her eyelids still closed. Pierce kissed her pursed lips before sitting back on his knees, his rod slowly gliding in and out of her canal. And while he fucked her slowly, gently, he watched Kaden lean over her slender neck and bite.

She fought the pain, but only for an instant. Once the venom took hold, she grabbed Kaden and held him to her. Her legs spread wider, welcoming Pierce deeper. Pierce accepted her invitation eagerly as he waited for Kaden to finish feeding, so hungry now for her blood he could practically taste it already.

The instant Kaden lifted his head, Pierce sank his fangs into Eden's shoulder. His mouth filled with the tangy flavor of her blood and the spicy taste of Kaden's venom. He pulled hard, sucking down desperate mouthfuls. And with every swallow, his cock thickened, his body hardened, his senses sharpened until he couldn't hold back. Again, he came, this time harder than the last. His entire body shook with the intensity of the release as waves of liquid heat pounded along veins and arteries freshly filled with life-sustaining blood.

Completely overcome, he threw his head back and cried out. Tears streaked down his face. This union, these two people, had done what nobody had in more years than he could remember.

They had made him forget everything, even himself.

* * * * *

They'd found him. He had taken such care to change his name, his appearance. He'd lived a private life since that day so long ago. Lived every day in fear of being discovered. Now the waiting was over.

He would thank Eden someday. She'd insisted on going to get the Eclipse, just as he'd expected she would. If it hadn't worked out this way—if he'd turned himself in instead—they would have been suspicious. No, this was the best plan and it was working perfectly.

He would be tried and convicted of treason within a few days. Then he hoped his luck would not change and he would have his chance. To set things right.

Nate dropped to his knees as the officers kicked open his door.

* * * * *

Eden nervously fingered the lid of the pill bottle Kaden had just handed her and stared down at the clothes he'd bought for her, folded and stacked in a tidy pile next to her hip. She looked so lovely, sitting in bed, freshly fucked, her cheeks still pink, her skin glistening with sweat. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure." A pink nipple caught his attention. Kaden flicked it, watching the skin pucker, the tip jut out. Now that Pierce had left them, he felt a little freer to talk.

"Why did you make this deal with me? I mean, there's something very special about you. Everyone looks at you like you're practically a god. They respect you, revere you. I would think you'd be able to have any woman you want."

He rolled onto his back and rested his head on his bent arm. "You're very perceptive."

"I study people."

Needing to look at her again, to see her pretty face, smooth skin, beautiful hair, he shifted back on his side. Much better. "Hmmm, since it seems you've figured out so much, why don't you tell me what you think my reason is?"

She bit her lip. "I don't want to make you mad."

"I won't be. Promise."

"Okay." She visibly inhaled, exhaled. "I think you need to keep people a safe distance, and a normal relationship with a woman—or a man for that matter since it seems you're bi—won't allow you to do that." She started playing with the bottle cap again. "But I still haven't figured out how Pierce plays in all this since you didn't make a deal with him too." After a moment's hesitation, she asked, "Or did you?"

"No, he received no incentive."

"I think he's in love with you."

He had wondered the same thing. "If he is, I am sorry for it."

She shifted lower until her head was level with his. It was an intimate position, their faces mere inches from each other, their eyes locked. "What are you protecting yourself from?"

"Deception, I guess."

"Then you've been lied to? Haven't we all?"

"You couldn't understand my situation. Lies aren't just lies in my case. They're weapons."

A moment passed between them. Several seconds of silence. But even though no words were exchanged, something else was. Energy, perhaps. Emotion.

Eden was the one to break the silence. "I know it's probably funny to you, but this whole thing reminds me of a movie I watched once. Of course you're not a king, so we're not talking literally, but the king in the movie was surrounded by people who were trying to overthrow him. He didn't know who his friends were, his enemies. I felt sorry for him."

"You have no idea how close you are to the truth."

Something flashed in her eyes. "Then you don't know your friends from your enemies either?"

"No. But please don't insult me with your sympathy."

She cupped his cheek. "Would it be insulting if I empathized with you?"

He flattened his hand over hers. "I suppose not."

"Okay."

His fingers curled, twining between hers. He lifted her hand, turned it over and kissed her wrist where her pulse beat softly beneath smooth ivory skin. "So tell me, little one, how do you empathize with me?"

"When I was a kid, I had a friend who lied to me, manipulated me. She pretended to be my friend to my face while she told everyone who would listen lies about me. I thought she was my closest friend, my very best friend. So I understand what it's like to trust and have that faith thrown back in my face."

Touched by her story, he nodded.

She stared at their joined hands. "I wish you could trust me. I realize that's not why I'm here, but I think everyone needs a friend."

"Thank you. But it's better if you aren't my friend. It's best that you know as little about me as possible." He caressed her sweet face. "More importantly, it's vital that you care as little about me as possible. I'd rather you fear me than like me. Just like I'd rather Pierce hate me than love me."

Eden grabbed the garment on top of the pile, the softest sweater she'd ever touched, and gathered it to her chest as she watched Kaden leave the room. He was incredible, much more special than she'd thought that first night. Sexy, yes. But also kind, with a gentle heart and an old soul. Clearly, he didn't know it, but it was already too late. She liked him. More than she had five minutes ago because she *got* him now. And Pierce loved him, and she knew in her gut that he couldn't stop himself any more than she could.

* * * * *

"Murdered?" Kaden braced his arms against the back of the chair. His knees were soft, his insides coiled into a tight knot of pain.

His lover. The one person he was closest to, except his brother, was dead. Slaughtered no doubt.

"No, Kaden," his brother said softly. "It was suicide."

Kaden's heart turned to ice. How many months ago had it been since that night? "No. Compton wouldn't kill himself. No."

"He left a note."

"It's a forgery."

"We can have it analyzed, but I honestly don't think we need to." Marek extended an arm, a folded piece of paper in his hand.

Kaden snapped it from his brother's grasp and slowly unfolded it, the sound of crinkling paper not nearly loud enough to drown out the heavy thump of his heartbeat in his ears.

This wasn't happening. How much was one man supposed to take? How much loss and grief and tragedy? He thought he'd already lost his soul, that he was an empty shell. But now, with this agony, he knew he hadn't.

His eyes blurred, he tried to read the words scrawled on the paper but he couldn't. He couldn't decipher them. He couldn't comprehend their meaning.

Furious and frustrated, he thrust the unread letter back at his brother. "Read it."

His brother cleared his throat. "My king, my friend. I know now, as you are reading this, your heart might be heavy, but you will soon realize this was for the best. I am no longer suffering, struggling to abide by the wishes and needs of the man I love, and you are no longer forced to bear my endless pleading for the affection you are unable provide me. I was weak. You were right. But in this final task, selfish in one way but selfless in another, I hope you'll find the respect you couldn't pay me before. I died to set you free."

"I respected you, dammit!" he screamed. He threw the chair across the room, cleared his desk in one broad scoop, and toppled every piece of furniture. The fury burned, but under that, the guilt stung a whole lot more.

He'd been so content to protect himself from pain that he'd driven a man to such a heinous act. A beautiful, loving, caring man.

Kaden's bones turned to sludge and he collapsed to the floor. Sobs ripped through his chest, exploding from his throat in painful, wrenching bursts. "I deserve to burn for this."

His brother knelt beside him. "You aren't to blame."

"It was my words, my actions."

"You didn't pull the trigger. You didn't give him the gun."

"No, I didn't. But I gave him a reason to." He met his brother's gaze for the first time since he'd read the letter and witnessed the worry in his brother's eyes. "What kind of man does this to another?"

"A man who must weigh every word and action at the risk of arming his enemy."

"To hell with the enemy." Driven by another wave of rage, Kaden jumped to his feet, threw open the window and screamed out into the brilliant afternoon, "The king is dead!"

"No!" Marek hauled him away from the window, ducking a punch Kaden threw his way before knocking him to the ground. "I won't let you do this."

Kaden turned a cold, hard stare toward his brother as he struggled to get up. "You can't stop me."

"Yes, I can. And I will." He leapt to his feet, allowing Kaden to do the same, and lifted his fists. "Give me your best, brother. Don't insult me by holding back."

"No, I've hurt enough people. I do enough damage without lifting my fists. I won't."

"Fuck you!" Marek spit at Kaden's feet. "I can't believe my brother has buried himself in self-pity."

"It's not self-pity."

Marek turned his back. "Maybe you're right. The people who count on their king to keep them safe, for protection and guidance, don't need a ruler who is too consumed with his own needs to think about them."

"That's not true! It's never been true." Kaden grabbed his brother's upper arms and hauled him around. "I've given every minute of the day and night to my people. I don't eat, drink, fuck or breathe without thinking first of them."

"Until today."

"Compton fucking killed himself! I drove him to it! I'm a monster."

"No, you're a man. A flawed, genuine, feeling, breathing, living man who must make hard choices because he lives every minute in a hell that nobody else sees."

Reeling from shock, fury and sorrow, he braced himself against a chair. "I want out. I can't do this anymore."

"I don't want you to have to do this anymore either. I love you, and it's killing me to see you live like this. But think, Kaden. How many Sons will suffer if you abdicate? You know who will take your place, and you know what he will do."

Kaden let his head fall forward. "Yes. He'll take us all back centuries."

"We'll be persecuted, viewed as monsters, feared, imprisoned and killed, despised. Our children won't be safe. Look how mankind treats its own kind. What horrid acts they have been driven to, out of blind, irrational fear. We won't survive."

"I know!" Kaden met his brother's gaze. "If only I could share this burden with another. The weight is too much for one to bear."

"Then stop carrying it by yourself, my brother. Allow someone else take a little off your shoulders."

"How will I do that?"

"Take a risk with your heart." His brother motioned to a nearby chair. "Will you sit? I have something to tell you, some news that won't lessen your grief, but it might bring some hope."

Chapter Ten

Eden couldn't believe what she was seeing. When a man dressed in a security uniform came to her room and asked her to follow him, she'd imagined all sorts of things, but not this. Not a hurried dash through secret passages, or a treacherous scramble down a set of dark, steep stairs leading down into the castle's bowels. Most of all, not her best friend sitting in a concrete-walled cell, bloody and beaten. "Ohmygod, Nate! What's going on? Why are you here, locked up in this place?"

He lifted his head, and once he saw her, slowly stood and shuffled toward the iron bars separating them. "It's selfish of me to have you brought here, I know. But I had to see you one last time."

She shook the bars, checked the door. Locked. "I don't understand. Why are you locked in here? Are you being held here against your will? I should call someone..."

"No, Eden. I'm where I should be." Nate placed his hand over hers. His fingers were icy. "I haven't told you a lot of things I should have. But don't feel bad about the way this has turned out. You did what I needed you to. I couldn't have asked for better results. You're a good friend, and no matter what happens, I want you to know that I love you for being so willing to help me."

"I don't get it, Nate."

"I've done some things. Very bad things. And that's why I'm here. I deserve to be."

"What things? Nobody deserves to be locked up like this. It isn't the Dark Ages, for chrissake. This is the United States, and there are laws and courts and judges to handle things like this." Furious now, she searched the area for a key to open the cell. "Not even the almighty Kaden Setara gets to make his own laws. Just wait until he hears from me."

Nate clamped his hand around her wrist. "No, Eden. Don't. I didn't have you brought here so you could help me escape. I wanted to explain. And to thank you. For being a true friend to me."

"But —"

"I tried to kill someone. No, actually, I succeeded. And I knew what the consequences would be."

"First, I don't believe you. I've known you for too long to believe you would hurt anyone. And second, this is bullshit."

"You've known me, but you never really *knew* me. Everything, even my name, was a lie... I'm not who you think..."

Eden couldn't speak. The words coming out of Nate's mouth made no sense. It was as if he'd suddenly started speaking in some bizarre foreign language she couldn't

understand. Every now and then a word would break through the thick haze congealing in her brain, clogging her thoughts. Lie. Assassinate. Hurt. Sorry.

"No. Nononono! I won't believe you. I can't believe you. You are Nate De Vries. My friend. A man who taught me the true meaning of the word sacrifice. You're just saying these things to scare me away. That has to be it. Why? What are you protecting me from?"

"I'm not protecting you. I'm telling you the truth because I don't want you to feel guilty."

Tears burned Eden's eyes and she couldn't help it when they started seeping from the corners and running down her cheeks. She had two close friends, both more dear to her than anything in the world, and one of them was pushing her away for some reason.

Her insides were so twisted she felt sick. Her throat constricted just as a sob ripped from her chest, and she whirled around and gasped, gulping in a lungful of air.

"I'm sorry, Eden. So sorry. I shouldn't have had you come. I should have known it would hurt you too much."

"This is my fault, somehow I caused this, and I'm going to get you out of here. You're just trying to protect me, like you always do."

"No. Listen to me." Nate grappled for her, hands swiping at the musty air between them. "If you love me, you'll leave me here. I won't go today. Now. Leave this place." He sank to his knees. "I won't hide anymore. I'm tired of being afraid. So tired."

Eden dropped to her knees too. She peered into eyes full of sorrow and guilt. "Afraid of what?"

"Afraid of the truth." He blinked once, twice, a third time and looked upward. A smile slowly spread over his face. "I'm not scared anymore. I'm free."

"You're locked in a concrete cell."

"From here, all I see is freedom. Sweet freedom."

She didn't understand it, but she could hear it in his voice, clear as could be. A radiant peace shone around him. He wasn't sick anymore. He wasn't jittery or nervous. He looked...content. He was telling the truth.

"You're going to leave now and not say a word to anyone. Go home. Pretend that you never saw me here. Pretend that none of this ever happened. Thank you, Eden, for doing what no other friend would have the strength to do—be happy for me because I'm not hiding anymore."

She reached through the bars and stroked his face. "I love you, Nate."

"I love you too." He gave her hand one final squeeze and then released it. "Go. I don't want anyone to know you were down here with me. You can trust the man who led you here. He'll take you to your car."

"No."

"Listen to me, Eden. You have to leave. Please. For me. And whatever you do, don't try to come back for me. I don't want anyone suspecting you're working with me. It could kill you. Promise me, Eden. Please."

Eden stared into his pain-filled eyes, and lied, "Yes, okay. I'll go."

Luckily, the opportunity came for her to shake her escort before they'd left the building. A call came over his radio, and when he answered it, she slipped out of his sight, eventually finding her way out of the maze of passages and into a main corridor, manned by a courteous guard who was all too happy to direct her back toward her room. The entire time she crept down those dusty, narrow passageways, her mind raced. What could she do? How would she get Nate out of that hellhole?

* * * * *

Even while she was still semi-lost in her thoughts, Eden could see something was wrong with Kaden the second he stepped into the family room the next day. Terribly wrong.

Eden jumped up from the couch, her worries temporarily shoved to the side. She wanted to talk to him about Nate so badly she hurt inside, but she couldn't. "What happened?"

Kaden drew her into an embrace and she closed her eyes and let herself melt into it for a moment, relish the sensation of his thick, strong arms wrapped protectively around her. He didn't speak, but what he said with his body was so poignant, she was nearly brought to tears. The fact that she was already emotional, thanks to that all-too-brief visit with Nate, didn't help matters at all.

When he released her, she felt like throwing herself into his arms and begging him to hold her longer. Ten minutes, an hour, no, much longer. A day or two or ten might be enough time. It looked like he needed a nice, long hug too.

He motioned toward the couch. "Please, sit." And after she sat, he settled beside her.

She quickly scooped up the TV remote and punched the power button, cutting off the television. This was not the time for seedy reality show reruns or melodramatic soap operas. "Can you talk about it, whatever's wrong?"

He looked at her, studied her, as if he was either trying to convince himself he could trust her, or searching for the right words to express himself. She waited patiently, sensing this was far more difficult for him than she could imagine.

"I learned someone I love is dead."

Eden's heart clenched as she met Kaden's dark eyes. For the first time she could see his emotions plainly, could read the anger and grief in their depths. "I'm so sorry." She knew there was nothing she could say to ease his pain. Words were useless, at least coming from her. All she could do was be there, support him as he worked his way through his emotions. She'd stood by enough grieving people to know how it would

go. First denial, which it seemed he'd already passed. Then anger. Bargaining. Depression and finally acceptance.

A heavy silence fell between them, and she searched deep inside for something that wouldn't sound trite. "My very first true friend died when I was fifteen. We were like sisters, closer, actually. We never fought. We practically lived at each other's houses—her family lived next door." The hazy memory of Chrissy's face flashed through her mind. "It was my fault she died."

"How?"

"We were sitting around one day, bored out of our minds. A few friends were over, including a guy Chrissy liked a lot, Joe. We were swapping stories about the worst thing we'd ever done, and Chrissy couldn't come up with any. She was such a goody-goody, but so was I. I just wasn't such a goody-goody that I wouldn't lie about my so-called crimes. Anyway, for kicks I dared her to steal her mom's car and take it for a joyride. She did it. I didn't think she had the guts. She took the damn car because I told her to. And she crashed it. She was in a coma for three weeks before she died. I've lived with her blood on my hands all this time."

"It wasn't your fault."

She let her head fall back and closed her eyes. How many times had she heard those words? Dozens, at least. She would never believe them. "Yes, it was my fault. I told her to take the car."

"But you didn't force her to. You didn't hold a gun to her head and make her. And you certainly can't be held responsible for the accident."

The agony of Nate's situation making her more emotional, she struggled to hold herself together. "Yes, I can. I knew she would do anything to impress that stupid Joe. And I also knew she couldn't drive worth a damn. I could've dared her to do anything—steal a candy bar from the 7-11. But I picked something stupid and dangerous. That's why I will always feel guilty."

Kaden got quiet then, so silent that Eden regretted telling him her story. Whatever was she thinking? She hadn't talked about Chrissy in ages. What he must think of her now.

"Thank you," he finally said.

"You're welcome?" She didn't really understand what he was thanking her for, but she was glad he didn't seem to be looking at her like she was a murderer.

"Your story reminded me of what my brother said to me today."

"I'm glad then." Although he still looked sad, she felt as if she'd helped him a little. That made her feel closer to him, more connected on an emotional level. This was both good and bad. She was starting to feel something more for this man than just lust, and already she was wondering how uncomfortable it would be saying goodbye at the end of the week.

The way things were looking, she'd lost one friend, Nate. In a handful of days, she would be saying goodbye to Kaden. And Pierce too.

Her insides twisted into a knot.

How was it possible for two men to touch her heart in such a short time?

"Pierce and I will return in a little while, and you will receive your third payment."

A response quickly came to mind, but she clamped her lips closed, curving them into what she hoped would be a believable smile. He didn't know she had found Nate down in the basement-slash-prison. Nate had warned her not to let him know.

She wondered if Kaden would trust her enough to tell her about Nate before the end of the week.

More than that, she wondered if she could disguise the heartache she felt at the thought of one of her dearest friends down in that horrible place, a prisoner for a crime she couldn't believe he was capable of committing.

* * * * *

Pierce stepped back from the door when he heard the approaching footsteps. Sure Kaden would take his eavesdropping the wrong way, he turned around and headed back toward the stairs. The last thing he wanted was to earn Kaden's mistrust right now when Kaden was at his most vulnerable and needing love and protection.

It wasn't that he was happy to hear about Kaden's loss. To have a friend perish was a terrible heartache, as he well knew. He would never wish such sorrow on anyone, particularly a man he loved so dearly.

But Kaden's unsteady emotional state might, ironically, give him the chance he had been waiting for.

Pierce hurried up the steps, slipped into his suite and slowly shut the door, not wanting the sound of the door closing to alert Kaden to his actions if he was following. He stood behind it and listened.

The footfalls were coming closer, closer yet. They stopped.

A soft knock made him straighten tall. He didn't move away, knowing Kaden would hear his retreat through the door, just as he had Kaden's approach.

Wishing he didn't have to deceive his king, he slipped off his shoes, walked into the suite's bedroom then stepped back into them and strode toward the door to answer Kaden's knock. At the sight of Kaden, he smiled and stepped aside to welcome him inside, "My king."

Kaden entered, lacking his usual presence. He looked like a man on the verge of a breakdown, and Pierce's heart ached to see the man he loved so dearly hurting so badly. "I wanted to talk to you privately before we go in with Eden."

"Sure." Pierce headed for the couch, waiting for Kaden to sit before he sat beside him. He twisted his upper body and threw an arm over the top. "What did you want to talk about?"

"Nothing in particular. I just wanted some time alone with you. I felt you deserved it."

"Thanks." Pleased by Kaden's effort to reach out for him on an emotional level, Pierce took Kaden's hand in his. "You look...tired."

Kaden's gaze dropped to their joined hands. "I am."

Pierce studied Kaden's face. The hard lines of his cheekbones and chin seemed a little harsher, the hollows of his eyes a little deeper. "Why?" He longed to take Kaden in his arms, tell him he knew everything and was there if he needed, but he couldn't. This was a step Kaden needed to make on his own time, at his own pace. When Kaden finally laid his heart at his feet, Pierce knew it would be his forever.

"It's the Hunger, I think."

"Hmmm." Pierce leaned closer, lifted Kaden's chin and brushed his mouth over Kaden's. "The Hunger? Are you sure?" At the sound of Kaden's sharp inhalation, Pierce deepened the kiss, sweeping his tongue along the seam of Kaden's mouth.

"Yes, I'm certain. I need to be close to you now." Kaden opened to him, allowing him a taste of decadent heaven and dark sin. The kiss started as a slow, wicked seduction and gradually, as their hands ventured from faces to chests to stomachs, changed to a wild, tormenting unleashing of raw, powerful emotion.

Pierce returned every stab of the tongue and drag of the fingernail with one of his own, drawing Kaden from his misery.

Kaden broke the kiss, looking at Pierce with lips gleaming and face flushed, eyes just this side of wild. "I...need you."

"You have me." Pierce cupped Kaden's face. "All you have to do is free yourself to accept what I gladly offer."

Kaden chuckled, the sound a rich, deep rumble that vibrated through Pierce's body. "What happened to the chase? You were so intent on bringing me to my knees."

"I haven't abandoned it. I've merely changed tactics." Pierce pulled his shirt off and at the sight of Kaden's glittering eyes, ran his hands down his own chest. "Tell me, have I not learned what you need?"

Kaden's tongue swept along his lower lip and then he bit it. "You have."

Pierce leaned close, until the heat radiating from Kaden's skin warmed him. "Then I will have you on your knees in no time." When Kaden pressed his mouth to his, he twisted and hurried away. "But first, I think Eden needs to be introduced to the rope." Pierce hesitated, enjoying the sight of Kaden's reddened cheeks and lust-filled eyes. "Unless you have anything else you'd rather talk about."

Clearly flustered, Kaden motioned toward the door. "No, no. The time for talk is done."

* * * * *

Eden knew the instant Kaden and Pierce entered the family room that things were about to get heavy. The dark shadow from earlier still clouded Kaden's eyes, making him look vulnerable. She wanted to draw him into her arms and hold him, tell him he wasn't alone.

It was the warning look he gave that told her not to.

Hadn't he told Pierce?

"Hello," she greeted both men with a smile. "What's up? It's pretty early yet, and I haven't eaten dinner. I thought I'd catch a movie on TV. Would you like to join me?"

"No, thank you." Kaden checked the kitchen, probably looking to see if his chef was cooking while Pierce made a beeline for her, taking her hand in his.

Glancing down at her fingers, woven between Pierce's, she explained, "The cook headed out, shopping. Dinner won't be for about an hour."

"That's perfect." Pierce pulled on her hands, coaxing her to her feet. "We'll have you back by then."

"Where are we going?" She fell into step with Pierce.

Kaden turned and led them out of the family room.

"Back to your favorite place," Pierce responded, beside her.

"Oh." A little buzzing zap of unease chilled her back.

"Are you afraid?" Kaden asked, pausing for a moment. He didn't wait for her to answer before starting to walk again.

"Kind of," she admitted.

Pierce stroked the back of her hand.

"I've watched Pierce with hundreds of men and women. You have nothing to fear. I can say that with absolute certainty."

"Hundreds?" she echoed.

"I don't take the same submissive twice," Pierce explained.

Interesting. "Does that mean you would only do this with me once too?"

He caught her chin in his fingertips, pulling it up until she met his gaze. "I can't say. I might be tempted to make an exception with you."

She didn't know how she felt about that. Partly relieved. Hugely disappointed.

"He is the most-sought-after Dom in my...in the dungeon," Kaden explained as they stopped outside a set of very familiar doors. "I've had some submissives plead with me to convince him to take them again."

"Really?" What did he do for those hundreds of people that made him so sought after? So powerful? Despite her first visit to the dungeon—which hadn't been all that bad after all—she just couldn't get it. Being tied up couldn't be that great.

Okay, that first time in the dungeon had blown her mind. She'd gone in not expecting to enjoy herself, and she'd left in a haze of sexual satisfaction, her every nerve zinging with energy. And all he'd done was have her kneel and watch.

But doing it couldn't be that much better. Right? She had a feeling she was about to find out.

Kaden opened the door and stepped inside, and Eden noticed right away that the room was empty. That was a huge relief. "I reserved the dungeon for tonight. We will have our privacy."

"Thanks," Eden said as she shyly followed him inside. Her gaze darted around the room. Now that there weren't dozens of people blocking her view, she could get a good look at every piece of furniture. Some were very simple and nonthreatening. Others looked like medieval torture devices.

She could not believe she was doing this. If anyone had told her a few weeks ago that she'd be willingly letting any man tie her up, she would've laughed in their face.

"This way." Still holding her hand, Pierce moved toward the room's rear, to the corner where he'd taken her before. A coil of rope lay on the floor, and she knew that rope would soon be twisted and knotted around her.

Oh God. Her heart jumped, slamming against her breastbone.

She stood, hands clasped, and waited for Kaden and Pierce to tell her what to do, all the while wishing she could turn around and leave. After all, the point of this agreement had been to get medicine for Nate. Now that Nate was here, a prisoner, the medicine wouldn't do him any good. She was letting them lie to her. Correction, letting Kaden lie to her, keep her here under false pretenses.

"Don't tell them you know I'm here." Nate's words echoed in her head.

Pierce lifted a short length of rope, letting it slide across one of his palms.

She backstepped away. "Please tell me you're going to take it easy on me?"

"I won't do anything you don't want or enjoy." He made a loop then started winding one end around it. "Undress."

She gave Kaden a nervous look. "I thought we agreed I wouldn't be forced to do this."

"Nobody's forcing you." Kaden tugged her top off. "I promise, this will be an experience you won't want to forget." Kaden cupped her cheek and forced her head to the side. His teeth grazed her neck, and she shivered. Then he nipped her earlobe.

"I hope you're right." She let Kaden distract her from the scary sight of Pierce and that rope. He dragged his fingernails over her bare stomach. He kissed her neck, from her ear to her collarbone. He tormented her breasts through the satin of her bra.

Her body responded to his every touch, warming, softening and tightening simultaneously. Slowly, gradually, her clothes were removed, each piece allowing him more access to parts of her body she ached to have him touch. Her panties were the last

to go, and by then she was ready to beg him to let her take them off. The crotch was sodden with her juices.

When she stepped out of them, she gave him a little smile of relief then took his hand from her breast and pulled it down between her legs. "Touch me here."

"No." Pierce placed a wound piece of rope against her face. "Open. You won't speak until we're through."

Another chill of fear swept through her body. "But what if you're hurting me?"

"I'll know. You won't have to tell me." He pressed his thumb into her mouth and she opened then closed her lips around it, suckling.

She'd show him. A mouth was good for more than speaking.

To illustrate, she flicked her tongue over the tip of his thumb while pulling on his thumb and giving him a lusty look.

His lips curled up. "I must deny myself such pleasure for now. But thank you for the invitation." He gently removed his thumb from her mouth and replaced it with the rope. It was scratchy and dry and she didn't like the taste. She grabbed at it, trying to pull it away, but he didn't let her. Instead, he tightened it around her face.

Panic raced through her body in one big, icy wave.

This wasn't pleasant. It wasn't sexy or fun. Why would anyone willingly let anyone do this to them? This was just the beginning. It would get worse. It had to. God, what had she gotten herself into?

Making noises that sounded strange and frightening, she clawed at the knot pressed against the back of her head, but he merely caught her arms behind her back and wound more rope around them. A sob of terror shot up her throat, exploding from her gagged mouth. She shook her head and sent pleading, desperate looks at Kaden.

Pierce grabbed her shoulders and looked into her eyes. "Stop. There's no reason to panic."

No reason to panic. Easy for him to say, he was the one on the other end of these awful ropes.

Please, please, please stop.

Tears blurred her eyes. Hot, burning tears. She blinked, forcing them out so she could see and stared into Pierce's eyes, hoping by some miracle he'd know how petrified she was and take the gag out.

"I haven't hurt you. I won't hurt you, and there's no reason for you to speak." He gently, tenderly touched her face, her cheeks, her forehead and finally her eyelids, making her shut them. "Go deeper, beyond the fear. Don't let it deny you the pleasure you could have, should have."

She'd lived this long without the pleasure of being tied up. She figured she wouldn't be disappointed if she had to live the rest of her life without it. But she couldn't tell him that. Worse yet, she couldn't tell him the rope was making her tongue dry and her cheeks burn.

What kind of man was Kaden to stand by and watch this?

"Listen to me, Eden," Pierce said, firmly. "Imagine you're somewhere safe, warm, a place you love."

Anywhere but here was safe and warm.

"Now breathe. Slowly. Inhale. Exhale. Feel your body relax as the rope winds around it. Every inch of rope is a touch from me, and when I am through, my touches will completely surround you."

That actually sounded kind of nice.

He tied a knot around her neck, loosely and then looped the rope down between her legs. The rough texture grazed her clit and she couldn't help a shudder of pleasure. As he wrapped a length of rope around her rib cage, under her breasts, she had to admit she could imagine it was his arm holding her tight. The tiny movements made the rope between her legs shift and pull. It was a very good effect, one she never would have expected.

Another length circled her chest, above her breasts. Now they were bound from below and above, and another unexpected result became apparent right away—her nipples felt a hundred times more sensitive. The wicked man flicked a fingertip over one of the hardened, supersensitive peaks and she practically screamed.

"Now you are beginning to see. My ropes aren't meant to cause pain but the kind of intense pleasure you have never experienced."

That was true, she couldn't help agreeing, even though the ropes pinched her skin a little, burned a bit. The good sensations, and there were many, far overcame the bad ones. And with each knot and each new length of rope added to the web wound around her, the good sensations increased. Before long, she was absolutely powerless, at his mercy, unable to move a hand, leg, even her head by her will. He posed her. He decided how she would lay, where her hands would be, her legs, her arms. How deeply she could breathe. What she could and could not see, touch, taste and hear. And yet she wasn't afraid anymore.

No, not fearful. Not anxious.

She was at peace. All the pressure of having to protect herself was gone. Pierce would protect her.

She had never realized how ingrained her drive to control everything around her was until this magical moment. As the knots tightened, she sank deeper into herself and truths illuminated like faint stars that could only be seen in the darkest night sky.

She'd always seen herself as a loving friend, the kind who would do anything for someone she cared about. Willing to put herself out there. But now, as she lay embraced in the most intimate way, all her power stripped away, she realized that her actions—especially the ones that required some sort of sacrifice on her part—were her way of taking power.

It took a man who was willing to strip away everything to help her see that.

Suddenly, she didn't want to think about a future without Pierce, without his strength, his touch, his protection. His embrace.

If every person he tied up had these kinds of revelations, it was no wonder they lined up at his door. This wasn't just a physical experience, although she couldn't deny the carnal pleasure, it was also a spiritual and emotional one as well.

She wondered if Pierce fully appreciated what he did for his submissives. He freed them by making them feel safe. He healed them. He made them whole.

He was not only the kind of man she'd always dreamed of finding someday, he was the kind of man she needed.

Chapter Eleven

Pierce bit his lip against the need to feed. The Hunger had stolen the peace he so desperately craved.

He'd known this exercise was going to be a painful one. But even with the Hunger searing his insides, he was in awe of Eden, not only her beauty, which couldn't be denied, but the level of her trust and her willingness to submit to the rope and surrender completely. She'd fought for only a short time after he'd placed the bit gag in her mouth.

Now she was physically calm and relaxed and yet elated. Something wonderful had happened when she was bound in his ropes. He hoped she would share it with him.

But not yet.

His body burned with the need for the perfect tonic that pumped through her veins, a blend of her sweet blood and their spicy venom. It was more potent than any wine he'd ever drunk, more delicious than anything he'd tasted. Every part of his body craved it. A drop would be exquisite. A mouthful, heaven. Several, absolute ecstasy.

Soon. Today, he would feed first.

Kaden looked as if he would collapse if he didn't feed in the next minute. Still, Pierce resisted the urge to hurry. He untied the remaining knots as slowly as he had the first, knowing his haste would steal a little of Eden's pleasure. Nothing was worth doing that.

He occasionally checked Kaden's face for signs of illness as he worked. The strength of Kaden's will, in the face of such suffering, only elevated his regard for the man. He was king not only because of his name, but because he truly possessed strength no man could match.

When the last knot slipped loose and the rope slid off Eden, she looked at him with such awe and pure joy, his heart lurched.

"I...I don't know what to say. Thank you," she whispered.

"You're welcome." He cupped her chin and kissed her as sweetly as he could with the Hunger driving his instincts. His tongue swept into her mouth, and he drank in her flavor as his fingertips traced the lines his ropes had pressed into her flesh.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled, fitting her soft body against his, and the need pounding through him amplified. When the scent of her arousal reached his nose, his will snapped.

Gently, he forced her head to one side, and guided by the beast within, sank his fangs deep into her neck, precisely over her throbbing pulse. Delicious blood, warm and sweet and intoxicating, flooded his mouth. He swallowed, once, twice, three times.

His body warmed and hardened. His balls grew heavy and tight. And carnal need flared through his body. It wasn't enough. He craved more. But he forced his head back and pushed her toward Kaden.

Stumbling slightly from the effects of feeding, he walked around Kaden and slipped his hands around his waist, beneath his shirt. His fingers traced the sharp lines of Kaden's abdominal muscles. His flattened palms skimmed over the clenching planes as they tightened and flexed.

Kaden groaned, dropped his head back, and whispered, "I can wait no longer."

Eden whimpered, sagging into Kaden's arms. "Please."

Kaden swept her into his arms and turned. When Pierce motioned toward a bondage table, Kaden shook his head. "No, not here. Tonight, she belongs in my bed. You both belong in my bed."

Overwhelmed with emotion, Pierce kissed him.

Kaden's kiss was full of raw emotion, just as his voice had been.

Together, side by side, they walked back to the private section of the castle. It was the longest, most painful journey he had ever taken. As he walked, Pierce pulled off his clothes, tearing them from his body. By the time the door to Kaden's suite was in sight, he had not only stripped his body bare, but his heart.

The games were over. The chase, the hunt finished. The hunter was now lying at the feet of the prey in supplication.

Kaden didn't know it yet, but he was Master of Pierce's heart.

And Eden, strong, beautiful, sweet Eden, was the Mistress of his soul.

Not since his wife had been executed for treason had Kaden taken anyone to this bed. That dark day he had made a promise. No man or woman would breach his defenses again, and this place, the only one not sullied by spies or enemies, was to be kept sacred. His alone.

But not any longer.

His sanctuary was nothing but a pretty prison without the warmth of genuine affection.

"Are you sure?" Pierce asked when they were stopped at his door.

Kaden nodded "Absolutely." With care, he passed Eden to Pierce.

Pierce's eyes shone with emotions deep and true as he took her from him.

Kaden laid his hand on the side of Pierce's face and looked deep into his eyes. "These rooms have become cold. Dead. But I'm hoping soon they will be full of life again. Life and joy." As he pushed the key into the lock and twisted, and as the door swung open, he imagined his heart opening.

For the remaining days of the week, he would be theirs, Pierce's and Eden's. He would demolish the walls he'd erected around his cold heart and let them in. They deserved no less.

And afterward, the goddess willing, he would belong to *her*.

Synne.

His brother had found a way. He would have his bride.

Eden's foggy head was beginning to clear. Her neck hurt a little, bruised, throbbed. But she didn't care. What was a little pain when something this wonderful was happening?

Nobody had to tell her that it was extraordinary that she was being invited into what she assumed was Kaden's private suite. She could see it on Pierce's face, hear it in his voice, so rough and raw with emotion.

It seemed this whole thing had gone far beyond what any of them had intended. It was most definitely not a simple arrangement, a no-strings exchange of sex for pills. Very real, intense feelings had become involved, perhaps on all their parts.

Her gaze darted about the room, but only for an instant. Then the scene between Pierce and Kaden became way too intense for her to bother checking out their surroundings anymore.

Lying on the bed, she watched the two guys kiss. It was the most erotic thing she'd ever witnessed. They were both so strong and powerful, sexual in a hard, masculine way that made her dizzy, and yet their touches were unbelievably tender. Their strokes sensually possessive. Their kisses addictive and intoxicating in the best sense. It was one thing to experience all that pleasure firsthand, she quickly became lost in all the sensations they stirred, but to watch them touch, stroke and kiss each other while her head was clear and her eyes focused, was almost enough to make her weep.

The sounds of male groans and sighs filled the room. The scents of man and sex and desire teased her nostrils. And the sight of two beautiful, perfect male bodies giving and receiving pleasure filled her eyes and stirred her desire to even greater heights. She burned for them. Hot and tight and desperate. But she couldn't get herself to interrupt the moment they were sharing with each other.

Thankfully, they did that themselves a handful of excruciating heartbeats later. In unison, they turned and focused their dark eyes on her face. Kaden's tongue slipped between the seam of his lips, dampening them, and her heart literally lurched in her chest. While she crawled to them, Pierce curled his fingers in Kaden's hair. With his gaze focused on Eden's face, Pierce pulled Kaden's head back, extending his neck, and grazed Kaden's skin with his teeth.

She couldn't possibly want a man more than she did right now. Her throat felt as if she'd swallowed something big and hard and round. "Kaden, Pierce," she managed to utter as she pressed her fingertips to her lips. She sat back on her heels. "You are..." She had no idea what words could possibly describe these two men.

"Burning," Pierce finished for her.

That wasn't exactly what she was going for, but yeah, she could tell they were on the verge of a meltdown. She wasn't far behind them.

He released Kaden's hair and reached for her face, cupping her cheek gently. "And you are a goddess." He kissed her, and she returned every stab and stroke of his tongue with one of her own. Her hands traveled over the landscape of two perfectly formed males bodies, smooth, velvety skin stretched taut over hard-as-concrete muscle.

She sighed into their joined mouths when Kaden moved around her and started sprinkling little kisses over her shoulders and down her spine. Her skin prickled as goose bumps bloomed over her back. Her nipples hardened. Her pussy warmed.

How long would they make her wait?

She whimpered, curled her fingers and raked her nails down Pierce's arm. He growled, broke the kiss and forced her backward until she was reclining against Kaden. She parted her legs, welcoming him between them. Yes, this was what she wanted, to be held by one and fucked by the other.

He wasted no time, and she was grateful. His cock found her entrance and surged inside, and she arched her back, taking him deep, and sighed. He filled her so perfectly. It was ecstasy and agony, both. While Pierce fucked her to oblivion, Kaden's hands explored her upper body, skimmed over her stomach, traced soft circles around her breasts. He seemed to know exactly where she wanted to be touched, how. When he pinched her nipples, she wrapped her legs around Pierce's waist and cried out, her body knotted tight, every muscle.

Too quickly she was at the verge of climax, that wonderful place where her body tingled all over, nerves buzzing with electricity. Her inner muscles clamped tight around Pierce's invading cock, amplifying her pleasure and his.

"Baby. Eden," he murmured, tangling his fingers in her hair.

She stared at his beautiful face, a mask of need and feral hunger and whispered, "Pierce..." as she climaxed.

He threw his head back and surged forward. The thrust was rough, raw and just what she wanted. Again and again. The friction drew out her pleasure, making the convulsing heat last and last. So good. So right.

She knew when he climaxed. He stopped for a split second, groaned and then fucked her even harder, each thrust accompanied by a rough huff. She clung to him as he rode out his release, her arms wrapped around his hot torso, her fingers splayed over smooth skin slicked with sweat.

Slowly lifting out of the fog of her climax, she realized Kaden was moving beneath her now. His hips rocked back and forth, and she could feel the hard ridge of his cock dragging up and down against her back. He had been so patient, but it was his turn and she was going to make sure his climax was just as powerful as Pierce's, or better yet, even more intense. There was one thing she hadn't tried before, something she'd heard men liked a lot.

She'd do it for Kaden.

Her legs shaky, and her body still sizzling from the incredible climax Pierce had given her, she rose up on her knees and turned around to face Kaden. He looked at her with such intensity, it made her melt. Now those were some seriously dangerous bedroom eyes.

"Kaden..." She closed her hands around his cock, and he groaned. It was a very satisfying reaction. She stroked up and down several times before bending over and taking him in her mouth.

His skin tasted salty. Delicious. She opened her mouth wide and took him as deeply as she could before pulling back until just the head remained inside. She swirled her tongue round and round as she explored what she could with her hands. Stomach, legs, chest, all perfectly formed. Very soon her mouth followed her hands. She kissed, licked and nipped him all over.

While she enjoyed tasting and touching Kaden everywhere, both men tormented her by returning the favor. Before long, her body was humming with sensual energy.

It was time.

On her knees, straddling Kaden's legs, she looked him in the eye and asked, "Will you take me as no man has before?" She reached back, tapping her buttocks. "Here."

Kaden tipped his head. "You don't have to. In fact, if you haven't tried before, I wouldn't want—"

"It's okay. I trust you."

"In that case, I would be glad to. But you will tell me if you want me to stop."

"Oh, you bet I will."

With Pierce's help, Kaden positioned her on her side. Pierce lay beside her, facing her. He cradled her head on his arm and, as Kaden gathered some lube and moved into position behind her, Pierce whispered sweet, encouraging words in her ear and stroked her pussy with his hand. She closed her eyes and let herself sink into the erotic sensations swirling through her body. The scents of man and sex. The sounds of their soft moans and whispered promises. The feeling of two hard bodies pressing against her from both front and back.

Kaden tested her anus with a finger first. It slipped inside easily. So good. So very good. She sighed. He groaned. And Pierce chuckled, cupped her face and kissed her.

"I can't wait another second." Kaden added a little more lube before placing his erect cock at her sensitive hole. He used gentle pressure, breeching her entry slowly. He worked his full length inside, inch by incredible inch, until she was full. Oh God, it was the most exquisite sensation. The fullness. The friction. The feeling as he withdrew and then slowly reentered.

She was ready to combust, and that was before Pierce lifted her leg higher and started stroking her clit. One hard cock gliding in and out of her ass and at least two

fingers plunging into her pussy and another rubbing her clit with just the right pressure and rhythm, and she was quickly on her way to a second orgasm.

Her skin tingled everywhere. Her breathing quickened until she was gasping. She hooked her elbow, wrapping her arm around her leg at the knee, opening her legs as wide as they could go. She was burning everywhere. Tight all over. Trembling. Moving closer. Yes, almost there. Pierce sat up and leaned over her to kiss Kaden, and a white hot spark of heat blazed through her body at the erotic sight. There was nothing more sensual than watching those two beautiful men kiss like that.

"Ohhhhhh!" She felt that wonderful wave ripple through her body, out from her center. Her anus and pussy contracted around the fingers and cock invading them.

Two men groaned as they broke the kiss. Pierce lay next to her again, gently pulling her flush against him.

Kaden drove his cock deep inside, growled out a gruff, "Yesssss..."

Feeling his cock twitch inside as he came, and loving the added fullness, she wrapped her arms around Pierce's neck and clung to him, pressing soft kisses to his salty skin. "Thank you," she muttered, over and over. "Thank you, both of you. That was...unbelievable."

"Yes, unbelievable," Kaden echoed. He withdrew his softened cock, snuggled up to her back and kissed her nape.

Now, this was heaven. Eyes closed, she just lay there and basked in the afterglow, fully appreciating having two men giving her after-sex cuddles.

Gradually the giddy, ecstatic feeling faded to deep satisfaction. Her body grew heavy and she drifted to sleep, expecting she'd have some wonderful dreams.

* * * * *

It was done. Kaden's second wife had been secured, thanks to a rift between her father and the man he had chosen as her groom. As he'd hoped, but hadn't dared expect—for fear of disappointment—the relationship between the two had proven extremely tenuous, despite reportedly strong feelings between the bride and her future groom. Both kings had sent spies into the other's courts. A little information fed to both of them, and the bond tying the two kings came unraveled.

Kaden's offer was accepted not more than twenty-four hours later.

He couldn't stop thinking about Synne. Even though he shared an intimacy with Pierce and Eden that was beyond any he'd shared in the blood-bond before, when he closed his eyes, it was Synne's face he saw. Even in the deepest sleep, she tormented him. Did he dare hope she might love him some day?

He was so overcome with emotion, had to keep reminding himself to focus on what was most important.

He hoped beyond all reason that this marriage would be different than his first. After so much sorrow, pain, loneliness and betrayal, he would have another chance to

gain lasting peace and stability for his people. With the goddess' blessing, he would hold on to his throne and sire an heir.

A single tear of joy trickled down his cheek.

He wiped it away when a knock sounded at the door. His brother entered a few seconds later, his expression grim.

It was time. Within moments, he would face one of the men responsible for their parents' deaths, hear his case, convict and sentence him.

He'd been waiting so long. They both had. It was hard to believe they would finally have justice. Now, as the time drew near, all the grief he'd suppressed deep within himself came surging to the surface. There, it swirled and churned, mixing with his sadness and guilt at Van's unexpected death.

Hiding his emotions, he nodded to his brother, standing next to the door. "It took longer than I'd hoped, but we finally have the last conspirator in custody."

"What a lucky break that he sent Eden to you now, when you needed a third for the blood-bond."

"He couldn't have known it was time for me to take the blood-bond. Though he had to be either a fool or desperate for the Eclipse to send her at all. He was so easily tracked down."

"Couldn't have known about that MySpace page."

The brothers shared a worried look.

"MySpace. Who would've thought it would be so easy? Every now and then the internet has its uses." Restless, thanks to the anticipation charging through his system, Kaden stood. "Have the son of a bitch brought to me now. He will get his due—the chance to confess. And then a swift, painful execution."

His brother tipped his head. "Yes, my king." He left.

Alone, Kaden prepared himself to confront his parents' killer.

* * * * *

The next three nights, Eden slept with Pierce. Strong arms holding her close. Hard body keeping her warm, safe. Pierce kept her company throughout the days with conversations about everything under the sun. Family. Friends. Her work. Hobbies. Strangely, not once did he share a meal with her. He sat across from her as she ate and watched. But she was grateful for the companionship, and it wasn't long before she considered him a friend.

And Master.

Every evening they returned to the dungeon. He tied her up, and she quickly grew to enjoy the sensation of his ropes wrapped snugly around her.

Only then, after they were done in the dungeon, would Kaden come. The three of them touched and kissed and fucked until they were all too tired to move.

It would have been heaven...if only she could find a way to get Nate released. There weren't any opportunities for her to sneak down and talk to her imprisoned friend. Once, she made it as far as the staircase, only to have to turn around and hurry the other direction when some security guards walked by. She tried several other times, but she was intercepted by Pierce, who seemed to be becoming more and more intent on watching her every movement. She wanted to talk to him about Nate, and Kaden, but every time she felt the moment was right, Pierce would say something that made her second guess herself. Instead, she suffered in silence, worried and guilty, wondering what would happen. Wondering what Kaden was thinking.

What did Kaden Setara do to men who committed crimes against him?

By the time the fifth day of their week had passed, Eden was miserable.

Chapter Twelve

On the sixth morning, Eden and Pierce fell into what was quickly becoming their regular routine. He woke her with a sweet kiss, she headed into the bathroom to take care of a few necessities, and by the time she exited, wrapped in a towel, she found a breakfast tray and a nude Pierce awaiting her on the bed.

This morning, just like the last couple before, she settled under the covers, snuggly warm, reclining against Pierce, and ate. But today, unlike the mornings before, she was finally able to talk about some important things. The conversation started awkwardly, a muttered, "I wanted to thank you for what you've done the past few nights."

"What part?" he asked, reaching around her to pluck up a strawberry and feed it to her.

As she accepted the juicy berry, she fingered her warm cheeks. "Well, it's all really, *really* great. You've been so attentive. I've enjoyed every minute we've spent together, but I'm talking about the things you've done with the ropes. We...haven't talked about that yet."

He kissed her shoulder. "I knew you were afraid at first."

"Yeah, petrified is more like it." She nibbled on the corner of a piece of toast. "But you talked me through it. It's no wonder you're a psychiatrist. You could probably talk anybody through anything."

His chuckle was so warm and deep, the vibration seemed to reverberate through her body. "I try."

"Anyway, this whole week has been an experience I won't ever forget. I...I've sort of sunken into myself and I've seen things...surprising things."

"Do you want to tell me?" He skimmed his hands down her arms.

Staring straight ahead, but not seeing anything, she said, "We've gone beyond our original deal, haven't we? I mean, all of us thought this was going to be one thing, but at least for you and me, it's become something a lot more...intense." She glanced over her shoulder. "Please tell me I'm not the only one who thinks this way."

"No, baby, you're right. I think this thing has taken on a life of its own, caught both of us by surprise." After the briefest pause, he added, "Are you afraid?"

"No. I should be. I mean, not because I think you'll hurt me or anything." She set down the toast, her appetite souring. "In a couple of days, I'm going home and who knows when I'll see you or Kaden again." Oh God, it hurt just saying it. Even though Kaden wasn't spending as much time with her as Pierce, and she didn't feel as close to him, she sensed something when they were together. A darkness in his soul. She guessed he was grieving, and she longed to comfort him.

"Don't be sad." Tenderly, he stroked her cheek. It was such a sweet gesture, it made her heart even heavier. "I have a feeling you and I will be seeing a lot of each other."

"I hope that's true. Because otherwise it's going to be very hard to say goodbye."

"What have you discovered during our time together in the dungeon? Will you tell me?"

"I see myself. It's almost like I rise up out of my body and I can watch myself. But more than that, I can see into my heart clearer than I've ever been able to before. It's like I'm transparent and there's a spotlight shining on all the darkest corners of my heart." She held her breath, waiting for him to respond. She didn't know what he would say. She didn't know what she wanted him to say.

"I couldn't have hoped for you to get any more from it than that."

His response neither disappointed her nor pleased her. Still, she continued the conversation for some reason, if not because she wanted to understand herself better, but to understand him. "What do you hope for people to get when you tie them up?"

"What I hope for them doesn't really matter. I have no power over their minds, their souls and so I cannot think about what they might be looking for, or what they will find."

"Then why do it at all? If you aren't striving to attain some end for your submissives, do you do it for your own needs? Do you get something from the experience?" When his hands slid down her arms, stopping to rest over top of her left hand, she flipped it over and twined her fingers between his.

"Yes, I do."

This was so nice, so right. Sitting there with his warm, hard body behind hers, his breath warming her neck, his hand in hers. Talking, sharing...falling in love. "What is it then? What makes you take a rope and knot it around people again and again and again?"

"Mostly I do it because it eases tension. It's a release."

"There are zillions of ways to ease tension. You could jog, do yoga, meditate, make love. Why not one of those ways instead?"

"I couldn't say. I don't know." He gave her hand a little squeeze. "What I can tell you is that when I tied my first knot, I knew it wouldn't be my last."

She closed her eyes, imagining herself in the dungeon, Pierce dragging the rope over her skin. Over her shoulder. Down her stomach. Between her legs. "What did it feel like?" Her voice was husky, breathless.

"Like I had discovered the answer to a question I hadn't known I'd been asking."

"What question?"

"I couldn't say."

She opened her eyes and smiled over her shoulder then offered him a grape. When he refused it, she popped it into her mouth. "I'm not trying to prod, I hope you don't feel like I am."

When he smiled, little crinkles gathered at the corners of his eyes. He cupped her cheek, and his thumb grazed her bottom lip. "No, I don't feel like you're prodding."

"Good. I'm curious." She plucked another grape from the bowl, stuck it in her mouth and chewed. So juicy and sweet. "No, it's more than that."

"Oh?"

"It's so strange that I feel so much for you, and Kaden, after such a short time. It normally takes me months to get to this point with a man. And two men? I've never let myself date two at the same time, let alone become physically intimate with them. I didn't know it was possible to—" She cut herself off.

She couldn't tell Pierce yet how much she felt for him. Even though Pierce was opening up a little more today than he had, she could tell he was still holding back. Nothing scared away a skittish man more than those words *I'm falling in love with you*.

"We aren't holding anything against you or judging you for it."

"I know." She shrugged, hoping the gesture would make the conversation feel a little less threatening. "I guess I want to know you better, on a level nobody else has."

He chuckled again. How she adored that sound. She would be content to hear it every day. For the rest of her life. "You're getting there."

"You know me like nobody else has. You, and Kaden too."

"But you're not afraid."

"No." She glanced at him. "But it would be good to hear we're in the same place, feeling...something. I'm not imagining things, am I? Did I already ask that?"

"You're not imagining anything. Kaden, in particular, has put himself out there. For both of us."

That statement shocked her. "He has?"

"You don't understand what a grave risk he's taken."

"I hope someday he'll tell me."

He kissed the top of her head. "Maybe he will."

* * * * *

Later that day, as Eden was strolling through the garden, she stumbled upon a chance to talk to Kaden alone. Finally. He was standing, leaning against a towering oak, his head tipped back, eyes closed. She approached him quietly, slowly. He opened his eyes when she was not quite close enough to touch him.

She greeted him with a casual, "Hey."

He responded with an empty smile.

"It's pretty out here."

"Yes, it is." He glanced around. "Pierce?"

"He's inside...getting ready for tonight, I think." When all Kaden did was nod, she asked, "Will you join us?"

"No, I don't think that's a good idea."

This was awkward. She'd never felt so desperate to break through a man's barriers. It seemed the more he threw up, the more she felt he needed her to knock them down. "Are you okay?"

"Yes."

"You've become so distant. I just wanted to make sure, after your loss, there isn't anything I can do..." She let her words trail off. He was standing there, just staring at her. With that blank, emotionless face. He didn't want to talk to her. He didn't want her to pry. She shook her head, bit her lip and started to walk away. "I'm sorry."

She heard him jogging after her, but she didn't stop walking.

"I'm doing okay. Really. Thank you for asking."

She smiled. Kaden hadn't spoken like this with her since the night he'd told her about his friend. "Do you have any other friends? Family? Anyone to talk to?"

"I have my brother. But he's got his own stuff to deal with, and I feel guilty for unloading on him all the time. It has to get old, listening to me bitch and whine." He pushed a low-hanging tree branch aside so she could walk past it without getting caught up in it.

"You are not a whiner." She turned down a narrow trail that forked off the main one.

"You haven't seen me at my worst."

"That may be true." She stopped next to a fallen tree. All around them, the sweet and mellow sounds of nature sang. Birds and insects chirping and whirring. Leaves fluttering in a gentle breeze. And she was with Kaden. He was letting down his defenses at last. It was a moment she wished she could bottle up and save forever. "I've seen you handle a loss that would send most people into depression."

He toed the moist earth. "I feel what anyone else does." He lifted his eyes, meeting her gaze. "I just don't have the luxury of showing it most of the time."

Her eyes burned as tears gathered. "I believe you do. I'm guessing you're the kind who bottles everything up. But I know what happens eventually to people like you – the pressure builds up until you can't hold it back anymore and then you blow up."

He smiled, and she marveled at how brilliant it was, what it did to his face. He was gorgeous no matter what, but when he smiled...it was like looking at the face of an angel. Too perfect and beautiful to be real. "Yep, pretty much describes me to a T."

She started walking again. The path was just wide enough for them to walk side by side. They had to be close to fit. On either side, dense brush reached toward them. It was a little eerie. A little ominous. And still, in a dark way, sensual. "I've known a few people like you, though you are by far the most closed up. Is it lonely?"

His eyes dark, he nodded and folded his arms over his chest. "It has been."

"Am I prying?"

"No."

They walked in comfortable silence for a while, following the trail as it wound down an embankment. It ended at a narrow creek, the water sparkling as narrow blades of sunlight flared on the slowly moving surface.

"Oh, how pretty!" The first thing Eden did was strip off her shoes and socks and step onto the slick rocks forming its bed. The cool air smelled fresh, like earth and water and green, lush forest. The water was icy, almost too cold. But it felt so good as it churned around her ankles. Kaden, with his shoes still on, walked into the creek with her, offering a hand to support her. "Did someone hurt you?"

"Yes. I learned at a young age that it's very dangerous for me to trust people, even those closest to me."

"Dangerous, as in...?"

"As in it could cost me more than a broken heart."

Her toes already going numb, she stepped back on dry land and sat down to put her shoes back on. "Like what?"

"Eden. I want to trust you. A part of me wishes we could be friends after this week is over." He sighed and sat beside her. "But if that's going to happen, there's something you must know about Pierce and me. I want to tell you the truth, but it's going to be very hard for you to believe it."

"I'd still like to hear."

"This way." He led her back into the house, down a corridor and into an enormous library, with glossy wood shelves reaching up to a vaulted ceiling on three walls, one of them cut in half by an enormous stone fireplace. He pointed to a painting hanging above mantle. "That is my father."

She took a long look at the man in the portrait. He was wearing strange clothes, very opulent but odd, and a hat with a big fluffy ostrich feather. His hair was very long, wavy, and he wore a little mustache and goatee. The getup reminded her of a costume for the renaissance festival or maybe a remake of the movie, *The Three Musketeers*. Confused, she asked, "What an unusual portrait. Is he wearing a costume?"

He led her to the opposite end of the room, where a second portrait hung, smaller, the subject a woman who was wearing an ivory-colored frilly dress. She too was dressed in historical garb, though from a different era. She looked like she was wearing some kind of wig. Her face showed no signs of age yet her hair wasn't any darker than her dress. "This is my mother. She was fairly young when this portrait was painted— younger than I am now."

"She's very beautiful."

"Yes, she was." He touched the portrait's ornately carved frame. "She died in 1828, and my father many years earlier."

"I'm...very sorry." She was sad to hear his parents were dead, but also totally confused. 1828? The math wasn't adding up. She took another look at Kaden. He couldn't be older than his thirties, which placed his birth year at somewhere in the mid-to-late 70s. If his parents were on the older side when they'd had him, say in their forties, that would put the date of their birth later than the year they supposedly died, even if he had the wrong century. "Um, that was a long time ago."

Still facing the portrait, he crossed his arms over his chest. "Yes, some people would think that. To me, it was only yesterday."

"Kaden, I don't understand. It's impossible for your parents to die that long ago."

He turned to face her. "I know it's difficult to believe. I told you it would be."

She pointed at the painting. "How could your parents die long before they should've been born?"

"Because our bodies don't age like yours. Our lifespan is longer."

"Okay, I can buy that to a point. But the oldest human to have ever lived was maybe one hundred and twenty years old. If you're older than I guessed, say in your forties instead of thirties—which blows my mind—then the math still doesn't work. You would've been born in the 1960s and —"

"Eden." He caught her upper arms in his hands and looked deep in her eyes. "When I said our lifespan is longer, I mean a lot longer. We don't live for decades, we live for centuries."

"That's impossible."

He walked to the huge desk nearby, pulled a set of keys from his pocket and unlocked one of the drawers. After a few seconds spent riffling through files, he pulled one out, opened it and set several sheets of paper face up on the desktop. "These are the closest we have to birth certificates. When we were born, births were recorded in books. Here's my brother's name. My other siblings, two brothers and a sister...died years ago."

She snatched the closest piece of paper up. It looked like a photocopy of a page taken from some kind of old book. Names were scrawled on a page, dozens, with a date next to each one. "What is this?"

"Copies of pages from a town register of births, kept by the local parish priest."

"This is easy to explain." She set the paper down. "You were named after these people."

"No, Eden." He pushed the page toward her, his index finger pointing at a name. "That is *me*."

She bent down and read the paper again. It wasn't the easiest to make out. The handwriting was strange, stylized, with slashes and loops. It was also faded. "It looks like the date next to your name is 1509. That couldn't be right. It was five hundred years ago. You aren't *five hundred* years old."

"Yes, I am."

Utterly confused, she backed away from the desk. "Why are you doing this?"

"I've never told a mortal who I am. I want to tell you."

"Mortal? Who you are? You're Kaden, a mortal man just like every other human being on this planet. Or are you trying to say you aren't Kaden Setara?"

"I am Kaden Setara, but that's not all that I am." He hesitated, as if he wasn't sure whether he trusted her enough to say the rest. "I am a king."

This was getting weirder and weirder. "King of what country?" Kaden lived in Michigan, for goodness sake. Granted, his house was an old, dusty castle that had been relocated from somewhere overseas. But still, she'd never heard of a reigning king or queen of any country living in the States, even part time. Not that she knew a whole lot about royalty.

Maybe he'd been overthrown? The king of some dinky country that had been taken over by a larger neighboring ruler?

"My realm is not measured in miles but in souls."

"Meaning?"

"I am a king of my people, not of a land."

"So your country was overtaken and you lost your land, right?"

"No, my family never ruled over a place. My people are children of the twilight. Your kind, mortals, call us vampires."

Now she knew he was pulling her leg. "Ohmygod!" She laughed, relieved to hear it was all some kind of silly joke. "You had me there, sorta. I mean, I could buy a deposed king hiding out in the U.S. Fergie, the ex-princess of Great Britain did ads for Weight Watchers. So anything is possible when it comes to displaced royalty. And I've noticed the way people react to you. I couldn't help that. They treat you differently, drop their gazes in reverence, but *vampires*?" She wrapped her arms around herself and shook her head. "*Vampires*, Kaden?"

"Yes, Eden. Vampires."

"Sleep-in-a-coffin, stake-in-the-heart vampires?"

"Well, actually, I prefer a bed, and there's more than one way to kill a vampire. Silver bullets, some kinds of poisons. But those are just insignificant details. All you need to know is this..." Kaden smiled, displaying a set of fangs that hadn't been there seconds before. "I'm a vampire."

She clapped her hands over her mouth and swallowed a scream.

Chapter Thirteen

Pierce rushed into the room just as Eden was racing out. She passed him in a blur of wild, terror-filled eyes and pale-faced horror.

He only needed one look at Kaden to know why she'd run out like that. The fangs. "Why did you show her?" Pierce asked, incredulous.

Kaden turned to face the window, leaning a shoulder against the wall. "I was hoping she was strong enough...to know the truth. But it was a mistake telling her." He shoved his fingers through his hair. "Yeah, it's better this way. What the hell was I thinking?"

Determined not to let Kaden hide his true feelings, Pierce positioned himself as close as he could, allowing himself a decent view of Kaden's profile. "Better? How so? I see you care about her. Hell, I'd go as far as saying you need her on some level." Pierce moved closer, leaning into Kaden. He lowered his voice to a soft murmur. "But that's the problem, isn't it? You don't want to *need* anybody. It's too fucking inconvenient."

"No, you've got it all wrong." Kaden pushed away from the wall, taking big strides across the room. "You think I'm trying to scare her off? Why? Once this week is over, I was going to erase all her memories. None of this would've happened, at least not to her. So, why would I need to tell her a goddamn thing?"

Pierce followed Kaden. His long legs made it easy to keep pace with him. And the strength of his commitment to Kaden and Eden made it easy for him to speak his mind, bluntly. "I don't have a fucking clue, so why don't you tell me?"

Kaden focused a chilly glare his way. "Watch your tongue, sir."

"Believe me, I'm holding back the worst, you son of a bitch. What the hell are you trying to do to that woman?" Pierce inched his chin up in a show of defiance. "And if speaking the truth lands me in prison for treason, then I will pay the price, gladly."

"You don't know what you're saying. I think you're the one who needs Eden, and that's why you're acting like a fucking asshole." Kaden thrust an arm out, index finger pointed at the door. "Leave, before you do or say something that you'll regret."

"I will. In a moment. First, I must say something."

"You dare defy a direct order from your sovereign?"

"Yes. Because I care about you. And any loyal servant who loves his king would risk imprisonment if it meant saving his sovereign from making a mistake."

Kaden dropped his arm, turned around and headed toward the door at the rear of the room, leading to his private office.

"As ruler, you have to live with death as a constant companion," Pierce shouted after him. "I understand that. But of all the rulers I have known, you seem to relish the

relationship. Sometimes I wonder if you don't think death would be better than life, if this is all life had to offer you."

Kaden turned slowly, stiffly. "Don't you dare suggest you know what I think or feel or need. You. Know. Nothing. I live for my people. I do everything for my people."

"And your people—most of them—respect and admire you for it. But you've let your enemies make you a prisoner. You're locked in this fucking fortress, afraid to step outside these walls. And even then, you're afraid to let anyone care about you."

Kaden's face was red as he stormed toward Pierce. "I'm not afraid." He grabbed Pierce's shoulders and sneered. "As you said, what do I have to fear? Death is always peering over my shoulder. When I sleep. Feed. Fuck. I don't hide from it, and nor do I seek it. I just tolerate it."

"Then why do you isolate yourself? Just when you started opening up to us, you began pulling away, cutting yourself off. You can trust me. Eden. You know that, don't you? We care about you, damn it."

"I don't want your friendship, your love." Kaden gave him a little shove, turned and started back toward the door again.

"Why not?"

"I don't deserve it. I almost let myself forget..." Kaden curled his fingers around the doorknob. "Any man who has committed a crime should be punished. It is right. It is justice. It is our law."

"What was your crime? I have known you for centuries and never once have I seen you act in any manner that would make me question your behavior or sense of justice."

Kaden turned toward him once again, but this time, his eyes were dark with guilt, regret, sorrow. "I have been responsible for three deaths. Me."

"Who? How?"

"My parents and Van."

"Van Compton? I heard that was suicide."

"He killed himself because I would not love him as he needed." Kaden's back pressed to the door, he covered his face and slowly slid to the floor. Between heavy sobs, Kaden mumbled things Pierce couldn't understand, although occasionally he'd shout, "Goddess forgive me."

Pierce sat silent for a while, his own heart breaking at witnessing Kaden's profound grief. There'd been no doubt Compton's death had been hard on Kaden, but never had he guessed how painful. He could see Kaden's suffering was amplified a hundred times by the guilt weighing so heavily on his shoulders, but Pierce felt powerless to ease his burden. Never, in over four hundred years, had he heard a man cry so hard. "Kaden, you're not a killer," he repeated over and over, hoping sometime his lover would not only hear the words but believe them.

But it wouldn't be now.

Kaden glared at him as he pushed back onto his feet. "I won't argue about this again. That's why I didn't tell you —"

"Then someone else has said the same thing."

Kaden crossed his arms over his chest. "Yes, my brother."

"And you can't believe him?"

"In most things, but not this. He cares about me too much to see things objectively. And he feels too much sympathy for me to believe I deserve anything but eternal happiness. What I deserve is hell. I almost let myself believe I should let the past go, be happy. I let myself care about you, Eden. I let you and Eden care for me. I had almost myself talked out of the guilt.

"But then I had a little conversation with the man I have despised for centuries and I realized I don't deserve to walk away from my crime scot-free if he can't. What king demands virtue from his people but not himself? My parents can't write off the past. Van can't write off the past. They're dead. Because of my actions. If they are still suffering for my sins, then what gives me the right to suffer any less?"

"Kaden —"

"Your Majesty."

"Your Majesty." Pierce felt tears of sympathy welling in his eyes but he held them back, knowing what an insult it would be to let them go.

This time when Kaden turned his back, Pierce knew he wouldn't be turning around again.

Kaden moved stiffly as he twisted the doorknob and pushed open the door. "We will complete the remaining hours of the binding but then Eden will be let go, her memory of most of the week erased, so that all she recalls are the times you shared with her in the dungeon."

"You might get away with that for her but not me," Pierce snapped. "You can't erase my memory."

"No. Nor mine." Kaden glanced over his shoulder, briefly, before stepping through the doorway. "Both of us will have to live with the knowledge of what might have been. I'm sorry for that. If I could spare you, I would pay any price. Once again, I have made a mistake and hurt a good man. I should have learned from my error with Van and not allowed you to care for me."

Something inside Pierce snapped and he shouted, "Your mistake wasn't in allowing me to care but in deciding you are the one person on earth and in heaven, besides the devil himself, who can never be forgiven!"

* * * * *

Later that evening, Eden was ready to go home.

That was a lie.

It had taken her hours to come to terms with everything she'd seen, heard, and learned the past few days. But by the time the sun had set she had sorted through her tangled, knotted thoughts. The facts couldn't be denied once she'd wrangled her emotions into submission. The people who mattered most were in this dark place full of secrets. Nate, her friend for years. Kaden, king of a race of vampires who had the heart of an angel, although she guessed he didn't know it. And last but definitely not least, Pierce, a man with whom she had not only shared moments of profound physical, but also emotional intimacy.

She needed them. All of them.

Tonight was the sixth night, the last night she would share with Kaden and Pierce. She would leave tomorrow evening some time. So little time left. Shitshitshit, even if Pierce had said they would see each other again. It wouldn't be the same. She'd walked away from her world and become fully entrenched in theirs.

To prepare as best she could for tonight, she'd soaked in a hot tub full of fragrant bath salts. After taking care of the necessities, she'd dried off and slathered herself with the fragrant body lotion she'd found in her bathroom. Then she curled her hair into long spirals and put on her makeup. She didn't bother with clothes. They would only get in the way.

A knock sounded just as she was smoothing on some lip gloss. She opened the door.

Pierce. His gaze traveled her full length, from head down to her feet then back up again. "You look amazing."

"Thank you." She slipped her hand into his, expecting him to lead her to the dungeon as he had every night.

He didn't. He stopped in the center of the hallway, faced her and took both of her hands into his. "I know you learned something frightening about Kaden today."

"I'd like to say I'm over it, but I'll admit that I'm a little squeamish...when I'm not trying to tell myself it was either a very sick joke or a hallucination."

"It was neither."

"Yeah, I figured."

He visibly inhaled, exhaled. "I don't want you to be afraid of us."

"Us? You're one too, then. Just like he said." She couldn't help looking at his mouth, expecting to see those awful fangs. She didn't. It was a small relief.

"Yes." He ran his thumb over her hand. "We have been living among mortals for hundreds of years without them knowing. Most of us are law-abiding and hold ourselves to a very high standard. There are, of course, a few exceptions."

"Like my friend Nate?" she blurted, pulling her hands free. She pressed her fingertips to her lips, as if that would stop her from saying what she wanted, what she needed to say. "He's been my friend forever, and I've never seen him do anything unkind."

"Nate?"

"Yes." The truth came tumbling from her mouth now. She didn't care about the consequences any longer. "He was the reason why I came here. He needed Eclipse. Well, that's why I thought he'd sent me. In reality, I guess he was feeling guilty about something he did a long time ago and was tired of hiding from his shame. When I came here, Kaden figured out who he was and had some men haul him back here...to..."

"How long have you known?"

"A few days."

"Yet you didn't leave, even though you knew you didn't need the Eclipse any longer?"

She shook her head and Pierce swept her into his arms, gently cradling the back of her head. "I couldn't leave you."

He whispered in her ear, "I'm sorry about your friend."

"I wish I could help him." She pressed her forehead to his chest. "But I realize now that when he first told me he was sick, I didn't just want to help him, I was obsessed with it. Now I simply wish I could help him face whatever consequences he has coming, help him endure his imprisonment." She tipped her head back, looking at his gorgeous face, the one she was going to miss so much. "See, that was what I was trying to tell you when I thanked you for that first night in the dungeon. When I was in those ropes, I saw myself like I never have before and I realized how much I need to control people."

Sweetly, he brushed her hair out of her eyes. "It's hard for me to see that in you. You haven't been controlling with me or with Kaden."

"Give me time and I probably will, or would have. Now that I'm aware of what I've been doing, maybe I won't. Right? You're the psychiatrist."

He pulled her closer, and she closed her eyes and sank into the embrace. "It's possible. But I'm not asking you to change anything about yourself."

"If I change—and I hope I do—it'll be because I recognize how much happier and healthier I'll be in the long run."

He sighed. "If only everyone I met was able to see things as clearly as you."

"Maybe you need to tie them all up," she suggested, not expecting him to take her completely seriously. When she looked up again, she saw he was smiling.

"Yes, maybe I do."

* * * * *

This was the final full night, and Kaden wanted to be relieved but he wasn't. Eden was leaving in less than twenty-four hours. And he and Pierce would be returning to the strained relationship they had once shared. A distant courtesy and mutual respect. No more touches searing his skin. No more kisses making his blood simmer.

Despite his upcoming marriage, he was going to miss Eden and Pierce, the intimacy they'd shared this past week. The touches and kisses and soul-searching looks. But, he reminded himself, this was ending the way it should.

"The dungeon is ready," Marek interrupted his glum thoughts. "It's almost over." He hesitated then asked, "Have you considered continuing your relationship with Eden and Pierce afterward? Maybe make them your regular blood-bond mates?"

"No. It's not possible."

His brother didn't respond, although Kaden knew damn well his brother would have liked to.

Kaden stood, hands flattened on the desk. "Thank you for making the preparations for tonight."

"It was my pleasure and honor, Your Majesty." Marek bowed and backed out of the room.

Kaden exited by way of the other door, leading through the private corridors to the dungeon. He was in no mood to meet any of his subjects face-to-face tonight.

He arrived to find Pierce and Eden waiting for him. Eden's pretty face brightened the instant their gazes met, and cool regret chilled him. Pierce had insisted it was important she leave with some of her memories of him intact, although Kaden was questioning the wisdom of that decision as he gazed into her lovely eyes. Gone was the horror from earlier. She no longer saw him as a monster.

Irony, since that was what he saw when he gazed into the mirror these days.

"Your Majesty," Pierce lowered his eyes.

Eden gave him a bewildered look then did the same.

Kaden shook his head. "Tonight I'm just Kaden."

Eden snapped her head up and gave him a beaming smile. "That's good. I don't know the rules of addressing a king."

Pierce extended his arms and lowered onto one knee. "It would be my greatest joy if you, Kaden, would submit to me this one night."

Kaden's mind was instantly filled with images of the many men and women he had watched submitting to Pierce. How many times had he stood by, transfixed, wondering what it felt like to completely surrender? He was not submissive, not by any stretch. But when it came to this Dom, he had to admit he'd thought about it. Many times.

But tonight, with so many differences between them, couldn't be the right time.

As if Pierce read his mind, he said, "If you don't tonight, there won't be another chance. You won't allow it."

Pierce was probably right.

Eden stepped closer, her slender fingers twined in front of her shaven mound. His nose filled with the fresh scents of orchid and vanilla. "Kaden, you can't imagine what it's like. I know you're not afraid like I was. I hope you'll let him, just tonight. For me. If

you think it makes you any less powerful in my eyes, you're wrong. A man who has the strength to turn over control to another possesses more power than any man—king or otherwise—could ever hope to have."

Reluctantly, Kaden lowered to his knees and dropped his gaze to the floor. "Tonight, I give you my body, my will. But only this once. Do with it as you wish."

The first thing Pierce did was cover his eyes, explaining he needed to remove the distraction of sight. Then he wrapped the first rope around Kaden's neck, and his body tightened, his heart thumped. The rope was rough. It abraded his neck as Pierce took one end and looped it down between his legs and then up his back. A second length was looped down around the other side of his testicles. A knot was tied between his ass and balls, applying delicious pressure to one of the most sensitive places on his body. The slight squeezing the ropes did around his heavy balls made them that much more sensitive. His cock hardened. His breath quickened.

This was exquisite. Erotic, but in a very different way than he'd expected. Everywhere the rope touched his skin, his nerves tingled. It was as if a hundred fingers grazed over his stomach, ass, balls, back. But it was more than that. As Pierce wound the rope around his body, encasing him in that beautiful web he wove, Kaden felt himself sinking deeper, deeper, plummeting into a world where sensation was completely blotted out.

No longer did he feel the ropes rasping over his body. His thoughts were scattered, broken images, like dreams. His siblings as children. His mother. Father. The blood. He couldn't stop the images. Van. His brothers again. Sister. Mother. Father. His hand, covered in their blood.

"This isn't your fault," his mother whispered.

"My fault," his voice echoed in his ear. "My fault."

"No!" his father said, taking Kaden into his arms. "I won't let you live with the guilt another day. Forgive yourself."

Eden stood next to Pierce, visibly shaking. "Is he okay?" she whispered.

Pierce looked up, catching the worry in her eyes. "He's in deep subspace. He doesn't feel anything, but if I stop, he'll come out of it too soon. He's not ready yet."

She pressed her hands to her pale mouth. "I can't watch."

"It's very important I focus on Kaden now. So I need you to go sit down over there and relax." He motioned toward a bench enough of a distance away to keep her from seeing the worst of it.

"Okay." She ambled over to the bench and sat, and Pierce returned his focus on Kaden.

His breathing was slowing, his body relaxing.

Slowly Pierce helped Kaden climb up from the deep space he had slid into. Coaxing him to progressively higher levels as he gently unbound him.

When the last knot was unwound, Kaden laughed and cried. Eden raced to his side, dropping on her knees, tears streaming down her cheeks. He held them both until the Hunger took all three of them in its clutches.

Kaden was the first to feed from Eden. He took his time, caressing her, seducing her until she was pleading for him to relieve her torment. When his fangs sank into her smooth skin, she did not react as she had every time before. She didn't scream or jump or fight. She sighed, a smile pulling at her plump lips.

And when it was Pierce's turn, she eagerly offered her neck. "I'm glad to offer my blood, so that you and Kaden may live." His hand closed over her breast as his fangs pierced her skin. Sweet, tangy blood filled his mouth and the glorious scent of her need filled his nose.

With every drop he drew from her, he felt more alive, muscles stronger, heartbeat steadier, senses keener. The smells. The tastes. The sounds. Ah, the glory of life.

Beneath him, Eden shuddered as the combined venom took hold, driving her to a hard, swift orgasm. He dragged his tongue over his bite, sealing the wound, and cupped her hot sex.

Heaven.

Kaden came around her back, sat down and reclined back against a cushion. He lifted her hips and lowered her onto his erect cock.

Kneeling upright, Eden arched her back and threw her head back, such a delightful show of feminine ecstasy. She was straddling Kaden's thrusting hips, but facing Pierce. It was a sight he couldn't pull his eyes away from.

Those succulent breasts, the pink tips begged for his mouth. He was more than happy to answer by straddling Kaden's outstretched legs and pulling one of the pebbled peaks into his mouth.

Kaden groaned.

Eden curled her fingers into Pierce's hair and held him at her breast. "Ohmygod, yes."

Pierce could hear her fast, hard, panting breaths. The scent of her honey had filled the room, just as the flavor of her skin filled his mouth. His body burned for her. His balls were so heavy and tight, he had to grit his teeth, and blood pulsed through his body in wild, tempestuous waves.

One of her hands slid down his neck, over his shoulder. She grated her fingernails down his arm, to his elbow. Sweet pleasure-pain pulsed up to his neck.

He rose up on his knees to kiss her, and she wrapped those slender fingers around his shaft. His head spun. Her fingertips pressed on the sweet spot under the flared head and he saw stars. She gave his full length several slow pumps and his entire body hardened. She pinched his nipple and he pulled her to him and plunged his tongue into her mouth.

It was no ordinary kiss. It was an outpouring of fury, need and love. He found her hard little clit with his index finger and stroked it. Back and forth, again and again. She sighed into his mouth, tightened her fist around his cock and quaked as a second powerful orgasm swept through her body. Behind her, Kaden growled as he followed in finding release.

Now it was his turn, and he was more than ready. But he wanted this time to be special, different. When Kaden withdrew his semi-flaccid cock from Eden's pussy, Pierce helped her off him and took her place, kneeling upright but facing him, legs straddling Kaden's hips.

"Fuck me, Kaden." He slipped his fingers into Eden's pussy, dampening them with the slick juices and stroked Kaden's cock until it was thick and hard and ready for him. Eden spread more of her damp lubricant around his anus, eliciting a groan of urgent need. "I have been waiting a lifetime for this."

"Then I couldn't be so cruel as to make you wait another minute." Kaden pushed into him slowly. It was a gentle possession. Deep. Slow. So good. Better than he had imagined. The wait had been worth it. Yes, most definitely.

As if he wasn't already in ecstasy, Eden wrapped her fingers around his cock and gave it a slow stroke. He nearly collapsed with the pleasure. Her thumb teased the slit, flicking over the ridged ring circling the head, cushioning the underside as she stroked him a second time, a third.

As his pleasure built, Kaden's pace quickened. He fucked him hard, harder, until his thick cock pounded into Pierce's ass. Kaden grabbed Pierce's arms, pulling him forward until Pierce was angled over Kaden's body. They kissed, and Pierce saw stars. Kaden's fingers dug into his skin as he held Pierce still, slamming his hips up to drive his rod as deep and hard as Pierce could take. Hotter. Harder. Building. Tightening.

A tingle gathered at the base of his cock. Eden squeezed right there. Kaden's fangs sank into his shoulder and the tingle exploded into a throb. His cum shot up his length and out, coating Eden's hands as she gave him several firm strokes. As a second pulse of cum surged up his length, a wave of heat swept up his chest. He dropped his head back and cried out. Instantly, his anus convulsed around Kaden's shaft. Kaden slammed his rigid cock into his ass one last time and filled it with his cum.

Together, they shook and shuddered as their bodies eased from the throes of ecstasy to warm contentment. Eden pressed her soft body to his and held him until he was too weak to hold his position. He swung a leg over Kaden and lay beside him, placing Eden between them.

He smiled as he drifted into a shallow slumber.

Chapter Fourteen

The knock at the door made Eden's heart drop.

After a long, amazing, incredible, absolutely freaking astonishing night of sex that didn't end until the birds had started singing their morning song, Eden had finally fallen into a deep sleep. Her body was worn out. She was so physically exhausted she could barely move. But that wasn't the worst part. She was so emotionally messed up, one minute she was crying and the next, laughing – at nothing.

After wiping her tear-dampened face for the zillionth time, she opened the door. She suspected it was Pierce or Kaden, or hopefully both. She was hoping to spend some time with them before having to say a final goodbye later that evening.

It wasn't.

"Nate!" She threw her arms around his neck and gave him a long, hard hug. "Are you free? What happened? Ohmygod, it's good to see you!"

"I thought I'd better come talk to you, before you do anything crazy." Nate gave her a patient smile as he gently extricated himself from her tight embrace. "I see you remember... Yes, I'm free. Thanks to your help, I was pardoned by the king. And it's good to see you too."

"Oh. Oh! That's so great!" Once again, tears burned her eyes. Nate was free. Free! He wouldn't spend eons in a nasty vampire prison. He had plenty of medicine, so he wouldn't be sick anymore.

At least she had that to be happy about.

She could think of a couple of other things that would make her happier, but she knew they weren't happening. "Hey, you said 'you remember'. What did you mean by that?"

Nate fiddled with doorknob. "Oh, um, I just thought with everything else going on you might've forgotten you saw me. I mean, I did tell you to forget." He opened the door. "Then again, I told you to leave, and you didn't do that."

"No, I didn't leave. I couldn't. And forget? You're one of my best friends. How could I forget I saw you?" Seriously, he couldn't honestly think she'd really forget.

"I'm heading out. They're sending me home in a car." He stepped into the hallway. "But I wanted to check on you first. Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Sure." She followed him down the corridor. "I'm a little...tired." She hesitated, turning around to peer at Pierce's door. "I'll be heading out later. After...I guess they're too busy to join me for breakfast..."

"Are you looking for Pierce and His Majesty?" Nate tipped his head in the direction of the stairs. "They're downstairs, waiting for you."

"Oh, they are?" She raced past Nate, shuffled down the stairs and practically threw herself into Kaden's arms. She tipped her head to look at his face. That was the face of a good man and a good king. Wise and just and loving. "I don't know what to say. You let Nate go?"

"A good king acts in the best interest of his subjects, does what's just and right for them, never what he would want for himself."

She knew he wasn't talking about Nate now. "If only they could be one and the same?"

"Sometimes they are, sometimes they aren't. It's just the way it is."

She pressed against him, holding him tight, wishing she wouldn't ever have to let go. "I wish things were different."

"So do I." He stroked her head. It was a gentle, kind gesture.

Pierce cleared his throat.

"I think Pierce needs to talk to you about something."

"He does?" She glanced over her shoulder at Pierce. "Okay."

Pierce nodded, then, looking very serious, he tipped his head toward the kitchen. "How about we talk over some breakfast—"

"Sure." She released Kaden and turned toward Pierce. "Is something wrong?"

Pierce took her hand in his and they slowly strolled toward the kitchen, leaving Kaden to head back to his office and the mountain of obligations awaiting him there. "I've been thinking." He stopped next to a chair and waited for her to sit before taking a seat beside her. "I don't want you to feel like I'm pushing you into anything you aren't ready for, but Eden, I can't imagine a future without you. Not a day, or even an hour."

To say that they had a connection was putting it mildly, but up to this point, Eden had assumed her feelings for Pierce weren't fully reciprocated. Not one hundred percent. Mostly because his love for Kaden was so intense—genuine and true and enduring. How could any man love more than one person like that? Was it possible? "Pierce, what are you saying?"

Pierce gently lifted her hand and placed it in his. He ran his index finger down the length of the ring finger on her left hand. After a moment's hesitation, he looked her straight in the eye and said, "Eden, I love you."

It felt as if her heart had taken flight. A sob of pure joy surged up her throat, and she blinked back tears, knowing they'd soon spill down her cheeks.

Pierce cupped her cheek. "I fought it. Hard. I didn't want to love you. I didn't want to need you. Just like you, when you fought my ropes that first time, I refused to submit. But the fear is gone, and the joy of surrender..." Sweetly, he wiped away a tear that was meandering down her cheek. "You make me happy, like nobody has before. Not even Kaden."

This wonderful man, patient and kind and attentive and loyal, loved her. He needed her. She made him happy. It was almost too wonderful to believe. But what about Kaden? "Kaden," she echoed.

"I respect Kaden. I care for him deeply, and I always will, especially after this week. The intimacies we shared...will possibly share again... But my love for you eclipses my affection for him. He is the moon, my beacon in the darkest hours of the night. A comfort, a still and calm beauty. I'm content to live apart from him and share only the blood-bond. I can live like that. But you are the sun, brilliant and lifegiving and so essential my entire world will fall into darkness if you leave. I can't wait a year to touch you, to hear your voice, to hold you in my arms." After a beat, he furrowed his brow and shook his head. "It's too much. I'm pushing—"

"No, you're not pushing. You just took me by surprise and I'm speechless. What you've said, how you said it. It's beautiful. Like a poem. I want to believe...and yet, what if this is all a dream?"

A week ago she would've said it was impossible to fall in love in such a short time, but now she knew better. Love had no rules. It had come out of nowhere, taken her heart and soul captive, and placed them into the hands of the most precious man she would ever know.

"This is no dream. I'm asking you to give me the chance to show you how real it is. I want to move closer to you, into your building, if you're not ready to have me move into your home. I want to take you on dates and make all your dreams come true."

"You want to live with me?" she repeated.

Smiling, he shook his head. "I want to marry you, Eden." He raised a hand before she had a chance to react. "But I thought I'd better take things one step at a time, not spring any more surprises on you all at once."

Marry? Marry!

"I like these kinds of surprises. Let me think about this..." She put on a show of indecision as she stared down at the table, set for one, as usual. It wasn't easy, keeping her expression serious, not when her insides were doing flip-flops and she was so over-the-moon happy. After a feigned sigh of resignation, she said, "I suppose I wouldn't mind a roommate. But only as long as you pay your share of the rent and clean the bathroom."

"Only the bathroom?" Pierce nodded. "Deal."

"Do we have reason to celebrate?" Kaden asked from somewhere behind them.

Eden turned to Kaden, standing, leaning against the kitchen island's countertop, arms crossed over his chest. "I'm sorry we can't see each other more. Are you sure there isn't..."

He shook his head. "No, I'm sorry."

She was too. Sorry and sad, for his sake, for Pierce's and for her own.

"Nothing would make me happier than having both of you stay here with me. This dark, empty place isn't the same with you here. It's full of life and energy and joy. But I won't force you to live like I do, as prisoners. No, it's better this way. You can continue your lives, and you'll have each other."

"But you'll be alone. And that isn't fair." She glanced at Pierce and caught the look of concern in his eyes. Even though they both had so much to look forward to, it seemed neither of them could hide the darker emotions churning with them. "Isn't there any way?"

"I hope this news will make it a little easier for you both, but I won't be alone, Eden. I'm taking a wife."

"A wife?"

"Yes, a wife."

Her emotions swung from sorrow to jubilation at the glimmer she saw in his eyes. "Kaden!" She ran to him, threw her arms around his neck and hugged him tight. "You're going to be married? When? You'd better invite me to the wedding."

"I promise you'll be there. I wouldn't have it any other way."

"When will we meet her? Your wife?"

"She's arriving later tonight. If you would like to stay until then, I'd be happy to introduce you." He ran his hands down her arms. "Eden, it may be selfish to say this to you now, but I don't want this to end between us. We share something very special, and I care for you deeply. Tell me we'll spend time together during the blood-bond every year. Seven days and nights. The three of us. Just like this past week."

"Can we do that after you're married? I mean, won't your wife be jealous?" She rubbed her bleary eyes, full of tears of joy. "After all, we did some things that would normally be reserved for spouses, not to mention the emotional connection I feel between all three of us."

"Not at all." Looking into her eyes, he smiled and smudged away a tear that had just slipped out of the corner of her eye. "All Sons of the Twilight over the age of three hundred and fifty must take the blood-bond with one of our kind who is the same gender once every year. I must take the blood-bond with a Son of the Twilight and a mortal woman, and my future bride must form a triad with another Daughter of the Twilight and, of course, a mortal man. My bride will understand this need, and as long as I limit our time together to only the days and nights of the blood-bond, she won't interfere."

Eden got it now, and yet she was almost afraid to believe she'd be able to share more wonderful, precious moments with this man, like the ones she'd enjoyed this past week. Would it be the same a year from now? Would Kaden be more distant, less emotionally vulnerable because he had a wife? What about Pierce, how would he feel? For that matter, how would she? "Still, even if your wife accepts the blood-bond as a necessity, something like a medical treatment, maybe she'd rather you choose different

partners, at least a woman you have no feelings for." She added, trying to keep the emotion out of her voice, "A woman who has no feelings for you."

Something flickered in Kaden's eyes. "You have to trust me that you will always have your place in my life, and in my heart. As will Pierce, and, very soon, my wife. There isn't, and there will never be, a reason for jealousy. Can you trust me on this?"

"Yes, Kaden. I can trust you." Slightly unsure, despite her words, she glanced at Pierce.

"Then the next question would be," Kaden began. "Will one week be enough for you? Will you want to return to me? To this?"

"I want to say yes, but I can't say that for certain." She gave him one last hug and kiss. "But it's not because I don't care about you. I do. I really do." She stepped back and watched Pierce hug him.

"Eden asked me why I have been practicing Shibari all these years and I couldn't give her an answer. But I can now." Pierce cupped Kaden's cheek and smiled. "So that someday I would be able to free your heart so you could give it to your bride."

"That's yet to be seen, but I do hope she'll have me."

"She'd have to be an idiot to turn you away," Eden said.

Eyes glittering with tears, Kaden took Eden's hand in his for a moment then released it. "Pierce, thank you for having the courage to bring me to my knees so I could find the forgiveness I needed so desperately." He smiled, his face shining with joy. "Perhaps I could ask a favor? One more time in the dungeon before you both leave today? Before the final feeding?"

Pierce dropped to his knees. "It would be my pleasure."

* * * * *

Eden halted midstride, the sudden cessation of forward motion so abrupt, it jarred her insides.

What was this? Why was Nate standing against the wall, peering around the corner like a spy who was sneaking into the enemy's lair? Kaden had set him free. He'd been escorted out of the castle hours ago, before she'd headed into the dungeon with Kaden and Pierce. Now, as she was gathering her things and getting ready to drive home, this was the last thing she'd expected to see.

"Nate?" she whispered.

His head snapped around. His hands, cupping a gun, followed. He glared at her for one, two, three heartbeats before lowering the weapon. "Dammit, Eden, you scared me!"

"What are you doing?" She moved closer to him, curious to see what, or who, he was looking at.

"Taking care of something I didn't get a chance to handle earlier."

With a gun? “What something? Where’d you get that gun? What’s that on the end? A silencer? Did you sneak in here? How? Why?”

Just as she peered around the corner, but before she got more than the briefest glimpse of a crowd of men, Nate dragged her backward, through an open doorway. He shut the door, closing them in a semidark, empty room. “Eden.” Nate reached for her shoulder, realized one hand was full – of gun – and jammed the weapon into a holster he was wearing inside his jacket. “I know this is really confusing, but you’ve gotta trust me right now. Okay?”

Trust him, sure.

She watched him as he leaned against the door and pressed an ear to it, listening.

Of course, trust him.

He stiffened, slipped a hand inside his jacket.

Trust him?

This was Nate. Her Nate. One of the few people she trusted with her life. But he was drawing a gun. Looking like he was about to shoot somebody. Why?

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“Listen to me.” This time his voice was sharp, his words clipped. “You have no idea what you’ve walked into.”

“So tell me.”

“No. Not now. Go.”

That sounded nothing like her friend Nate. He never spoke to her as if she were a pesky child. He was respectful, caring, patient. Kind. And he did not have a gun.

Her stomach started twisting. Something was very wrong.

“I’m not leaving, especially if you’re in some kind of trouble,” she said. “I thought you left already. Did someone smuggle you back here? Who?” The voices outside grew louder. Footsteps shuffled on the opposite side of the closed door. “Nate?” Suddenly, she found herself flattened against the wall, Nate’s hand clapped over her mouth.

“Shut up!” he whispered, something dark flashing in his eyes. His jaw was clenched so tight the muscles along his neck popped out. Suddenly, she felt as if she were staring into the eyes of a stranger.

Her heart started racing, the beat pounding hard and heavy in her ears. Against her, Nate was standing stiffly, staring down at something on the floor.

A metallic click sounded next to her head.

Was that the gun?

The door creaked.

A heartbeat later, something hard struck her head. A brilliant light blinded her, and she felt as if the world had suddenly dropped out from under her feet.

* * * * *

"You say someone attacked you from behind?"

Eden's head hurt. She felt sick to her stomach. Where was she?

"Yes, Your Majesty," someone said. "I was talking to Eden and the door opened, and before I realized what was happening, a man struck me. I'm guessing he attacked Eden after I fell."

She was lying down. On something hard. The floor?

"I don't believe him," another voice responded. "Isn't it a little convenient that he was here with her when she was attacked, when he should've been miles away?"

"I told the guard when I came back to the castle that Eden wanted me to drive her home."

"And he let you wander free?"

"No. I was waiting for her in the dungeon, which, of course, is open to all Sons of the Twilight, but I got concerned when she didn't come out to meet me..."

Who was in the room with her? What were they talking about?

She opened her eyes, but the light amplified the pounding in her head. She closed them again and listened, expecting the conversation would make everything clear. But the darkness was calling to her and it was so comforting. The voices faded until she could hardly hear them.

"She's slipping in and out of consciousness." Something stroked her cheek. The sensation made the shadows recede and once again, the pain was there, making her feel sick.

"I hurt. Head." Her voice sounded weak, scratchy, nothing like it usually did.

"Lie still."

Whoever that was didn't have to tell her to do that. The thought of even moving a finger made her stomach lurch.

"Okay." She lifted a heavy arm and gently fingered her head. Something warm, sticky was matted in her hair. Blood? "Ouch."

"We've called for help. Rest."

That was a nice voice. Calm, reassuring, gentle. She hazarded another try at opening her eyes.

It was Kaden, kneeling beside her, and his expression was far from the emotionless mask she was used to seeing. "What's wrong?"

"You were attacked. I was...we're still looking for the culprit. Do you remember anything?" Sweetly, he stroked her hair back.

She tried to remember but everything was sort of hazy. "No...well, I do recall seeing Nate. We were talking about...I can't remember."

"She could have a concussion. I need to take her to the hospital." That was Nate. Where was he?

She rolled her head, slowly. It hurt like hell, but she found him standing on her left and looking like he wanted to tear someone limb to limb.

"We have a doctor on the way." Kaden rested a hand on her shoulder, as if he expected her to try to get up. "There's no need to take her anywhere."

Nate scowled. "We've been waiting at least twenty minutes. Where's he coming from, Antarctica?"

Grimacing, she massaged her temples. "I don't feel so good."

"Just rest, sweetheart." Kaden kissed her forehead "Help is on the way."

"Fuck that." Nate slid his hands under her and hauled her up.

The world did a flip-flop.

Her stomach did a flip-flop and before she knew it, everything she'd eaten that day was on its way to the floor. She was in hell.

"It's okay, baby." Cradling her in his arms, Nate headed toward the door. "I'm going to take you to the hospital right now. Where's your car?"

"I don't know. Ooooh. Would the world stop swinging back and forth like that?"

"She's right there, Doctor," she heard Kaden say. "Nate, stop."

Nate didn't stop, at least, it felt like he was still moving. Everything around her was still swooping and spinning as if she were on an out-of-control carnival ride. She wanted to get off. Now.

"Nate." She swung her arm, striking him on the shoulder. "I don't wanna go anywhere."

"You're confused. You took a hard knock on the head."

She hit him again. "Please set me down."

"You're not thinking straight right now." He started walking again but a few seconds later, after a short struggle and a few curse words, Kaden had her in his arms and was slowly carrying her down the hallway. When Kaden walked, the world didn't tilt and spin quite so bad. And when he set her down on a soft bed that smelled wonderful, she almost felt human again.

She smiled at him.

He smiled back. "The doctor's going to take a look now."

"Okay. I'm feeling a little better already."

"Good." Kaden stepped back and the doctor took his place at her side. He asked her some questions as he listened to her heart, checked her blood pressure, looked into her ears and eyes and finally inspected the sticky lump on the back of her head.

The doctor then turned to Kaden, rattled off some instructions and left.

It was official — she had a concussion, her first.

And suddenly, she remembered exactly how she'd gotten it.

She jerked upright, and before the spinning had stopped, she was searching the room. "Where did Nate go?"

"I'm right here." Nate was on the other side of the bed, looking very worried and a little sick. She wondered if it was guilt making him so pale. Or fear of being discovered. "I couldn't leave your side, not when there's someone out there who might attack you again."

He sounded so sincere. And when he turned around, she saw that he too had blood in his hair. Was she mistaken? Had somebody else hit her?

Now that her memory was coming back, she did remember the door opening right before she'd been struck. But how had the person hit her without getting past Nate first? He'd pinned her to the wall.

And there was that obvious lie, the one about being struck first. She knew that wasn't true.

It had to have been Nate. He'd hit her. Why? What the hell?

Confused and upset and furious all at once, she dragged in a deep breath, clapped her hand over her mouth and looked at Kaden.

Kaden tipped his head to one side. "What's wrong?"

She had to tell him what she knew. But she wasn't sure at this point whether it was smart to let Nate know she remembered some things yet. "Feeling sick again. Need a trash can or bucket or something. Nate?" She turned to him and reminded herself that her eyes might be lying, that the man looking so concerned might not be the friend she'd known the past few years, but a complete stranger.

A stranger with a gun under his jacket. "I'll find something." Nate looked around the room then shook his head.

Kaden motioned toward the door. "The bathroom's two doors down on the right."

"Be right back." Nate ran from the room.

"Shut the door!" Eden snapped, unsure whether Kaden had caught on to her leeriness of Nate.

Kaden didn't say a word, he just did as she asked.

"Lock it," she added.

"Done." He dashed to her side. "What's wrong?"

"I remember now. I remember everything. It was Nate. At least, I think it was him. He lied to you. He hadn't been attacked first. I know that for an absolute fact. I think he was the one who hit me. He has a gun, and I don't know what he's doing here. Are we alone? You should call for help before—"

Something big and hard struck the door.

Kaden raced toward it, but it flew open before he could brace it.

Nate, holding that gun now in his fists, stormed into the room. His arms were extended and he pointed the weapon at Kaden's head. "How convenient that you found a way to get rid of me. What did you two talk about while I was gone?"

"Nothing." Her headache all but forgotten, Eden scrambled across the bed on her hands and knees. "Nate. What are you doing?"

"I told you earlier, I'm taking care of something I didn't have a chance to handle earlier."

"But Kaden hasn't done anything to harm you. Quite the opposite—"

"You don't know anything." His focus on Kaden, Nate slowly moved closer. "This piece of work isn't what you think."

"I know what he is."

"No, you don't, but it doesn't matter. You accomplished what I needed you to."

"What does that mean?" Suddenly Eden was feeling even worse than before. Had Nate used her to get to Kaden?

No way. Not Nate. It still blew her mind that he was holding a gun right now, let alone pointing it at Kaden.

No. Nate couldn't have known how everything would turn out. And more importantly, he wasn't a killer. He was a good friend who would do just about anything to help someone he cared about.

Then again, maybe...

"Please, Eden, leave the room." With his eyes still locked on Kaden, Nate motioned toward the door. "You don't understand. This is just going to make you upset. It's better if you aren't here when I...kill him."

"Kill? No!" She couldn't imagine Kaden doing anything to deserve being shot to death. He was a good man with a good heart. He was fair, wise, gentle. Self-sacrificing. She ran to Kaden and threw herself in front of him, but he immediately forced her behind him.

She was not pleased, but she understood exactly why he'd done it. Of course Kaden wouldn't let her put herself in danger for him. He was that kind of man. "It's okay, Kaden. Nate wouldn't shoot me."

"Can you be so certain?" he mumbled, holding her back.

"Yes, of course I can." Or could she? "Nate's been a good friend for years. He wouldn't..." She looked at Nate. "Would never..."

Nate had clobbered her over the head. Granted, a knock on the head wasn't as bad as shooting someone, but it wasn't exactly nice.

"I had no choice, Eden," Nate said as if he was reading her mind. "You were in danger and you wouldn't be quiet. I tried to tell you to stop talking."

"I was in danger? From whom?"

Nate motioned with the gun. "Him."

"No." Maybe there was some hope she could talk Nate out of this. It seemed Nate genuinely believed she was in jeopardy. "You really came back here to protect me? I don't understand."

"Yes, I told you that. I wasn't lying. If only you'd left when I told you to..."

"No, you told me you were here to take care of something."

Nate nodded and shook the gun at Kaden. "Yeah."

This just wasn't making sense.

"Can you put away the gun?" she asked.

Nate shuffled his feet, bracing them a little farther apart. "No way. Neither of us'll get out of here if I do that. I won't. I love you too much to let you down now."

Clearly, Nate believed she was in mortal danger. If so, it would be a simple thing to remove Kaden from the crosshairs.

She stepped around Kaden and walked to Nate. "I don't know why you think Kaden is going to hurt me, but obviously you do. I'm grateful for your concern, and so, to avoid anybody getting hurt, I'm willing to leave with you right now. We can go. You and me. Now." When he didn't budge, she very carefully curled her fingers around his wrist. "Come on. You're here to rescue me, so let's go."

Nate finally took a step toward the door. It was a move in the right direction, and finally Eden felt like she could breathe again, even if it did hurt to look at Kaden right now.

She was supposed to have more time. She wasn't ready to go, to say goodbye. Instead of what she wanted to say, she kept silent, afraid her words would come out wrong or she might somehow set Nate off. She opened the door and stepped through the doorway.

The door slammed closed before Nate followed her out.

It had to be Nate who'd done that. Kaden was too far away.

"What the hell?" She tried the knob. Locked. "Nate!"

She pounded, kicked, pounded some more.

Then she whirled around, wondering where everyone else was.

There, against the wall, lay one dead man where there hadn't been one just moments before. And down the other direction, two or three more. There was blood everywhere. Nate had to have shot them before he'd kicked in the door.

He was a killer. In there. With Kaden. She gagged.

Now breathless, nauseous and close to hysterical, she pressed her ear to the door. She could hear voices inside but couldn't make out what they were saying.

This couldn't be about her. Nate lied. What was he doing?

"Help!" She yelled, her voice echoing off cold stone. "Somebody! Helpppp!"

Pierce. She needed Pierce.

The two men were locked in Kaden's suite. There was another way to get into that room. She just hoped she could remember it.

Screaming Pierce's name, she ran as hard as she could, given her current physical state. Down the corridor and through a series of connected rooms she raced, knocking into furniture and tripping over things. Finally, she reached the door she remembered, opened it and staggered into the room.

Kaden was sitting now, a piece of paper sitting in front of him, a pen in his hand. His gaze snapped to hers the instant she stepped inside.

Nate was standing in front of Kaden, holding the gun to Kaden's forehead.

"Nate, what the hell are you doing?"

"Sign it," Nate demanded, poking Kaden's head with the gun.

Kaden gave Eden one last look and then started writing.

Eden wanted to run to him, to rip that paper away and read it, to learn why someone she had known and trusted for years would do so many bad things. But seeing that gun pushed up against Kaden's head was absolutely terrifying. What if she startled Nate and he accidentally pulled the trigger?

Kaden handed Nate the paper.

Nate read it, smiled and pulled back the gun's hammer. Nate was going to kill Kaden, no matter what she did.

Something inside her snapped.

"Noooooooo!" She charged forward, hurling her body at Nate with every ounce of strength she possessed. She hit him and there was a hollow pop. "Noooooooo!" It took her a couple of seconds to realize Kaden hadn't been shot. She'd managed to knock the gun aside as Nate had pulled the trigger, but he still held the gun and he was aiming again, and for some reason, Kaden wasn't moving to stop him.

Nate was about to shoot a man she loved and he wasn't doing a damn thing to stop him.

She screamed Pierce's name again and then, when it became clear that nobody was going to come to Kaden's rescue, she did what any girl in that position would do—kicked Nate in the side of the knee and then, as his leg gave, kned him in the balls. Nate doubled over and she lunged forward, eyes locked on the gun.

She knocked the weapon from a dazed Nate and scrambled after it as it bounced on the floor. In less than three heartbeats, she had it pointed at Nate's grimacing face. "You used me! Was everything, our friendship, a lie?"

"No. Not everything. At least, not in the beginning." Still bent over, Nate chuckled. "It's come to this, it seems. A question of trust." Nate motioned toward Kaden with his head as he slowly reached behind his back. "There's one bullet in that gun. Who should get it? The friend who has known you, loved you, helped you for years? Or a has-been king who has just abdicated his throne after confessing to murder?"

"That's an easy one." Just as he swung his arm around, another gun in his hand, she aimed, braced herself for what she expected would be a fierce recoil, and pulled the trigger. "You don't love me. You miserable bastard."

Nate's expression was one of shock as he crumpled to the ground.

Eden dropped the gun and sank to the floor. "Why?" she mumbled over and over, staring into Nate's eyes. "Tell me."

"Some things are bigger than one person, or two, or even a hundred, and good people find themselves having to do bad things. For good reasons. The world isn't always black and white. Good and bad." He blinked once, twice. "I needed your help, but I never wanted to hurt you."

"What things are so important? Why would you kill a man who'd forgiven you, set you free?"

Nate died before he could tell her.

Chapter Fifteen

Eden couldn't say how long she sat on the floor and cried. Never had she thought she'd ever be in a position where she would have to kill someone, let alone somebody she knew and thought she loved. God, it hurt. So bad. Even though Nate had pretty much forced her to do it. She'd had no choice, that was, unless she was going to stand by and watch him slaughter a man who didn't deserve to die.

Kaden did his best to console her. And so did Pierce when he finally found them. The three of them remained in that room for hours and hours, not saying much, just holding each other.

Eventually, Kaden's responsibilities pressed upon him, and after his brother Marek came into the room and left three times, he had to step back into his role of king. He kissed Pierce first. The two of them exchanged some hushed conversation while she waited, shaken still from the episode with Nate. A few moments later, Kaden approached her.

He hugged her, held her close then stiffened and pulled away. "Eden, this is such a bad time for you now. Pierce and I agree you should go home. While we do need to feed once more, there's no reason why we need go to the dungeon. And you can meet my bride another time."

"What?" She dabbed at her blurry eyes.

"I want you to go home and rest. You've had a terrible shock."

"No." She glanced at Pierce. Pierce nodded. "No." She turned back to Kaden. "What if it's not over? What if someone was helping Nate—"

He cupped her face and gave her a tender kiss. "I'm safe. It's okay. My brother's elite security team is on alert and they're questioning several people. If Nate had help getting into this part of the castle, we'll find out who it was. I trust my brother and his men."

"I saw one of them. He took me to Nate. I can help you," she offered.

"No, it's under control."

Not sure if she believed he was safe, but hoping he was, she shook her head and offered another excuse to stay longer. "I might not be in the right frame of mind for the dungeon tonight, but I want to meet your future wife, really I do. I'm okay." She scrubbed her red face. "I-I just need a few minutes to freshen up."

"Are you sure?"

She nodded. "Positive."

After Kaden and Pierce each bit her one last time, Kaden launched into an explanation she assumed was meant to ease any jealousy she might feel about his

upcoming marriage. Ironically at the moment she felt no jealousy, perhaps because she was already so emotionally wrung out to feel any emotions at all. "Eden, please understand, the welfare of my people comes first..." Kaden said more, but he might as well have been speaking in Swahili. She couldn't really comprehend his words, she was too overwhelmed by the earlier events. Every now and then, a few words stuck.

"Arranged marriage."

"Vampire clan."

"Peace and security."

It seemed he realized after talking for a while that she wasn't understanding. He gave her shoulders a soft shake, looked deep in her eyes and said, "I will always care about you. And I will always be grateful for the unconditional friendship and love you have shown me. I've never had that, not even from Van."

"Tell me you aren't marrying for duty." That was it, the tears started again. She dragged the back of her hand over her eyes. "I want your fiancée to love you with all her heart. And you, her. You deserve no less than that, Kaden."

Kaden's eyes reddened, and Eden's heart pounded. The hope she read in their depth was almost unbearably sweet. "Kings don't expect to marry for love. They marry for duty. But I'll admit it here and now, only to you, I have loved Synne since the moment we first met."

Yes, that was what she'd needed to hear. "She must be a remarkable woman." Eden slipped her hand into his. "Is she here yet?"

Kaden nodded.

"Let's go. I must meet the woman who has captured your heart." Eden turned to Pierce and offered her other hand, meeting his eyes. The love she saw in their depths made her want to cry all over again. How had she become so lucky, to have such a wonderful man love her so deeply?

Together, they descended the stairs, strolled down the hallway and turned into the foyer.

The woman standing in the center of the room was all that she'd imagined and more. Tall and breathtakingly beautiful, she looked as if she'd been born to be a queen. Eden was *almost* certain Kaden would be a happy man. And then, his soon-to-be bride spoke and Eden knew for a fact he would be.

The gorgeous woman inched up her chin, narrowed her eyes, and glaring at Kaden, said, "If you think you'll ever get me on my knees, you can kiss my ass, you bastard."

Eden clapped a hand over her mouth.

Kaden's eyes twinkled as he turned to Eden. "I hate to say goodbye, but I'm afraid I have some pressing obligations to attend to."

Eden stifled a giggle and gave him one final hug. "Goodbye, Kaden."

"Goodbye, Eden." He stroked her face tenderly. "Thank you again for caring enough about me to forget what I am."

“No, it’s me who should be thanking you, for opening my eyes to a new and wonderful way to love.”

Eden left Kaden’s castle happier than she had ever imagined she could be. Beside her during the ride home sat her lover, best friend, soul mate and Master, Pierce, his large hand folded around hers as he drove them home, making her feel safe, protected and loved every minute of the trip. She couldn’t wait to start her new life with Pierce as Master and slave—and hopefully someday soon, man and wife—and even though she was a little sad she wouldn’t see Kaden for some time, she was content with the knowledge that Kaden would be busy, and happy, doing the same with his feisty new fiancée, whose name couldn’t suit her better.

The End

About the Author

Nothing exciting happens in Tawny Taylor's life, unless you count giving the cat a flea dip—a cat can make some fascinating sounds when immersed chin-deep in insecticide—or chasing after a houseful of upchucking kids during flu season. She doesn't travel the world or employ a staff of personal servants. She's not even built like a runway model. She's just your run-of-the-mill, pleasantly plump Detroit suburban mom and wife.

That's why she writes, for the sheer joy of it. She doesn't need to escape, mind you. Despite being run-of-the-mill, her life is wonderful. She just likes to add some...zip.

Her heroines might resemble herself or her next door neighbor (sorry Sue), but they are sure to be memorable (she hopes!). And her heroes—inspired by movie stars, her favorite television actors or her husband—are fully capable of delivering one hot happily-ever-after after another. Combined, the characters and plots she weaves bring countless hours of enjoyment to Tawny...and she hopes to readers too!

In the end, that's all that matters to Tawny, bringing a little bit of zip to someone else's life.

Tawny welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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