



**Mating Fever**  
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MATING FEVER

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## Chapter One

The chill of the night ran along my arms. Every time I drew in a breath the strong gusts stole the air from my lungs. The icy fingers of the night slithered up my skirt and caused my legs to tremble. The sounds of the passing cars and their horns filled my ears. A clacking subway train ran along the street next to me.

I pulled my coat closer to my body to ward off the striking wind. It sliced through the thin material of my clothes. The temperature had dropped while I had been in the office, and I wasn't prepared for it. Home was only a block away. It was a four-bedroom house that I shared with two other roommates and the fourth was unoccupied at the moment. No matter how much I worked, I wasn't able to make the rent on my own or buy a house with the rising housing costs in Boston the way they were. I got by with two other guys who were trying to "find" themselves.

MacIntyre, or DJ Mac, as he wanted everyone to call him, was off in California on a club tour, but he had left his rent. The other, Sandi, was an aspiring artist this week. Next month he would try rock climbing or some other pastime. We'd all been thrown together by friends of friends who told us about our original roommate Gulliver who had moved back to Jersey.

It was a fucked up world that I lived in. All of my previous relationships had gone to hell. The images of my deceased beaus flashed before my eyes and the horrible ways they had died.

Being the responsible one growing up, to find myself in such a disorganized living situation was a bit strange. Here I was, walking back to the room I called home, wondering if the sink would be full of Sandi's dishes or if his pot-smoking friends would have enshrouded the house with a haze of hallucinogenic vapor.

When I passed the small package store on the corner that sold alcohol and lottery tickets, I heard a bottle drop in the alleyway. My heart throttled against my chest. Without stopping to see who or what was hiding, I quickened my pace toward home. Before I

made a few steps, someone's hands enclosed my waist and yanked me into the darkness. I was hurled into the brick wall of the package store. My attacker's face was hidden in the shadow. But the muscular frame and the cut of his ragged clothes told me it was a man. Rancid breath blasted against my face. I curled my nose at it and glanced around for a way to escape. There was nowhere for me to go. His fingers came around my throat and squeezed. I clawed at the hand, but my assailant was too strong. He stepped closer, but a hood was down over his face.

"You'll do just fine. Strong. You'll do just fine."

"Please don't hurt me." I hated the helplessness in my voice. All my muscles were locked in place, frozen in fear at what he would do to me. The worst rolled through my mind. Rape. Murder. Being chopped up and my body dumped into the Charles River.

"Don't worry. It'll only hurt for a minute. Then you'll be one of us." He wrenched my head to the side. A cry let loose from my lips. His fingers wound through my hair and he pulled out the scarf I wore. My mugger pressed his body against mine. He had no other weapon I could see, but I was trapped. His hot, stinking breath moistened my skin.

"Your kind has got to learn." Another deep voice rumbled in the alley.

I opened my eyes and felt the man's lips move away from my throat.

"My master doesn't obey the laws. Humans are meat," he snarled.

A guttural growl answered him. "Trenton knows better. His day will come. As yours has now."

My attacker launched himself off me, pushing me into the wall so my head struck the brick exterior. The world grew a fuzzy around the edges. I tried to move, but my head spun. All I could do was listen to the two men fight next to me. Whoever had come into the alley heaved my attacker into the trashcans and was on top of him, holding him down. My savior raised his arm over his head. There was something large and pointed in his hand that he brought

down. A sharp shriek pierced the night that chilled my bones. The scream died as a blast of wind hit me. Then silence.

The world started to return to normal. I was able to stand without the aid of the wall. I rubbed my throat, but my neck hurt from the tight grip. My hero approached. The light next to the alleyway flickered on and off so it was difficult to see. All I could make out was that he was dressed in dark jeans and a fitted t-shirt. His hair was disheveled with strands hanging over his ear. He didn't seem out of breath, but there were dark spatters on his cheek I could only assume were blood.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

I nodded. "I-I think so."

"Did he stab you? Or bite you?"

"No."

"May I check?" He reached for my neck, but I backed away.

"I'm fine. Thank you for your help." I pulled out my phone, ready to call the cops.

"Don't call the police."

"Why not? I was attacked. Of course I'm going to report it." I walked closer to the light to get a better look at my phone and to feel a little safer. He stepped in front of me.

"Please don't." His tone was firmer. I glanced back at him, and his eyes glowed in the light.

My head grew a little fuzzy, but I shook off the feeling and attributed it to hitting the brick wall. "Sorry. But you're not the boss of me." I dialed the police and waited for the operator to answer.

"I wish you hadn't done that."

"Why?"

The man rushed forward, plucked the phone from my fingers, and crushed it in his hand. *What the hell? That isn't normal. No person moved that fast unless I am really out of it.*

"Hey, what did you do that for?" I stood transfixed. Fear trembled my spine as I watched him sprinkle the remains of my phone onto the pavement.

I backed away from the crazed man, hoped to make it to the front of the package store, and then inside so I could have the clerk call the police. I kept my gaze locked on him. Then he disappeared. A breeze brushed past me. Someone clutched my arms from behind. I jumped.

"I won't hurt you, but you have to listen to me very carefully."

"W-what are you going to do to me?"

A low chuckle echoed in the darkness. "Nothing. Just that if you tell anyone about what you've seen tonight, I'll be forced to come back. Then you *will* know what I can do to you."

"What is that?"

He pressed his lips to my throat. The wetness of his tongue trailed along my flesh. A warm tingle spread from the spot and all along my body. I shouldn't have been reacting to him this way, but I couldn't help it. I bit my lip to keep from moaning. Conflicting emotions assailed me. I walked a line between fear and the stirred passion that he had awakened in me.

"I'll make what he was going to do to you seem like a holiday. I have ears and eyes everywhere in this city and beyond. So keep your mouth shut." He nipped my throat once more and then released me. His words were imprinted into my mind. I spun around to see where he had gone to, but no one was there.

Sirens sounded in the distance, getting closer. I didn't know if they were in response to my call, but I wasn't going to stick around to find out. While I searched the darkness, I wondered if he was already watching me. Some part of me said to hide. The instinct blanketed me, and I ran home.

The rest of the night and the next day, I constantly peered over my shoulder to see if anyone was following me. However, on the streets of a big city like Boston, everyone was following me. That didn't make me feel any better. A scarf round my throat hid the handprint bruise. I told no one what had happened, hardly believing it myself. Some kind of strange dark fantasy had played out before me. Every time I turned my head, I felt the bruise on my neck, and it reminded me that the dark fantasy had occurred.

When I returned home that night, I found a package waiting for me on the table where we laid the mail. No return address grazed the box. Inside was a newer version of my cell phone. I turned it on and found it was already preloaded with my numbers and contact info. It made me wonder if he had kept my SMS card from my old phone. There was no note. Shaking my head, I headed upstairs to get ready to take a bath when the phone rang. The number wasn't one I recognized.

The high-pitched ring grated on my nerves. After the second ring, I answered. "Hello."

"Do you approve of your new phone?" His smooth voice sounded over the receiver.

"How did you even get my phone number and address?" My knees went weak from the silky tone. Although the fear he instilled in me froze my bones.

"Now now. You didn't answer my question. Do you like my gift?"

I peered through the blinds of the downstairs window, scrutinizing the shadows. The darkness didn't reveal anyone, but that didn't mean someone wasn't watching from the small alleys between the houses. Anyone could be hiding inside them. His breaths came evenly on the other end of the phone. I tip-toed around the house looking into corners and closets to see if he might be lurking somewhere inside.

"I'm not spying on you, Madison."

"Then how did you know to call me right when I turned the phone on? How did you get my number and my address or any of my phone information?"

"All in good time. I wanted to replace what I destroyed. I was a little hasty last night. I shouldn't have threatened you. I was hoping that we could meet for drinks."

I burst into giggles. *Is this guy serious?*

"Do you find the idea of that comical?"

Some of my fear melted away. "Well, yes honestly. No smart woman would go out on a date with a stalker."

"I'm not stalking you. Look at this as a way for me to apologize for how I acted last night. I can explain to you that I'm not a bad guy."

*Why is this happening to me? Why do I always end up with the strange ones?* I rolled my eyes and groaned. "Sorry. I appreciate the offer, but please don't call me again."

"For tonight, I will bid you goodbye." A small note of remorse lingered in his voice when he hung up.

*Whatever. It doesn't matter.* The only thing I needed to focus on was the pint of chocolate chip mint ice cream that called my name in the freezer. I half expected the phone to ring again, but it didn't. I brought the ice cream back upstairs and spread out some work I had to look over.

At work the next day, a bouquet of flowers was delivered to my desk. *Ooos* and *ahhs* came from my coworkers as they ogled over the blue roses and irises. Both were my favorite flowers. A card lingered among the blooms. The message read;

*You can't get away from me that easily. I don't give up.*

He didn't even sign his name. I rolled my eyes, crumpled the card, and then threw it away. My coworkers were mortified I did that, but he wasn't a beau, and I hoped to never see him again. At the end of the day, I thought about throwing the flowers away but took them home with me instead. They couldn't help that they were delivered by a jerk, and I wouldn't make them the helpless victims. When I got home, I half expected him to be waiting for me. He wasn't.

Relief filled me. I opened the door and slipped inside. I deposited my purse on the small table and kept the flowers so I could get some water for them in the kitchen. The day washed over me and weariness sunk into my bones. I closed the door and rested my head on the hard wood. Laughter drifted from the sparsely furnished living room. I took a deep breath and listened. One was my roommate, Sandi. There was another male that I didn't recognize. I tried to sneak by them, but Sandi saw me.

"Madi, come on in here."

I forced a smile and walked into the other room. Next to my roommate was another man. He had medium brown hair the color of creamy coffee that curled around his ears. Just long enough so I could run my fingers through the strands and feel their silky smoothness. His complexion was somewhat paler than normal. No blemishes marred his features. It was his dark gray eyes that held me dumbfounded. They reminded me of the color of storm clouds breaking after a tempest. His lips were full enough that I could see myself kissing them with ease. He had a round face with a slight cleft in his chin. Sandi's guest was dressed in a black sweater and tailored charcoal pants. An air surrounded him that put him out of my roommate's usual league of friends. Maybe he was his agent or some prospective buyer for the loads of paintings Sandi had stacked in his room and the fourth bedroom. The stranger stepped toward me, smiled, and stuck out his hand. I glanced at it and then back at Sandi, who grinned and rolled his eyes.

"Hello, Madison. Your roommate was nice enough to invite me inside your home."

My eyes widened when I heard his voice. Smooth like silk that ran along my skin. I shivered listening to him and clutched the flowers closer to me hoping they could be my shield. That voice stirred my passion even if his presence wasn't welcome.

"W-what are you doing here?" I asked. I turned to my roommate. "How could you let him in here?"

Sandi opened his mouth, and closed it again. His features tensed up as he thought about a reply.

"You mustn't blame him. I told you I didn't give up that easily. Did you enjoy the flowers? Blue roses are nearly impossible to find."

I glanced down at the blooms and then tossed the bouquet at him. Once they left my hands, I scrambled up the stairs, slammed the door to my room, and locked it. I searched my pockets for my phone and remembered it was still in my purse downstairs. *Shit.*

The stairs creaked as someone came up them. The window beside my bed led to the fire escape, but I didn't trust the rickety



iron to hold my weight. It was barely bolted into the side of the house as it was. Still it would be better than facing him.

The thunder of my pulse echoed in my ears. I could feel the reverberation of it in my throat. I started toward the window and tried to lift. The window wouldn't budge. I remembered it was painted shut. *Great, now that I need to escape I can't. Maybe I can break it.* A knock sounded on the door. The breath caught in my throat.

"Please open the door," his voice came from the other side.

"Go the fuck away!"

He laughed, a soft chuckle that wound down my spine and caressed my nerves. I shivered and gritted my teeth. There was another knock. This time it was softer. A cold draft snuck in through the cracks around the window.

"I won't hurt you. Please let me talk to you so I can explain." The plea in his voice allayed his persistent tone.

I took a few steps toward the door, drawn by his entreaty, and almost unlocked it, but stopped. A cold gust came again. I shivered and watched a white vapor seep through the crack. Before I could explore it further, my light flickered and then winked out. My room was dumped into total blackness. The stairs creaked again. Darkness wrapped around me, blanketing more than it normally did. It was thicker and slid along my skin like cool, smooth fingers. The iciness of the room centralized around me, behind me. I spun around. Nothing was there. A chuckle exploded next to my ear. I tried to turn again and see who was behind me, but those silken fingers became hooks that clutched my upper arms and held me against a firm body. I squirmed and wriggled in the grasp of the thing that held me.

"Sandi, help!" I screamed at the top of my lungs, but my plea sounded weak and muffled.

Darkness encapsulated me, and my stalker held me hostage. The floor dropped away from my feet. Brisk and biting air rushed by me. It pressed into my skin like nails. I tried to cry out again, but the darkness spilled into my throat and smothered me. The more I tried to draw in a breath the more I suffocated. And when I thought

I was going to die, the darkness cleared. Air rushed back into my lungs. It tasted musty and stale on my tongue. Everything was quiet around me. The darkness left me blind until my eyes adjusted. I had no idea where I was, just that I something bizarre had occurred. Shaken to the core, I prayed I would live to see another day.

## Chapter Two

The pressure of his complete body pressed against mine as he held me to him. Unlike before in the darkness, it seemed he was solid and yet only half there. My captor released my right arm but still had one of his arms around my waist. Now that my eyes adjusted, I glanced around the room and noticed we were in a sumptuous bedroom that wasn't my own. A large bed stood along the wall covered in cerulean and silver coverings. A gray couch with splashes of cobalt sat at the foot of the bed. An antique chest of drawers was to the left of the bed. The carpet matched the colors and brought them together. The lighter blue walls made it seem like the room was awash in twilight. The coolness of the night loomed just on the other side ready to descend over me.

"Where are we? How did I get here?"

"You're at my house. We came here by the means of how my kind travels."

*His kind?* "What's that supposed to mean? You're an alien that pursues women and whisks them away to torture them in a plush pad?"

A chuckle slipped from his lips. "No. I'm not. I brought you here so we could be alone together. Here you can't get away from me and there will be no interruptions. Please listen to me. Once I'm done, I'll do whatever you wish. I'll remove myself from your life and you'll never see me again. I'll bring you home and you needn't tell anyone what happened. I'm just asking you to trust me. I *did* save your life the other night. Doesn't that count for something?"

"Let me go, and maybe I'll listen." I didn't care if he was going to tell me he was on the Titanic when it sank. All I wanted was to get away from him. Not to mention, I wasn't going to let him see that I was trembling inside with fury and fear from being ripped from my house. The two emotions were so entwined that it was tough to tell them apart.

He brushed the hair away from my neck and planted his lips on my skin. My kidnapper ran his mouth over my throat sucking in the flesh and then nibbling on it. I drew in a quick breath when the pleasure of his act slithered along my veins. The anger died for a quick moment. He kissed my throat again, trailing the tip of his tongue along my jugular vein.

"You taste better than you smell. Would you let me indulge in sampling your lips before I release you?"

"I don't have a choice. You're the one holding me hostage. I imagine you want to tie me to the bed, too. Then you..." I turned my head toward him only to be met with his dazzling smile and those eyes that captured me. The rest of my retort died on my lips.

With our mouths being within centimeters of one another, all thought flew from my mind. The fear inside me evaporated. My hand suddenly had a mind of its own. I reached up and placed it on his cheek. Once I touched his face, an electric jolt passed through my body. He uttered a small moan. We both leaned closer until our mouths met in a kiss. I tried to scream at myself to stop. This man had wrenched me from my house by some unknown means, but my reason escaped me. It was all instinct. And my desires dictated they wanted to kiss him, to feel his body pressed against mine. That I would find myself dying in his arms because all I yearned for was for him to consume me.

Before I could have more than a taste of him, he pulled away. As promised, he released me. Once I found myself away from him, I could rationalize again. The impression of his lips still burned on mine. I brushed my fingers across my mouth to remind myself that the gesture had occurred.

I stumbled backward and fell onto the couch. The luscious cushions almost swallowed me whole. He perched on a chair opposite me. "What's your name? Since you're forcing me to kiss you, I figured I needed to know."

"I'm not forcing you to do anything that you don't want to do. At least I assume you wanted to."

"Why assume? Can't you read my mind?"

His brow furrowed. Those stormy gray eyes darkened the longer he stared at me. "No. I can't. It's quite frustrating. I also can't influence you which is doubly aggravating."

"Why do you say that? Not used to having people not bending to your will?"

A scowl settled on his lips and pinched the side of his eyes emphasizing the creases around his and making him appear entirely feral. "Usually they do."

"I wonder what makes me the exception."

"I don't know."

"So what's your name?" I asked, trying to pull my gaze from those tantalizing eyes of his. The longer I looked at him, the more turned on I became. It felt as if I was burning up. I pressed my hand against my forehead to see if I had a fever and that this might be some hallucination. It came away cool.

Tingles of pleasure shot through my body and settled between my legs. I shifted uneasily in my seat. Dizziness overwhelmed me. He was across the room, but something in me was drawn to him. I needed to feel his lips on my flesh again.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine," I lied and tried to keep my cool. But my whole body trembled with a deep hunger for him that I couldn't comprehend. I didn't know him. Something was going on that I didn't understand.

He got back up and knelt before me. "You're not all right." He laid his hand on my cheek. "You're not warm. Do you feel okay?"

I heard what he asked me. Those sensuous lips formed around his words and each time they moved, I inched a little closer to him. My body's reactions were beyond me. It seemed that I was in a dream. A strange nightmare that I couldn't shake and yet part of me didn't want to. I wanted him to keep on touching me. I needed it.

Instead of responding, I grabbed his face between my hands and pulled him to my mouth. His body stiffened against mine, but

he yielded to my demanding tongue that plunged between his lips. The taste of him settled on my tongue. I yearned for more. His fingers raked down my back. The tips of his nails pressed through the fabric of my blouse into my skin. I straddled him, trying to merge our two bodies. I ran my hand down his chest feeling the powerful muscles underneath. I kept going lower until I found his erection. When I did, he broke the kiss and pulled away from me.

"What's the matter with you?" Concern lit his eyes. His brow was furrowed, and the corners of his mouth were pinched together.

"What's your name?" I squeezed him a little harder and he groaned.

"I thought you hated me and wanted me gone."

He was growing stiffer the more I touched him. "Part of me does. I can't explain it. There's this other part that's driving me wild. I don't normally act this way with men. Especially those who threatened me. Now what's your name?" I kissed his throat.

He hissed when I bit him. He pulled away from me then and retreated to his seat across the room. I remained on the floor. I closed my eyes and tried to gather my wits. *This is crazy. I never lose control like this. Whatever is happening to me? All I want to do is fuck him.* Whatever he did to me was beyond normal. It was supernatural. This man was more than human. The shock widened my eyes, but it didn't stop the ache I had for him. A deep need to have him between my thighs and pumping into me burned in my body.

He shook his head and pushed the hair away from his forehead. He tensed his hands and clasped them before him. I tried not to look at him, but a pain started inside of me then speared to the core of my being. I doubled over resting my head on the carpet and tried to take slow breaths to calm the raging ache inside me. I scraped my fingers along the rug.

"Tell me what ails you, Madi." His hot breath exploded by my ear.

"I need to be near you. It hurts when you go away."

When he ran his hand down my spine, the hurt eased. His touch seemed to be the only thing that kept the pain at bay. "I'm going to take you to someone who I think can help. Are you okay with that?"

I lifted my head and gazed into his eyes. The tenderness I saw in them was real. He did actually care about me. *How could he care for me when we didn't know one another?*

"Yes. Make this stop. Then my life can return to normal."

"I don't think your life will ever be the same, but if you wish me gone. Then I will go. But it would hurt me not to see you again."

A half-hearted chuckle moved over my lips. "We'll see." Tears slid down my cheeks. *What the fuck is wrong with me? I can't continue this way.* He wiped the tears away and scooped me up in his arms. At once, the agony I'd been in disappeared. I breathed a sigh of relief and buried my head into his shoulder and let him spirit me away.

## Chapter Three

He banged on a door once the darkness receded. After he pounded a second time, it finally opened. A short woman in her mid-forties stood in the doorway with frosted blonde hair and purple eye shadow that made her blue eyes pop. Her long lavender nails caressed her wrists as she had her arms crossed over her chest.

"What the fuck are you doing here? Didn't I tell you to never darken my doorstep again? Damn it, Keaton."

"Stephania, will you listen please? I need your help."

"Why the hell would I help you after the last time?"

"Will you at least help her?"

She sighed. I tried my best to smile. The look in her eye was doubtful and filled with a hate that pulled at the corners of her mouth making her face pointed. "What's wrong with her?"

"I don't know. Otherwise I wouldn't be here," Keaton answered.

"You don't have to talk about me as if I'm not here," I said.

"Fine! Bring her inside." Stephania moved aside so we could enter.

I glanced around the room. A beaded curtain hung from the doorway across from us. The walls were a muted pink, almost peach in the light of the room. No pictures adorned the wall, just a lone large rectangular mirror that hung over the sofa. Keaton's reflection was hazy, semi solid. He laid me gently onto the couch. It was soft and I could easily fall asleep from the weariness that settled over me. Stephania knelt next to me. She pulled my top eyelid open and peered into it. She repeated that with my other eye, lifted my top lip and ran her finger along my teeth, and then checked my pulse.

"She's not turning."

"I know that."

"Then why did you bring her here?"



“Because every time I separate myself from her, she is in pain. And when I am near her, she tries to jump me.”

She arched her eyebrow. The woman struggled to keep a smile from turning up her lips. “That true? Feel like you want to fuck him right now?” Stephanie asked me.

My mouth dropped. I wasn’t used to anyone being so forward. “I-um—”

“It’s a simple question. You want to fuck him when you’re next to him and maybe do other things?”

I bowed my head. “Yeah. That’s true.”

“How much does it hurt? Does feel like your heart is being pulled out your nose?”

“Like someone’s twisted my insides around barbed wire and pulling out my veins with fishhooks. What’s wrong with me? This isn’t a normal reaction. Did he poison me?”

“Move away from her for a moment.” She instructed Keaton.

Gritting my teeth, I tried to manage the oncoming pain. Keaton walked across the room. Once he wasn’t in contact with me, my body was alight. I doubled over and gripped my knees. My heart thundered in my ears. I couldn’t catch my breath. My nails sunk into the flesh of my palms, but even that pain didn’t overwhelm the separation I felt from him. The burning seared my veins, and I shrieked.

“Enough. Take her hand.”

Keaton slipped his fingers through mine. When he touched my flesh, the pain evaporated. I was able to sit up again and breathe. I pulled the hair from my face and wiped the tears from my cheeks. Now that he was touching me again, lust was born inside of my heart. I wanted to fuck him. But I was able to handle that part of it, at least, for now.

“Tell me what you’re feeling for him now?” Stephanie asked.

I glanced at my hostess and felt my cheeks burn. “I want to throw him down and ride him.”

Stephanie chuckled. “How do you feel about her?”

Keaton's expression changed the longer he thought about it. At first his face remained stoic. A deep fire ignited inside of his eyes. His nostrils flared and he ran his nose along the curve of my neck. Then followed by his tongue. He nibbled my ear. His hot breath exploded on my throat.

"I want to take her right here until she comes, screaming my name."

"You don't want to drain her? Bathe in her blood? Slit her throat and drink it down in a crystal goblet?"

I glanced between the two of them, wondering what he would answer. A tremor of fear gripped me. Suddenly it seemed I was thrown back into the alley and that someone would jump me again. Should I run or bury my head in his shoulder? Once I went away from Keaton, I would be consumed in the agony of needing to be close to him again. My body was playing a deadly game of tug of war with itself. I settled my eyes back on him.

"No. I don't feel that." He moved the hair from the other side of my neck and trailed his finger down my cheek. A tender expression crossed his face. Keaton's eyes lightened, and I saw the concern there.

"Have you tried her?"

"No. But I desire to."

"How did you feel about her when you first laid eyes on her?"

Keaton sighed. "At first, she was an innocent bystander about to be bitten, but then I touched her. I didn't want to harm her. Only get to know her better."

Stephania rubbed her chin and settled her gaze on me. "What about you? Before this pain started, what did you think about him? Was there an instant attraction that you couldn't explain?"

"I was grateful that he saved me from the asshole who attacked me. When he crushed my phone, I was scared to death. But then he touched me and I felt something for him. A primal attraction that I couldn't explain. But I didn't think about it."

She nodded and looked between the both of us. "What have you done with her?" Stephania asked Keaton.

"Nothing!" he replied.

"Bullshit!" Stephania withdrew a pack of cigarettes from inside her bra. She stuck one between her lips and snapped her fingers. A flame danced at the top of her thumb and forefinger. Fascinated, I watched as she lifted the flame to the tip of the cigarette and lit it. After that, she blew out her fingers. "You did something to her to accelerate the fever. It would have progressed at a normal pace if you hadn't done something."

"Fever! What fever?" I hit Keaton on the shoulder and pushed him back. "What disease did you give me?"

He put his hands up to ward me away. "My kind doesn't carry any disease." He turned toward our hostess. "You have to be wrong. It can't be the fever. She's not. She can't be."

Stephania inhaled a long drag and blew out a smoke ring that floated the length of the room. "Surprised the big bad monster finally has a mate?" She curled her nails around his cheek and placed a quick kiss on his lips. Jealously overwhelmed me, and a small hiss escaped my lips. Her gaze flicked toward mine and she laughed, a deep throaty sound that made the hairs stand up on the back of my neck. "Remember we tried that and it didn't work out?"

Keaton growled at her. "Get off. If she's my mate, then the fever shouldn't be this advanced."

"Exactly what I've been telling you. Now what did you do with her?"

He dragged his finger through the strands of his hair. "I saved her from a minion. Tonight I swathed her in shadow and pulled her back to my house. That seems to be when her pain started."

"What does that mean exactly?" I asked. "What does any of it mean?"

Stephania sighed. "Sweetie, I know you don't understand what's going on. But think of this as a wondrous gift."

"Gift! I step away from him and it feels like I'm being flayed alive. When I'm next to him, I want to peel his clothes off. That isn't normal."

"No, it's not. And the mating fever shouldn't be this bad so quick." She snuffed her cigarette out in the palm of her hand and turned to Keaton. "You of all people know never to enclose shadow around a human. You were the one who set the rules. It messes with their heads. Why?"

Keaton rose up and slammed his fist against the wall. The wall shook. Pain began to snake along my veins again. The muscles strained in his neck. That tender expression turned toward one of anger.

"I don't know. I didn't think about it. I wanted her." He looked straight at me, and I saw the truth in his eyes. "You were pushing me away and not giving me a chance to explain myself. I didn't mean to scare you with the phone or sending flowers to your work. I couldn't influence you and you slammed the door in my face. I didn't think and resorted to drastic measures."

Hearing the sincerity in his voice, something inside of me melted. "How did you expect me to react when you showed up at my house after you'd called me and I had no idea who you were?"

A small sigh escaped his lips. "I apologize. Can you forgive me? Maybe we can start again. After we get this resolved."

I smiled. He didn't seem like a bad guy when I was thinking straight. Getting to know him sounds like a good idea. "I'd like that." I stuck my hand out. "I'm Melinda Stowe."

Keaton chuckled. He took my hand and brushed his lips across the back of it. I held in a small moan when his mouth connected with my skin. "Keaton Blackson."

"This is great and all. You two agreeing to work things out, but it doesn't mean that you still don't want to fuck her and claim her for your mate. Get it over with now. Turn her."

"I can't do that. You have to do something to break the mate bond so we can do this the natural way."

Stephania swirled her nail along her palm. "Not even the strongest sorceress in any line can break the bond between mates. I can make it manageable. That will give you some time to get to know one another."

My ears perked up when she said that. "How?"

"Well, there is a spell I can do—"

"Anything to make the pain stop," I said.

"Now that the mate bond has been established, you won't ever be able to get away from Keaton. And this might give you a little time to learn what he is. I can make the sexual agony controllable."

Keaton's stone-faced expression didn't give me a good read on him. I sure as hell didn't want to be mated to him. It made me sound like some kind of animal that was going to fuck him. The rational side of me said for me to run far away from him, but my heart agreed that getting to know him wasn't a bad thing. He had brought me to Stephania to get help. He seemed remorseful for what was going on between us.

"Do whatever you can. No offense, but tonight wasn't the night I wanted to discover that supernatural creatures were real. I rather enjoyed the wool being over my eyes."

Stephania cackled. That confirmed to me that she was a witch. She might not have a wart or be green, but anyone with that laugh combined with the fact she could light fire by snapping her fingers, had me convinced. I still hadn't figured out Keaton yet. I suspected he might be some kind of breath stealing demon. What did it entail for me to be mated to him? How was I going to get to know him? Was he going to put me in his thrall every night and whisk me away to his world?

"Okay. Give me a second." Stephania disappeared through the beaded curtain. Dishes clanged and doors slammed in the other room. Then I turned to him.

"Can you tell me what the hell is a mate bond? How did this bond form between us?"

He sighed and looked down at his hands. "When I brought you here the way I did, covering you in shadow, the darkness that I'm part of, that's inside of me, I had to spread it around you, too. It must have accelerating the mating fever, but I never thought that you would be my mate."

"What is that supposed to mean? I'm not good enough for you?"

A half smile formed on his lips when he turned to me. It lightened his eyes and gave him a boyish appearance. "No. I just never assumed I'd have a mate. Besides, I thought you weren't interested in me that way with the way you've been avoiding me!"

I crossed my arms over my chest and huffed. "I'm not. You're not my type." I pulled away from him as far as I dared on the sofa.

He laughed. Keaton slid his hand along the top of my thigh. I bit my cheek from the line of fire that rose along my nerves from his touch. "If I'm not your type, then how do you explain your body's reactions to my very presence? My touch arouses you. I can smell it on your skin. And you did agree to get to know me better."

He inhaled next to my ear. The tip of his tongue swept over my throat. I shivered with pleasure and yearned to feel more of him.

He was right. I did agree to get to know him better. "Okay, so maybe I find you attractive. But I want this pain gone before I can rationalize what is going on between us. Is that clear?"

Keaton nodded. "Very clear. Unfortunately, I can't wipe out the attraction that you feel for me now. Once the mating fever has taken affect and the blood starts to boil; it can't be ignored. Stephania may be able to dull the pain, but in the end, it will rage until the lust between the two partners is consummated. It can eat away at the mind. It becomes so animalistic that it might hurt the other partner. I can do more damage to you than you could to me. We can work this out. Now that I know you're destined to be with me, I'll do everything I can to show you we *are* meant to be together. Will you let me?"

The truth lit his eyes along with his earnest expression. Keaton ran his thumb across my lips. His touch was tender. I leaned forward and slipped my hands through his hair. I brought his lips closer to mine and kissed his lightly. He moaned. At that moment, I was of two minds. I yearned to taste more of him and see his body before me. To let this fever broil me and for him have his way with me. Then there was the other part that was slowly losing ground

that said to hightail it and run. He returned the kiss gently and then pulled away.

"Is that a yes?" Keaton asked.

"I don't know. I can't think about anything else except being around you. Is that normal?"

"It is only when the fever has started to burn the body. I'm sorry I've brought this upon you. It was never my intent. You intrigued me after I couldn't influence your mind. After you ran off, I found your SMS card and took it to a store. I influenced the clerk to get your information and an upgrade on your phone. I wanted it to be a foothold into getting to know you better."

The beads jingled and Stephania returned carrying a goblet in one hand and a knife in the other. "This concoction will help stave off the fever for a while, but I need a couple of more ingredients. I require blood from the both of you."

"If she ingests any of my blood then it can start—"

"The blood will be good for her and cement the bond between you. It won't be enough to turn her. If you want her to survive then this is what has to be done."

I glanced between the two of them. "Do it. I can't stand this."

Our hostess took the blade and pressed it against Keaton's arm. She held the goblet underneath the blade and then sliced the flesh. Blood welled into the cup. When she was done, she took the knife and pressed it into my inner arm. I breathed through the pain. After she was done, he grasped my arm. He licked his lips. His eyes glowed red from the hunger. Things snapped into place then. My mind cleared at that moment with one singular purpose and focus. I was the rabbit and my instincts said to run. He clasped my arm tighter. My heart thundered in my chest. Sweat dampened my palms.

"You really shouldn't do that right now." Stephania cautioned.

Keaton growled, but it was too late. I saw his teeth. They weren't his canines like I expected, but the next teeth over growing longer. "Stay out of this." He looked back at me. His eyes widened and his nostrils flared. Here before me was the monster I assumed I

would turn into. Terror stirred my heart faster. I tried to stay calm. To this point, he hadn't harmed me. He licked his lips. "Will you let me taste you?"

The wound dripped onto my skirt and his fingers. It must have taken extreme control not to pounce on me. I swallowed and stared back at him. I wasn't sure what I could say. I did want to feel his lips on me. *What would it mean to have them buried in my throat?* That was my thought that had always lingered when I saw a vampire movie.

"Please." His voice was filled with longing. The plea stabbed my heart. His other hand ran down my arm. I shivered from the gentle touch. My heart told me he wouldn't hurt me.

"Do you want this done or not?" Stephania asked me.

"Yes, but can you give us a second please?" Keaton grumbled.

She rolled her eyes, plunked down the goblet and the dagger, and went through the beaded curtain. I looked back at him. "You're a vampire."

Keaton nodded. "You'll keep bleeding if we don't attend to your wound."

"And you can."

"Yes."

I glanced at the cut again and saw it still seeped. I lifted my arm to his lips. His tongue trailed down my arm. A shudder went through him. He groaned. The pleasure of his touch rolled along my skin and made me clench my legs together. Keaton sucked on the wound. After a few gulps, he glanced back up at me. A little bit remained on his lip. I wiped it away. His hand went around my wrist and brought my thumb to his mouth. His tongue wound around it and sucked the blood away. I moaned and leaned forward to kiss him once more. Keaton then claimed my lips. This time I melted into the embrace and easily fell into the fire that consumed me. How would it feel if we were together?

Keaton separated from my lips and kissed my neck before tugging on my ear. "I can show you so many things if you just trust me. I'll tell you anything you want to know." He pushed me back



gently onto the couch. He straddled me. His stiff cock pressed against my belly. "I want you, Madison. Now! Damn the concoction Stephania has made for you. After tasting you, I know we're meant to be together. I've dreamed about having a mate for centuries. Many others of my kind are happy, and I have ached for the same thing."

I ran my hands over his chest. A slight heartbeat underneath my palm. I assumed it was from my blood that powered his heart. He was warm to the touch. "What else have you wanted?"

"So, are you going to do this or not?"

We both looked over at the woman who had reemerged into the room. I blinked immediately coming out of the daze I was in. Keaton growled at her and then retreated to the other side of the couch. She looked between us.

"Yes." Keaton had settled back on the couch next to me.

I couldn't do this. Panic ran rampant through me. I wanted to be back in my apartment and know that witches didn't exist. I stood up and straightened my clothes. When I did, I noticed the gash on my arm was only a pink line. Some of my fright died down. Stephania smiled and handed me the goblet.

"Drink it down without stopping, and don't ask me what's in it."

I did what she said and drank the toxic fluid. It tasted of diluted dirt with a hint of copper to it. Once I was done, I set the glass down. A wave of dizziness enveloped me. It took a moment to pass. When it did, I got up from the couch and backed away from Keaton. No pain or lust consumed me. My head was clear.

"Thank you." I hugged Stephania.

"You're welcome. I've hailed you a cab. Keaton, I think you should go for the night."

He stood up. The muscles tightened in his jaw. "I will not leave my mate."

Stephania stepped toward him. "This is not a request. Don't make me revoke my invitation."

The darkness of the room enlarged in the space, like a monster taking shape. I backed away and felt a coldness descend into the room. I ran my fingers over my arm to ward off the chill. Nothing was going to stop them. I bit my lip and touched Keaton's shoulder. He looked at me and I didn't recognize him for a moment. His nose was scrunched up. His mouth pulled back into a sneer. Keaton's pupils were fully dilated, filling his eyes until they were completely black. His teeth hung over his lip. His skin had taken on a waxy pallor. He lunged at me, but stopped inches from my throat. When he looked up again, he was more familiar.

"You shouldn't have done that. I could've hurt you," he said, slowly forcing his words.

"You have to try and woo me remember?" I kissed him lightly on the cheek.

He drew in a ragged breath. I stepped away. The darkness that had been building in the room dissipated. He forced a smile to Stephania. "Thank you for tonight."

Darkness surrounded around him until he was consumed by it. It seemed forever when I was with him, but he was gone in an instant. Then I was left alone with Stephania. I flashed her a nervous smile and then backed away.

"That was a good thing you did and a stupid one. No one gets in the middle of a vampire pissing contest. You have balls. I think you and I'll be great friends."

"Ahh, thanks. Umm, how long will that potion you gave me last?"

She straightened the pillows on the couch. "A month or so. You've got it bad already. As one of the founding members of the council, Keaton knows better than that. He knows what can happen by wrapping shadow around humans. You're lucky that it didn't kill you."

"What can happen?"

"The touch of the darkness can drive a person mad. It can deform them physically. There are many things that may go wrong. Don't worry about it. You seem to be fine. I didn't sense any side

effects. Your cab is here. I already took care of the fare and the tip. Guy's a client of mine."

She ushered me outside. I wanted to ask her more, but she closed the door on me. The night surrounded me, but the haze that hung over the city distorted the stars. It would be wonderful to see their familiar light. I shook my head and went into the cab. The cabbie asked my address. I rattled it off, but I barely felt the cab pull away. I was too focused on what I had learned that night.

Real monsters lived in the dark. I rubbed my neck, felt the bruise from the other night, and thought back about my attack. It made sense now. I was going to be food for another vampire and Keaton had come out of the shadows to save me. He had threatened me because he didn't want me to reveal what he was or what I had seen. Closing my eyes, I rested my head against the window. Exhaustion from the night's events swept over me.

The cab stopped outside my house. A chill penetrated my bones from the oncoming winter. I checked my pockets for my keys. They weren't there. *Shit*. My purse was still sitting on the table on the other side of the door. The house was dark and I had no cell phone.

"Need to get inside?" Keaton stood at the bottom of the steps. He looked relaxed in the darkness.

"What are you doing here?"

"I had to get my car, and I wanted to ask you out for dinner tomorrow night if you're up for it."

I chuckled. "Maybe. Pick me up around seven."

"I can do that. I'll see you tomorrow night then. Oh, your door is open."

The squeak of the door swinging open caused me to turn. When I looked back, he was gone.

## Chapter Four

The day passed slowly as I tarried at work thinking about what I was going to do. Every time I thought about Keaton and what had happened between us, I blushed. It made it tough to concentrate while staring at my computer screen. Images of us together rushed through my head and burned my cheeks.

I tried looking up information on vampires, but everything I came upon was the same old myths that I had read about in books. They hated religious objects, needed permission to enter into homes, and of course they needed blood to survive. Some books said that their blood or saliva could heal wounds. When I looked at my arm, the slash from the dagger was completely gone. It confirmed some of the texts. Monsters were real. The darkness held things that I couldn't fathom. Stephania was a powerful witch. What was next? Werewolves wearing bunny costumes?

"Hey there, you okay?" Terri stood next to my cubical.

I blinked, awakened from my stupor. "What did you say? I'm sorry."

Terri smiled. "You're in another world today. I asked if you still wanted to go out for drinks tonight. Remember, you had said we were going out?"

*Fuck.* "Sorry, Terri. I made other plans last night. What about tomorrow night or this weekend?"

Her expression darkened and then sank. "This is the second time this month. I thought we were friends."

I rolled my eyes. Terri didn't understand sometimes things came up. The last time I ended up getting stranded at work and couldn't leave because I had to do some overtime. It was a special project, and she hadn't taken no for an answer. I ran my hand through my hair and felt the weariness of the long night I'd had. Even after I had gotten home, sleep eluded me. My dreams were filled with blood. The thought of them was exhilarating and made me slightly hungry.

"Look, I'm sorry. I met a guy. We have a date tonight. You know how long it's been since I was out with a man. Forgive me."

Terri perked up. "Really? What's he like?"

I blushed and looked down at my computer screen. "Gorgeous. Tall. And mysterious."

"How'd you meet him?"

"He saved me from a mugger the other night." I pulled down the neck of my shirt and showed her the now fading handprint.

She drew in a breath and touched the bruise. "So he pulled you away from certain death, and now you have a date with your hero? Oh, that is so romantic. When can I meet him? When is he picking you up?"

A small giggle left my lips. "Sorry, let me get to know him first. He might have saved my life, but let me get to know him. Then I'll bring him by the office or we can do a double date."

"That sounds like a plan. Have fun tonight and tell me all the details."

"Will do."

Terri left my cubicle. Work sucked me back in, and my mind was troubled with blood and violence. *I have to know why he thinks we are mated.* It had to be some of the complications that Stephania had warned me about. I couldn't figure it out. The more that I tried to, the more complicated it got. I didn't want to get a headache over it.

It was bad enough my mind kept turning to him. To how he felt against me. How Keaton had kissed me. The way his hands had trailed along my body. How those teeth felt in my flesh. The computer screen blinked and I shook my head.

I left the thoughts behind and finished the rest of my work. When that was done, I caught the train home. My mind was turned toward Keaton and what was going to happen. The trains were running behind so by the time I got home, it was six forty-five. I jumped out of the shower and heard my roommate coming up the stairs. I was draping a towel around me as he walked into the

bathroom. His mouth dropped. Sandi began to sputter, but no sound came out. He backpedalled and then slammed the door.

"Sorry," he called through the door.

I chuckled, grabbed what I needed from the bathroom, and stuck them on top of my clothes. My roommate was outside waiting to get in as I exited. Sandi's embarrassment still colored his cheeks. I walked into my room and swore when I saw the clock. It was five past seven.

"I hate being late."

"I don't mind waiting."

Keaton emerged from the darkness. Seeing him took my breath away. He was dressed in fitted black pants that weren't too tight, but showed off enough of his body I could appreciate it. His shirt was dark purple with a black tie. The darkness receded when he fully stepped away from it. I almost thought to ask him how he got in here, but I already knew the answer. He had cocooned himself in shadow and slipped in.

"What are you doing here?"

"We have a date, don't we? Unless you don't want to go out?"

I looked down, feeling how very naked I was underneath the towel. "No, I didn't say that. I'm just surprised to find you in here. That's all."

He spread out his arms and then bowed his head. "I couldn't wait to see you. I didn't want you to think that I'd be late. And here I see that you aren't ready yet. Tsk, tsk." He wagged his finger at me.

"I had to work late and then the trains were running behind. I was trying to get ready as fast as I could. I can stand here dripping and talk to you or you can turn around and let me get dressed."

Keaton stepped forward and traced my collarbone. Tiny shivers gripped me and raised the hairs on my body. He ran his fingers along the top of my towel, over the swells of my breasts. It left trails of fire along my flesh. "What if I don't want you to? Isn't this the end result of what we're heading toward?" He walked

around me and pulled my hair to the side. Those luscious lips of his settled on my throat.

I groaned and leaned back against him. My head lolled against his chest, exposing more of my throat. The pleasure of his touch shot straight down to my clit. His lips trailed over my flesh. I slipped my arm around his neck while he kissed me. Keaton's other hand enclosed my waist and inched up my towel around my upper thigh. He stopped only after a few inches from my pussy. I ground against him, feeling his growing erection. The lust that gripped me wasn't as bad as it had been the night before.

"Your blood was sweeter than any wine I've ever tasted. If I die tomorrow, the ecstasy I've known from your touch will bring me to Heaven."

"You really know how to sweet talk a girl."

"You're not a girl. You're a woman. My woman."

"I'm not yours. This was supposed to be our first date, remember? I don't normally sleep with a man on the first date." I guided him from my throat and claimed his mouth with my own.

He kissed me hungrily while one of his hands snuck under my arm and cupped my breast through the towel. The fabric was losing its hold on my body and soon it would slip to the floor. Keaton slid his tongue along my lips and then met mine with wet, languishing caresses. He pushed his hips into my ass until I ground along his covered cock. My stomach rumbled. Emptiness started to spread in my belly. The fuzziness of hunger wound through my head.

"You're hungry." He nuzzled my neck.

"Yeah. I didn't have time to eat lunch at work."

He sighed and gave me one last kiss on the cheek. "Then we have to get you to dinner. I'll leave you to get dressed."

Keaton stepped away, leaving the cool air to blast against my back. I trembled from the unspent desire. Now I could think straight again. Drawing in a deep breath, I quickly dressed in a black dress I hadn't worn in months. It still fit, which made me happy. I threw on a silver chain that hung between my breasts.

Thank God I had shaved the night before. The bruise on my neck was disguised by makeup. My hair would have to dry wavy. I grabbed my purse and opened the door. Keaton gave me an innocent smile and offered me his arm.

"You look amazing. Ready to go?"

I nodded.

Keaton led me out of the house and into his sleek, silver Mercedes. We drove in silence to downtown Boston and then parked on a side street. I got out and shivered. I pulled my shawl closer to my body as my date led me down the stairs and into a hidden Italian restaurant. From the layout of the place this was an exclusive establishment. Most of the patrons were the upper crust of Boston. The others that I looked at gave me the shivers. Keaton pulled a chair out for me at our table. The waiter handed us our menus. They were entirely in Italian. Keaton ordered a glass of merlot.

"How did you get into this place?" I asked.

He met my gaze and gave me a fabulous smile. "I know a few people. Besides, you told me to woo you. So here I am wooing."

"Yeah, but you didn't have to bring me here. This place is overpriced, and I can't read anything on the menu."

He stared at me until I felt uncomfortable. "You deserve the best. Does it make you uncomfortable?"

I hated that he had gone to all the trouble. "Yeah. Sorry. It's not that I don't appreciate the thought, but—"

He stood up and pulled a bill from his wallet to cover the wine. The waiter looked at him but said nothing. We walked back into the night. Keaton slipped his fingers through mine. I glanced down, and felt a coil of warmth unwind in my heart. I laid my head on his shoulder for a moment. Being with him knowing how much he was trying made my heart soften. He stopped when we got to the car and squeezed our combined hands before bringing them to his lips and kissing my knuckles. A small sigh escaped my lips.

I hadn't had anyone try and romance me for a long time. My luck with relationships was horrible. I shuddered to think about all



the bad luck I'd had. But that wasn't something I wanted to dig up now. I only hoped my curse with men had been broken.

"Hey, you okay?"

I blinked and stared into his concerned eyes. I brushed a piece of hair from his face. I smiled. "Yeah. I'm okay. Just thinking about the past."

"Well I hope it isn't too bad. It took you away from me for a moment."

"I don't want to go away. I like what we have going here. Even if you are a bloodthirsty monster."

"Only for your blood. Look, I'm sorry about that the restaurant. I should've asked you where you wanted to go."

"It's okay. I appreciate the thought. It's been a long time since anyone has done anything so nice."

"Well that's a shame. I'll have to remedy that. So where do you want to go?"

He ran his fingers along my cheek. For being a vampire, he was a good guy. I caught one of his fingers when it slid across my mouth and sucked it in between my lips. He tasted good. Thoughts of going back to his place ran through my mind. But a slight headache had formed behind my temples from not eating. He growled when I released his finger.

"I know a place in Jamaica Plain. This pub that serves some great goat cheese quesadillas. Do you eat?"

"I can in small quantities. I just haven't in a long time. Food tastes like sand after several thousand years. But with you it might taste better."

"H-how old are you?"

"I'll tell you later. Right now, get in, and I'll take you wherever you want to go."

We drove back to Jamaica Plain to the pub that my roommate had introduced me to. The restaurant was upstairs away from the main bar. We sat down, ordered, and when the food was delivered, I dove into it while Keaton watched. After a couple of bites, I noticed he wasn't touching what he had ordered.

"Everything okay?"

He smiled. "Yeah. I was just enjoying watching you eat."

I blushed and ran my napkin over my lips only to come away with a long string of cheese. Keaton chuckled. "Why didn't you tell me there was cheese on my face?"

"I figured you wanted it there. It accentuated your cheekbone very well."

I threw a red pepper at him. "You're in for it."

Keaton took the pepper from his shirt and popped it into his mouth. "I can only imagine what I'm in for."

My body became flushed, thinking about what had been on my face. I gazed down at the rest of my food. I didn't speak to him until I finished eating. My mind was straight. Parts of me kept oscillating back and forth about seeing him naked and tasting all of him or just saying screw it and run away from him. I still wanted to believe that monsters didn't exist and nothing else lurked in the dark. I tried to push that out of my head, and think about the gooey cheese and the vegetables that were melting in my mouth.

Keaton paid the check. A band came onto the small stage and began to play. I leaned back in the chair and listened to the soothing music. The waiter came by with a piece of chocolate cake that I hadn't ordered, and Keaton smiled, took a fork, and cut a chunk off and brought it to my lips. The intoxicating scent of the chocolate filled my nose. The dark tang of the cocoa made my mouth water.

"I can always eat it myself." He began to guide the fork to his mouth.

I growled and grabbed his wrist. "I'll eat it, but slowly."

I took the fork between my lips and caught the crumbling bits of chocolate with my tongue. The cake was moist and the frosting was rich. It enflamed the need for more and it also stirred my passion for him. He carved into another piece and fed it to me.

Little creases formed around his eyes as he smiled. His eyes widened and lit up as I ate the cake. The music slowed even more, and I took another bite. Finally, I pushed the cake away and

watched Keaton eat the last few crumbs. He wiped his finger in the last bit of frosting and held it out to me. I leaned over the table and swept the tip of my tongue over his finger to get the last bit of icing. Keaton broke out into rich laughter.

"You have no idea how you and I are alike."

"How do you mean?"

"You have passion inside of you. Simmering underneath that controlled exterior of yours. I sampled some of that the other night when you were caught in the mating fever."

I felt the blood drain from my face. "You mean that doesn't happen to everyone that experiences the fever?"

"No. It affects everyone differently. The pain is customary. It normally drives others to insanity if not acted upon. Some develop certain appetites for blood, food; some go on a killing spree. The mate connects on a subconscious level to the other and they channel the hunger into their own form of addiction, let's say. For you it seems to be sex. Not that I mind. I've always found it fascinating to watch other mated pairs come together."

I crossed my arms over my chest and scowled. "I am not a sex addict. I enjoy it when I can, but I don't sleep with every man I've gone out with. It's..." The breath caught in my throat as I recalled the images of my past relationships. The pain of losing the ones I had cared for flashed through my mind. The horrible way they had died, getting hit by the bus, falling on the third rail in the subway station.

Losing my fiancé had been the worst. *Mark and his crazy gifts.* How he presented me with my engagement ring ran through my mind. The loving times we'd spent together in bed. I shook my head and tried to wrench my thoughts away before they pulled me under. The dose of the reality dampened my spirits. Suddenly, the world was a darker place, and I was thrust back into it again.

"Madi, what did I say?" He took my hands and leaned across the table.

The darkness of the world crept in around me. *How could I tell him what had happened? I couldn't.* I was cursed. The hunger that had

awakened inside of me was the darkness that hung over my life. Maybe it was because there was already a monster inside of me, and now it was loose.

"Nothing. It's nothing." I got up abruptly from the chair. "Can we go, please?"

His brow furrowed and his lips pursed. "Of course. Do you want to go home or back to my place?"

Desire burned in his eyes, but I heard the concern in his voice. I shook my head. "Home. I just need to be alone for now. I'm sorry."

"There's nothing to be sorry about."

We left the restaurant. I climbed back into his Mercedes trying not to let my mind drift backward. I thought I had walled up those memories so tight they would never escape. Here they were popping up when I least expected them. My date laid his hand on my knee and squeezed. It drew me back to the present. We were outside of my house. I tried to smile, but even that simple gesture was beyond me at the moment.

"I'm sorry. I didn't —"

He placed a finger on my lips. "Don't worry about it. We can always have another night. Right?"

I didn't want to tell him yes. But I did want to see him again. He was kind to me. My heart was turning from thinking he was a crazy stalker who bought me flowers and a cell phone to a man who truly wanted to get to know me. Being so I couldn't endanger him the way I had Mark, Keaton had to stay out of my grasp. How could I do that if we were meant for one another? I brushed my lips over his cheek.

"Right."

## Chapter Five

I looked at the clock and knew I had to go into work, but I just wasn't feeling up to it. I had spent the night twisting and turning, trying not to think about my past. Trying not to think about Keaton or what he meant to me.

The passion I felt for him and the darkness was consuming me. My body was enflamed each time I thought about Keaton. It was hard to breathe. When my mind wandered over our night together, wherever he had touched me came to life. The phantom caresses pressed upon my flesh. The ache to see him again grew worse. But then the images of my past boyfriends and how they died would flash through my mind. The thought of Keaton falling prey to my curse twisted my stomach in knots.

I called in sick claiming I had the flu. While I dressed, I realized I needed someone to talk to. The one person I could think of who might understand what I was going through was Stephania because she had helped the last time. When I looked through my purse, I found her card she had had slipped into my jacket pocket.

I worked my way through the tunnels from the T to her house. Standing outside her door, I wondered if she was even home. *Will she talk to me?* Maybe she could tell me if I was cursed. I raised my hand to knock when the door opened and Stephania was on the other side.

"I had a feeling that you were coming. Come on in."

I smiled and went into the house. "Thanks."

She closed the door. The house was the same as it was the other night. She motioned me through the beads. I rubbed my arms and bit my lip thinking about what I would say. *She'll probably think I'm nuts if I tell her this.* We went into her kitchen. The kettle was steaming on the stove. She poured the water into two mugs with teabags hanging off the side of them. The mint from the leaves perfumed the air once the water hit the teabags. Stephania handed

me the mug and sat at the kitchen table. I rested my head in my hands and then combed my fingers through my hair.

"So what was it you wanted to talk about?"

I laughed. "How did you know I wanted to talk? Maybe I'm just here to see what other spells you could cook up for me."

She slapped her hand on the wooden table. "You are too much. I see that Keaton and you are getting along well now. Have you had a chance to crawl between the sheets yet? He really is a great lover."

"From the other night it seems you had a harsh reaction to him bringing me here. What's up with that?"

Stephania took a sip of her tea and grimaced. "Yeah. We've had our differences in the past. The last time we were together, he got a little bit too physical with me. We said some things to one another. He touched a few nerves. But we were over long ago. I told him never to darken my doorstep again. And then he appeared with you. So what's bothering you?"

I blew the steam away from the cup and looked at the wilted leaves in the teabag. The scent helped clear my senses. "Both of you said that we were mates, Keaton and me. I appreciate your help with that. But I can't have a relationship with him. Any relationship I've had has always turned to shit. The last one, things...Mark was great. I loved him very much. He proposed to me."

"And you want to know if your relationships are cursed? Why some dark cloud hangs over you? Maybe why you've gotten pulled into this world of monsters and beings that you don't understand."

I nodded. "Yeah. How come you know what I was going to say?"

She shrugged. "I had a dream about this last night. I've been keeping an eye on you just to make sure you're adjusting to the spell." She reached out her hand. "Let me see your hand."

I held it out. She traced her finger over the lines of my palm. Her eyebrows scrunched together. Then her eyes widened, but the look didn't give me much encouragement. I sipped my tea. She took my other hand after a moment and peered at it, too.

"That look doesn't say I have good news."

"No, it's not that. Actually your hand tells of a long life. Longer than you may desire, but I think you already know that any way from being mated to a vampire. But you're not cursed. On the contrary you're something of an enigma."

"Well, that sounds wonderful. Any idea on how I deal with what I'm going through?"

"The only way you can deal with it is to confide in someone that you love. Tell Keaton what happened. Once you relive what you've been hiding, then you can find peace. You must tell him. If not, it will haunt you. The blood madness will creep from your dreams and drive you insane. That's all I can tell you." Stephania released my hands and relaxed back in her chair.

I took another sip of my tea. I hadn't thought about Mark in a long time. It was only now that my relationship with Keaton had progressed that Mark came to mind. More than just sex. My heart was starting to go out to him. I couldn't understand it. Maybe that was the part of being his mate. I don't know. Sighing, I tried to understand everything she had said.

"Thank you for the information. I do appreciate everything that you've told me. I guess there's a lot that I've been repressing."

She nodded. "The one thing about finding your true mate is that everything will come to the surface. It doesn't matter how much you try and bury it. The longer you're around them the more the fever will rise. The more you try to hide, the more it will reveal. Don't fight it."

*Accept it.* "Yeah that's not going to be easy. You don't have any more spells that can repress memories do you?"

She shook her head. "Not for you. Don't despair. Just tell Keaton what's in your heart. You should go to him tonight and tell him."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea. Besides, I don't even know where he lives."

Stephania's mouth turned up in a tantalizing smile. "Well that's simple."

She slid her palm over my hand. When that happened, the image of a large brownstone flashed in my mind. A wrought iron fence surrounded the front garden. The bedroom I'd been in before. Other images passed before my eyes that I tried to make sense of, but the address was burned into my memory. I gasped and pulled away. A cold chill lingered where she had touched me. The back of my hand was also slightly pink from where she had touched.

"Forgive me, but with what I give, I must take. It's the nature of who I am."

I bit my lip. "What exactly are you?"

"Keaton hasn't told you?"

"No."

"What do you think I am? You already know he's a vampire."

"A witch or a sorceress. That's what I figured."

A loud cackle erupted from her lips. "You kill me. If only it were that easy. No. I'm a lamia. I prey on men and suck up their seed to keep me vibrant. That was one reason it never would've worked out between Keaton and me. But I do have a little bit of magic in me. My grandmother was a witch."

My mouth fell, but I closed it quickly. I nearly dropped the cup, but set it back on the table. I hadn't figured she would be some other kind of supernatural creature, at least not another immortal. "So you're like another kind of vampire?"

"Yes, something like it. But you have no need to fear me. I do not prey on women and besides, I smelled the vampire all over you. It was unbecoming."

"If vampires don't smell good to you then why were you with Keaton? Wouldn't he have smelled, too?"

She got up and wagged her finger at me. "That is true. I made do with it. Being with another vampire, is..." she trailed her hands over her breasts and gave me a smile. Her lips turned up into her cheeks larger than what a normal human could have done. Stephania's eyes grew large and round as quarters. They reflected the light and then her features returned to normal. "I look far better when I'm in my true form, but I don't want to scare you."



"I appreciate that." I took a sip of my cooled tea and played with the teabag label and thought about everything she had told me. "So, what other creatures exist in the dark?"

"Everything that humans have dreamed about or that have lurked in your nightmares. Only half of the creatures have been catalogued by humankind." Stephania rose from her seat. "But you should get going. I have a date tonight, and I need to get ready."

I finished my tea and got up from the table. She opened her arms and drew me into a hug. I'd never know she was some supernatural creature from the hug and the hospitality she'd shown me. I think she was right. We could be friends. I'd just have to get to know her a little better.

"Thanks. Umm...maybe we can have lunch or something. Catch a movie?"

"How about going shopping on Sunday? I can help you pick out something for Keaton. You can totally catch him off guard."

I blushed. "Okay. I'll call you."

"Sounds good. Oh, do yourself a favor and put a line of salt down at your bedroom door and window tonight. Any entrance to your room."

"Why?"

"Just trust me. It'll keep the evil at bay." She shoved a container of salt into my arms.

"Okay." I clutched the salt, gathered my things, and then left.

While I walked to the train station, her words tumbled through my mind. At least I wasn't cursed, but she had also brought up the fact that I would be living a long life, but that could be something that wouldn't happen. I could not accept Keaton's offer and remain human. I couldn't think about becoming a creature of the night. The darkness wasn't appealing to me in that way. At least not yet.

As I boarded the train, people getting on the Green Line Train heading to the Red Sox game swarmed me. Some of them were couples. I watched them discreetly. Their hands wound together on the pole. Smiling at one another. Their lips meeting in a welcoming

kiss that turned nearly indecent with the touching and caressing of tongues. Envy wound around me and had me in its harsh claws.

It would be nice to have such a loving relationship. Keaton offered one. But was I ready to accept that offer? Now that my head was on straight and I wasn't lusting after the vampire or in pain, then I had to consider my options. My demons had to be reconciled.

I rested my head against the pole and wobbled along with train. For three years I'd been alone. Friends had tried to set me up, but I'd always been unreceptive. Now I was ready. Maybe that was the reason things were coming back up. Or I was being forced to face my demons. Either way, I had to own up to the past. Stephania said what happened to Mark and the others wasn't my fault, but it still weighed on my soul.

The train screeched to a halt. I got out at the station and headed down the stairs to catch the Red Line to head home. While I contemplated heading back to the house, the breeze from the tunnel wafted down toward me. I inhaled the stench and rethought my course for the day. The trip to Stephania's, hanging there, and then coming halfway back had taken me three hours. Keaton's address flashed through my mind. I had the sudden urge to go there. I had to see him.

Of course, it was in the middle of the day, so I figured that he wasn't awake. Then again I had no idea what the rules were for the real vampires and not the ones that were found in books. The pull toward him was irresistible. I bit my lip and tried to resist the attraction. When I dismissed the thought, it started to bring me a faint sense of pain. The need to be near him was coming on me again. I backed up against the tiled wall of the subway. My body ached. When I thought about Keaton, it seemed I was there with him and not underground waiting for a train.

I couldn't see Keaton, but I sensed he was there. Passion flamed once again through me. I bit my lip to keep a moan from escaping my throat. Keaton's hands moved all over me. Hot breath blasted into my ear. His palms clutched my breasts, and his thumbs played

with my nipples. A groan inched up my throat. His fingers slipped down my stomach until he delved between my wet folds and found my clit. His thumb pressed against the buried bud. I clutched the side of the tiled tunnel and tried to hold my ground. Keaton's soft chuckle echoed through the subway. When I thought about him, I suddenly saw through his eyes. Keaton was staring in a mirror. His lips were curled up into a mischievous smile. He touched his cheek and I could feel those fingers on my face.

*Come to me,* he whispered.

*What are you going to do to me if I do?*

*Come and see.*

His image faded. All my senses had returned. I opened my eyes and caught my breath. I wet my lips and gazed around me. People turned their heads in my direction. Some muttered. Others laughed. I ignored them. Once I got my bearings, I clutched the salt to my chest and started climbing the stairs to the surface. The fresh air was a welcome relief. I was on the corner of Park Street and Tremont. Boston Common was to my left, and I had to cut through there to get to Keaton's house. The sun was lower than I thought.

I remembered his hands on me and started toward his house. I wasn't exactly sure of where it was, but I followed the pull toward him across the Boston Common and down Boylston Street. The brownstone that Stephania had shown me was there. The windows were covered. I went up to the door and found a combination lock on it. Numbers flashed through my mind when I placed my hand on the door. I smiled and pressed the numbers on the lock. When I did, the door opened. I slipped inside and closed the door behind me.

The interior of the house was dim from the heavy curtains that obscured the windows. I inhaled and tasted the dust in the air. I figured he didn't open the windows during the day. I squinted through the shadows that clung to everything. I walked further into the entryway and saw a small, old-fashioned bench. A cloak was laid over it. I brushed my hands across the crushed velvet. Further into the house I saw double closed doors. Straight ahead

was another door that I assumed led into the kitchen. I walked toward the stairs and saw someone sitting at the top. I gripped the railing and slowly walked up. They creaked under my feet. When I got midway up the staircase, the person sitting on the top step rose.

"Come no further, human!" the person warned. He stayed in the shadow so his face wasn't visible. He was monstrously tall and muscular.

"Umm...I was invited."

"No one is invited into the Master's house. How did you get in here?" He took another step downward. His long nails were curved and sharpened. His face was lumpy. It was disfigured, with sharp teeth, and only slits for a nose. He took another step down and before I could retreat, his meaty hands were around my throat. I dropped the salt and tried to pry his hand from around my neck. His grip was one of death.

The salt hit the step. I heard it land with a thunk and tumble to the floor. The brute roared. He dropped me on the steps. I tried to catch my fall, but was unable to. I tumbled head over heels down the stairs and hit my head on the floor. Something in my arm broke. I heard the crack and felt the burning pain. The bellow of the bodyguard echoed through the house. I opened my eyes and through tunneled vision saw him rushing at me and smelled burnt flesh. I tried to get away, but he grabbed my hip and pulled me toward him. I clutched at the rug beneath me with my good hand, but he was too strong.

"Ivan! Let her go!"

"Master, she has broken into your home and attacked me with salt!"

"And you have done your duty well, but she is expected."

Ivan grumbled, and he released me. Keaton bent down and picked me up. I hissed in a breath at the pain from my injuries. He kissed my forehead. I eyed the other creature and heard him mumbling as he walked toward the kitchen. Keaton climbed the stairs and picked up the spilled container of salt.

"I think this is yours." He handed it to me. I held onto it the best I could.

"Thanks."

"What are you doing with the salt?"

I sighed when he opened a door. I assumed it was his bedroom. Instead, it was a sitting room. A fire crackled in the hearth. He rested me on the sofa and then took the salt from me and set it on the table.

"Stephania said I needed to put it across my door and windows tonight because of the evil that would be out and about."

"You should listen to her. She knows what's she's talking about. Next time you might not want to bring it around Ivan. His kind hates salt."

"What is he?" I shifted from the pain that radiated from the wounds that he inflicted. Keaton lifted my head up and examined my bruised neck. Next he looked over my arm. Pain overwhelmed me. I hissed in a sharp breath when he was done and looked at him.

"He's part troll and part human. Not many like him. I saved his life a long time ago. He's been my bodyguard while I sleep. I trust him with my life. Again, it was my fault that I didn't tell him you were coming over. He was doing what he was told. Protecting me from any intruder. Don't hold it against him. He means well. Unlike trolls who turn to stone in the sunlight, he is immune. He's a good ally."

"Does he eat little kids, too?"

"No. But lots of raw meat. He is good at cleaning up if there are any bodies lying around. Do you really want to talk about him, Madi? Why are you here? Why did you pull me from my rest?"

"I-ah- didn't realize I did. I'm sorry. I should go." I tried to get up, but my body cried out in agony.

"It's okay. I was dozing anyway. Besides, you're in no condition to go anywhere. I can heal your wounds though, but there's a price to pay."

"What kind of price?"

He trailed a finger over my neck. "You have to spend the night with me and tell me what happened last night. We were having such a good time and then you wanted to run off."

I shook my head. "It wasn't you. It was me." I glanced down at the carpet, studying the small burn holes in the rug from the fireplace.

"It's not nothing. You mean everything to me. I'll do anything to keep you safe. I seem to have failed at that today. I should've told him you were coming. That's my fault." He squeezed my hand, and I cried out. "I'm sorry." He brought it to his lips and brushed a kiss across my knuckles. Tears slid down my cheeks.

"You don't have to be sorry."

"Yes I do, because you're suffering. That should never happen." He bit into his wrist and offered it to me. The blood rose to the surface. He held it closer. I cradled it with my good hand and brought it to my lips. I inhaled the scent and then met his gaze. I drew in a few swallows letting the blood slide down my throat. Keaton gently took it away. The sudden pain wasn't something I expected. Keaton clutched my hand. I rested my head against his chest and waited for it to pass. He kissed the top of my head.

"You should sleep now. The blood will take a toll on you. I'll make sure you have something to eat when you awake."

I tried to fight his control, but I wasn't strong enough. The lethargy of sleep descended over me. It was almost a welcome relief. I closed my eyes and let the sleep take me away.

When I awoke, I had a stale taste in my mouth like old pennies. I glanced at the table and saw the salt and a bottle of water. I opened the bottle and took a swig. It was somewhat cold. The scent of food drifted to my nose. I got up slowly and found I felt fine after sleeping. I didn't see Keaton anywhere, but heard pots and pans clanging downstairs. I followed the sound into the kitchen. Ivan towered over the stove cooking.

He didn't seem to notice me while he nearly danced over the stove. It was a spectacle observing him because he was so tall and large with his claws, but he was delicate.

"I'd rather you join me than just stare. It makes me rather nervous." He switched his gaze from the pan he was working over to me.

"Sorry." I slipped into the kitchen. I glanced down at his feet. Small black specs dotted his tanned skin. They must have been from the salt. "I'm sorry about the salt. I didn't know it'd hurt you. I know you were protecting Keaton when you came at me."

He stopped and turned toward me. He gave me a small smile. "I'm sorry about that. Thanks for caring. Not many do."

"Why not?"

"I'm an outcast. Not accepted among trolls and not among humans. My master is the only one who sees me for who I truly am. I did not mean to hurt you before. I didn't know you were coming."

"It's okay. I didn't know there was anyone here except Keaton. What are you cooking? It smells great."

"Cooking is a hobby of mine. I get lonely, so I pass the time watching a lot of cooking shows and reading a lot of books. My master is very indulgent with providing me with what I need. I do for him what he needs doing during the day if he bids it."

"How do you pass in the human world?"

He sighed. "Many think I have a deformity. They give me looks, but in the end they give me what I want. Sometimes I can produce enough magic to do a glamour and be seen as a human. It takes much of my energy." He turned the burner off and began plating what was in the pans. He handed it to me.

"Please. Join me and eat dinner. The Master is out procuring his dinner for the evening. Once he returns, I will leave you for the night."

I took the plate and the fork that was on the counter and sat with him. His weight made the chair shift, but it held him up. The fare was chicken, baby carrots in a white wine sauce with new potatoes. I dug into it, and realized I was ravenous. The first bite was magnificent and melted in my mouth. The wine sauce coated

the chicken and the carrots were crisp. I ate another couple of bites and savored each one of them.

“Do you like it?”

“You should be a professional chef. It’s amazing. Keaton said that you ate mostly raw meat.”

“Thank you. Yes. That’s true for the most part, but it does not satisfy my human side. I try to balance both.”

“That’s a good thing.”

He nodded and smiled, showing me his sharp teeth. “Please eat your dinner. It’s nice to have company. Maybe we can speak again.”

“I’d like that.”



## Chapter Six

After dinner that same night, Ivan showed me to the bathroom. I showered and found a robe on the back of the door. I wrapped my hair in a towel and then slipped the robe on. Keaton's musky scent surrounded me.

I licked my lips and thought about the blood I had swallowed. It led me down the path that connected both of us. He was basking in the night, feeling the moon on my skin. It's silvery energy feathered across my flesh. The exhaust from the cars irritated my nose. The blood pulsated through those who passed me. The sound filled my ears enough that I had to cover them and withdrew from his mind.

When I did, I was back in the house and sitting in the drawing room where he had laid me down before. Ivan had added a couple of logs to the fire so it heated the room well enough. The bookcases were filled with numerous volumes behind glass. I dared not open them since they looked old and expensive.

I went to the other double doors that were closed and opened them. Inside was his bedroom. Moonlight spilled through sheer curtains and illuminated the room. The blue and silver motif was spread throughout the room. Gauze curtains hung from the four-poster bed. The spread was dark blue with silver speckles all throughout. It looked like twilight. All the furniture was dark wood and heavy. It seemed to fit him. I trailed my fingers over the soft fabric and remembered a couple of nights ago I was here and in tons of pain. I pushed those memories away. Images of Keaton and I on the bed, making love flashed through my mind.

Curiosity got the better of me. I opened the other door at the far end of the room and saw it was his closet. I picked up one of his shirts and slid it across my face. His scent enveloped me, and it made me feel safe. I stepped away and closed the door. I had to sit down.

The pull toward him weighed on my soul. In reality, I didn't know him that well and shouldn't have been attracted to him the way I was. Then again nothing made sense. Monsters survived when there shouldn't be any. And I was falling in love with one. I didn't have a logical explanation for this any longer. Keaton was showing me that he cared. He was doing everything he could to not give into the mating fever that was probably consuming him, too. I hadn't thought about him. How much pain was he in? He was doing everything for me, and I hadn't said thank you.

I sank down on the bed and let the cool moonlight encompass me. I thought about what it would mean to be with him. Eventually, I would become a vampire. It frightened and intrigued me.

He was clearly lonely. I didn't see any womanly touches in the house. It seemed it had been just him for a long time. Stephania's words came back. She wanted me to tell Keaton what I had been hiding. That meant I had to dredge up Mark. I had to live up to my past. It was only fair to Keaton. I had to face the darkness that was part of my soul.

A cold chill caressed my neck. I felt fingers trail down the line of the robe. I glanced around but didn't see anyone. The fingers delved lower. I arched my back when they touched my nipple. It hardened. I sensed Keaton in the room, but he wasn't solid to me. Lips slid over my throat and another hand slithered up my inner thigh. The moan escaped my lips.

"I know you're there." The darkness in the room thickened. Everything went completely silent. Keaton's musky scent enveloped me. He was there and yet not there. I peered further into the darkness to try and see him, but the shadows were stretched tight over everything. He was controlling the show now.

Coldness feathered up my spine, touching my flesh. I cried out again, feeling the heat stirring in my body. Keaton slipped the robe further down my shoulders and undid the belt. My hair lifted from one shoulder and moved to the other. His teeth nipped my flesh. I felt the curve of his fangs pressing into my skin.

"So not fair," I murmured. "I can't touch you." I twisted my fingers around the coverlet and tried to hang onto reality. Subtle weight pushed against my legs to open them further. I fought it for as long as I could and then finally gave in.

"Lay back," Keaton's voice dragged through the room as a breeze stirred the bed curtains.

"Not until you show yourself."

"Not going to happen. Indulge me for a little while. It's been so long since I've done this." The longing in his voice tugged on my heart.

The weight on my chest eased me back. It was too much to fight. My eyes closed. I lay back against the pillows and was allowed a moment to enjoy the softness of the bed. The bed depressed with the heaviness of another person coming to join me. Nothing appeared before me, not even the solidity of a shadow.

"Please!"

His lips swept over mine. "Trust me."

Keaton straddled me. He spread the robe away from my body. Then he took my hands and put them above my head. The belt from my robe dangled in mid air with nothing holding it and then it slipped around my wrists. The strap tightened around my hands and then the end tied itself to one of the posts in the headboard.

His fingers trailed up my calves, and I realized that I hadn't shaved in a couple of days. But it didn't faze him. His light touch stroked my inner thighs. The soft caresses were on the edge of being ticklish to being painful because there was no physical presence for me to touch, and my hands were useless. Teeth replaced the lips on my leg. Keaton bit down on my skin. I arched off the bed and screamed. Wetness gushed from my pussy. His fingers pressed into my hips. His body nestled between my legs. Kisses trailed from my navel until he found my buried clit. Once his lips encompassed my throbbing bud, a groan loosened from my throat.

I clung to the belt. He slipped a finger inside of my depths and pressed against the sensitive walls. Expecting to find the matching

weight of his body, I raised my hips, but there was just air. Keaton continued to pump into me and then added another finger while his tongue flicked over my clit, manipulating me faster and faster. Cries left my throat that I'd never heard myself utter before. He was driving me into a frenzy, coaxing me higher and higher until it seemed my very nerves were ablaze. My skin burned from the passion he instilled in me. White light appeared behind my eyes. It grew brighter and brighter increasing with the ecstasy he imparted to me.

He drove his fingers deeper into me until he had three fingers inside of my pussy. Keaton stroked my clit with fierceness as he redoubled his efforts. I tried to focus on my breathing to slow down the rising tide that would sweep me away, but it was nearly impossible not to give in.

"P-please," I pleaded.

He didn't relent, and he didn't materialize. Everything in me ached from holding on so much. No man had ever driven me crazy the way that he was. I writhed on the bed. Sweat had broken out on my skin. So close to ecstasy all that was needed to send me over the edge was a small push. And Keaton gave me that little thrust when he nibbled on my clit once more and then trailed his tongue along my moist slit replacing his fingers with his tongue. Once he did, I came.

Keaton didn't stop delving into my pussy. Instead, he kept on torturing me until only strangled gasps left my throat. It wasn't until a second wave of bliss picked me up and carried me away that he relented.

I collapsed back into the pillows and tried to catch my breath. My heart jackhammered into my ribcage. I wondered why it wasn't protruding through my chest. Keaton's cool presence glided over me and felt good against my flushed skin. He freed my wrists and rubbed them where the belt had been tied. He settled next to me and fanned his fingers across my chest. He was solid, flesh and bone with an evil grin on his lips.

"Did you enjoy that?" he asked.

I nodded, still trying to catch my breath. He kissed my cheek and snuggled next to me. His fingers snaked lower, but I grabbed his hand before he could start manipulating me again.

"I can't."

"But I want to pleasure you."

"I know, but you have to give me a little while to recuperate, get some water, and I wanted to talk to you."

He sighed but claimed my lips in a kiss. "Okay." I heard the exacerbation in his tone.

I grasped the bedpost to help me stand and then made my way back into the bathroom. After cleaning myself and drinking a few mouthfuls of water, I told myself I had the courage to do this.

The images of Mark's death stole my breath and pulled the happiness from my heart the way it had done in the past. I sank to my knees. The encompassing loss drove a forlorn wail from my throat. The world felt as if it was pressing around me, and the walls I'd built were starting to crumble. I gripped the sink. Keaton rushed in.

"What is it?"

Concern filled his gaze and pinched his forehead. There was no way to face him. I launched myself in his arms and buried my head against his shoulder. He pulled me close and rubbed my back.

"Was it something I did? What just happened?"

"No. That was wonderful." I hugged him tighter. He picked me up and carried me back into the bedroom. Keaton laid me down gently on the covers.

"I'll be right back."

When he left the room, emptiness swallowed my soul again. I drew my knees up to my chest and began to shiver. Keaton returned with a box of tissues and glass of water, which he set on the nightstand. He dabbed at my cheeks with the tissue. His soft touch helped to keep me anchored in the present.

"Tell me what haunts you. If I could read it in your mind, it would make it easier for me to understand."

Sniffing, I chuckled and hiccupped. "You wouldn't want to see what's in my mind. It's a poisonous place where everything that lives there is toxic."

He brushed the hair from my face. "I don't believe that. If it were so, then it would've manifested in you. You are perfect."

A small laugh tumbled over my lips. "I'm not perfect. Far from it. See." I let the robe drop from my shoulders. There was a large scar there that marred my back. A reminder of what had transpired. His fingers traced the jagged skin that slashed across my spine and came to rest on my left buttock. It was sheer luck not to have been permanently damaged from it.

"How did you get this?"

"Five years ago, I dated a man named Mark Cooper. We went out for two years. We were happy. Then things went to shit. I started working late. I thought things were good, but he accused me of having an affair with my boss. He was jealous of other guys, but he wasn't controlling or abusive or anything. My boss was going through a lot of personal problems, and the company was restructuring so I was helping him out. If it all worked out I would've gotten a really great promotion.

"Anyway, one night I got home past ten. Mark had mentioned that he wanted to do dinner, but I had completely forgotten about it. When I arrived, I saw the candles and how they had burned down. The plates of cold food. I felt bad. I walked into the bedroom, and he was sitting on the bed. He had tears in his eyes and a ring lying on the bed. An empty bottle of wine stood on the nightstand. Mark said that he'd had enough and that he was going to leave. I tugged on his arm, nearly dragging him back into the bedroom. He shoved me into the wall. I lost it. I ran after him and clutched his arm again. We were in the living room.

"He said he found evidence. Receipts for hotels and dinners, but those were from the clients I had handled for my boss. Mark thought it was all part of me trying to hide the affair. I was distraught. I grabbed one of the vases and threw it at him. He dodged it. He'd been drinking and pushed me backward. I

stumbled and landed back first into the glass coffee table. He tried to help me up, but lost his footing and fell down into a shard of glass. It went straight through his chest. The phone had been knocked down near me. I called the cops. They broke the door down. I was taken to the hospital and was questioned. The courts ruled it was an accident. Ever since, it's weighed on my conscience. I've pushed the memories down, hoping to forget them.

"I almost had. I'd resigned myself to being alone for the rest of my life. And then you come along and become my vampire in shining armor."

"What happened was an accident. There is no curse. You deserve to be happy. You've suffered long enough. Forgive yourself."

I sniffled and nodded. "I've told myself that many times. But it never happens. I've gone out on dates before, but they all end badly. One guy, while crossing the street to meet me, was run over by a bus. Another one fell onto the third rail of the subway and was electrocuted while I watched. I could tell you more horror stories, but I'm sure you don't want to hear about them."

He smoothed my hair and hugged me. "I can understand why you think you're cursed. But you've just had a run of bad luck. Very bad luck."

"But I don't want it to rub off on you. I don't want you to get hurt because of the evil cloud that hovers over me."

Keaton smiled. "I won't. I'm over two thousand years old. I can take care of myself."

"Yeah, but what if now that you've met me, the curtains fall down and you go up in flames. Or Ivan beheads you. Someone follows me here and stakes you. I couldn't bear it."

"Nothing like that is going to happen. I swear."

"You can't be sure of that. I —"

He placed a finger to my lips. "Hush. I can take care of us. You are my life now. Don't you know that?"

I shook my head barely believing what I was hearing from him. He was willing to take care of me. He didn't believe that I was

cursed. Neither had Stephania. She had said all I had to do was tell Keaton and he would understand. It seemed that he did.

He took another tissue and dabbed my eyes with it before handing it to me. Keaton swiped his thumbs across my cheeks taking away the excess moisture and smiled. I saw the absolute love in his gaze. He saw me as a jewel. It was evident in the way that he handled me. In the way that he loved me.

"I don't see how you could." I backed away and blew my nose before taking another tissue.

Keaton chuckled. "Madison, you're beautiful, intelligent, and so full of passion that it burns inside of you. You've dampened the flame so much that you haven't let yourself experience it for a long time, and that isn't living. You have to let yourself live. Let me take care of you. Let me love you." He held my face in his hands and kissed me lightly, sweeping his tongue across my lips before I opened my mouth to his. His tongue tangled with mine. A small moan let loose from my throat. I rested my hand on his chest. In that moment, I felt completely safe with him. He kissed me a little longer, lazily, letting me taste him until I pulled away.

Some weight had been lifted from my shoulders. I did feel better, but I still wasn't sure exactly what I wanted to do. "Can I ask you something?"

"Anything, Madi."

"What if I get through this mating fever and I choose not to be with you? What happens?"

He sighed. His forehead furrowed in distress. "I hope that doesn't happen."

"Why?"

"Because I'd never be able to see you again. I'd have to take the memories of me from your mind. Or have a friend do it since I can't penetrate the veil of your thoughts. I'd have to spend an eternity alone pining for you until there happens to be another chance of a woman coming into my life that might be my mate, but who knows if that would happen. Please don't tell me—"



I shook my head. "No. I don't plan on abandoning you. I just wanted to know. Keaton, I like you. Even though you stalked me and kidnapped me."

"But?"

"But, I don't know."

He pulled away. "I know what your problem is."

My eyes widened and I crossed my arms over my chest. "Really and what is that?"

"You think way too much. I might not be able to read your mind, but I can see the wheels already turning in your brain. The cogs starting to get caught as you think about the prospect of love. Of someone breaking your curse and coming to rescue you. You can't believe in a happy ending. Don't let yourself think. What do you feel? What did you feel when I came to you as a bare shadow and pleased you?" He kissed my neck.

Keaton was right. I did think too much. Way too much for my own good. I thought back to earlier when he had me on the bed. My body flushed with heat. The pleasure of the recent memory overwhelmed me. I had wanted all of him. I had desired to hold him. I needed him buried inside of me. But I wanted him forever. I was ready to accept everything that he was. If I did, then I knew that I loved him even if my brain hadn't completely processed it yet. My heart already had. He continued to place soft kisses along my throat, but didn't advance toward my breasts or any other body part. I sensed he was waiting for me to tell him it was okay.

"I enjoyed the experience."

"Exquisite torture wasn't it?"

I nodded. "No one has ever done that before. Not that they could. I loved it. I want more of it. I want more of you."

"Good. That's all you need to listen to. Know I would protect you with my life."

I nodded and got up. Stephania's warning came back to me. I went into the other room and grabbed the salt. I started pouring it on the windowsills. Keaton grabbed my hand.

"What are you doing?"

"Stephania said I should put this around any entrance to a room tonight because there was evil afoot. I'm sorry. I should've asked. I just had a feeling it was something I had to do."

"No. It won't bother me. She is a wise friend to have. Let me go and tell Ivan not to come in until tomorrow when we can clean this up. Salt is protection and will keep evil at bay. Not that Ivan is evil, but the troll in him is repelled by the salt. Even us vampires. We can enter a domain, but if there was salt across the threshold it would even hold us out if we meant evil intent."

"It's a strange world that you exist in."

He laughed and released my wrist. "It certainly is. One I really hope you can experience with me. I'll go tell Ivan about the salt."

I caught Keaton's hand before he went out of my reach and pulled him to me. A confused look ran across his face. I conformed my body to his. My brain said to stop, but I pushed that away. Keaton told me to feel, so I was just going with what I felt. I pressed my lips to him and nipped down his throat until my mouth covered his Adam's apple. I flicked my tongue across it and sucked on it. I raked my fingers along his chest and began to unbutton his shirt. Keaton moaned and backed away.

"We should do this later."

"Don't you want to?"

"You know I do, but you want to finish this and I need to tell Ivan about the salt so he just doesn't walk into it. I don't want you to jump into anything."

He was right. Keaton was giving me more time to make up my mind. He brushed a kiss across my forehead and then left the room. I continued to lay the line of salt across all the openings, the door, windows, and even the fireplace. The stairs creaked, so I knew Keaton was coming back up. Done, I set the salt on the nightstand and sat on the bed. His body depressed the mattress. He snuggled up against me drawing me closer. Nothing was said between us. That didn't matter. The only thing that was more important was that he was there for me. Some of the darkness surrounding my soul evaporated.



## Chapter Seven

The next morning I was glad it was Friday, and I had the day off anyway. Keaton had stayed with me most of the night. Nightmares plagued me, but Keaton had woken me during them and said soothing words until I calmed enough to sleep again. I cleaned up the salt and hoped that the remnants wouldn't hurt Ivan. After I dressed, I found the half troll downstairs cooking breakfast. He offered me a plate. I didn't say much and neither did he. When I went to leave, Keaton waited for me at the foot of the steps.

"Your car awaits."

"I thought you couldn't go out in the sun."

He was bundled up in a long sleeve shirt, pants, and wide sunglasses. "I can move about in the day. It weakens me, but it can be done. My car has special glass that filters the UV rays. Come on."

I shrugged and followed him outside. Keaton winced when we stepped out into the direct light. He opened the door for me. Once I got in he raced around the car to get in.

We drove in silence back toward my house. As we drove, I thought a lot about what he had said to me the night before. The more I contemplated being without him, the more I didn't want to be. Maybe he was right. I was the recipient of bad circumstances. When I reached the house, I shivered. A dark cloud blotted out the sun. Keaton stopped and I got out. With keys in hand, I mounted the stairs and went to slide the key into the lock. However, when I placed my hand on the door, it swung open. I glanced back at Keaton. He shut the engine off and then rushed out of the car.

"What is it?"

"I don't know. Something isn't right. None of my roommates wouldn't lock the door. Not in this neighborhood."

He went in ahead of me. I heard a harsh growl utter from his throat. "Stay here." He waved me back and then bolted into the house.

I looked around and didn't see anyone. Finally, I went inside. When I did, I was immediately hit with the damp, overwhelming, wet aroma that was laced with metal. The living room was splashed with blood. There was a trail of it leading into the kitchen. I followed it and found Sandi dead on the floor. An open wound on his throat was dried with blood. The tears in the skin showed his muscled beneath the flesh. *Oh shit! What the hell happened in here?* I blanched and turned from the scene.

I heard footsteps upstairs and rushed up them. I found Keaton, fangs extended in my bedroom. The state of my room was in shambles. The mattress and bedding were in tatters. My drawers had been rifled through. Clothes were strewn on the floor. Glass littered the floor from the window being broken inward. My closet had been picked through. Keaton stopped me when I stepped forward.

"Stay there. You'll contaminate the scent."

I stepped away from the room. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. *What happened?* My blood ran cold at the sight. If I had been there then I'd have been shredded too. Someone had broken in and killed my roommate. It looked like they were aiming for me.

Stephania had said there was evil stalking the night. *That's why she gave me the salt. She knew something was coming to my apartment.* But I hadn't been. I'd been with Keaton. This was worse than anything that had ever happened to me. I stumbled backward until I hit the wall. I slid down the solid surface and looked at my shaking hand. Keaton came out from my room and said something. He took me by the arms and lifted me up. His lips were moving, but I couldn't hear anything he said.

He patted my cheek. It didn't register in that he was touching me. He snapped his fingers in front of my face. The blackness that had descended over us had me in its grip. Sandi became Mark,

sprawled out on the floor. He opened his eyes and stared at me. He began to speak.

"This is all your fault. Madi—"

I covered my ears and squeezed my eyes shut. "No. No. I didn't do it. I didn't kill you. No—"

"Madison," I opened my eyes when someone shook me. Keaton's lips were pursed. His forehead creased as he stared at me. He had my hands in his. Keaton kissed the back of one of them. His appearance had returned to normal. I focused on him and tried not to get pulled down back into the dark tide of images rising inside of my mind.

"What happened?"

"Another vampire was here. I think it was the one who attacked you the other night. Have you seen him since?"

I shook my head. "N-no. I-I would have told you if I had."

"Of course you would have. Come on, we need to get you away from here."

"But what about Sandi? We can't just leave him in the kitchen. All that blood."

"I've already called Ivan to come over. He will take care of the body."

"How?"

"Do you really want to know?"

I shook my head. My stomach turned at what I thought Ivan would do since he had a penchant for raw, human meat. I couldn't think of him snacking on my roommate. Keaton helped me up.

"Thank you."

"You should come to my place for now. Do you need anything here?"

I glanced at my room, but I needed clothes. "Just give me a minute, okay?"

"Sure." Keaton stepped away. I grabbed a suitcase from my closet amongst the wreckage. Some clothes were okay. Those went into the bag. In my dresser were a few bras and panties to wear along with some pajamas that I would need. I gathered my laptop

and a couple of books I was reading. But none of that seemed to matter. I walked out of my room and in that moment knew that I was saying goodbye to my old life and beginning a new one. Keaton brought me back to his house afterwards.

The last thing I had taken with me was an old stuffed bear that hadn't been shredded. I snuggled closer with it in the bed. Keaton walked into the bedroom carrying a mug filled with hot tea. He gave it to me. I blew the steam away and sipped on it.

"You'll stay here from now on. We'll go shopping when you're ready. Sunday if you want."

I shook my head. "No. I told Stephania that I would meet her Sunday so we could go shopping."

Keaton gave me a tight smile. "Well, that's good."

"You don't sound like it is."

"It's not that. There is still some bad blood between us."

"You don't trust her?"

"No. I do. I just don't want you to get hurt."

"I'll be careful. She seems sincere about our relationship. She did warn me about the evil and gave me the salt. If I had been home..." I couldn't finish the sentence.

Keaton grimaced. He ran his hand over my knee. "I know. If you had been there, I would've lost you."

"Do you know who was in the house?"

He got up and began to pace. He clutched the bedpost. "It was that bastard who attacked you in the alleyway."

"I thought you killed him?"

"So did I. He might have had someone with him. Pulled out the stake right after I left. I was too focused on you."

"How did he find me?"

"He must have had a piece of your clothing to trace your scent. Did he take anything of yours that night?"

I thought back. His hand caressed my throat and ran through my hair. I had a scarf around my neck that night that he'd ripped off. "He took my scarf. I didn't think about it because he dropped it to the ground."

"He must have come back and grabbed it after we left."

"Do you know who he is? Can he track me back here?"

Keaton nodded. "I know who he is."

"Who?"

"Someone I thought would've known better. I'll take care of him."

"I just don't want anything to happen to you. I love you."

Keaton stopped pacing and stared at me. Surprise lit up his face. "What did you say?"

"That I don't want anything to happen to you."

"Before that."

I felt the blood heat my cheeks. The words had slipped out, but once they did, I knew them to be true. He had protected me. Shown me that he loved me, and it wasn't because of the mating fever or whatever the vampire mojo was that bound us together. "That I love you."

He took my hands and peered into my eyes. "You mean that?"

"Yeah. I do. I don't want to lose you."

"You won't. I swear." He wove his fingers in my hair and pulled me to him. His lips met mine, and I conformed my body to his. The pleasure of his touch ignited my need for him. Keaton thrust his tongue into my mouth. I tasted his sweetness. I cried out when he parted from me. I didn't want him to be gone from me.

"Can I ask a favor?"

"Anything."

I bit my lip and looked at him. I trailed my finger along his throat. He sucked in a breath. I slipped closer. My lips ran along his neck. I nipped at his flesh. "Let me taste you again."

He pulled away with shock in his eyes. "You know if you do, it only hastens you turning into what I am. I don't want to bring you into the darkness until you are ready to be with me forever."

I bowed my head. "Forgive me. I didn't mean to ask." I began to pull away from him, but he took my arm.



"No. You don't have anything to forgive. I was surprised that you asked. That's all. I'd never deny you anything. But allow me to sip from your veins."

I pushed the hair from my neck. I guided him to my throat. His soft lips touched upon my flesh. The bolt of pleasure that speared through me from the simple gesture reminded me what Keaton was. The fear that I originally had for him wasted away. I trusted him now with my soul. He spread his lips over my jugular. His teeth pressed into my flesh. I slipped my fingers through his hair. His teeth plunged into me and I moaned. One hand cupped my breast. He squeezed it lightly. The nipple puckered when he brushed over it.

As I relaxed, I felt his mind poking against mine. I tried to drop the barriers on my thoughts. He sucked on me harder. The fire he sparked in me grew. It burned along my veins and engulfed me.

Keaton pulled away after a few more sips. When he did, I was out of breath, and my heart slammed against my chest. He cupped my chin and glanced at me. "Are you okay?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Fabulous."

"I'm glad. If I ever hurt you, then I couldn't bear it." He slid his finger along his neck. I wanted to taste him. I hungered for it. The longer I stared at the gash, the more the gnawing grew in my stomach.

"You're hungry. It's faint, but I can feel it in you."

I nodded. "Yes."

"Then drink, love."

I wrapped my mouth around the wound. The blood slid down my throat. It tasted like new pennies and cotton candy mixed together. I took swallow after swallow until Keaton groaned and asked me to stop. I couldn't. I wanted more. He finally had to wrench me away from him.

"Sorry."

"Don't apologize to me. It felt wonderful, but if you drink any more you'll really start to turn. Not that I don't want that, but you might still wish to remain human."

"I'm okay with that. I just don't want the other to come after me. Can you protect me from the one who wanted me dead?"

"I'd give my life to protect you. He won't hurt you again. Ivan has already delivered a message to his house."

"You know where he lives?"

"I know where the head of his line lives. Being on the council has privileges. It will not go unnoticed. You've been marked as my mate. He'll pay for using you as a pawn in his retaliation against me."

"Who is it? Why would they want revenge against you?"

"It isn't anything that you need to worry about."

"But it *is* because we're in this together."

Keaton drew me into his arms and held me close. He sighed and began to stroke my hair. "My race has a council that keeps the laws. None of them are to hurt our mates. We made a decree not to kill humans. Many of our kind hate that ruling. Trenton and I used to be friends, but after the declaration, we split. Now we are enemies. He kills people violently and anyone I find in his house, his bloodline that is guilty, we kill."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I assume that when you first saved me you didn't know that I was going to be your mate."

"No. Trenton's underling must've gotten your scent and then followed it. Or watched us and saw that I was interested in you. He must've followed and told Trenton something. It doesn't matter now. Trenton will recognize you as my mate. And then cease his actions. I sent Ivan to present an offer to him."

I gripped his hand, not liking what he had planned. "What was the offer? Leave me alone or you'll find your head disconnected from your body?"

"Nothing so extreme. I want to meet with him. No council involved. I'll forgive his transgressions and see if the council will bring him back on if he leaves you alone. The city is big enough for the both of us."

"So the council isn't in the city?"

Keaton hugged me closer. "No. The members are all over the world. It's made up of the oldest of our race. Those on the council who live within a city claim it for a hunting ground. Any new vampire that comes into the city is supposed to introduce themselves to me so I can tell them the rules no matter if the master has already told him."

"How would they know to come to you?"

"It's tricky to explain. All vampires have an energy about them. The older you are, the stronger the energy. Think of the moths being drawn to a flame."

"And you're the dark flame?"

"Yes."

I placed my hands on his chest. I couldn't feel anything. He began to move me off him when I pulled his shirt from his pants. Keaton tried to push it down, but I gave him a smile.

"Should we be doing this now?" he asked.

"Trust me." I kissed the side of his cheek. I yanked the shirt over his head and dropped it to the floor. I flicked my tongue down his neck, over his collarbone, and then rested my mouth over his heart. I closed my eyes and listened. Something throbbed underneath his chest. It wasn't his heart because that was dead, but there was a pulse. The energy that came from him was hot and cold. It was bright and dark all at the same time. My lips worked over the spot while my fingers ran along his back, feeling the supple skin. Keaton tasted of soap and his own unique flavor. I drank in more of his essence. The longer my mouth remained over his heart, Keaton moaned, and his back bowed. His muscles strained from the tension. He slid his fingers through my hair and lifted my head.

"What are you doing?"

I licked my lips, which tingled. "I can feel it. I can taste it."

"Impossible. You shouldn't be able to draw in my essence."

I swept my lips over the muscles of his chest until I came to his nipple. I took the pert bud between my teeth and nibbled on it. I tasted his energy then. I ran my tongue over the edges of it, but

didn't pull it in. Instead I let my tongue sweep over the hardened pea and pinched the other. Keaton quivered when I stopped.

"I don't know how I can, but I do. Maybe it's because I'm supposed to be your mate. But I don't want to think about that right now." I slid my hand along his inner thigh and then over his erection that pressed against his jeans. The large bulge was something I had been yearning to get my hands on for a long time. Keaton clutched my breasts. His hunger for me burned in his eyes.

"I like your line of thinking." He slowly pulled my shirt over my head and added it to his. He placed his lips over my chest and began to kiss it until he sucked on my hardening nipple beneath the triangle of lace. I started rubbing his cock through the fabric of his jeans. His fingers slid along my sides and then he slipped his thumbs underneath the straps of my bra. Keaton pushed them down, gliding his fingers along my shoulders. Then he grabbed the middle of my bra and ripped it. It tore open, leaving my breasts exposed. He sucked on them hungrily, taking as much as he could of one into his mouth. His tongue twirled over my nipple while his teeth grazed the sensitive tip.

I dug into his jeans finding the button that held them closed and then pulled down the zipper. His cock sprung out, ready to be abused. My vampire lifted his head from my breast and captured my lips. Keaton thrust his tongue between my lips so they could meet and taste our passion. I bit down and caught his tongue. His eyes widened. I smiled, but then had a surprise of my own. His teeth shifted and grew longer. I released his tongue and swept mine over the points. I caressed them, feeling the slight curve. He remained still and let me explore. But I pulled away and kissed his cheek. I pushed him back down onto the bed. He gave me a questioning look, but I delved lower. I pulled his pants further down. I replaced my hand with my mouth around his cock. I drew him in slowly letting my tongue explore his shaft. Before I could get too far, Keaton lifted his hips and thrust into me.

"Suck on me, baby."

I grabbed the base of his dick and held him in place. Cupping his balls, I took him all the way into my mouth until he hit the back of my throat. I dragged my teeth over his smooth skin. He jumped and moaned. I withdrew, keeping my lips tight on him until I came to his spongy head where I tasted the salty cum. It was almost better than his blood. Keaton ran his fingers over my shoulders and then touched my neck. His hips rose off the bed as I increased my intake of his cock. I sucked on him more and clutched the fleshy mounds of his toned ass. He thrust into my mouth one last time and then he released. I swallowed all of him down. Keaton groaned and then fell back onto the bed.

"Oh, God." I slid up his body and rested on his chest. I placed kisses along his collarbone. "If you can do that, then I want to know what else you can do."

A sultry laugh left my throat. I kissed him lightly on the lips and wiggled. He closed his eyes and lifted his hips again. Keaton was growing firm once more. I gripped his semi-erection and began to stroke him, hoping this time I could have him inside of me. "You seem eager to go again."

"Only because you're so goddamn sexy. It's been hell having to not take you every time you've touched me. That first night when I spirited you away and you were in heat, I longed to tear your clothes off and fuck you all night. In every room."

I flicked my tongue along his nipple. "Then why didn't you?"

"Because I didn't want to take advantage. How could I win your heart when you weren't completely in your right mind?"

I squeezed his balls and watched his mouth form an O. His eyes fluttered shut. His back rose off the mattress and then slammed down again. "I appreciate that. Although, I'm in my right mind now. I want you to fuck me. Ravish me until I beg you to stop."

A devilish smile appeared on his face. "Are you positive you know what you're asking? By the end of this, you might have wished otherwise."

“I trust you, Keaton. I want to spend the rest of my life showing you how much I love you. But you do have a limit because Stephania and I are going shopping on Sunday.”

He rolled his eyes. “I can work with that.”

I squeezed his balls once more for good measure. I loved seeing the look of pain and pleasure sweep across his face. Keaton opened his eyes and kissed me on the forehead. I basked in our togetherness. It calmed my heart and made me whole for the first time in a long time.

## Chapter Eight

Keaton trailed his fingers down my back. He pressed against each little notch in my spine until I could feel the subtle pressure of his caresses zinging through me. He stopped at my ass and clutched the mounds. He began to kiss my throat. His tongue swept over the wounds he had inflicted. I moaned again. It ignited the hunger in me. I wanted to drink more of him. I nipped along his collarbone, biting here and there, waiting to see if he would tell me to stop. Before I could break the skin, the world had shifted, and I was now underneath Keaton. I giggled when he had me trapped between his knees. He had me pinned quite well so I couldn't move. I ran my fingers over his perfectly formed chest. His nipples stiffened when I flicked my fingers over them. He grabbed my hands and pulled them away from him.

"Don't you want me to touch you?" I asked.

"Oh, I enjoy it, but you were the one who said I had to ravage you."

"Then ravage me, baby."

Keaton claimed my lips once more. He pushed my hands down above my head. I felt a pressure weigh them down. When I tried to move them, I wasn't able to. A momentary bolt of panic sped through me. Once he began kissing down my stomach, I calmed. Keaton sucked in the skin between his teeth. When he came to my pants, he undid them and gently lifted me off the bed and slid my pants off. He pulled his pants off the rest of the way and stood before me completely naked. His cock caressed his thigh and had a mind of its own. I smiled when it moved to the right.

"You sure you're in control of that bad boy? It seems to want to go in a different direction."

His lips spread into a wide smile. "We both want to discover that succulent pussy of yours." He got onto the bed and lifted my foot to his mouth. His lips touched my ankle and trailed along the inside of my calf. Keaton worked slowly until he came to the inside

of my knees. I jumped when he trailed his tongue there. I began to writhe. He stopped and peered at me.

"Ticklish?"

I nodded.

"That's good to know."

"No. It's not. I hate to be tickled."

He ran his finger along the underside of my other knee. Tears came to my eyes the longer he tickled me. I bit my lips. Without being able to stop, I reacted and kicked his shoulder.

"What was that for?"

"Sorry. I can't help it. I don't like to be tickled."

He sighed and rolled his eyes. "Okay. No tickling. At least not under your knees. I can think of other things that you might like to be tickled with." He moved higher along my thigh until he was close to my moist slit. He knelt between my legs and hooked the one he was pleasuring around his neck. I tried to slide closer to him, but my hands were still restrained. His lips worked over my thigh. Keaton's teeth scraped over the flesh, and then a sharp pain hit when he began to drink. It vanished instantly and was replaced by a passion so deep that it swept me into another world. I squeezed my eyes shut. My hips left the bed as he continued to suck. The more he drank in my blood, the longer I was skyrocketed into an orgasm. Light burst behind my eyes.

Keaton lifted his head from my thigh. A smear of crimson adorned his lips. "So sweet." He swept his tongue over his mouth, relishing the taste of my blood. "But there's something so much sweeter I want to taste."

Before I could answer, his mouth covered my pussy. Keaton's tongue lapped at my juices. A bolt of pleasure engulfed me when he enclosed my clit. He nibbled my buried bud. Then he attacked it with his tongue. My hips pushed into his face. I wanted him to eat me all up. He focused on me some more.

The friction his teeth caused rolled through me. I tried to keep it contained, but he was bringing me back up to the heights of my first orgasm. I groaned when he began to slow down. He gripped



my thigh and kept it around his neck. He also took my other one and hung it around his other shoulder. I hugged his neck with my ankles. Keaton stopped pleasuring me and licked lower.

He thrust his tongue into my pussy. The sudden entrance made me cry out. I writhed on the bed, trying to escape the passion that overrode my brain. But Keaton wasn't going to let up anytime soon. If I begged him to stop he would, but I wanted to feel his cock inside of me.

"Keaton, I need you. Please."

He glanced up and trailed his fingers over my trembling stomach. "I've been waiting for you to say that." He pressed his mouth to mine so I could taste my tang. I arched up to get closer to him, but he pulled away. When he did, he guided his cock deep inside my pussy.

"Fuck." I squirmed underneath him and crossed my ankles behind his neck. I struggled against the restraints. I had to touch him. But he was pumping into me quickly. I struggled to keep up to the frenzied pace he had set. He gripped my thighs to control my motions. His fingers dug into my flesh. I screamed when his shaft rubbed against my clit. Ecstasy washed over me and I came again. Keaton groaned when he spilled into me.

He collapsed onto me and lay there. The invisible restraints were lifted and my arms dropped. Exhaustion washed over me. I tried to keep my eyes open, but it was nearly impossible. Keaton kissed my cheek and smoothed the hair from my face. I heard him whisper something to me, but I wasn't able to make it out.

The next time I opened my eyes, I was alone in the bed. I glanced over and saw a bottle of water next to the bed. I downed a few sips. Then I got out and trudged into the bathroom. I splashed some water on my face after using the facilities and decided to take another shower. My body felt like it had gone through a marathon session, and ached in a good way. I examined the wounds on my throat and saw that they were healed. Two faint scars remained. Were there any other changes in me? I didn't see any. I didn't feel any. So I turned the hot water on and climbed into the shower.

I had just stepped under the hot spray. It began to go deep into my muscles when I sensed something enter the shower. It was the same energy that had come to me before the other night. Keaton. Fingers slid down my back. The hot water suddenly went cold. Lips pressed against my neck. Keaton's fangs scraped my flesh. His hands clutched my breasts and roll the nipples between his fingers. I arched my back and turned my head around. I couldn't see him.

"This isn't fair. I need to touch you. Please."

*What if I want you to suffer?*

"Then you're being cruel. So very cruel."

*Isn't that what you wanted?*

"Not exactly. Please I need you."

*Need me for what?*

"I need you in the flesh. Not that I don't enjoy you being this way, but I need you as man, not as shadow."

The hot water encompassed me. Keaton slid his hands around me. They became more solid the longer I was under the water. He moved the wet strands of my hair away from my throat and began to kiss the side of my neck. His solid hands cupped my breast. He took the sponge in his other hand and trailed it over my stomach. He squeezed it until it was full of suds and slipped it down my stomach. Light kisses enflamed my desire. All I wanted was to feel him inside of me again. His cock pressed against my bottom. He trailed it between the mounds of my ass. I cried out when he dropped the sponge and touched my clit. I was already throbbing with pleasure. My body longed for him to take me again. The towel rack was behind me. I grabbed a hold of it and spread my legs further.

"Such a fine ass that you have."

"Take me."

He bit my shoulder with regular teeth. "I love it when you say that."

Keaton spread my ass further apart. As his finger slipped into my ass I bit my lip. He delved in, slowly letting me feel him. He took another and slid it inside. His other hand stayed on my clit.

He fondled me slowly at first, getting me wet. He removed his fingers and then moved his cock into my opening. It moved into me slowly. He was careful, working his way into me until finally I felt him all inside of me. I groaned from having him there, but he continued to fondle me. He gripped my hip and slid out of me. He moaned when he went back in. Everything in me wanted him to continue.

My hips bucked forward. Keaton guided my hips and held me close to him. He groaned and kissed my neck.

"Fuck me."

"I could hurt you."

"Do it."

Keaton shoved into me fully. I cried out and clutched the bar. He pulled out of me and then went back in. I screamed, but it wasn't pain. It was complete pleasure that engulfed me. He had taken control of our coupling and wasn't letting up.

"Yes. Keaton. That's it."

He dove inside of me once more. His hands gripped my hips. He kissed my shoulder and then bit into it when he came.

"You are just full of surprises."

I glanced behind me. "I hope that pleases you."

"Very much."

"Good. Now you have to wash my back before the water gets cold."

Keaton picked up the sponge and began. I grabbed the shampoo and lathered my hair. He washed my back and turned me around, but gently washed my breasts. He lingered over my nipples. When he came to my pussy, it was already burning with the desire to be mounted by him again. He touched me, but before he could sweep me off my feet, I took the sponge from him and stroked his cock slowly. The sponge fell to our feet and went to my knees in the shower. I licked the water from his dick. He tasted like soap, but before I could raise his shaft again Keaton wove his fingers into my hair and pulled my head back. He stared at me with his fangs fully extended.

"I would stop that if I were you."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because you need to get something to eat, and I don't know how much longer you want me to ravish you."

I giggled. "Weren't you going to take me in every room of the house? I can go another few rounds I think."

"If we do this any longer you won't be human in the morning."

I worked up his body kissing him slowly. I claimed his lips and thrust my tongue into his mouth. I wasn't sure how much of the pleasurable torture I could take either, but I didn't want to stop. I desired to be with him in all ways. Keaton wasn't going to desert me in any way, shape or form. He was going to stick with me throughout everything and protect me.

"What happens if I want you to turn me tonight?"

Shock peppered his eyes. "I'm glad that you're ready to accept the prospect of eternity, but I still want you human. You've ingested a lot of my blood. If you did, then you'd miss your shopping session with Stephania and she'd kill me for that. Come on. Let's get out and get you something to eat."

Keaton wasn't going to budge. However, I gave him another quick kiss and then let the now cold water wash over us. I climbed out of the shower and dried off. In the bedroom, I pulled out an outfit. When I glanced at the clock I saw it was seven in the morning. I must have been asleep for longer than I thought. Keaton came in after and dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. He seemed out of place not being in a button down shirt, but I liked the t-shirt because it hugged his form. Just staring at him, I wanted to fuck him on the bed. A devilish smile turned up the corners of his mouth as if he knew how much I wanted him.

I shook my head and turned from those thoughts. My stomach grumbled. I kissed him lightly and then grabbed his hand. We both went downstairs. Down at the end of the landing, the curtains were opened. The sunlight would eventually stream in. When we got to the bottom, I smelled something fetid, like rotten meat. Keaton's hand tightened on mine. He moved before me.

"Stay put."

"Why?" I asked.

"Something's not right here."

He growled and then stepped down into hallway. He gazed around and then slowly went to the door. Keaton motioned for me to stay put. I peered around the corner. Keaton opened the door. Once he did, the stench came into the room. It smelled like burnt leather. Smoke billowed from a box on the front porch. My mate bent down and picked up the contents in the box and drew out a blackened head. When I saw the head, I screamed. It was Ivan. Keaton growled and threw the head outside. I cringed when he came in and slammed the door. It bounced back and reverberated throughout the house.

"Damn it, Trenton."

"What happened? What's the matter?"

"This is his answer to my proposal. Damn him!" At that instant, the phone rang. Keaton grabbed it. "Hello."

His face morphed from that of the man into the monster. His fangs elongated and hung over his lips. His nose scrunched up and his eyes became slits. They went to a red hue. I watched his nails sharpen and darkness surrounded him. It pulsed and consumed the light. I understood now how the other vampires would be drawn to him, as that was the energy that I had tasted before. That he had talked about. I shrunk back into the landing.

"You didn't have to kill him. I wanted to work this out. Trenton, we used to be friends."

A chill went through me. Something else descended over the house. The shadows were growing. The darkness surrounded me. It was cold. I tried to fight it off.

"Keaton!" I cried.

"Madi," He raced over to me, still clutching the phone

The shadows crept under my skin. They pulled at my flesh and wrenched at what was in me. The pain was excruciating. "Leave her alone. Trenton. She is my mate. I would never desecrate yours."

The shadow fingers scraped along my face. And then they stopped. Keaton held out the phone to me.

"He wants to talk to you. He doesn't believe me."

I took the phone with shaking hands. "Hello."

"So you're Keaton's whore." The voice on the other end was suave.

"I'm not his whore. I'm his mate. He just wants you to leave me alone. Leave us alone and he will do the same."

"If only that were the case. He's self-righteous enough that he'll hunt me down and slaughter me. But maybe we can come to some understanding."

"What kind of understanding?"

"Meet me for a drink, and we'll talk."

Keaton ripped the phone from my hand. "You will never meet with her and talk. We will settle this another way." He hung up the phone and gathered me in his arms.

"Are you okay?"

I sniffled. The impressions of the shadow fingers lingered on my flesh. "What was that? What did he do?"

"He has more of the power of shadows than I do. It was one of his specialties. He must be close by or he wouldn't have been able to get in. I'm sorry you're in the middle of this war between us. I'll take care of it once and for all. You'll be safe here after you line the openings with salt. He won't be able to get in. It will keep his evil out."

"Won't it keep you out, too?"

"That doesn't matter. I can deal with that. As long as you're safe and if you invite me into the room then I can come in. Come on. Let's get away from here. Grab your things and we'll go someplace else."

"Where? He can find us."

Keaton smiled. "Trenton might know a few of my secrets, but there are many more that have been kept hidden. Come on."

I got up and went back upstairs. I packed my bags. Keaton collected a few of his things. Back downstairs I gathered what I

could of the salt. He stood before the door to the basement and motioned me down. I followed him down the stairs and found that it wasn't a true basement. It was a passageway that went below the house.

I got lost under the many twists and turns that he took, going lower and the walls shook from the rumble of the subway. We were close to it. We finally came to another set of stairs. When we emerged, it was in a garage. Keaton clicked his keys and one of the lights blinked. After we set the bags into the trunk, we climbed into the car. I sank into the seat and wasn't sure where we were going and didn't much care. Once we got out into the light, it burned my eyes I couldn't look at it.

"Light sensitivity?"

"Yeah."

"It means you're in the first stage of turning."

I didn't respond, but let him whisk me away to safety.

## Chapter Nine

I must have drifted off because when I opened my eyes again, I was in a different bedroom. Familiar laughter drifted from the other room. I got up slowly and smelled bacon, potatoes, and eggs. The enticing aroma drew me into the kitchen. Inside I found Stephania and Keaton sitting at the kitchen table. She got up and swept me into her arms. I returned the hug.

"You look wonderful. I can already sense the coolness of the change on you. You should eat." She heaped food onto the plate and then led me back to the table. Keaton stood behind me and began to rub my shoulders. I took a few bites of the meal and then sat back in the chair.

"Thanks." I glanced back at Keaton. "Why are we here? I thought we were going someplace else?"

He smoothed the hair on my head. "Well we were, but Stephania called and told me that you would be safer here. She can keep out Trenton and protect you while I'm gone."

"Gone? Where are you going?" It dawned on me what he was going to do. I stood up. "No. You can't! I won't let you."

"It's the only way to keep you safe."

"And I can't lose you."

"And you won't. Everything will be okay. Now finish eating. I'll return soon."

He pressed his lips to mine and thrust his tongue into my mouth. I held him to me. "Please don't leave me."

He bit into his wrist and held it to me. "Drink, Madi. I can't say it will completely turn you, but it will get you there eventually. Drink."

I took his wrist and drank in his blood. I took a few swallows and then pulled away. A cool chill zinged through me. I shivered from the blood moving down my throat. It was working into my system. I wasn't sure if I wanted to think about the consequences, but this way at least I would be close to him. I could feel that I was



close to changing. It was odd feeling two energies fighting within me.

Keaton took me in his arms and hugged me close. It was nice to have him with me. All I wanted to do was keep him near. He kissed me again and then let me go. I saw the panic in his eyes, but he quickly left and I was alone with Stephania. He was gone before I could even put my hands around him again.

Tears streamed down my face. She wiped the tears from my cheeks and led me away from the table and into the other room. The light hurt my eyes. When it touched my skin, it seared it. I shied away.

"I can see you've consummated your relationship and accepted your fate."

"Who knows what's going on?"

She sat next to me on the couch after she drew the curtains. "It will be fine. Keaton will reason with Trenton."

"I hope so. If not, I don't know what I would do without him."

She chuckled. "It's amazing to see how far you've come in such a short time. Now, you're on the cusp of turning."

"Yeah it's odd, but it just happened. I love him."

Stephania patted my hand. "I know you do and that's a wonderful thing. Come on. Get some more rest. Later we can go shopping. Keaton said you needed some new clothes and he left me this." She withdrew a credit card from her pocket.

Hopefully by the time I got back from shopping, Keaton would be back. Time passed slowly. Stephania finally dragged me out of the house when the sun was not at its apex. When I stepped out into the light, it didn't hurt as much. We drove through the center of Boston to a little hole in the wall shop that was hidden on a back street. It was an exclusive lingerie store. When I went inside the clerk was fawning over Stephania without a second thought. They embraced. I sensed something about the clerk and I realized that she wasn't human. She looked human, but she was something else.

"Stephania, it's nice to see you again. And you've brought a friend," the saleswoman said.

"She needs something sexy to entice her mate. Something red, I think."

"No. I don't look good in red." I eyed the other panty and bra sets that were around the shop. Emerald corsets and others with fancy lace and see through were hanging about. Leather masks and whips.

The clerk came over and eyed me. She pushed the hair out of my face and then took my hand. "Sapphire. Yes something with blue and black. I can see that. Twilight. A little bit of crimson. I know just the thing." She raced into the back room. After a couple of moments she emerged with a corset. It was a dark blue cut with silver lace around the top and tied with crimson. She held it up to me and smiled.

"This is just your size. I finished it the other night. I dreamed about it being worn by a great lady of the night. It will cup your breasts and the lace will hide your nipples. There are garters that go with it. I have other things too that will go in the making of it." She fluttered around the shop and heaped me with things to wear.

"I can't get all of this."

"Of course you can. Keaton will love it. Trust me. He loves to undress anyone. Have you found he was insatiable?" Stephania teased.

I smiled at her and then looked away. Stephania laughed. When I thought about all of his touches it made me hot again. And then I realized that everything the salesperson was putting on the counter was something he would love. "Okay fine. You're so bad." I told Stephania.

"I know. Don't mind me, I was just playing."

"It's okay."

"Will that be cash or charge?"

Stephania handed me Keaton's credit card. Her cell phone went off. She stepped outside, and I faced the clerk. "Charge please."

"You're going to love everything here. We make the corsets to fit. You'll be back soon for something a little different. Yes, I can

already see what I am going to be making you. I'll get started on it straight away."

"How do you know that?"

She shrugged. "Something that I kinda picked up."

I leaned over the counter. "Not to be rude, but I know that you're not quite human."

Her eyes widened. "You're very good if you know that. Don't worry about it. Neither is Stephania. But you already knew that since you're involved with a vampire. Soon to be turned into one. I'm Natalia."

"What are you?"

She slipped the lingerie into a large bag and handed it to me. "I'm a little bit of an oracle. A little bit of a witch and a seamstress. I get along going through time. We'll get together soon." Natalia squeezed my hand and then Stephania came back in.

"Stephania, it's nice to see you again." Natalia reached out to hug her again, but she shied away. I glanced between them. Stephania winced away and grabbed my arm to tug me out of the store. Something passed between them.

Natalia's gaze focused on my companion and darkened. "Oh sweetie. You can't do that. Don't listen to him."

"Come on." Stephania led me from the store. I wondered what Natalia meant by that last statement.

I waved goodbye to her and then went out to Stephania's car. "Is everything okay? Natalia sounded like she was warning you about something."

She gave me a small smile. "Everything's fine. Her predications come and go. Did you get what you needed?"

I nodded. "Yeah. It was great. She's great. Keaton will love them."

"I'm glad." She gripped the steering wheel. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?"

Stephania's face morphed. Before I could stop her, she swiped at my face with a handful of claws. I felt the pain and then there was darkness.

When I woke up again, the agony on the side of my face was horrendous. I could only open one eye. I tried to move my arms, but they were tied behind my back. I was sitting in a chair in the middle of sunlight. My skin was on fire. Someone groaned next to me. When I looked over, I saw Keaton in the same position that I was in. He was tied to a chair as well. Blood stained the front and side of his shirt. From what I could see part of his throat had been torn out. It was healing, but slowly. His shirt was shredded at the arms, but I couldn't see any more. I tried to get closer but couldn't move.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

I glanced in the other direction and saw a tall figure standing in the light. He had long, blond hair. He was thin to the point he was almost emaciated. I tried to see more of him, but he stayed out of the direct sunlight.

"Why not? Who are you?"

"Don't you recognize my voice?"

*Trenton.* "What have you done to Keaton? Why did you bring us here?"

"Actually, I'm the one who brought you here."

Stephania walked into the light.

"Why would you do this?"

"Because she's a traitor." Keaton growled.

"I am no traitor," she spat.

"Tell that to me when I get out of here," Keaton barked.

"Then what am I doing here? Help us!" I pleaded.

A tear slipped down Stephania's cheek. "I can't."

"You're my friend. Please!"

The other woman ran from the room. Trenton laughed. "She won't be able to help you."

"What do you want?" I asked Trenton.

"To see Keaton suffer." Trenton stepped into the light. He winced, but he didn't withdraw.

"You leave her alone!" Keaton screamed.

Trenton grabbed my chin and forced me to look at him. I stared into his eyes and saw the darkness that lived there. He wasn't going to scare me. "Kill me and get it over with."

Trenton laughed. "Oh no. If I kill you, then you'll rise again. He's given you enough blood for that. I can smell it in you. It'd be easier to watch you burn. That'd give me much pleasure. It would ease some of the heartache that I've suffered."

I looked at him blankly.

"Oh, he didn't tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"Don't you wonder where the rule came from for not harming another's mate?"

"It was an accident," Keaton whispered.

Trenton growled and slashed at him. Blood exploded in the room. I screamed when I heard my mate cry out. "Leave him alone."

Trenton spun around and bared his fangs at me. He grabbed my throat. "He killed my Juliette. I watched him. When he did, he cut out a part of my soul. She was the reason I would've done anything for the council. Anything for him. We were friends once. And then she was gone. It was grueling to live without her, but then I began to take lives. That filled the void in my soul. And now, I'm going to make him suffer the same fate."

He sliced through the ropes tying my hands. I tried to run, but he had a good hold of me. Trenton dragged me toward Keaton and forced me to my knees. Keaton was weak and holding on by a thread. He needed blood.

"Please leave her alone," he whispered. The pain etched in his face was hard to bear.

"Say your goodbyes." Trenton pressed upon my neck. So close to my mouth, I could feel the frigid, prickly energy that made him up. I closed my eyes and focused. I pulled on the energy imagining it sliding down my throat. His energy was colder than Keaton's. I remembered the shadows that wound around me. It touched my insides and I drank it in. Trenton screamed and then threw me

across the room. I landed hard, but I was okay. Trenton was seething and clutched his arm. The opportunity allowed me to race toward Keaton. The energy zinged through me. It settled over my eye and where I was hurt. I struggled with Keaton's bonds and loosened them. Trenton grabbed me again and dragged me away by my hair.

I shrieked.

"You're very clever. I've never met a human who could pull energy the way you have. The same way it's difficult to get into your mind. I can see why Keaton fell for you. But it still won't stop me." He pressed his nails to my neck.

"You will leave her alone!" I heard Stephania's voice behind me.

"And what are you going to do? If you do anything, then she dies."

"You won't kill her. Now let them go!" Stephania demanded.

Trenton released me. I looked over and saw Stephania had a crossbow aimed at Trenton's heart. I moved back to Keaton and then helped him undo his ropes. I tried to help him up, but he fell to his knees. He needed more blood. I bared my throat and guided his fangs to me.

He bit down and drank in a few swallows and then withdrew. He needed more blood, but at least he was responding. When he finally stood up, Stephania had the crossbow against Trenton's back. Keaton took the weapon.

"I'll deal with you later," he snarled to Stephania. "You'll pay for this!"

Keaton pushed Trenton toward the sunlight. When he got into the sun, he bellowed. Stephania stopped me from going toward him.

"By order of the Council you are condemned to death. For kidnapping a mate, for killing humans, for being a dick." Keaton released the crossbow and it went straight through the other vampire's heart.

Keaton dropped the crossbow and then turned toward Stephania. I felt the darkness emanating from him. It grew and surrounded him. "You brought her to him. If anything happened to her...why?"

Shadows twined around her throat. Her fingers dug into the dark leash and tried to pull them off. I placed my hand on Keaton's shoulder.

"Don't."

"She betrayed us. She must!"

"No. She said that Trenton had someone. Let her talk."

Keaton snarled at me, but the shadows lessened. Stephania drew in a long breath and dropped to the ground. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. He took my daughter hostage. I had to or he was going to kill her."

"When did you have a kid?" Keaton asked.

"Does it matter? Please, I have to get her."

I placed a hand on his shoulder. "Let her go, love. She only wants to get her child. You would've done the same for me."

He stared at me and searched my eyes. I placed a hand on his cheek. The darkness around him receded back into the shadows. They left Stephania and joined with him. She ran off into the light. Keaton dropped the crossbow and then fell to his knees. I held him next to my chest. His power was fading. He had used the last of this strength to save me and standoff with Stephania. His mouth sought my throat.

I pressed his head to my neck. I sensed the hunger moving through him. His fangs pierced my throat. The pain was sharper than ever. It raged through me. His hands clasped my shoulders in a death grip. I tried to stay conscious, but the coldness descended and I went with it.

## Chapter Ten

The next time I opened my eyes, I was back in bed at Keaton's house. Light poured in from the open window. It was bright, but it didn't hurt. I went to the window. The sky was overcast. A beam of light cleared the clouds and hit my hand. I yanked it back from the sudden sear and backed out of the light. It was nice to know that I could still move about in the day. Keaton was in the house somewhere. I followed that sense and found myself downstairs in a library. He was sitting at a desk typing away at the computer. I stood in the doorway and watched him. It took him a moment before he looked up.

"You're awake."

"Yeah."

"How are you feeling?"

I shrugged. I didn't feel much different. My stomach turned over and grumbled. When I thought about blood it wasn't for that, but for regular food. "Kinda hungry. I guess."

"That's good. Honestly, I'm surprised that you haven't turned yet. You were out for a long time."

"How long?"

"Three days."

I clutched the door. I had been unconscious, but I felt completely rested, but I still also felt human. "So, you're okay?"

He rose from his chair and came over to me. Keaton pulled me into his arms and held me for a long time. He ran his fingers over my face and my neck. The hunger in him wasn't for blood. It was for me. The concern was written on his face and burned in his eyes. "I'm fine. It was stupid of me to go to Trenton alone. I should've gone to the council first and then gotten backup. I was only thinking of protecting you. Then Stephania betrayed us and brought you there."



I placed a finger on his lips. "Don't think about it. We all made it out alive. Stephania was protecting her daughter. You should forgive her."

A flash of anger sparked in his eyes. My mate growled. "Maybe. I did find several bags had been delivered here and my credit card was sitting on the table. Stephania must have brought them back. I put them upstairs in the bedroom."

I kissed him lightly on the lips savoring the taste of him. The attraction for him spiked through me. It gripped me so intensely that I moaned a little in pain. The mating fever was upon me again, but this time I welcomed it.

"Thank you. She is our friend. You'll forgive her one day. I'm sure that you were tempted to look in those bags."

He gave me a devilish smile. "I was tempted, but I didn't. Whatever you bought is fine. There's plenty more that we need to get you. You barely have enough clothes to be wearing with what you brought from your apartment."

I shrugged. He was right about that. "Well, I can rectify that. I'm going to get something to eat."

He caught me around the waist and pressed his lips to me. His tongue plunged into my mouth but then he pulled away again. "Eating is a good thing. You're blood gave me the strength to get us back here. Without it, I would've been a goner. You saved my life."

"I would have done it anytime."

His expression turned serious. "No one has ever been so selfless before. To be honest, no one that I know should've survived being human with the amount of vampire blood that you've ingested and that I have taken. It's something I have posed to the other council members."

"So you're saying that I'm a mystery?"

"More than that. You're my mate and you should be a vampire. But you've not completely turned yet. I don't know why. Maybe it has something to do with the barrier in your mind and the fact you could pull in energy."

I touched his cheek. "Does it really matter? I want to spend the rest of eternity with you. Eventually, I will change."

"How do you know?"

I thought about it. "Because I can feel it. The sun hurts me and I feel almost like I'm in shadow. Or at least part of me is. I'm walking in between light and dark." I shrugged. "I don't know where that came from. But it's the truth."

"Whatever it is, I'm glad you're mine. Now go eat." He slapped my ass as I walked away.

I shook my head and then moved into the kitchen. The refrigerator was full. My heart went out to Ivan. He was a good guy. I wanted to get to know him better, but that wasn't possible now. So I set out to cooking dinner. As I laid the food out, I realized I wasn't as hungry as I thought I was. No matter, I cooked a little chicken and then made it into a salad. Keaton came in and stole a piece of chicken and then held it out. I tried to bite at it, but he pulled it away.

"That isn't fair."

"Life isn't fair. Besides, seeing you eating made me realize that I was a little hungry as well." He kissed the back of my neck. I knew what he was hungry for when he reached around and cupped my breast. Keaton sucked on my skin. His other hand slid lower until it went under my shirt. I grabbed his arm then.

"You don't want me."

I turned and saw the concern in his gaze. "I didn't say that. Let me finish eating and take a shower. I'm kinda icky from being captured and tied up. I'll come down with a surprise for you if you can give me the time."

He bit me deeper and I moaned. "I can give you all the time in the world with a promise like that. Are you sure you don't want me to join you in the shower?"

"Yes and you can do the dishes while I'm upstairs."

"Ugh. I knew I never liked doing the domestic stuff. I guess that's why I haven't had a mate before now."

I took another bite of my salad and hit him in the chest. He backed away and let me finish my dinner. When I was done, I placed the dishes in the sink. Keaton rolled up his sleeves and actually started washing the dishes, which surprised me. I shook my head and went upstairs to shower.

Before I headed in, I noticed the bags by the wall. I took out the parcels and found the twilight set of lingerie that Natalia had picked out for me. I laid it against my skin and loved the contrast of colors. In the same bag were panties and a dark blue robe. Underneath that were garters and silk, silver stockings that matched the lace. I hadn't seen those or the robe before. I held them up and decided I could use those for later. Right now I wanted to get clean again.

Once I dried off, I dug around in my bags for something to put my hair up with. I found the clips and then I went back into figure out how I would get the corset on. I tried to remember what Natalia had shown me. I thought about it and then slipped on the contraption. I tightened the laces until I could barely breathe and then fluffed, moving my breasts a little higher. When I looked at my reflection in the mirror, I was happy about the corset. I realized that I did look a little bit different. My skin was lighter and my eyes darker. I looked at the panties and decided to forgo them and just slip on the robe. It covered just enough of me, and when I looked in the mirror I was satisfied.

I went downstairs and found Keaton back in his office. He was focused on his computer. I knocked on the door. He didn't look up the first time. When I sauntered in and sat down on the desk that got his attention.

"Hi stranger. I thought you were going to be waiting for me. Here I find you back on the computer. You're almost as bad a me."

Keaton slid his hand along my thigh. "I have some council business to attend to. And I was answering my colleagues' email about you."

I peered around until I could see the email. I couldn't read it though because Keaton took my head between his hands and

brought me to his lips. His mouth pressed against mine. He sought it in a hungry embrace. Keaton leaned me back against the desk and I heard a clatter as the contents fell to the floor. He ripped the belt from my robe and gasped.

"Do you like it?" I ran my hands over the top of my breasts and then over the corset, feeling the boning.

"Beautiful." He trailed a finger over the metal fasteners.

"Are you going to open your present?"

"I didn't realize it was my present. Although I do find it quite appetizing. The covering is exquisite." Keaton slid his hand around the back and trailed his finger around the laces. Then he came back to my breasts. The hunger made his eyes burn red.

"Thanks. There is more if you like it."

He nodded.

I slipped my fingers through his hair and held him to me. His mouth opened wide and he sunk his fangs into my breast. He drank a moment and then looked up at me. "You taste different. Cold and hot. In between. That's what you are. Walking a balancing act. I've seen it happen before, but it's rare."

I placed his hand around my neck. "So I'm a freak. I guess you don't want to be with me then."

He laughed. "I desire you all the more. You're a precious jewel that I want to keep with me forever, but I need to know if you want to be my mate."

I cupped his dick, feeling it through his pants. "Do you have to ask?"

"I do have to ask. I need to hear you say it. I need you to accept me for all I am."

"I accept you for my mate. I want to be with you forever." The hunger washed over me and as it did, I felt a tingling in my gums. My teeth began to change. They grew longer. They weren't as long as Keaton's, but they would do. I kissed the side of his neck and bit deep. He jumped. Then he moaned. He held me to him while I drank in his blood. Once it hit my stomach, it quieted the hunger that raged through me.

"I want you forever." I said when I was done.

"I'm so glad that you said that. I swear that I'll never let you down. I'll love you until the end of time."

"I love you, too. Now get over here." I claimed his lips once more and then guided his hands between my thighs. I was rewarded with one of his dazzling smiles when he discovered that I wasn't wearing any panties. He slipped a finger deep inside my already wet depths. I grabbed his shirt and ripped it open. The small buttons popped off and flew across the room. I tore the rest of his shirt off and then worked on getting his pants down. I forced them past his hips so his cock sprang out, ready to be used.

He couldn't wait any longer and forced my legs apart. I groaned. Keaton began undoing the laces on my corset when I pushed myself against him.

"I need you in me. Now."

"I want to feel you."

I pulled him into me and slung my ankles around his waist. "And I need you to fuck me right now. No excuses."

Keaton smiled and showed me his fangs. He threaded his hand into my hair and pulled my neck back. He licked my throat and then nipped on my ear. "I love how you think. Besides that, we have to christen every room in this place."

I pressed him closer to me as he pumped into me. I smiled and tugged on his lower lip, scraping my fangs along it. He trailed kisses down my throat and along my raised breasts. He pulled one out to suck on the nipple. I shrieked when he bit down on the sensitive bud.

"Maybe, but tonight, we're only going for this one."

He slid into me again. When he did, he hit my clit and I was brought to new heights of pleasure. I moved with him and hugged him tighter around the waist as he increased the rhythm between us. Each time he rubbed against my clit. He barely had a chance to kiss me, thrusting his tongue between my lips until he was claiming my breast and sucking on the nipple, alternating between both. I clutched his shoulder and felt the bliss gripping me taking

me into the darkness. When the darkness washed over me, I was suddenly forced into the light. Keaton bit deep into my shoulder. I held him there while he drank. At the same time, I slid my fangs into his throat.

We were locked together. Our bodies were one and our souls had conjoined. I'd be with him until the end of time. He loved me with all of his soul and so did I. He had continued to be my vampire in shining armor, and no matter what lay ahead of us, we were going to face it together.

## About the Author

Crymsyn Hart is a bestselling author of Erotic Romance. Her worlds are filled with luscious vampires, gorgeous gods, quirky witches, and everything else that goes bump in the night. Crymsyn worked as a psychic for many years in Boston while attending Emerson College. She graduated with a BFA in Writing, Literature, & Publishing. When she gets bored, she sneaks away to local cemeteries and coffee shops to find peace and quiet. Crymsyn shares her life with a small zoo, two playful puppies and her hubby Mark. If you come after dark, you're more than likely to find her snuggled up with a gory horror movie, or a bloody vampire movie. Crymsyn has a collection of Living Dead Dolls and five bookshelves overflowing with books. Of course there's always room for more.

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