



SAMHAIN

MAGICAL
SISTERS

Beverly
Rae

MAGICAL *Sex*

He can give her satisfaction...if he can survive her kiss.

Magical Sisters, Book 1

Allie Tristan's older sisters get to have sex. She's not allowed—not until she learns to control the ravenous appetite of her emerging succubus powers. Till then, she's resigned to her sisters watching her every move, poised to intervene before her kiss drains a man of his life force.

There's something about local bar owner Tom Halloran, though, that tempts her to sneak away to have another taste of their deliciously electric connection.

Love and marriage are not in Tom's plans. Occasional hot sex with a willing partner, when his busy life allows it? *Definitely* on the menu. Yet Allie nails him to the wall with her smokin' hot body, innocent blue eyes...and drugging kisses that leave him more than just weak in the knees. For the first time in his life, he pictures a woman in his life long-term, not just for one night.

Along with hunger for raw sex, fear claws at Allie's soul. Giving in to her raging need will kill him. Which leaves her only one choice: risk everything to keep their love alive—or die trying.

Warning: If you like flowery language, sweet sex and your heroines all sugar and no spice, do not enter. However, if you like lots of sex with a magical edge described in no uncertain terms, and hot women -with smokin' men, enter and enjoy.-

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Magical Sex

Beverly Rae

Dedication

Thank you to all my sisters from other mothers.

Chapter One

“Where the hell have you been? The bakery doesn’t run itself, you know.” Hillary Tristan, oldest of the three Tristan sisters, scowled at Megan, the middle-born and perpetually late sister. “You’re over an hour late.”

Allison, the youngest sister, giggled, then turned away from Hilly’s hard look to take Meg’s hand. She and Meg had a different connection, a closer bond than they had with Hilly. Still, they loved and respected their older sister.

Meg rolled her eyes at Hilly and shrugged. “Am I? Well, you know what they say. Time flies when you’re having sex.”

“Meg, not in front of Allie. Besides, I don’t think that’s how the saying goes.” Hilly’s cautionary glance at Meg wasn’t lost on Allie.

Allie hopped up and down, unable to hold back as just the idea of sex sent bursts of yearning through her. “So you had sex? Last night and again this morning? Oh, please, Meg, you have to tell me all about it. I’m dying to hear everything.” She wiggled her eyebrows. “And I do mean every little detail of every little—or big—part.”

She tossed her long hair, the excited urges she’d experienced over the past two months growing stronger than ever before, to the point of taking over. Each day the eagerness and desire, along with the physical need to feed, grew stronger, churning inside her. The air thickened around her, and a heady scent of vanilla extract mixed with succubus pheromones filled the air.

“Allie, stay calm. You don’t want to tire yourself,” Hilly warned, but it was too late.

Allie didn’t bother trying to suppress the urge struggling to break free. She’d tried and lost the struggle against her natural instinct. Her anticipation of having sex grew along with her body’s need to feed.

She glanced at the predominantly male patrons scattered around their family bakery. A few men pretended they weren’t watching her, but most blatantly gawked and, yes, a couple of them even drooled. Allie always captured male attention wherever she was, but when her scent grew stronger... Well, then the men were drawn to her like children to an ice-cream truck.

Allie sighed and caught her sisters’ reflections in the mirror behind the counter filled with flaky pastries, breads and muffins. Although they were beautiful women, Allie couldn’t help but think that her golden-haired girl-next-door-meets-sexpot vitality made her just as attractive. She straightened her shirt,

pulling the material tight over her ample breasts, and heard the men sigh. When her natural allure kicked in, her appeal doubled.

Meg, too, radiated a sexual attractiveness that was enhanced by her wild red hair, and the bright blue eyes all the women in the Tristan family possessed. Meg was as untamed as her hair and Allie envied the freedom she enjoyed. Why couldn't she have been born a witch instead of a succubus?

And then there was Hilly. Hilly could put both her younger sisters to shame if she'd only try. She had an amazing body—albeit shorter than the other two women—and with her dark hair and sultry looks, she could wrap any man around her pinkie finger. With makeup and a decent hairstyle, Hilly was smokin'. But, as her oldest sister was fond of reminding her, she didn't have time for "all that girl stuff". She'd raised Meg and Allie after their parents' untimely deaths in a freak skydiving accident and hadn't had time to indulge in learning how to dress seductively and flirt with men.

If it weren't for dealing with Allie's problem, Hilly could take time for herself. Allie vowed that, once she'd fed, she'd help her oldest sister find her own joy in life.

Allie bit her nails, a habit she'd failed to break, and tried to hide her enthusiasm over Meg's latest conquest. But her curiosity was too great.

"Please, Meg. I have to know. Tell me what it's like." Being a succubus who had never fed sucked big-time.

"Really, Allie, I don't go around talking about my flings. And that's all he was: a fling. Nothing more. I'm here now, so let me get to work, okay?" She sent Allie an unmistakable warning tilt of her head toward their older sibling. "Keep your voice down before these men overhear. Did you take your anti-attraction potion today?"

Allie caught Hilly watching her in the mirror, fixed a loose strand of hair behind her ear, and, not wanting to tell her sister that she hadn't taken the potion that counteracted her natural succubus allure, changed the subject back to the original conversation. She knew she should've taken her potion, but the whirling craving inside her wanted the attention. "But I'm just so jealous."

She pouted, pushing out her full lips and eliciting an agonized groan from a nerdy-looking young man. "It's not fair. Just because of what I am and what I can do, does that mean I have to hide away in a dungeon somewhere? I will have to feed at some point, you know. And soon."

A fierce sadness swept over her sisters' faces and Allie immediately regretted her words. Instead, she tried to lighten the mood, bringing the subject back to the pleasures of sex. "I'm a grown woman, for Pete's sake. So when the hell am I ever going to have sex?"

Coffee cups dropped around the room, and pastries stuck in mouths as every set of male eyes focused on her. Hilly leaned over the counter and grumbled at the mess of spilled coffee and broken mugs covering the floor. "Can we please start using Styrofoam cups again?"

Meg slumped against the counter, then twisted to face her. “Not on your life. We have to do our bit for the environment and if that means cleaning up a few—”

“A few?” Hilly grabbed the broom and *swooshed* her sister out of the way.

“—broken mugs, then so be it.” Meg followed her with the dustpan. “Allie, go to the back room and see how many mugs we have left. We need to give the men a breather before they do any more damage. Besides, you could use some time away from them, too.”

Allie’s lips plumped up more, going into full pout mode. “No. I don’t want to. Damn it. I’m tired of hiding in back rooms whenever you two want to talk about me.” She waved her hands at the glassy-eyed onlookers. “Or whenever there’s a man around. Can’t you give me an answer, Hilly? When am I going to get my cherry busted having raunchy sex?”

“Allison Tristan, watch your mouth. Besides, you know darn well that you don’t have a cherry, as you so crudely put it. Your body is different. From what little factual information we’ve found, we know that much at least.”

“Yeah, little sister. You’re ready-made for sex without all that messy first-time business.” Meg grinned. “That’s one good thing about being a you-know-what. You came into the world with all the equipment in working order without needing to be broken in. So to speak.”

“Please, Meg, you’re not helping,” grumbled Hilly.

The eddy of lust raged inside Allie, building higher, infusing her with hunger that would soon drain away more of her strength. “Damn it, I need a man!”

“Allie!” Hilly’s angry voice rang out.

An older man jolted toward Allie, his arms outstretched to ensnare her, but Hilly swatted him with the broom, breaking him out of the trance. At least until he took another whiff of Allie’s mesmerizing fragrance. He lunged again, this time blocked by Meg.

Why did they have to treat her like a child? She was twenty-one, a grown woman, and ready to use the powers she’d been born with. If that meant draining a few men of their life force—not all of it, of course—then that was what she had to do. What other choice did she have? She was a succubus and should act like it. After all, could a tiger lose its stripes? Could a monkey never eat a banana? It was silly to even think so and the same was true of her. Besides, if she didn’t feed soon... Well, she didn’t want to think about that grim fate any more than her sisters did. Better to think about the pleasurable side of things.

“Okay, everyone. Let’s get moving. We’re closing early.”

“But you just opened,” grumbled a man Allie knew was married. Not that his marital status had ever stopped him from pinching her bottom.

“Like I said, we’re closing early. Now get going, Jerry, before I call your wife.” Hilly waved at the mess. “And add a hefty tip for the breakage.”

The men complained, even with their eyes glued on Allie, but they still left money on the tables or in the tip jar on the counter. Meg thanked them, flirting with a few to appease their bruised egos and speed them along their way. She stood by the door, making sure she was the last one they saw. Allie frowned. Even in the safety of the bakery, Meg could have all the fun and she was stuck playing the innocent—and sexless—sister.

“Meggy! Where did you go, baby?”

Meg cringed and shot her sisters a silent plea. Hilly slumped, the ever-suffering pseudo-mother resigned to another day of taking care of her worrisome sisters. After all, who else would do it? Not Allie. At least that was one perk of being the youngest. Seeing Hilly’s resignation, Meg whirled around, almost bumped into the young man standing behind her, then took a couple of steps back.

“Oh, it’s you, Steve.” Meg kept her distance even after he tried to pull her into his arms. “I thought we already said our goodbyes. You know. This morning at your apartment when I thanked you for an incredible night? Right before I said we could never get together again. Remember?”

Steve’s hopeful face fell flat and Allie had to admit she felt sorry for the guy. Meg was the queen of one-night stands and would never settle for just one man. In fact, if Meg were a succubus, their small hometown of Cottageville, North Carolina, would have dead bodies lying all over the place.

“But, Meggy—”

“Eeww. Do not call me that. Ever.”

“But, Meg. I thought we had something special.”

Allie mouthed the words as they came out of Steve’s mouth. Meg would find a guy at a club, take him home and have flying-from-the-chandelier sex with him, then dump him flat. And they all said the same thing when they tracked her down. Why, oh why, couldn’t her sister remember to remove the love spell she put on them instead of letting it wear off on its own? If not, the very least she could do was to fill Allie in on the juicy details.

“Meggy, did you forget to take the spell away?” Allie hardened her voice, mimicking Hilly’s maternal you-are-in-so-much-trouble tone. “Again?”

Meg stuck out her tongue. “You can’t expect me to remember everything, can you?” She grabbed Steve and pushed him toward the back of the store. “I think you need to wash up. Wait for me in the men’s room.”

His brow furrowed. “Really? I don’t think so. I had a shower earlier.”

Meg whipped her hand in a zigzag motion in front of his face and a flash of blue light came and went. His mouth slammed shut. “Yes, you do, Steve. Now go along and I’ll be with you in a moment.”

Steve’s eyes glazed over and she hurried him toward the hallway before turning back to point a finger at Hilly. “Don’t you dare say a word. I’ll take care of him once I’ve helped you two clean up. Who knows?”

Maybe by then the spell will have worn off on its own.” She grumbled under her breath, barely loud enough for her sisters to hear. “If not, I’ll zap it off him.”

Apparently, poor Steve was just another victim of Meg’s lack of forethought, unmindful as she often was of the consequences of her actions. But Allie wasn’t about to mention that. Instead, she started picking up broken porcelain without an argument. Keeping her head down, she let the kernel of an idea form.

“Meg, you really shouldn’t flaunt your escapades in front of Allie. You know how vulnerable she is right now. Her succubus instincts are coming to the forefront. A little early perhaps...”

“Early? Are you kidding me? I’m way past my time.” Or at least Allie thought so. None of them had a clue at what age a succubus came into her powers. Still, she was an adult by all other standards so why not by succubus standards? “I’m more than ready, and you know it.”

Hilly shot her another exasperated look, then returned to her conversation with Meg. “Which means we can’t ignore the problem any longer. She needs to feed, and soon.”

“I know. But what can we do? Turn her loose? In a small town like Cottageville, the loss of a single man would get noticed.” Meg stood up, stretching her back. “Damn. I wish these local yokels would get over her. No offense, Allie.”

“None taken, dear sister,” she said in a singsong voice while plastering on a phony smile that she knew Meg would recognize as fake.

Meg did, but chose to ignore it. “You’d think showing up here every morning would cause a ruckus with their women. And yet they still come.”

“That’s because the women are almost as attracted to her as the men.” Hilly stood aside to let Meg dump the pieces of broken mugs into a trashcan, then ran the broom over the floor again. “It’s time we come up with a plan before the worst happens.” Hilly’s eyes glistened with unshed tears.

A lump formed in Allie’s throat. They often attempted to make light of her situation, focusing only on the sexual element, but they all knew what lay ahead if she didn’t find a way to feed. And if she didn’t feed soon, she’d grow weaker every day until, at last, she’d shrivel away to bones and skin.

Ever the strong one, Hilly pulled herself to her full, albeit diminutive, stature. “We’re going to have a family meeting tonight. Think you can stay home for one night, Meg? Or will the men at the bars send out a search party?”

Allie matched Hilly’s weak smile, trying to equal her sister’s brave front.

“Yeah, I think I can manage it.” Meg took the broom and headed toward the back, but Allie snatched both tools away from her.

“I’ll take them.” She scurried toward the back, pausing at the entrance before turning around to make sure her sisters hadn’t caught on. Quietly putting the broom and dustpan on the floor, she rushed toward the men’s restroom.

“Guess I’d better take care of Steve. I used a new love spell on him and didn’t realize that it would last this long.”

“Not so fast.” Hilly glanced at Meg, then ran a rag over the counter even though the counter really didn’t need cleaning. But at least it was something to keep her hands busy. “Let’s talk about Allie and her problem.”

“I hate that you refer to it as a problem. It’s who and what she is. Don’t make it sound like she’s some kind of freak.”

Hilly wasn’t about to go down that road again. Her sister was just stalling the discussion and the difficult decision they’d have to make. But they’d have to do something soon to either help Allie before her succubus hormones took over and she went off on her own, or the inevitable happened. Hilly shook her head and set her jaw. No way would she lose Allie.

“Why don’t we just let her do what comes naturally?”

“You know as well as I do that an undisciplined succubus is a dangerous thing. Half the time I’m not sure even Allie realizes how much harm she could do.” She sighed. “If only Mother had lived. She would’ve known how to help Allie.” Not for the first time, a pang of anger zipped through Hilly, but she shook it off as she always did. Being angry at her parents for dying and leaving her to raise her sisters was both unfair and unproductive.

“Well she didn’t, so there’s nothing to gain by wishing the past away. It’s just too bad that Mother was the only other succubus in the family. At least, the only one we know of.”

“Now who’s wishing the past away?” Hilly caught a movement across the street and turned to watch a familiar homeless man sort through his worn-out duffle bag. Woolly Wilbur—a name he’d earned because of his determination to hang on to a ratty fur coat—was the town’s one and only vagrant. Not that the good folks of Cottageville hadn’t tried to help him live a normal life, but he seemed to enjoy life on the streets. And he had it better than most in his situation since the town’s merchants gave him free food, clothes and shelter whenever he’d take them.

“I understand we’re not the best people to guide her into becoming a responsible succubus, Meg. But that doesn’t mean she can’t learn to live by a few rules. Most of her kind do, you know. Or so I’ve heard.”

“Yeah and I agree. But if it comes down to either losing her or letting her do what she has to do—whichever she hurts—then guess which option I’ll choose.”

Hilly wanted to argue the point, yet she knew if push came to shove, she agreed with Meg. Allie’s survival would come first. “I have to believe that we’ll find a solution. One where no one gets hurt.”

“I hope so. But listen, Hilly, let’s sort through this tonight, okay? I need to take care of Steve.”

Hilly waved off her sister, dismissing her as her mind returned to the town’s vagrant. She studied him again and murmured, “He’s the town stray cat. I wonder if anyone would miss him.”

“What’d ya say?” Meg called out, even though she was already halfway to the restroom.

“Never mind.” *Hmm. Stray cats. I bet even a little town like this probably has a lot of other stray cats. Ones we never see. Ones no one ever notices.* The inkling of an idea was about to grow into a substantial thought when Meg’s shout shoved it away.

“Hilly! Get in here. Hurry!”

Hilly dropped the rag and dashed toward the men’s room. She rounded the corner, hung on to the wall and slid into the open doorway. But the restroom was empty. “Where are you?” she called.

“In the storage room. Hurry!”

Hilly took off running again. Pushing the door wide, she almost fell over her own feet in an effort to stop.

“Oh, my word.” She glanced at Meg who, fists on her hips, jerked her head toward Allie and Steve.

“Oh, my word.”

Chapter Two

Allie clutched Steve, plastering his neck and the hollow of his throat with fast, furious kisses. Steve ran his hands over her body, pulling her clothing away to slip his hands underneath. Allie moaned and unbuttoned his slacks to let them fall to the floor. His boxer shorts followed, chased by her shirt. Steve groaned, then bent to take Allie's nipple into his mouth. She laid her head back, her eyes closed, her face rapturous.

"Why the hell is he making out with Allie if he's still under your spell?" Hilly glared at Meg, too flabbergasted to do anything to stop them.

"I guess it finally wore off." Meg tilted her head, attempting to get a better view of the couple. "Unless she told him that I wanted him to hook up with her. I can see him believing that and doing her, er, *it* to please me." She giggled. "Isn't that wild? He's getting busy with her, but it's really me he's trying to please."

"I'm so glad you find this humorous, because I certainly don't."

"Oh, come on. It's funny. And very interesting." Meg leaned to the side and gaped. "Sheesh, who knew she was so flexible? Has she been doing yoga?"

Hilly followed Allie's movements, noting the experienced way she held her body, the way she fondled Steve, quickly bringing him to an erection. If she hadn't fully realized it before, she did now. Her little sister was changing into an adult succubus with very adult succubus needs and actions. "Oh, my word."

"Will you quit saying that and make a suggestion?" Meg crossed over to the groping couple to stand beside them, close enough to touch them. No longer giggling, she fisted her hands on her hips and glowered at the two, who appeared unaware of her presence. "Allie? Allie, let go of him immediately." She pulled on Allie's leg that was wrapped around Steve's waist, but neither of the lovers paid her any heed. "Hilly, help me."

At last, Hilly found her feet. Striding forward, she positioned herself on the other side of the couple. She tugged on Allie's arm as Meg continued to yank on her leg. Failing to remove her arm, Hilly pulled at her hair, but Allie gave no sign that she would let go. Instead, Allie turned to stare at her, her eyes glowing red, unfocused and lost to another place. Hilly saw no sign of recognition. Her sister was gone, replaced by a creature older than time. A being that not only had the desires, but the inborn knowledge of a sexual predator. Still, she couldn't and wouldn't give up.

"Allie, release him. As your big sister, I'm ordering you to let the man go." Hilly held her breath, hoping that Allie would heed her demand, then sighed when she ignored her. She hadn't expected Allie to suddenly obey, but how could she make her set him free?

Growling like an animal on the hunt, Allie grabbed Steve's chin and pressed her mouth to his. Her cheeks sank in, signaling that Allie was sucking on his tongue, drawing every ounce of taste, every bit of saliva from him. She pushed against him, rubbing her crotch against his firm shaft, and Steve groaned with desire. She was a temptress, a marauder who knew how to use her body to arouse a man. Steve was a man caught in a sexual vise and loving every second of it. Even if it killed him.

Steve moaned and jerked, his body stiffening as though he'd been struck by lightning. Allie deepened the kiss and wrapped her arms around him like steel rods. She had a death grip on her prey and wasn't about to let go.

"Allie, get off him!" Meg tugged on Allie's arm, then on Steve's, but couldn't budge either one of them. She shook her head at Hilly and threw up her arms in defeat. "Do something."

"Don't you have a spell you could try?"

Meg wrung her hands together and paced in a circle. "Uh, I don't... I mean, I'm not sure... Oh, hell, you know I'm no good under pressure."

Unfortunately, Hilly did know. If someone was going to save Steve, it would have to be her. Time, however, was not on her side. She gasped as a smoky haze drifted from the corners of the couple's mouths, signaling the thing she feared most. Allie was draining Steve's life force.

"Oh, hell." Meg's face went white. "She's sucking him dry."

"I know. But at least she can't drain him all the way until they...you know."

Meg puffed out a breath. "I think 'you know' is where they're headed unless we can break them up."

Doing the only thing she could think of, Hilly shifted. Her body dissolved, muscles liquefying, bones disappearing and flesh melting until nothing was left except a pool of dark-colored liquid on the floor.

"Hilly, don't you dare hide in a transformation and leave me to handle this alone."

The pool swirled, changing form again, solidifying into a thin piece of black metal. The metal grew, pushing up between the couple, moving them gently but firmly apart until Allie had no choice but to drop her legs and allow a space between their bodies. She moaned deep in her throat and reached for him again, trying to renew her grip on his body. But she couldn't get around the blockade Hilly had made. The wall continued to grow, forming an impenetrable obstacle. Allie cried out, making a guttural, animal-like sound, as the barricade finally separated their mouths.

Freed from her hold, Steve stumbled backward. The metal surged higher, hiding Steve from Allie's view. Every time she tried to go around it, the wall reformed and grew wider, taller. She growled and moaned, her gleaming eyes glued on her quarry, her hair in wild disarray as though electrified from within.

She screeched, reaching as far as she could for Steve. Once, then twice she ran into the wall, slamming against the impenetrable fortress with a frustrated cry.

“Allie, stop!” Meg struggled to keep Steve upright. “Hilly, make her stop before she hurts herself.”

Hilly’s wall changed, adding a protective layer of cushion. Allie rammed against the wall again, but this time, the blow was softened. Panting, Allie tried to climb the wall but, with each attempt, failed to reach higher than before.

“Keep it up, Hilly. I think she’s weakening.”

At last, Allie blinked several times and her eyes focused, returning to her normal sky blue. The anguish, the primal instinct in her eyes, shocked Hilly. Allie’s succubus side had taken complete control of her. If Hilly and Meg hadn’t arrived in time, Allie would’ve killed Steve.

“No, Hilly. Please don’t make me stop,” Allie whimpered. “I don’t want to. He tasted so wonderful.” She jumped from side to side, but each time the metal expanded to block her approach. “Hilly, please. You know I need him. You don’t want me to die, do you? Please, just let me have a little more. I promise I’ll stop before it’s too late.”

Meg tugged the befuddled Steve with her, then pushed him into the hallway. “Back off, sister.”

“No! Come back, Steve. Please, I need you.” Allie pounded her fists against the wall, but it didn’t matter. Meg was gone, taking the stumbling man with her.

Hilly morphed, returning to her human body within seconds. “Allie, what were you thinking?”

Allie’s skin was pink-hued, shining vibrantly with Steve’s life force. Her blue eyes blazed with power and yearning. A smoky haze, much like the one that had come from their joined mouths, bathed her body in a soft sheen.

“I wouldn’t have drained him. I swear it.” Allie’s tone was soft yet backed by steel. She clenched her hands, a new power resonating from her in shimmering waves. The life force she’d taken from Steve was flowing through her, renewing her strength.

“How can you be so sure? You don’t know how to control your feeding yet. Until then, until we can figure out how to help you, you have to leave men alone.”

“No. I won’t. I have to feed. I can’t stop. Especially not now that I know how good it feels. How succulent a man tastes.” Allie wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and narrowed her eyes, a fierce gleam firing in them. “I won’t and you can’t make me.”

Hilly stumbled back a couple of steps, stunned by Allie’s refusal. Her sister seemed larger, stronger, and, yes, even frightening. But she couldn’t let her intimidate her. Not for her own sake and especially not for Allie’s. “Allison Tristan, you will do as you’re told.”

For a moment, she wasn’t sure what her sister would do. If Allie refused her, or worse, physically fought against her, would she have enough strength to keep her in check? She’d heard a succubus was at her greatest power after feeding, and frankly, she didn’t want to find out if the rumor was true.

Then, all at once, Allie seemed to deflate, losing her fight and her belligerence.

“Oh, Hilly, I’m sorry. I only meant to take a taste. You know, just to find out what it was like. I won’t let it happen again.” Allie wiped a tear away and reached out for an embrace. “Is he all right? I didn’t mean to hurt him. I just couldn’t control myself.”

For a moment, Hilly was afraid to touch the sweet girl she’d helped raise, but she forced herself to take Allie’s hands. “I’m sure Meg will take care of him. I’m more concerned about you. Are you all right?”

Allie fell into her arms, clinging to her and weeping. Hilly patted her sister, grateful that they’d found her before the worst had happened. She held her tightly, much the same as she’d done when she was a young girl missing their parents.

“It’s okay. Steve will be okay. Everything’s back to normal now. Don’t worry,” she cooed. Cupping Allie’s chin, she forced her to lift her face and meet her gaze.

Her breath caught in her throat. Was that a grin? But it was gone in a flash before she could be certain she’d seen it. Moving her sister away, she narrowed her eyes to zone in on her sister. “Allie, are you playing me?”

Allie burst into laughter, twirling around twice before stopping to shoot her a mischievous grin. “Of course I am. And you know what? I don’t regret a single second. I’m sorry if this sounds awful, but I can’t help it. I feel amazing. Stronger than I’ve felt since the urges began. Don’t you see? I knew what I had to do and I knew how to take what I needed. And Steve’s fine, so no harm done. You know I don’t ever want to hurt anyone, don’t you? But, oh, Hilly, I want to do it again.”

“Can we get started?” Hilly motioned for Meg and Allie to sit on the sofa across from her while she took the oversized armchair their father had loved.

Allie squashed the ache thinking about her parents gave her. She’d been thirteen when they’d died, and although she’d never admit it, their faces were fading from her memory. Every night she studied the photographs of them scattered around the house to refresh the images in her head.

“Earth to Allie. Are you ready to get down to business?” Hilly cocked an eyebrow at her, demanding her attention.

Allie resisted rolling her eyes at her oldest sister. She’d learned the hard way not to do that when Hilly had morphed into an exact replica of her, following her around and mimicking her eye-rolling for an entire day. But oh, how she hated family meetings. Especially when they centered on her.

“Something has to be done about Allie.”

“Gee thanks, Hilly. So I’m the problem child? Is that how you really feel?”

At least Hilly had the decency to blush at her poor choice of words, but Allie forgave her. Her big sister often put her foot in her mouth even when she had the best of intentions. And, of course, her best intentions right now were to help Allie.

“You know what I mean. The time has come to address the fact that your body is changing. We have to sort out how we can accommodate your, um, special needs without harming others.”

“Or at least not killing them.” Meg shrugged at Hilly’s pointed look. “What? I’m just saying what you’re thinking.”

“I have to feed. It’s not like I can turn off these growing natural instincts. We may not like what’s happening to me, but we have to be realistic. I’m a succubus and I have to have a man to live.” Surely they had to face facts. After the almost disastrous—yet amazing—hook-up with Steve, they had to see that she was determined to do whatever she had to do. What was the alternative anyway? Dry up and die?

“What she needs is a teacher, but we don’t know anyone who can tell her how to be a responsible succubus.”

“Maybe I don’t need a teacher. I mean, Steve was only my first try at this draining thing. I’m sure I can be more careful next time.”

Allie almost laughed at Hilly’s and Meg’s astonished expressions.

“Are you kidding? If we hadn’t been there to stop you, Steve would be a dried-up mummy right now.” Meg slumped into the sofa.

“But can’t I at least try?” Allie bit her lip, keeping the rest of her thoughts to herself. After what happened with Steve, she wasn’t sure she really could control the urges. The burning, the whirlwind of lust rushing through her body, pushing her to take what it needed, couldn’t be denied. Still, she never wanted to hurt anyone, let alone kill them.

“Oh, sure,” scoffed Meg. “Tell you what. I’ll reverse the spell that wiped Steve’s memory and we’ll ask him if he’s willing to risk it. Trust me. If he could remember what really happened, he’d run for the hills.”

Allie dropped her gaze to her lap. “I know and I’m sorry. I feel awful about what I did to Steve.”

“You sure looked like you were feeling pretty damn good to me.”

She looked at Meg and couldn’t deny the truth. “I’m not sure I can explain this, but it’s a love-hate kind of thing. It’s like there are two sides of me, both wanting something different. One part of me, the part of me that existed before the succubus urges started, wants to be a normal girl who can have normal sex without worrying about hurting someone.” She paused, trying to find the best words to express what she was going through. “But the other side is compelled to have sex because sex is how I can get what I need: energy from a man’s life source. I have a battle going on inside me and I don’t know which side will win.”

She stopped, letting what she’d said sink in. Meg reached out, took her hand and squeezed it. “Hang in there, little sis. We’ll figure this out.”

Hilly leaned back in the chair and folded her hands in her lap. “Girls, I think I’ve come up with a solution.”

Allie scooted to the edge of her seat and bit her bottom lip. “Really? Good deal. Then let’s hear it. Come on. Don’t keep us in suspense.”

Hilly’s face lit up. “Here’s what I’m thinking. You know Woolly Wilbur, right?”

Allie glanced at Meg, who looked as clueless as she was. “You mean the homeless guy? Sure I do. Everyone knows Wilbur. But what’s he got to do with me?” She gasped, placing her palm on her chest as though to slow her racing heart. “You don’t want me to have sex with him, do you? God knows his life force is corrupted as hell. Not to mention getting past his dirty hair and that nasty coat.”

“Urgh. I think I just threw up in my mouth.” Meg swallowed and made a face. “Tell us you’re kidding.”

Hilly, however, didn’t look like she was joking. “No, not Wilbur. But he did give me an idea.”

Allie wasn’t sure she wanted to hear the rest. In fact, right then she wanted to be anywhere other than listening to Hilly’s plan. “I’m afraid to ask, but what idea could he have given you?”

“Well, we all know Wilbur doesn’t have any family, right?”

Meg and Allie nodded at the same time. “Yeah. So?”

“So why not find men like Wilbur—albeit clean and not infested with lice—who don’t have families or friends in the area, and let Allie practice drawing out some of their life force? Emphasis on the word ‘some’.”

“Gee, thanks. You’re going to let me feed on a man who’s clean and without bugs. Wow. Talk about a step up from dear old Woolly.”

“What more would you want?” Hilly leaned back in the chair. “After all, you’re not looking for romance.”

Romance? Allie had never given the idea much thought, never imagined that it was a possibility. Her gaze flitted to her parents’ wedding photograph on the fireplace mantel. Could she find someone who would love her no matter what she was? Could she find a way to love someone without hurting him? Hadn’t her mother found the love of her life? So why couldn’t she? A flicker of hope fluttered in her chest.

“But what if she goes ape-shit like she did with Steve and loses control?” Meg dodged as Allie tried to smack her arm. “Not that I’m saying you would on purpose, mind you.”

Hilly cast a soft smile. “We stick around to make sure she doesn’t take it that far.”

“But how would you stop me? Who knows what kind of power I could wield if I got enough energy in me? I mean, if the man is strong and virile, I might become one supercharged powerhouse in a sexy little body.” Allie batted her eyelashes and tossed her hair, trying to lighten the mood.

“Gee. Modest, aren’t you?” teased Meg.

“Oh, I think we could take you. We tore you away from Steve, didn’t we?”

“Hilly’s right. Between my magic and her shape-shifting into the Incredible Hulk, we could pry you off anybody. Especially if we’re prepared to do so.”

“Still, to make sure we don’t have to resort to magic or shifting, the men she feeds on will be, shall we say, less than your average brute.”

Was Hilly saying what she thought she was saying? “You’re talking about my making out with a wimp, aren’t you? A nerd? A brain-but-no-brawn kind of guy?”

“Not exactly.”

“Whew. For a minute there—”

“He doesn’t have to have much of a brain.”

“Oh, my God. She’s talking about a lonely Pee-wee-Herman type.” Meg clutched her stomach in a fit of laughter. “Ooh, how sexy! Allie’s going to jump Pee-wee Herman’s bones. Hey, Allie, be careful not to break him. You know how brittle he is.”

Allie shot her sisters an if-only-looks-could-make-you-fat-and-bald stare. “You, Meg, are just so funny I forgot to laugh. And you, Ms. Hillary Tristan, need to have your head examined. I am not attracted to skinny dumb men.”

She could see, however, that Hilly was growing fonder of her scheme. “Whether or not you’re attracted to him is irrelevant and, frankly, I doubt it’ll matter to you anyway.”

“Hey!” protested Allie.

“You know what I’m talking about. As I said before, you’re not looking for love, so the fact that he’s less than appealing to you is a plus. What matters is that you have someone to feed from. And, once you start taking his life force, we have to make sure that you don’t get too strong for us to pull you away from him.”

Allie flopped back against the sofa cushions. “This just sucks. I’m finally going to get what I need, but I have to make it with a geek. A weak-willed, no-muscles simpleton, to boot. Remind me to thank you, big-time.”

Meg and Hilly glanced at each other before doing as they always did—trying to make her feel better.

“Come on, Allie, cheer up. This won’t be as bad as you think. Right, Meg?”

“Oh, uh, of course not. I mean, even some of the scrawniest men I’ve had have been surprisingly good in bed. Not that I’ve had that many scrawny ones, mind you.”

“I guess.” Allie pouted again, hoping that pooching out her lower lip just a fraction more would push them over the edge. Surely they wouldn’t make her take a wimp, would they? Although at least she’d get to feed. “But I still don’t see why I can’t have one decent-looking guy. Sort of an average-Joe-on-the-street kind of dude?”

Hilly rose and took her hand, pulling her out of her seat and out of full-pout mode. “Okay then, let’s give this a try. How about we head down to the Sundowner and find our first donor?”

“The Sundowner? But that’s a local bar. A dead local bar.” Meg took Allie’s other arm and helped Hilly lead her to her bedroom. “Wouldn’t it make more sense to go out of town?”

“It would. Except that I happen to know that there’s a convention in the city and our small town’s hotel is catching a lot of the spillover. I bet the Sundowner’s packed right now with strangers in town for only a few nights. Our perfect choice is a strange man in a town where he knows no one.”

Allie caught the slinky red halter top Meg threw at her and obeyed her gestures to put it on. The silky material flowed down her skin, forming to the curves of her breasts. A short black skirt that accentuated her shapely legs completed the look. Her reflection in the full-length mirror gave her a thrill and she stepped into the four-inch heels Hilly offered her. “I can’t believe this is finally going to happen. Maybe not in the way I thought it would, but it’s happening all the same.”

“Yep, your date with a ninety-pound w—”

Allie snapped her fingers in front of Meg, silencing her. “Don’t even think about finishing that sentence.”

“Okay, okay. Take a chill pill, baby sister.” Meg chuckled and pretended to lock her mouth with a make-believe key.

“If you two are finished with your witty repartee, then we can get going.”

The Sundowner had changed since the last time Allie had visited the place. Granted that had been a few months earlier when she’d celebrated her twenty-first birthday—with just her sisters in attendance—but the old place had been nothing like this. Instead of the dingy room with outdated lighting and peeling paint, tiny bright lights cascaded around the black and gold decor like shooting stars bouncing off the dance floor. Sleek colorful booths flanked the walls while mirrored tables welcomed guests. Head-pounding music made it difficult to think, much less talk. Young men and women crammed together, gyrating their bodies in spaces too small for real dance moves. A throng three-people deep formed along the counter where several bartenders hurried to keep pace with the thirsty partiers.

Allie smiled and led the way into the crowd. “Wow. This is awesome,” she shouted.

Hilly’s frown told of a different reaction. “Uh-oh. What happened?” She scanned the area, her frown deepening. “I expected to find a few older men and some business travelers nursing their drinks. Nothing like—”

“Like a real club? You got me, but I think it’s terrific.” Meg’s grin grew wider. “And I don’t care how it happened. The only thing I want to know is why didn’t someone tell me? I could’ve partied here instead of that lame bar across town.”

“Come on, Allie. We’re leaving.”

Allie, however, had no intention of letting Hilly drag her away. She hurried toward the bar before Hilly knew what hit her. Too bad Meg was hot on her tail.

“Hey, hold on a sec.” Meg grabbed her arm, tugging her around to face her.

“No, let me go. I want to drink and dance, then drink and dance some more.”

Men turned toward the sound of Allie’s voice. Jaws dropped and eyes glazed over. Two of the more aggressive men moved closer, closing in on the girls like wolves ready to attack two vulnerable deer. Allie reached out and took the bigger man’s hand, drawing him next to her. “Hi. What’s your name?”

“Michael. And what’s yours, babe?”

She leaned closer, ignoring Meg’s warning. “Ooh, I like that name. My name is Allie. Do you like my name?” Catching movement to the side of her, she noticed more men leaving their dance partners to come her way. Maybe this wasn’t such a great idea after all. She let go of Michael and tried to step back toward her sister. “Meg?”

“See? I told you to hold up a sec. But don’t worry, and cover your face. I’ll handle this.” One sweep of her hand and a blue mist settled over the room to float gently down from the ceiling. People lifted their heads to watch the mist, dreamy expressions on their faces. Once the mist had evaporated, the crowd returned to dancing as though nothing unusual had happened. Michael and the other men stayed quiet a few moments longer, confusion etched on their faces, then returned to the women they’d abruptly left.

Hilly pushed through the crowd to slide beside Meg. “Oh, my word. If I hadn’t known what the mist was and covered my nose and mouth in time... Well, never mind. Like I said, we have to leave. Now.”

Allie couldn’t keep her eyes off the people around her. Their excitement, their energy, their raw sexuality drew her, calling her name as though they’d waited for her for a thousand years. The familiar excitement started in her abdomen and swirled outward in slow tendrils of desire. “No, please, let’s stay. It’s okay now. No one’s paying any attention to me.” She swayed with the music and closed her eyes, willing her sisters to disappear. If only she had Meg’s gift of magic!

A yank on her arm had her stumbling to stay upright. Hilly dragged both girls to the far wall and into a corner. “This is not the right kind of place. No, we need to find a quiet bar. A bar that has the type of men we’re looking for.”

Allie slumped against the wall, trapped by her sister’s glare. “You mean the old, the ugly and the imbecilic? Are those the kinds of guys I can have? That’s so not fair.” She couldn’t help it. Usually her pouts were mostly for show, but this one was all real. “Why does Meg get to dance with a cute guy and I don’t?”

“She doesn’t.”

“Apparently she does.” Allie huffed and pointed at Meg, who had scooted away to sway her bottom at a handsome blond man.

Hilly made a grunting sound and extended the length of her arm seven feet, then changed her hand into a hook to snag her wayward sister. Meg came back, protesting as she waved goodbye to her dance partner. “Good thing everyone here is either too drunk or too self-involved to notice my shift. Both of you should remember why we came here.”

Meg snatched a drink off a passing waitress and took a sip. “Oooh, yummy. Want me to get you two a drink?”

“Meg, focus. We’re here to help Allie. Not to have a good time.”

“I don’t see why we can’t do both.”

“Yeah, she’s right. Let’s have fun while we’re searching.” Allie and Meg tried to blend into the crowd, but Hilly clutched their arms, keeping them with her.

“Not on your life. We’re leaving and finding a different bar.”

“No I’m not.” Allie planted her feet and fisted her hands on her hips, blatantly defying her sister. She didn’t stand up to Hilly often, but now seemed as good a time as any. Her body tugged at her mind, calling for her to choose one of the many men moving their bodies in enticing dances.

“What did you say?”

Allie swallowed and pictured steam pouring from Hilly’s ears. “Uh, I said no?” Shoot, she hadn’t meant for her answer to sound like a question. She held up a hand, cutting off the harsh retort she expected from her oldest sister. “Why can’t we find a man here? I think it’s the perfect place. Don’t you see?”

She glanced around and licked her lips. Yes, this was the place with perfect, handsome, hot men. Men with powerful auras, drawing her to them like a salmon swimming upstream. Although her mind warned her to take care, to heed the possible consequences, she couldn’t ignore her instinctive urge that demanded more with every moment that passed.

“But they’re not the type of men we decided on.” Hilly searched the room before landing her gaze on Allie. “Okay, I know I’m going to regret this, but what are you thinking?”

“Well—” she paused, knowing she had only one shot to make her case, “—it’s like you said. These people are either drunk or self-absorbed and won’t notice anything out of place. I mean, no one even batted an eye when you stretched your arm.”

Although Hilly looked like she was about to burst with arguments, she kept her silence, giving Allie more time. “Think about it, Hilly. What’s more likely to get noticed? A beautiful girl talking to a lonesome man at a quiet bar with a few nosy patrons? Or just another beautiful girl among other beautiful girls talking to one man in a room so crowded you can’t see two feet in front of you?”

Meg raised her glass in salute. “She has a point. And although most of these guys are hunks, I bet there’s one or two nerds around. All we have to do is find the right one.”

“Seriously, Hilly. We’re already here, so why not give it a chance? If it doesn’t work, we can always go to another place later.”

Spinning on her heel, Allie motioned for them to follow her, not waiting for Hilly to disagree. She took the long way around the room, sticking close to the walls and moving slowly to search each male face. If she could find a man Hilly would feel comfortable with—someone who wasn't a wimp or bad looking—then maybe, just maybe, her sister would let her stay. She could hopefully dump the victim, er, *gentleman* once she was through with him and return to the club for some real fun. The normal kind of fun.

She pointed at a nearby table. "Ladies, I think I've found Mr. Right for Tonight."

Chapter Three

Hilly followed Allie's direction and studied an attractive man chatting among a group of people. "He's no good. He's with friends."

"You don't know that they're friends. Maybe they just met tonight." Allie bit her fingernail and tapped her foot. The ever-growing compulsion tested her, commanding her to find the right guy and take what she needed. She moaned, too low for her sisters to hear. No, she had to stay in control. She couldn't, wouldn't let The Hunger, as she'd begun to think of her succubus instinct, hurt someone else. Still, if her sisters stopped her in time, then where was the harm?

"Hilly's right. Even if they don't notice us, they'll notice his absence. Especially if they see him leaving with us." Meg downed the last of her drink and snatched another one off the tray of a different waitress.

"One of these days, you're going to get caught." Nonetheless, Allie tried to do the same, and knocked over two of the five drinks on the tray. The waitress fumbled with the tray and shot her a dirty look. "Sorry. Here's something for your trouble." She smiled and shoved a twenty-dollar bill her way.

"Ya gotta have the touch, sister, and you just don't have it." Meg easily picked off another drink from a different tray and handed it to Allie. "Or use a little magic to help."

"I wish." Allie sipped the pink liquid and let the heat from the drink slide down her throat. A little magic would help a lot. Unfortunately, she was saddled with being a succubus. She took another sip to drown her envy, hoping the fiery liquid would somehow ease the knot in her stomach. If only she could squash her need, just a little. Yet she knew there was only one way to stop The Hunger.

Meg lifted her drink, saluting her as though she'd heard her thoughts.

"Okay, then. We're looking for a man who is by himself in a crowded club where no one will notice when he leaves. Of course, it would be best if he didn't walk out with us and instead met us outside, but we'll sort that out once we find the right guy." Hilly scanned her surroundings, reminding Allie of a lioness in search of prey.

"How about we split up and cover more of the room in less time?" She didn't miss Hilly's suspicious glance and mentally crossed her fingers.

"Fine. But this is all business. No fooling around just for the fun of it. Understood, Meg?"

Meg nodded and splintered away from them while Allie shifted from one foot to the other. "Can I go?"

“Just be careful. And let us know before you start doing anything, okay? Can you promise to do that?”

“I promise.” Allie nodded, wanting to believe her own words and yet she couldn’t shake the sensation that she might not be able to keep her promise. That the gnawing need clawing inside her wouldn’t let her. She swallowed, almost tasting the energy she’d soon drink.

“Good. Then I’ll go this way and you go that way.”

Allie pivoted and hurried off before Hilly could change her mind. She’d find a donor. Of that she was certain. However, until then, she would enjoy herself.

Thanks to Meg’s magical mist, hardly any of the men paid attention to her. In fact, for once in her life, she felt like any other ordinary girl. Trouble was, she wasn’t like any ordinary girl and could never forget that. Gulping down the last of her drink, she elbowed her way to the front of the bar and crooked a finger to signal the bartender. “Hey, bartender.”

The too-slim-to-have-muscles young man swiveled in her direction, the expression on his face anything but pleasant. In fact, if his nose stuck up any higher, he’d drown during the next rain. “I am *not* a bartender. I’m a mixologist.”

“Oh, excuse me. I didn’t know.” Sheesh, who did he think he was anyway? No matter what name he called himself he was still just a guy pouring drinks. And she was just a girl on the prowl. “I’d like a domestic light beer, please.” She managed a polite smile.

“I would’ve thought a sweet drink like a strawberry daiquiri would be more your style.”

The aroma of musk accented with the perfect amount of male hormones drifted to Allie’s nose and she inhaled, wanting more of the intoxicating scent. Fingers of lust spiraled outward, searching for his essence. “Not really. I like beer better.”

She forced herself to study the wood grain of the counter instead of glancing at the mirror behind the bar to see who owned the delicious voice. Let him finish checking her out before she did some checking of her own.

“Are we talking domestic? No, that’s not good enough for you. I think imported is more your style. Marin, give the lady our best imported brew. On the house.”

On the house? Maybe Meg’s mist hadn’t disguised her appeal after all. Someone wanted to buy her a drink. Someone with a deep masculine voice that made her nerve endings stand up and shout for joy. Someone who smelled like heaven but with a solid mix of hell thrown in. Someone who was leaning against her back just hard enough to let her know of his presence, but not so hard as to be rude. She closed her eyes, letting the rush of desire wash through her like a flash flood. Her pulse quickened, her breath shortened, her need spun into high gear. If ever she’d wanted a man...

She warned herself to stay in control. Allie licked her lips then counted to ten before opening her eyes and, tossing her hair away from her face in a practiced flirtatious move, pivoting to face the charming stranger.

His knowing green eyes took her heart and clenched it in its unseen grip, tightening her chest. Dark flecks of an unknown color highlighted the jade, somehow deepening the shade while brightening the color. Laugh lines drew her away from his eyes, then showed the path to the full sensuous mouth below. A mouth she could easily imagine doing naughty and delightful things to her body. The manly mouth, however, was only the start of this alluring face. His jaw line, so strong, so set, captured her imagination, and she had to fist her hands to keep from running her palms along the dark stubble framing his face.

Another kind of yearning, one she'd never felt before, burst to life to run side by side with her primal instinct. She wanted him, more than ever. This need was different. Sexual, yes, but not in a predatory way. Instead, this need wanted more than just his life force. It wanted every part of him.

She blinked, moving back a few inches to take in all of him. Here was a man who knew what he wanted. Here was a man who wanted every ounce of joy he could squeeze out of life. Here was a man who could teach her everything she'd ever wanted to know. Here was a man she had to have. Not to take from him, but to give everything, her body and her heart to him.

He reached across her and she inhaled, suddenly too overwhelmed by his presence to think. Instead, she arched her back and his arm grazed the tips of her breasts. The slight touch was enough to set off a hurricane of lust that had her gripping the bar for support. Steve had turned her on, had drawn out the craving, but this was so much more. Holy hell, who was this guy?

Taking the beer from Marin, he cocked an eyebrow at her and offered her the cold bottle. "Is a bottle okay? Or would you prefer a chilled glass?"

Allie tried to speak, but nothing came to mind. Not even the simplest answer would form. In fact, she was almost afraid that if she said anything he wouldn't speak again. And not to hear that wonderful voice would be more than she could bear. Instead, she took the drink from him, smiled as sexily as she could and took a sip.

The laugh lines crinkled together as a grin lightened his face. "I guess that means you don't want a glass, huh?" He took another beer from the mixologist and pressed the bottle to his lips.

Oh, to be his lips at that moment! Allie's mouth opened, then realizing what she was about to do, she abruptly closed it. Did she drool? Rolling her lips under, she lowered her gaze and prayed that she hadn't. But who would've blamed her if she had? "No, a bottle's fine."

She inhaled his scent again, enjoying the unique aroma, and let the rush of lust sweep over her. Stronger than ever before, her succubus instincts kicked all her senses into overdrive, wiping reason from her. Power surged to every part of her and she raised her gaze to meet his, secure in the knowledge that he couldn't, wouldn't resist her charms. She lifted her hand, extending her index finger to touch him.

A jolt of energy swept over Tom Halloran as those mesmerizing cerulean eyes locked on to him. He'd found many women attractive before and, in fact, liked everything about women. Fat, thin, old, young—

every girl he'd ever met had an allure all her own. Even so, he'd never found one who could make him think of settling down, much less one who could capture his heart. But the magnetism, the mystical charm this sex kitten of a woman possessed drew him in as no other had.

He frowned, simultaneously wary of her charms and unable to resist her. Her long golden hair flowed past her bare shoulders, shoulders of porcelain skin that led to the soft swell of her bosom cruelly hidden under a simple red halter top. He lingered on her breasts, thinking they were the perfect size for his hands, then abruptly jerked his attention away lest he reach out and fondle them. He met her gaze, his mouth suddenly dry. Her mouth, pursed in either petulance or in anticipation of a kiss, called to him, daring him to find out which it was. An oval face fooled him at first, making him think her naïve, yet he could sense an ageless wisdom hiding under the surface.

Then she touched him.

A spark leapt from her finger, lighting up the spot where her fingertip met his shirt. Heat flamed into him, diving downward to scorch his heart, then raced to blaze into his abdomen and between his legs. His shaft jerked to full extension, painfully pressing against the material of his slacks until he ached to shift his package for relief. But relief wouldn't come so easily. He shuddered as though an ice-cold breeze had wafted over him, but that couldn't have been further from the reality. He was caught in a vortex of heat, the need to seize her overwhelming him until he had to hold back the yearning to throw her on top of the counter and fuck her until she screamed his name.

"What the hell?"

Tom almost expected her to question his outburst but, instead, she merely gave him a smile that could own any man.

Her gaze melted him, torching him from the inside out and threatening to stoke the fire even hotter. Taking his hand in hers, she turned and led him toward the hallway leading to the restrooms. Tom had no choice but to follow her. Not that he would've chosen any other option.

She hurried down the dimly lit hallway. Tom, however, couldn't wait another minute. Tugging her with him, he stepped into a dark corner and pressed her to the wall.

His mouth crushed against her full lips, his hands slid over her curves, his body pushed against her hot form. Yet no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get close enough. Lying next to her wouldn't be close enough for him. Only by getting inside her would he have a chance to quench his desire.

Feathering kisses along her soft shoulders, he ran his hand under her top, pushing the material aside to find the taut tip of her breast. Groaning, he rubbed his thumb over the pebbled bud and almost came when she sighed. This girl was more than he could ever have imagined, somehow claiming his body and mind with one sound.

Forgetting that someone might happen upon them at any moment, he lifted her and rejoiced when she wrapped her legs around his waist. Using the wall to hold her, he ran both hands under her top to fondle her

breasts, kneading them, pinching at the hardened nipples. His mouth found hers again and this time he slowed down, leisurely tasting her exhilarating flavors.

Her hands gripped his shoulders, beckoning him to lower his head and take her sweet bud in his mouth. Licking, then nibbling, he pulled the tender flesh, suckling as though she held the elixir to life itself. He groaned again, unable to express his aching need for her in any other way.

Pulling her skirt higher, he cupped her bottom. He kept her bud in his mouth, then slipped his hand between their bodies, and when she rubbed her pantiless pussy against his crotch, he had to fight to keep from passing out. Instead, he pushed her pussy lips apart with his middle finger. She lifted her face to the ceiling, inhaled, then tightened her legs around him.

“Holy shit.” Tom pushed his finger deeper, going as far inside her as he could. Warm wetness enveloped him and his cock throbbed, demanding to replace his finger. His thumb found her already swollen clit and massaged it, working it, making it enlarge even more. She cried out and clutched his back, digging her nails into his shirt, into his skin. Finger-fucking her, he laid his head against her neck to savor her exotic smell. Soon, he would lick her juices from his finger, then plunge his shaft far inside her cave.

“Allison Tristan, no!” The woman’s voice was low yet full of command.

Although he heard the woman, he paid no attention to her. He didn’t care who saw them, he couldn’t let this mysterious sexy woman go. Instead, he boosted her higher and added another finger to her pussy.

“Allie, you have to stop right now.” A different woman spoke this time, but he ignored her too.

His golden-haired goddess, however, tensed, then stilled, her body going rigid. After a moment, shudders ripped through her and, although he tried to make her face him, she turned her head away and emitted a torturous moan. He couldn’t resist bellowing his dismay.

“Allie? Allie, please don’t stop. I have to have you. I want you so much.” But she wouldn’t let him keep her. Amazing him with her strength, she unlocked her legs, lowered them to the floor and pushed him away. Unable to fathom not having her, he held on to her arm and turned to challenge the intruders. “Go away.”

Two women confronted him. The one with black hair, the one with the take-charge attitude, glared at him. “Take your hands off our sister.”

Sister? Yes, he could see the resemblance. But that resemblance was only on the surface. Neither of these women possessed the vitality, the energy his woman did. And he wouldn’t let them take her away. Not until he’d had her. And maybe not even then.

“Allie, come away from him. Now.”

Allie pushed harder against his chest, but he could sense she didn’t want to leave.

“Allie’s a beautiful name.”

At last, she gave him a wonderful smile, a smile hinting at nights of pleasure. “Thank you.” Yet when she faced her sisters, her smile faded. “But I have to go.”

“No. I won’t let you.” He hadn’t meant to say it that way—demanding, as though she had no choice—but it was still what he wanted. Meeting her glistening blue eyes, he vowed he would have her. If not tonight, then soon. “Back off, ladies.”

“Look, big guy, I hate to spoil your fun, but when Hilly says it’s time to go, then it’s time to go. Allie, come on.”

Tom turned his head, ready to confront the redhead, but saw nothing but a fine blue mist. His words got lost somewhere between his brain and his mouth. Stunned both physically and mentally, he was powerless. Allie kissed him lightly on the cheek and gently leaned him against the wall for support. He groaned, this time in frustration, and watched helplessly as the two women led Allie down the hallway and out of his life. His arms felt as though they were encased in cement, making it impossible for him to reach out and bring her back.

Still he vowed, *I’ll find her. Someway, somehow, I’ll find her.*

“Welcome, guys.” Meg did a mean Vanna White impression, sweeping her arm around the living room.

Mitch and Jim sauntered in, glancing around just enough to be polite, then moved next to Meg and Hilly. Mitch snaked his arm around Meg and Jim did the same to Hilly. Hilly, however, spun out of Jim’s hold, then shoved Allie toward the man.

“Hilly, are you sure?” She pushed his arm away and wiggled out of his grasp as Hilly had done, staying close to her sister. The energy that had started with the other man, the one she still wanted, clung to her. She still needed to feed and, in fact, The Hunger was close. Maybe too close to control the next time. “I’m worried that things might get out of hand.”

Hilly shot him a quick glance and pulled Allie closer, then tipped her head and lowered her voice. “You wanted this and here’s your chance. Do what you need to do. Stick to the plan and the guys will be fine. Meg’s going to stay in the room so she’ll be close by. You know, in case you can’t stop. She’ll call me in if I’m needed. Trust me. We won’t let you hurt anyone.”

“Meg’s staying because of Mitch, not just for me.”

Hilly sighed. “True enough. That’s why we ended up with both men, but we’ll handle it. Besides, you know she wants to have fun, too. Especially since Mitch looks like a Greek god come to life. Don’t worry. I’m right in the other room.”

“I just don’t see why I couldn’t have stayed at the club with...you-know-who.” Allie matched her sister’s tone.

“We’ve already gone over this on the way home. I heard that you-know-who is a local. And that’s not what we wanted, remember? Besides, Jim’s a hunk. He’s handsome with a ripped body and, to top it off, he’s super nice. He’s exactly the type you wanted. So what’s wrong?”

“Nothing, but...” Allie ran her gaze up and down him, trying hard not to catch his eye. He was hot, that was for sure. And sexy as hell. At least she’d finally changed Hilly’s mind about looking for a wimp. Due in part to Jim’s and Mitch’s charm, of course. Once the men had Hilly laughing at their jokes, she’d known her sister would give in.

She glanced at the men again, a shiver of desire coursing through her. Who wouldn’t want to have sex with these hunks? They were the type of men women longed for: handsome, rugged, considerate, fun and intelligent. Meg caught her eye, her gaze brilliant and gleaming with eagerness.

The longing for Jim’s life force burst open, a physical force pushing her to do what would come so naturally. All she had to do was stop thinking about the man at the bar. After all, she’d just met him and, with her sisters nearby, she could do what had to be done in relative safety.

Still, after the connection she’d made with the mysterious man at the bar, having sex with Jim somehow felt...off.

Hilly had a right to be confused. Hell, *Allie* was confused. Before tonight she would’ve been all over Jim. What had changed other than meeting the man at the bar?

Hilly arched an eyebrow, shooting her a pointed look, then kept the ball rolling by offering everyone a drink. Meg held on to Mitch, pulling him with her to the couch. Hilly, always the perfect hostess, waved Jim toward the adjacent—and much smaller—loveseat along with Allie.

“No, sis, let me help you.” Allie struggled not to spill the drink on their guest, although she seriously considered the idea as a delaying tactic.

She wanted to return to the club. Not play waitress to these guys. Jim offered Allie his arm, then pulled her close to snuggle his body next to hers. His deep brown eyes met hers and she felt a tug of yearning that demanded fulfillment.

“You have the best eyes. You know that? The best.”

“Thanks.” Allie rewarded him with a soft smile, trying not to send out any pheromones to spur his attraction into higher gear. Yet she knew it was hopeless. The sappy expression on his face said as much. If only she could stop *The Hunger*, but it was already too late. She could almost see the flow of energy spread through her body working outward to find Jim’s essence. Instead, she tried to keep her face averted and glared at Meg. *Yo, Meg! Pay attention.*

Meg and Mitch, however, had their lips locked together. Their hands were everywhere on each others’ bodies and, if she hadn’t had to deal with Jim, Allie would’ve found the sight interesting, enticing. Lust, hard and hot, exploded. She clenched her teeth, turning away from her sister and Mitch. She had to keep her wits about her. “Hilly, would you like some help?”

“No, no. I’m fine. You just get to know Jim, okay?” Hilly peeked around the edge of the kitchen, then disappeared. “Go on, Allie. Do what you *need* to do.”

Hilly was right. This was what she’d waited for. A man she could drain—a little—for his life force with her big sister’s approval. So why was she hesitating?

An image of the man from the bar flashed in her mind, his green eyes twinkling in the light, his admiring looks diving deep inside her. She closed her eyes, remembering the way his tousled hair had felt as she’d run her fingers through it. She remembered how his hard body pushed against hers, spiraling a carnal ache to every nerve ending, and how he grabbed her in a way that had made her feel all woman. With him, she’d gotten a taste of what real lovemaking was like, and she craved more of it.

“Is everything okay, Allie?” Jim’s brows dived downward in concern. “I thought we were going to have some fun.” He leaned forward, giving her a sneak peek at the rock-hard chest under his shirt.

She glanced at Meg and her man, both of whom had their tops off. Meg was already spread out on the couch and trapped underneath Mitch’s body. Meg caught her looking at her, flicked her hand at Allie with a look that said, “Stop watching me and get on with it”, then wrapped her legs around him.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Although her sister’s sexual escapade should embarrass her, Allie had to admit that she didn’t feel embarrassed at all. Was that part of being a succubus, too?

“And you still want to do this?”

Sheesh, but he was so nice. She bit her lip, trepidation for his safety making her rethink the plan. But what other choice did she have? “I guess.” *Not really. Not with you.* “Hilly?”

Hilly arrived to place the appetizers no one wanted on the coffee table and gritted out her words. “Allie, don’t be rude. Make Jim feel welcome in our home.” With a wide-eyed “do it” expression that mimicked Meg’s earlier one, along with a comforting squeeze of Allie’s arm, Hilly headed toward the kitchen.

Allie had to try one last time to get out of this. Telling Jim to wait, she hurried after her sister, grabbed Hilly and scurried into the kitchen. Hilly broke free and scowled.

“Will you stop acting this way, Allie? You need a man and here he is. So just get on with it, okay? And remember not to go too far.”

Allie wasn’t sure which angle might persuade her sister so she went with the easier one first. “No, it’s okay. In fact, I can wait.”

Any other time, Allie would’ve laughed at how fast Hilly’s jaw dropped. But not now. Not when she wanted so desperately to hide in her room. No, nix that. She wanted to get back to the club.

“What do you mean you can wait? Are you kidding me? After what happened with Steve? At the club?” Her oldest sister gaped at her, her expression incredulous. “Wait a second. Are you trying to get out of this so you can go meet that guy at the bar?”

She tried to hide the truth, but Hilly knew her too well.

“Oh, my word. You are.”

Allie wanted to deny the truth but couldn't bring herself to lie.

“Allison Tristan, don't you dare do this to me. To you.”

“I don't know what you mean, Hilly. But, yes, I'd rather have the man at the bar.” Was it horrible that she didn't even know his name? “I mean, Jim's great, he's sexy and a nice guy and everything, but I want the other guy.”

“Oh, my word, you don't even know his name, do you?”

If Hilly's eyes got any narrower, she'd have two slits in her head instead of eyes. “I don't need to know his name, do I? I mean, he's just, you know, sustenance.”

Yet, as soon as she'd said the words, she knew it wasn't true. The man at the bar—*damn, I wish I had asked him his name*—was more. They'd shared an amazing connection. A connection she didn't think had anything to do with being a succubus. He'd stirred another part of her, a better part of her. He'd somehow made her more than a succubus needing nourishment. She hadn't felt the same way with Steve and she had no doubt she wouldn't feel anything similar with Jim.

“Sustenance, my ass.”

“Hilly!” Her sister using a word like “ass” meant she was upset. More than upset, in fact.

“You've got a crush, don't you?” Hilly pointed an accusatory finger, emphasizing her suspicion.

“Don't be silly. A crush? No way.” She averted her eyes, trying to sort out the meaning behind her feelings. Did she have a crush? Could someone develop a crush that fast? Certainly a sexual attraction, but a crush?

“Allie, you're blushing. Oh, my word.”

“Will you please quit saying that?” She straightened up, determined not to let Hilly push her into admitting anything. Let alone her real feelings. “I just prefer his energy to Jim's.”

Hilly, however, wasn't about to let the discussion die. “Look at me, Allison Tristan.”

She couldn't help it. Years of obeying Hilly had trained her well. She brought her gaze to her sister's. Hilly, however, didn't seem bothered any longer. In fact, she seemed almost...understanding.

“Would you like to go on a date with the man at the bar?”

“Seriously?” The word was out before Allie realized the mistake she'd made.

“Ah-ha! I knew it.” Hilly shoved her finger closer to Allie's face. “And no, I'm not serious. But I proved you do have a crush on him.”

“I do not. Okay, maybe a little one. But Hilly, you don't understand. I felt something with him. Something special.”

Hilly backed away, a frown marring her smooth forehead. “Special?” She shook her head, denying Allie's emotions. “No, it can't be. Come on, Allie, be reasonable. You're too new to all this. I'm sure that special feeling happens all the time. Not with every man, but with more than just one.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“You don’t know that.” Hilly crossed her arms over her chest, taking a stand.

“You don’t know it doesn’t.” However, she knew she wouldn’t get anywhere once Hilly decided to dig in. And she was as dug in as Allie had ever seen her. “Look, Hilly, I don’t know how or why I feel the way I do, but I do. If I do this with Jim, it almost feels like I’m cheating on you-know-who.”

“You’re not cheating on someone you don’t have a relationship with. Oh, my word, Allie, you don’t even know the man’s name. I know this is difficult to understand, but you can’t think like that. Until you learn how to control yourself, you can’t get involved with anyone. Promise me you’ll forget about the man at the club.”

Allie nibbled on her lip, unwilling to make a promise she didn’t think she’d be able to keep. But Hilly’s stern expression gave her no choice. “Yeah, fine. I know what you’re saying is right. So, yes, I promise.”

Hilly gave her a quick hug, then held her at arms’ length. “Good. Now get back in there before Jim leaves.”

Hilly spun Allie around, then pushed her out of the kitchen. She stumbled forward, almost tripping, but Jim leapt off the loveseat and caught her, bringing her close to him again.

She couldn’t deny that her sister had a point. Now that they stood in front of Mitch and Meg, she couldn’t tear her gaze away from them. “Oh, wow.”

Meg glanced up, frowned, then waved her hand. The fine blue mist that accompanied most of Meg’s spells floated in the air and a gauzy screen materialized in front of Allie, shielding Meg’s and Mitch’s bodies from her view. Another flip of Meg’s wrist sent blue fog into Jim’s and Mitch’s faces, making them unaware of her spells. Sporting a wicked grin, Meg lay down behind the screen, leaving only shadowy forms for Allie to watch.

Although Allie couldn’t see as much as before, the nearby sexual play swept the all-too-familiar urge through her, igniting from a tiny spark into a burn that threatened to consume her. What would it feel like to go all the way with a man? Her hands moved to her breasts to fondle them while her panties grew wet.

Maybe Hilly was right. After all, she didn’t even know his name. Still, having sex with Jim felt wrong in some indefinable way.

Meg cried out, her body jerking in ecstasy behind the screen. Allie’s mouth went dry and thunder pounded in her ears as her pulse sped up. Her breathing quickened as the burn in her abdomen flared to a full flame. Suddenly, she found it hard to think, to reason, to remember why she didn’t want to do this. The need that sprang from the heat was too strong to resist, blurring all other thoughts except one. *Feed*.

“Put down your drink, Jim,” Allie demanded.

Jim dragged his attention away from the shadowy forms to study her. “Sure. Yeah. Whatever you say.” He placed his glass on the end table and pulled her onto the loveseat.

“Yeah. Whatever I say.” Swinging her body over his, she pulled up her skirt and straddled him.

Jim’s hot gaze fixed on her breasts.

Sighing, Allie untied the straps of the halter top and let the material drop. Jim let out a moan, grabbed her breasts and buried his face between them. She arched her back, enjoying the way he played with them.

Heat burned within her, leading the way to her core, then outward again. She dug her fingernails into his shirt, ripping it from his body. Leading his hands under her skirt, she rubbed against his crotch.

“Damn, you’re beautiful. And sexy as hell.”

“And you talk too much.” Although she’d never had sex before, she instinctively knew what to do, where to touch to stimulate him more. His cock grew harder, wider under her, straining at the denim of his jeans.

Chapter Four

Allie undid Jim's zipper and managed to get his jeans and his underwear down to his ankles. Taking hold of his shaft, she stroked him, letting the friction send her growing need higher. She held her breasts for him, fondling them as he suckled first on one nipple, then the other.

Jim moaned and slipped his hands under her buttocks. His fingers dug into her, kneading her flesh, separating her cheeks to run his fingers along the crease of her butt.

The heat, an inferno starting deep inside, blazed upward into her abdomen, turning the need inside her loose. Intense desire swept through her to tear at her very essence like a lion closing in on its prey and unwilling to let its victim escape. And, as with Steve, she let the predator take over even as an inner voice warned her to stay in control.

She tore him from her breasts and brought his mouth to hers. Jim tasted wonderful, filled with a teasing hint of the male life force lying underneath his skin. A life force she desperately wanted. The only thing that mattered now was access to his soul, to everything that made him a man. How she got there and what she had to touch, see or smell was not a concern. He was no longer a mere man, but a vessel by which she would find nourishment.

Whipping her tongue around his mouth, she let the burning whirlwind rise from her stomach, rush past her lungs and heart, and move into her throat. Her skin pulsed with energy, her hair stood on end, her eyes seared behind her eyelids.

I'll take what I want.

The force filled her mouth, tumbling out of hers and into his. She only wished she could keep the smoky haze inside, but some escaped from the spots where their mouths parted. But no matter, she had more than enough power to do what she needed to do, to take what she wanted to take.

Jim let go of her butt cheeks and stiffened; the first signs that he sensed that something more than sex was happening. She increased her power over him, willing him to continue to run his hands over her body. For a moment, he paused, unsure of what was happening, but she pushed him to go on. He surprised her with his willpower, but soon enough, she won him over and he lost his ability to protest.

Give me what I need.

Allie rocked back and forth, rubbing him as she positioned her crotch against his leg, imagining different ways to draw his strength into her body. She wanted more from him and she wanted it now. Tearing her body away from his and ignoring his shout of dismay, she tugged him to the floor with her.

“Suck on me while I suck on you.” Although she could drain more energy by riding his cock, she wanted to try a different way first. She grinned, her instincts blazing to new heights, thrilling at the power she held over him.

Jim’s glazed eyes blinked, then he did as she told him to do. He offered his shaft to her and she took it, reveling in the texture of his skin in her palm. Wrapping her hand around the shaft, she deep-throated him. Jim jerked, then put his mouth on her lower lips.

Allie spread her legs wide, mewling to let him know he pleased her. He moved her lips apart, pressed his mouth to her nub. The combination of both of them sucking at the same time sent hot waves of lust swirling outward, spreading from her torso into the tips of her fingers and toes. He drank from her as she pulled on his shaft, drawing more from him than he could ever realize. He trembled, hazy smoke pouring from his mouth to float over her mons.

“Allie.” Meg’s voice broke her concentration. “Let’s change it up, okay?” She still lay behind the screen as she pushed Mitch through the hazy blue wall toward Allie. “Besides, we need to be careful. Take a little from Mitch, too. Then you won’t take too much from one man.”

Excitement at having both men’s power leapt inside Allie. She checked Jim, wanting to make sure he was all right, and noted his cloudy eyes. Under her control, he would do as she wished. “Jim, go to Meg. Mitch, come here.”

Jim stumbled his way to Meg, who tugged him through the blue haze, while Mitch scooted over to Allie and gave his shaft to her, straddling her head and running a hand through her hair.

Allie sucked him in, craning her neck to see his face and watch as her power overtook him. Within a minute, his eyes glazed over and the delectable taste of his life energy flowed into her mouth. She sighed, blowing her breath and a fine fog over his length.

Allie closed her eyes, enjoying the sighs of pleasure and moans of delight coming from the others. The intensity of life rushed through her, absorbing their life forces to combine them with her own. Strength made her feel invincible and beautiful, as though she’d been only half a person before. Her body tingled from the influx, sending wave after wave crashing through her, invigorating her.

Surges of multiple releases shook her body but didn’t slow the ever-increasing urge to draw life force where she found it. She closed her eyes, letting the sensual sounds of Jim with Meg wash over her, adding to the hungry murmurs Mitch made. The fire burned brightly within her, the animal of lust gaining more, wanting more.

Opening her eyes, she watched the shadows come together behind the screen. Was Jim treating her sister to the same delights he’d given her? She ached to have more, more sex, more sensation, more life force. As though Mitch knew her thoughts, he spread her lips and blew on her aching nub.

The wave of release surging through Allie sent her skyward. Yet, the same release traveled inward, bringing a rush of Mitch’s life force with it. She leaned her head back, no longer aware of anything or

anyone except the desire trembling through her body. A blast of lust erupted deep inside her and The Hunger doubled in intensity.

Allie, like an addict ready for a fix, tugged Mitch onto the loveseat and straddled him. She rubbed against his leg as she'd done with Jim, teasing him.

Meg lifted her head from behind the screen and shot Allie a questioning grin. "Are you all right, little sister?"

She moaned, giving her answer the only way she could manage. The burn inside flamed impossibly higher as Mitch kissed her, then ran his hands along the curve of her buttocks, positioning her to slide his shaft inside her. Her need to drain him spiraled out of her control and she tried to shout a warning, but her words were lost in the need to feed.

Mitch growled and she took his face in her hands, needing to see what was happening within him. What she saw startled her; his eyes were even more dazed than before. Allie cried out, knowing she'd lost the battle for control. The hazy smoke of before was nothing compared to the darkening cloud forming around them. Her eyes grew hot and, with a growl, she yanked his mouth to hers.

I have to have more. Give me more.

She repeated the need, like a mantra, setting The Hunger, the supernatural side of her, free. Allie closed her eyes, gritted her teeth and held on, sucking his energy, bit by bit, into her body. She could no longer stop.

"Allie, no! Hilly, get in here!"

Allie heard her sisters' shouts but couldn't, wouldn't, stop. She moved against him, coaxing him to enter her if he dared. The smoke floated around them, sifting out of her mouth. Her body pulsed with energy as the life-affirming pink hue spread across her skin. And still it wasn't enough. She rose, took his shaft in her hand and placed the tip of him at her opening.

"Allie, you're going too far."

Hilly's voice was close to her ear, low yet demanding, but she ignored it. No, this time, she wanted all of it. All of him. She stared into Mitch's wide eyes, studied his parted lips. He was under her domination, his mind unaware of what was happening to his body. Allie touched his hair, silently thanking him for the gift he was about to give her.

An explosion rocked the world around them, shaking her out of her trance. Shock waves rippled through her, pain tore at her, stunning her and quenching the inferno within her. The world wavered, then refocused as her body shuddered.

She sat on top of an unconscious Mitch, their bodies surrounded by the same smoky fog she'd noticed with Steve. His head lolled back, and his eyes were open and blank. Terror gripped her heart. Had she killed him?

Each taking an arm, her sisters pulled her off him. Her body, imbued with vigor, still shook, a strange combination of fear and exultation raking through her as a pink hue covered her skin. “Is he alive?”

Hilly sat next to him and held his chin. She peered into his unfocused eyes and nodded. “Yes, he’s alive. But barely.”

Allie glanced at Jim, nude and sitting upright on the sofa. His eyes were dull, his jaw slacked, in many ways resembling Mitch. Yet Mitch was different. His skin was pale, his body limp. Jim’s body contained a subdued life, a satisfied exhaustion, but Mitch’s seemed devoid of spirit. Allie’s stomach twisted into a knot. “I tried to tell you, but I couldn’t. Please let him be all right.”

Hilly reached over and squeezed her hand. “Don’t go there, Allie.”

Meg, fully clothed, waved her hand in front of Jim. “He’s still out. That gives us time.”

“Time for what?” She couldn’t keep her voice from rising. “Time to bury Mitch’s body? Oh, hell, what have I done?” How could she have gone so far? An idea hit her, frightening her. What would *he* have thought of her?

Hilly patted Mitch’s face. When he didn’t respond, she checked his pulse. “Allie, calm down. He’s not going to die. Let me work on him and he’ll recover. I’m just glad Meg’s disruption spell snapped you out of it before... Well, before.”

“In the meantime, you get dressed while I get loverboy here—” Meg ran a hand through Jim’s tousled hair, “—back in his clothes.”

Calming down, however, was the last thing Allie thought she’d ever do. “I took too much.”

Her sisters didn’t answer, instead shooting each other a look that confirmed her suspicion. She shivered and, although she hated what she’d done, she couldn’t ignore the vitality spreading throughout her. The men’s life forces were exactly what her body had needed.

“Allie, wait for us in your bedroom.”

“But, Hilly—”

“No, buts. I’ll stay with Mitch while he recovers, and then Meg will put them both under a spell to forget everything that happened here. They’ll think they went on a bender and ended up in the alley behind the house. Now go.”

Allie left her clothes on the floor and hurried to her bedroom. Slipping on her nightgown, she lay on the bed, stared at the ceiling and blocked the image of Mitch’s hollow eyes. She had to think of something else. If she didn’t...

She sighed, remembering the romantic comedy movie she’d watched last weekend. Even with all the silly obstacles in their way, the lovers had managed to be together in the end. Why couldn’t that happen to her? The answer was easy enough to sort out: She was a succubus.

Would she ever learn to control her needs? If only her mother had lived, then maybe... Her mother's image smiled at her from the photo on the wall. Unlike so many times before, it gave her no comfort. Instead, she stared at the ceiling and the heavens beyond.

"Mom, if you're listening, could you please help me?" Her whisper sounded desperate, lonely and afraid. "What am I supposed to do? How did you live this way? Oh, how I wish you were here."

A tear trickled down the side of her face. If her mother were here, what would she tell her about the man at the club? Would she tell her to forget about him? To leave him alone? Or to find out why he seemed special?

"If I can't control this, how will I ever have a relationship?" She let her mind wander back to the club. "Mom, am I being ridiculous? Can I ever have a real love like the one you found with Dad?"

Another tear slid down her cheek and she wiped it away. Crying wouldn't help matters. If she wanted to have what her mother had, what her sisters could have, then it was up to her to make it happen. Why shouldn't she have the same chance at love that her sisters had? She bit her fingernail, letting her mind wander in search of the answer. Maybe, just maybe, she could have a real relationship. Maybe, if she saw her lover only after she'd fed on someone else, she wouldn't feel the urge to drain him.

She sat up, smiled at her mother's photo and dared to dream. "That's the trick, isn't it? Making sure I've already fed before going to see him?" Stretching out her arms, she liked the strength inside her limbs and was reassured by the energy flowing through her. She'd never felt this strong. Surely she wouldn't be tempted to drain anyone else's energy. At least not for a while. But for how long? Maybe a week? A day? Or only a few hours?

"I bet I got enough life force from Jim and Mitch to last the night." *Almost too much.* But she couldn't let the guilt of what she'd done shake her determination. Thanks to them, she could see the sexy man at the club without worrying.

Her resolve faded a little, a different type of guilt washing it away. What would he think about what she'd done? Had he seen them leaving the club with Mitch and Jim? She hugged her knees to her chest. What she'd done with them couldn't be considered cheating, could it? After all, the man at the club—*sheesh, why didn't I ask him his name?*—wasn't her boyfriend or anything. Still, she felt guilty. And if she felt that way now, how would she feel if they did become a couple and she needed to feed on another man?

She groaned and flopped on the bed. Why did her life have to be so complicated? Sex was simple. At least for others, for her sisters. But for a succubus? Not so much. She rethought her idea, forming the basis of a plan.

Step One: Feed on someone other than her potential boyfriend. Hilly and Meg could help her with that. In fact, she could do as she'd done tonight, although she'd have to learn to control her urges and cut the connection before she'd drained her source. Or before Meg had to light a magical fuse under her butt—literally—to get her to stop.

Step Two: See the prospective boyfriend only while full of energy. She had no way of knowing for certain, but she had a feeling that her urges wouldn't lead her astray if she'd already satisfied them with someone else.

Step Three: Get away from her boyfriend when the urge strikes again. She couldn't risk staying close to him while she needed energy. Of course, that meant she'd have to come up with various excuses she could use to abruptly leave.

And Step Four? She bounced out of the bed, threw off her nightgown and pulled on a red dress. Forget Step Four. She knew what she had to do. She was full of Jim's and Mitch's energies—*thank you, guys*—which meant now was the best time to see the hunk at the club. Without her sisters around to drag her home. Hilly was already suspicious of her feelings for the mystery man. If she knew she wanted to get emotionally involved, she'd never let her out of her sight.

Allie sat up, focusing her attention on the voices drifting in from the living room. She could hear Meg compelling Mitch and Jim to get dressed—which meant Mitch was all right now—and knew her time was limited. Tiptoeing to the door, she cracked it open to better hear their conversation.

"Well, that didn't turn out so great." Meg's sarcastic tone floated on the air.

"We did the best we could."

"Get moving, Jim."

"Take it easy, Meg. Besides, Mitch's legs are still buckling. I can barely keep him upright."

"Then do as I suggested, big sis. Make like a wheelbarrow."

Hilly groaned. "Urgh. I'm not sure I want to."

The shadows of Meg and Hilly helping the men around the corner had Allie pushing the door quietly shut. She flicked off the light and held her breath, waiting for them to pass.

"I guess Allie went to bed early, Hilly."

"Hmm. That's odd. With the energy she received tonight, I'd think she'd be wide awake."

"Yeah, but who knows? Maybe that's how it works. Maybe she needs to rest and store the energy before reaping its benefits."

"Reaping is right. She just about sent poor Mitch to the Grim Reaper. Next time we'll have to stay out of the fun. Both of us."

"Oh, stars and moon, don't be such a killjoy, Hilly. Besides, someone had to stay in the room with her. If I hadn't glanced over at her, Mitch would be toast right now."

"I know, but—"

"No buts about it. Maybe if you had a man once in a while you wouldn't be so squeamish about sex. Once we help Allie transition into a full-fledged succubus, you need to start thinking about yourself and find a man of your own. After all, we're all grown up now."

Hilly's chuckle was rueful and sad. "You're grown up? Then why am I hauling two knocked-out men outside?"

"Come on, Hilly. Can't you see how much easier this would be with you as a wheelbarrow? So change, sister, before this big lug breaks my back."

Allie heard Hilly groan, a sure sign she'd given in to Meg's suggestion and was already getting the men loaded onto her new form.

"That-a-girl, Hilly. But you still need to do your part. Turn those wheels of yours."

The door slammed behind them as they hurried toward the dark street behind the house. Allie turned on the radio she always listened to while sleeping and pushed pillows under the bedspread. Although she had a nagging feeling that she was forgetting something important, she grabbed her purse, then peeked through the window. Meg and a back-to-human Hilly were gently positioning the men against the fence on the other side of the street, propping them up as though they'd fallen and passed out. Making certain her sisters were too far from the house to see her, she shoved open her bedroom window and crawled out.

Chapter Five

Allie paid the overly attentive cab driver, rebuking his thousandth advance and, for just as many times, chided herself for not bringing the anti-appeal potion. Without the potion, her appeal attracted too many men and she could barely move around in public without constantly getting hit on. She sighed. Tonight, she'd just have to deal with the fallout of her succubus allure. Besides, if that fallout happened to bring the hot mystery man back to her, then the other advances would be worth it.

The excitement of the crowd washed over her as she entered the club, filling her with a delight she'd rarely experienced. She paused, checking around her to see if the spell Meg had used earlier to counteract her allure still held. No one noticed her, adding to her happiness.

"This is awesome." Tossing her hair over her shoulder, she marched up to the bar. People closed in around her, yet instead of making her feel trapped, it gave her the feeling of welcomed acceptance. She grinned at her reflection in the mirror behind the bar. Was it always like this? Did these people have fun every night?

She nodded at a young woman tending bar and ordered a beer. The bottle was cool against her palm and she longed to hold it to her cheek. Hoping to appear nonchalant, although she was anything but, she scanned the throng and tried not to look too obvious.

Where was he? She took a sip. Had he gone home? Her heart dropped at the thought, but she pushed it aside, unwilling to admit defeat. Instead, she concentrated on watching a couple dancing a few feet away from her. Their bodies bumped together as they thrust in enticing sexual movements. Would someone ask her to dance? And if he did, would she be able to dance with such abandon?

"Hi."

Allie broke her gaze away from the dirty dancing couple to a very tall man tearing off her clothes with his eyes. "Oh. Hi."

Catching the disappointment in her tone, he frowned, then wiped the frown away with a leer. The man's frank perusal raked over her again and Allie had to resist the urge to see if she was still wearing any clothing.

"Wanna dance?"

With this guy? Allie looked behind him. Where was he?

"So? Did the cat get your tongue?"

"Oh. Uh, no. I mean, why would a cat want my tongue?"

The man laughed, then took her beer and set it on the counter. “Come on, sweet cheeks. Let’s hit the dance floor.” Grabbing her hand, he tugged her along with him.

When it became all too apparent that he was intent on being her dance partner, she fought the impulse to yank her hand away and instead let him lead her to the middle of the dance floor. Allie copied the other women’s movements and, although not thrilled with her partner, started to enjoy the music. She closed her eyes and swayed with the beat.

The hand on her breast jolted her out of her reverie and she stumbled.

“Hey!” Losing her balance, she fell backward, her arms flailing outward as she reached for anything to stop her fall. Strong arms slipped under hers, saving her. Green eyes locked on to hers and she sucked in a breath.

The mystery man she’d searched for stared at her, a concerned expression hardening his face. “Are you all right?”

She blinked, unable to find her voice. Instead, she reached out and ran her palm over his cheek.

“She’s fine, dude. Now back off and leave my woman alone.”

His woman? Mystery Man placed her on her feet and, after a momentary wobble, she set the tall, annoying man straight. “I am not your woman.”

“Yeah, you are. I figured we’d end up between the sheets later on which means you’re my woman for the night. And this dude better back off.”

“Hey, I’m not getting in the middle. I’m just glad I was here to help.”

His wonderful green eyes captured her and she grabbed his arm and held on. “No, no. Seriously. We’re not together. I was just dancing until I found—” She clamped her mouth closed on the “you” that had almost popped out.

“Until you found what?” Her dance partner moved in closer, putting his face inches from the hot man of her desire even as he spoke to her. “Until you found someone better? And you think this guy’s better than me?”

Allie snorted out a scoff. “Well, duh.” She slapped a hand over her mouth. The man was an annoyance, but she didn’t need to be rude. “I’m sorry. That wasn’t nice.”

“Like I said, I’m just happy to be in the right spot at the right time.” Mystery Man turned away from Mr. Annoying to study her. “Unless you want me to do something else? Like maybe save you again?”

“Save her from what? Me?” Mr. Annoying’s voice rose, his bloodshot eyes narrowing as he scowled at them. “I’d like to see you try it, asshole. The bitch is mine, so back off.”

“Okay, that does it.” Mystery Man grabbed Mr. Annoying’s arm and twisted it behind his back in one smooth move. The big guy howled in pain and struggled to get free, but it was no use.

Allie’s mouth dropped open, then she rolled her lips under to keep from laughing. If Mr. Annoying’s face got any darker, he could double as a big red balloon.

Her hero, however, simply shook his head at her. "Since my friend here doesn't have the manners to do so, I'll apologize for him." Two large men, obviously bouncers, strode over and took the complaining Mr. Annoying off his hands. "Okay, folks, the fun's over. Go on back to having fun."

Two dimples made their appearance as Mystery Man held out his hand and took hers. "Hi, I didn't get around to introducing myself earlier. I'm Tom Halloran."

"Allie Tristan."

"Yeah, I know."

She couldn't repress the shiver of delight running through her. "You do?"

"The other two women who pulled you away from me said your name. And I never forget a pretty girl's name."

Was she blushing? She sure felt like she was.

"Come with me, okay?" He nodded toward the left side of the club and took her with him.

He settled her into the booth with a *Reserved* sign on the table, and she held her breath as he scooted onto the seat beside her.

"Still, I'm surprised you remember my name."

"How could I forget it?" His chuckle was warm and made her want to press her hand to his chest. He scanned the club a moment before focusing on her again. "They were your sisters, right? Did they come back, too?"

She giggled at the slight cringe he tried to cover up. "Yes and no. Yes, they're my sisters, Hilly and Meg. And no, I'm by myself."

"Good." His huge smile brought his delicious dimples out to play again. "No offense. I mean, I'm sure your sisters are very nice, but I like having you all to myself."

Her pulse quickened at his declaration. "Me, too." He chuckled and she widened her eyes as she'd realized what she'd said. "Uh, thank you for saving me from that man."

"No problem. Besides, I don't want guys like him in my club."

"Your club? So you're the one who bought the place and fixed it up?" She dared to lean closer so that their shoulders touched. The heat from his body seared into hers. She bit her lip, letting the urge wash over her. Fortunately, she no longer needed the energy. Instead, her desire was all pleasure without the hunger.

"I am. Actually, it was my uncle who owned the bar before me. When he decided to put it up for sale, I jumped on it. With a family discount, of course." He laughed at her incredulous expression. "I know. No one thought I could ever make any money, but I did. I go on my gut feelings even when it doesn't make a lot of sense, and my gut's always right." Another laugh brought out the dimples in his cheeks again. "Call it my special power. Anyway, my gut told me this was a diamond in the rough. Besides, I couldn't resist the challenge." His intense look sent shivers down her spine. "I love challenges of all kinds."

She batted her eyes, an action that normally had men falling to their knees and begging her for a kiss. Sure enough, Tom's jaw dropped, his eyes glazed over and he leaned closer, placing his lips an inch from hers. Yet instead of following her desire, she pressed her fingers to his mouth and shook her head.

"I like you, Tom."

He jolted out of the trance. "Uh, I like you, too. In fact, I'd really like to get to know you."

Allie couldn't be sure if he'd been affected by Meg's earlier spell or not, but it didn't matter. This was no ordinary man. She didn't know how she knew he was special, but she did.

He zeroed in again, and again she declined the kiss. "Let's talk, okay?"

Although he was visibly confused, he acquiesced and waved a waitress over to take their drink orders. "Would you like another beer?" She nodded and he gave the girl their orders.

"It must be nice to be the boss. I guess you get faster service, huh?"

"Yeah, being the boss has its perks. Like getting to meet a beautiful woman."

She'd been called beautiful thousands of times, but the flattery had never meant anything. Until now. "And the cons?"

"Trust me. There's a lot of cons. Like having to toss out unwelcomed dance partners like yours."

"Hey, I'm not claiming him."

His laugh, so infectious, made her giggle along with him. "I don't blame you."

He stilled, studying her as though she'd suddenly changed. Was her succubus glow showing? She dipped her head, avoiding his intense look.

"Allie?"

"Yes?"

"I don't know what it is about you, but I don't think I've ever met anyone like you before." He took a drink. "Wow. Did that sound as lame to you as it did to me?"

Allie lifted her gaze to his, then took his hand. "That wasn't lame at all. And I know what you mean."

Tom glanced at her hand on top of his, then looked at her, a strange gleam in his eyes. "I don't know if you need to get home or anything, but I'd really like it if you'd stick around. I want to get to know you, and once I get my assistant manager, Rob, to take over for me, we can spend the rest of the night together. Would that be okay?"

If she grinned any bigger, he'd probably think she was a lunatic. But she couldn't help it. The joy bubbled inside her, taking over. "More than okay."

The waitress returned with their drinks and, after a quick exchange, he relayed the message to Rob. Turning back to Allie, he twisted, placing one arm over the back of the booth and the other on the table so he could look directly into her face. "So tell me about yourself."

She squirmed, lowering her gaze to her drink. Although she was used to men staring at her, having this particular man study her made her suddenly shy. Besides, what could she tell him? That she was a

succubus with a witch and a shape-shifter for sisters? That she could drain him of every ounce of his life source? Yeah, right. Instead, she stuck to the things she could reveal.

“Well, there’s nothing extraordinary to tell you.” *Oh, how you lie!* “My sisters and I own a bakery called Sweet Nothings.” She glanced up to see his lips slightly parted and yearned to kiss them. Instead, she yanked her attention back to her cold drink.

“Is that the bakery on Patterson Street?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“I’ve always wanted to stop in but haven’t gotten around to it. But now that I know you’re there, I’ll put it at the top of my to-do list.”

She’d like that. Unless Meg and Hilly caused a problem. Would they remember him from the club?

“Other than working at the store, I stick to home most of the time.” *Except when I’m sneaking out my window to see a sexy guy.*

“A homebody, huh? Funny, I wouldn’t have pegged you as one. But then again, if I had someone at home who looked like you, I’d stay home, too.”

Was his flattery sincere? She hoped so. Oh, how she hoped so.

“So we’re both business owners. Go on. Do you live with anyone?”

She dared to look up, wanting to see his reaction. “Not like you mean. I live with my sisters.” To his credit, he only blinked when she half expected him to hurriedly excuse himself and make a dash for safety. “They’re really not as bad as you might think. They’re just very protective of me.”

He tightened his arm around her, drawing her closer. “That just shows how much they care about you. And who can blame them?”

She liked his answer and knew it came from the heart. In fact, everything about Tom seemed genuine. “What about you? Any family?”

“You mean other than my late uncle? No.”

A cloud darkened his features and Allie regretted the question. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to pry.”

His dimples and smile returned in full force. “Don’t worry about it. It’s not a big deal. I lost my parents when I was very young. Then I lived with an aunt until I went to college. When she passed on, that left my uncle and me, and now it’s just me.”

She touched his hand, wanting to touch his heart more. “I know how hard it is to lose parents. Both of mine died when I was younger. But it’s been more difficult for my sisters, Meg and Hilly. Especially Hilly, since she basically raised Meg and me.”

“Of course.” The crooked smirk he gave her warned her in advance. “But loss hasn’t seemed to hurt the power of their lungs.”

She playfully slapped the hand she'd just held, then wrapped her hand around her drink. "Watch it, bub. My sisters and I are tighter than a noose around a condemned man's neck." *What a thing to say, Allie. Sheesh!*

Tom lifted his hands to her, palms out. "Hey, it was only a joke."

Their conversation flowed on as though they'd been long-time friends who had only now started to recognize that their connection could grow stronger, deeper. Allie listened to him describe his childhood and his life after college. She added bits of information from her comparatively unexciting life without telling him too much. How much she said, however, didn't matter. Just sitting next to him was enough.

Even as the crowd began to thin and the hours passed, they remained, sitting close together, talking about the important events in their lives as well as the meaningless things. At one point, the assistant manager came by to check on them, but they barely acknowledged his presence. Allie had never experienced a night like this, one spent simply talking with a man.

"So tell me, Allie Tristan, do you always do what your sisters tell you to do?"

Startled, she wanted to deny the accusation, but then thought better of it. From what little he'd seen, she did follow their orders. "Not always."

He reached out to slip a strand of her hair between his fingers. "Uh-huh. Just what I thought. You've got a wild streak, don't you?"

Had she gone too far? She bit her bottom lip and focused on his. Or had she not gone far enough? She wanted him. And in a different way than she'd wanted Steve or Mitch. Could she trust her body not to take over and drain him? After all, she'd already fed tonight. Why would she need to do so again?

"I think everyone has a wild streak." She dared him, not with words but with her eyes. "If they have someone around to bring it out in them."

"Then let me bring out your wild streak, Allie."

Tom pressed his mouth to hers and slipped his arm around her shoulders to pull her closer. Allie sighed and rid her mind of any thoughts other than how warm his lips were. A tingle shot through her, sizzling her to the core. Her pussy tightened, lust flowing into the sensitive parts of her body.

"Now that I've had time to consider what happened, I have to say it was a good night's work."

Meg touched her wineglass against Hilly's. "I didn't think so at first but, on second thought, I agree. After all, we got Allie what she needed and no one died. Mitch and Jim will wake up tomorrow morning and not suspect anything other than having gone on a bender. And, thanks to my forget-me spell, they won't have any memory of the Tristan sisters. Much less Allie's withdrawal from their energy accounts." She ran her tongue over her upper lip, catching a drop of wine. "Are you sure they'll be all right?"

“Definitely. I checked on them again. They’re out cold and snoring enough to scare away the stray cats.”

“Good. Now we can relax.”

The sisters leaned back on the couch and grew silent, savoring their drinks. The quiet of the home swept over Meg and she sighed and closed her eyes, content to be by her sister’s side.

“Meg, maybe we should check on Allie.”

Aw, *damn*. Forcing her tired eyes open, Meg drowned the remainder of her wine, then scowled at her sister. “Stars and moon, Hilly. For once in your life, take it easy. She’s fine.”

Hilly glanced at the hallway leading to her sister’s bedroom. “I’m sure she is, but still...”

Groaning, Meg took Hilly’s hand and stood, pulling her older sister along with her. “Come on. We might as well check on her, because I know you won’t relax until we do.”

Together the sisters strode toward Allie’s room. Hilly knocked on Allie’s door and they waited, hoping for a reply.

When none came, Meg uttered a curse and wiggled the doorknob. “Locked.”

“Oh, my word. She never locks her door.” Hilly shot her a suspicious look.

“Yes she does.” Meg bit her lip, then told her sister the rest of her thoughts. “She does. But only when she has something to hide.”

“Meg, we have to get this door open.”

“Yeah. I know.” Uttering a curse under her breath, Meg said a quick spell, then waved her hand in front of the doorknob. The door creaked open, allowing the sisters to barge inside the room.

Meg snatched the sheets off the bed, exposing the two pillows underneath. “Shit. Can you believe she pulled this old trick?”

Hilly, however, was already one step ahead. “Where the hell is she?” She flung open Allie’s closet doors and pushed aside the hanging clothes to search in the back.

Meg arched an eyebrow and crossed her arms over her chest. “Do you really think she’s hiding in the closet? I don’t know about you, but Allie quit playing hide-and-seek about ten years ago.”

“She pulled the old pillows-under-the-covers routine, didn’t she?” Hilly whirled around and stomped to the other side of the room. Going down on her hands and knees, she checked under the bed. “She has to be somewhere.”

Meg fought back a laugh, knowing her sister wouldn’t find the situation—or the fact that her bottom was stuck in the air—the least bit funny. “I doubt you’re going to find her under there. But watch out for the dust bunnies. Those little buggers can take one helluva bite out of you.”

“Meg, this isn’t funny.” Hilly rose, then strode over to the window. “Who knows what might happen to her. Or to someone else.”

Meg flopped onto the bed and watched her older sister push open the window.

“Ah-ha! Just as I suspected. It’s unlocked. I’ll bet you anything she slipped out of the house through the window. All while we were busy cleaning up.”

“Ya think, Sherlock? And by cleanup, you mean taking Mitch and Jim out to the alley for a little snoozy time. Come on, sis. What’s the big deal? She just fed. It’s not like she’ll need energy anytime soon. Hey!”

She scrambled over the bed to the other side as Hilly rushed at her. “How do you know, Meg? We have no clue how long she can last before she’ll need another man to feed on.” She paused and snatched up an ornate green bottle sitting on the nightstand. “Oh, my word. I’ll bet you anything that she forgot to take her potion, too. Now I really am worried.”

Her sister had a point. Without her non-attraction potion, Allie’s succubus allure was bound to attract a lot of men. Men who might not take no for an answer. “Okay, that’s not good.”

“Really?” Hilly pocketed the bottle, took a big breath and fisted her hands on her hips. “All right, let’s stay calm and focused. How do we find her?”

“To bad we didn’t put a GPS locator on her. Or implant a chip like they use for lost dogs.”

“Meg.” The warning in Hilly’s voice was unmistakable. Her irritation and worry formed lines in her forehead. “You don’t think she went back to the club and that man, do you?”

“Of course she did. Why didn’t I think of that?”

“But she promised me she’d leave him alone.”

Meg rolled her lips under to keep from chuckling at her sister’s disbelief. “Yeah, ya think she’d obey you better than that. Not.”

“Then let’s get going.”

Hilly was halfway out of the room when Meg hailed her. “Hang on. Don’t get your panties in a bunch, big sis. I have an idea. Let’s be sure our hunch is right and we don’t end up on a wild goose chase, wasting valuable time. Follow me. Oh, and bring Allie’s hairbrush with you.”

Meg led the way into their combination work-slash-junk room and rummaged through her collection of herbs, preserved animal body parts and various other ingredients for spells and potions. “Good. Here’s what I need.”

She dumped the ingredients onto the big table in the corner, then reached for the slow cooker and plugged it in. She patted the cooker like she’d pat an old friend, satisfied with her choice. After all, who said witches had to use cauldrons anyway? She’d take a good old Crock-Pot anytime.

“What are you mixing up?” Hilly peeked over her shoulder.

Meg added water from a nearby pitcher, then edged Hilly away. “Give the master some room to work. I’m mixing up a finder spell.”

“I thought that was only good for finding things like lost keys.”

Meg sprinkled in a dash of frog's toes. "Usually. But I'm hoping it'll help find missing sisters, too. Now give me a few strands of Allie's hair and we should be all set." She spooned the hairs into the concoction, stirring everything together until all that remained was a brown blob with the consistency of pudding.

"Would you like to do the honors, Hilly?"

"Uh, no thanks. The last time I tried that, I almost burned my hand off."

"Wuss." Meg shot her sister a quick smile, then carried the gunk into the bathroom and dumped it into the sink. The awful smelling mess bubbled and gurgled, staining the sink a terrible color. "Here goes nothing."

"Let's hope you're wrong about that." Hilly positioned herself next to Meg and stared into the goop.

"Quiet, now. Concentrate and look. Come on. Show us where Allie is."

The mixture swirled as though ocean currents had set it in motion. Bubbles burst, releasing an awful stench while bits and pieces of frog toes popped to the surface.

"Argh. Why do your mixes have to be so revolting?"

"First, I don't think that's true. But sometimes, they have to be. Just like the best medicine is usually the worst tasting."

"Then this should help us find our little sister in a flash and cure cancer at the same time."

Meg peered into the glop and nodded. "When you're right, you're right. At least about locating Allie. I already see something."

Hilly leaned closer, her nose scrunched up and her brow furrowed. "Where? I don't see anything."

Meg pushed her away to get a better look. "That's because you're a shape-shifter and not a witch. Ah, I see her and you were right. She's at the club with what's-his-name."

"Oh, for cripe's sake, Meg. Why did she go there against my express order not to?"

Meg opened the drain and turned on the faucet to wash away the mixture. "Gee, I don't know. But if you were a young woman with burgeoning sexual desire and you'd met a very handsome man earlier in the evening, wouldn't you want to see him again?"

"At least tell me she's not draining him."

"Nope. Not yet anyway. But we'd better get over there before she does something we'll all regret. Especially Mr. Hottie. Let me grab a potion and we're off."

Chapter Six

Allie broke off the kiss, forced her growing desire under control, and smiled at Tom.

"That was nice," he said.

"Uh-huh." Perhaps too nice? Had she made a mistake coming back to the club? She gazed into his rich green eyes, then shoved away her concern. No. She'd keep her succubus urges at bay and enjoy his company. Nothing more. After all, she'd already taken energy from the other men. Why would she need Tom's?

She leaned against the cushion of the booth and let her wishes take hold. Could she ever have a love like the heroines in her favorite movies? A love where she didn't have to worry about hurting the man? A love where she would be adored just for being herself and not because of her succubus allure? And failing a true, long-lasting love, could she at least have sexual escapades like Meg without almost killing her partners?

She glanced at Tom and wanted to say something witty, but never got the chance. Tom crushed his mouth to hers, cupping the back of her head. At first she tried resisting, tried to keep her resolve not to give in to her attraction, but within seconds she knew she couldn't. Groaning, she slid her arms under his to grip his back, pushing her breasts against his chest.

The kiss was magical. That was the only word Allie could think to describe how Tom's lips felt pressed to hers. His warm lips against hers made her shudder with a delight she hadn't known could exist, hadn't dared dream she might experience. He nibbled her lower lip and she sighed, then felt him smile at her girly gesture. But she didn't care. At that moment, nothing mattered except staying close to him.

Demanding yet gentle, Tom drew in her tongue until he could play his with hers. Keeping her lips to his, he ran a hand along her leg, pausing a moment at the hem of her skirt before sliding his fingers under the material. He hesitated again, waiting for her to give him a sign. She uncrossed her legs, silently giving him permission to move upward. Her body was as alive as when she drew life from another, yet in a more subtle, more meaningful way. Her skin tingled and heated. Absently, she wondered if this was what everyone enjoyed. Was normal attraction always this good? Or was it because it was Tom?

Allie arched, wanting him to know how good he felt against her. Her nipples pebbled at the warmth coming from his body at the same time her panties grew wet.

Tom abandoned her mouth and she let him ease her head back as he traveled kisses downward to the hollow of her neck. She gasped, the thrill his touch gave her possessing her breath as surely as he possessed

her body. He cupped her, then fingered the thin material of her panties out of the way until he found her folds. The fire inside her instantly blazed into an inferno and she struggled, trying to cage the craving that had suddenly roared to life, demanding to take his energy.

She knew it was hopeless, knew that she'd failed. The part of her that wanted him was ready to take the risk and told her other side that everything would be all right.

Deciding to believe the voice inside her head, she reached up to grip his hair and tugged at him, roughly dragging his head up so she could meet his eyes. "Not here."

He gritted his teeth, then looked around as though only now remembering where they were. Taking her hand, he dragged her from the booth.

"Boss, I have a question about—"

"Talk to Rob. I'll be in my office. Don't disturb me." Tom waved off the stunned waitress and kept moving toward the back of the club. Several pairs of eyes, male as well as female, followed them. Their gazes, filled with envy, glared at her. She giggled, happy to be the center of attention for a different reason than her usual allure.

Tom's office was large and decorated just as Allie had imagined a man's office would be. A large desk dominated the room, but she barely had time to look at anything else before she landed flat on her back on the sofa shoved against the outer wall. Tom sat beside her instead of lying on top of her as she'd hoped he would.

"You have a couch in your office." The fact that he did made her a bit uneasy, but she shoved away the bothersome feeling.

"I often spend a lot of late hours here after the club closes and I'm too tired to drive home." Tom removed her top, then tugged his off as well.

His chest was solid, his abdomen firm and enticing. His tanned skin showed that he liked the outdoors, and strong callused hands alluded to a life that had seen manual labor. She lay still, watching the muscles in his arms move as he tugged her skirt down her legs. His broad shoulders fascinated her and she reached out for them, needing to know if they felt as hard as they looked. Warmth burst from his skin into hers, and she moaned, more than ready to skip the foreplay. She tried to hold on to him but lost contact when he shucked his jeans to the floor.

"Kiss me again."

Tearing her gaze away from his body, she sought his eyes and smiled. "Are you telling me or asking me?"

"Whichever way gets you to do it."

His sense of humor was nearly as captivating as his sexiness. In fact, humor was part of his sexiness. Grabbing his arm, she pulled him down and touched her mouth to his. He took her lips, gently, sweetly. This was how she'd imagined a kiss should be: tentative, endearing, yet burning with the promise of more.

She wanted him, wanted more than even his kiss could give her. She welcomed his tongue while his hands explored her curves.

Tom lifted his body over hers as she'd hoped he would. He fondled her breasts, rubbing the taut buds to send shivers through her. She groaned, loving the way the heat from his hands warmed her skin. Bare skin pressed against bare skin, impossibly soft from such a hard body. But it was his hardness between her legs that sent her lust soaring.

She grew hotter, the heat scorching her from the inside out. Unlike with the other men, however, she didn't sense a hunger. At least not the same type of hunger she'd experienced earlier. This hunger was stronger, more insistent, demanding more than mere energy. She cried out as he bent to take a nipple between his teeth and arched her back for more. She clasped her hands behind his neck, holding him, wanting to never let him go.

Yet somewhere, down into the darkness of her mind, she wondered what she was doing. Wondered if she could resist taking him. If she could have what she wanted without harming him. But the thought was squelched again by the touch of his hand on her breast, the sensation of his shaft between her legs.

Maybe if I only go a little way? I can stop when I need to. I'll have to stop. And I'll have to stop soon.

His hand delved between her legs to tear away her panties and found the nub that ached for him to massage it. Startling her, her orgasm burst from her, beginning at her core then spreading outward to shake her frame. Draining the other men hadn't done this to her. No, this was different, as special as Tom was. She thrust her pelvis at him, forcing him to readjust and push two fingers inside.

"I need to get a condom, Allie."

She opened her mouth to tell him it wasn't necessary, but she couldn't speak. Her succubus nature protected her.

Tom made the decision for her by reaching into the pocket of his jeans. Pushing away from her, he put on the condom he'd found in his wallet, then bent to kiss her. "It's okay now."

She nodded, knowing it didn't matter. She wanted everything, all of him. Everything except his energy.

He plunged two fingers inside, moving them in and out, varying the speed. "Do you want more?"

She placed her hand over her breast and copied the way he cupped the other one. "More." Every time he touched her he gave her more. More sensations to ripple through her, more emotions to surprise her.

He complied, adding a third finger. She worked her hips, luxuriating in the sensation of his fingers inside her while his hard rod rubbed the crease between her legs.

"Harder. More."

Again, he obeyed her, adding a fourth finger and increasing the speed, the force. His fingers worked her, pounding inside her, rubbing her. Her nub throbbed and another orgasm rushed free. She closed her

eyes, reveling in the river of delight cascading through her, rushing her over the cliff again to soar into the air.

“Damn, you’re amazing.” He placed his hands on either side of her head and she opened her eyes to find him staring at her, searching inside her. “Allie, I want you to know how I feel, that you’re...” He shook his head, confusion clouding his eyes. “This doesn’t seem like a one-night stand to me. I need you to know that.”

She nodded when emotion closed her throat. Could it be possible? Could he feel the way she did?

“I have to have you, Allie. Now.”

“I want you, too. But, Tom, I need you to know.” She darted her gaze away, suddenly shy. “You’re my first.”

He paused, his brow furrowing. He touched his lips to hers, caressing them as though she might break. “Oh, my God, Allie. I had no clue.”

Had she made a mistake in telling him? Did he think she was weird? She waited, the moments dragging out forever until she couldn’t stand another second to pass by. “I want you to be my first. Don’t you want me any longer?”

“Of course I do.” The yearning on his features dimmed. “But what I want doesn’t matter. *You* matter.”

“Then make love to me.”

He touched his palm to her cheek, making her look at him. “Are you sure? I’ll stop if you want me to.” When she didn’t answer, he added, “Maybe we should do this another time. You know, someplace special.”

She bit her lip, closed her eyes and took a moment to center herself. The urge to drain him renewed itself and she knew she should stop. But it was already too late. She couldn’t, wouldn’t quit now. Not when he was giving her more than his body.

“Any place is special as long as it’s you.”

His eyes sparkled and she wondered if he could ever understand how much she risked. How much he risked. But the danger was worth it. She could hold back the need to feed. She had to.

Placing her legs around his waist, he positioned his cock at her opening, then eased inside her. She froze, for the first time feeling the expanse of a man inside her. That it was this man who had taken her was important, more important than she could ever express. She inhaled sharply at the size of him, how he filled her completely. Her walls closed in around him, holding him prisoner.

Don’t let go. Just this once, don’t let it take over.

Tom watched Allie’s eyes close as though in prayer and was stunned by her beauty. But her real beauty lay deeper than the surface. He marveled at this wondrous woman, remembering her laugh, her

smile, the way she touched his heart as much as his body. In the short time he'd known her, he'd found out more about her than he'd thought possible. She was so open, so fresh, so different from anyone else.

He didn't know if it was possible or not, but he would've sworn his cock had grown larger. Not by simply looking at her body, but by thinking about her. He was already two seconds away from blowing. Could she know how much she'd already come to mean to him?

Then when she'd offered her most precious gift to him... He would've been thrown, perhaps even worried if she'd been any other woman. Instead, he was grateful, proud, and, amazingly, humbled by her.

She opened her eyes, then blinked, making him yearn to know her thoughts. He wanted a relationship with her. Of that he was sure. The idea that she might not want the same struck him, physically unbalancing him so that he had to take hold of her legs. He had to convince her to come back, to let him take her out, to let him simply be with her.

He eased all the way inside her, then increased his movements once she'd relaxed. Unable to control himself, he thrust into her with all his strength, all his power, all his being. She cried out and lifted up, placing her palms against his sensitive nipples. Over and over, he shoved into her, going deeper and deeper with each move. His buttocks tightened and released with each thrust and perspiration dripped from his forehead. He would show her the kind of man he was and make her understand how wonderful a woman she was.

Tell her. Don't just show her.

He wanted to. Wanted to shout how much he cared from the top of the world. He wanted her to know how incredible she was, how he'd longed for her from the first moment they'd met. But the feeling was too strange to him, foreign to his mouth. Hadn't he already tried? How had she gone from a quick romp to something more?

Closing his eyes, he concentrated on the pleasure she gave him, how her pussy clamped around him and held on. Yet his mind drifted back to her voice, her eyes, the way she smiled at him. She'd taken control of him and he didn't want to break free.

All at once, another sensation he couldn't explain washed over him. Heat swamped into his shaft, a heat more intense than he'd ever experienced. Yet it was more. Almost as though he no longer had power over his movements, his body joined with the new feeling, giving in to the siren call. He tensed at first, surprised at his body's betrayal, then euphoria hit him, milking him of his need to understand what was happening. A smoky fog surrounded him, enveloping him in a cozy field of sexuality. His shaft pulsed inside Allie, and although he wasn't climaxing, he could sense something leaving his body, streaming out of him and into her.

Yet he no longer cared. As long as he stayed with her, she could take whatever she wanted from him.

Tom closed his eyes, ignoring the shouts he heard from outside his office. Pounding continued at his door, in his ears, but he was unconcerned. All that mattered was Allie.

And yet, somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew this wasn't the woman he'd welcomed into his office. This was another part of her, a darker side. He wasn't afraid of this aspect of her but sensed it was dangerous. He tried to wrench his mind away from the seductive aura surrounding him, but couldn't. Attempting to turn toward the door, he found that he couldn't move. Whether that was due to the strange fog surrounding them or from the weakness invading him, he couldn't have said. But he knew he had no choice. Instead of fighting against it, he let go, his climax roaring from him as the blackness took over.

"Please, Meg, can you help him?"

"I don't know, Allie. Give me space to work."

Allie moved away from the couch where Meg knelt over a supine Tom, her fingers on his pulse as she lifted his eyelids to check his pupils. Hilly had lured the nervous assistant manager away from the office seconds before Meg had used a spell to break through the door. She had no idea how Hilly would keep him from entering, but if anyone could do it, Hilly could.

"I thought I could control it." Allie wrung her hands, keeping her attention on Tom as though she could will him to awaken. "I thought since I'd just fed that it would be all right."

"I guess you thought wrong." Meg sat back a moment to look at her. "Allie, calm down. It won't help him for you to lose it. Fortunately, I brought along a potion to help restore his strength." She reached into her purse to retrieve a small, blue crystal bottle.

Relief flooded Allie and she rushed to kneel beside her sister. She took Tom's hand and squeezed it, but he gave no reaction. "I'm so sorry. You believe me, don't you, Meg? All I wanted was love like everyone else, like *you*, have. I never meant to hurt anyone, least of all him."

Meg studied her until she had to glance away from the intense examination. "Oh, stars and moon. You like him."

"I guess."

"No. I mean, you really like-like him. Am I right?"

"I do."

"But Allie..."

"I know I don't have much experience with men, but Tom's special. He's different. When he looks at me, listens to me, I feel like he can see straight into my soul."

"Wow. That's...unusual."

"Yeah. Unusual and wonderful."

She could tell that Meg wanted to ask more questions but, thankfully, decided to stick to the urgent matter of reviving Tom.

“Okay, then, help me help him. Hold his head up so I can pour the potion into him. The more I pour, the better.”

Allie did as her sister instructed, lifting his head so Meg could slowly pour the contents of the bottle into his mouth. Tom coughed, then sputtered, but soon calmed. “What is it? How long does it take to work?”

“It’s a vitality potion. I used it on Mitch and Jim, too. Also, I added a bit of a forget-me spell into the batch.”

“No! I don’t want him to forget me.” The idea of wiping the entire night from Tom’s mind was too much. Their talk had been meaningful to her and, if she was lucky, to him as well.

“Take it down a notch, okay? And don’t worry. I only added enough for him to be agreeable to whatever we say. He’ll remember you—and what happened—to the extent that we want him to. We’ll convince him that you two were getting it on when he suddenly and inexplicably blacked out. Once we’ve talked to him, he won’t remember the fog or anything else associated with your, um, lack of control.”

“I would prefer that you make him forget about everything. Including meeting Allie.”

They turned to the intimidating police officer standing at the office door, his burly arms crossed as he glared at them.

“Hilly? Is that you?”

“You were expecting a real cop?” Hilly, aka Officer Tally as his nameplate declared, strode into the room, shaking his head. “Because that almost happened. The assistant manager was about to call the authorities. But I finally convinced him not to check on Mr. Stud here by telling them that my younger sister was his guest. I didn’t say it outright, but I gave him the impression that Allie was underage. He backed off quickly enough once I promised that we wouldn’t press charges if he kept his mouth shut. Then I changed into the cop disguise.”

“Why take the form of a cop?” Meg grinned. “Although I’ve got to say, sis, I like you in uniform.”

Hilly rolled her eyes. “You like everybody in uniform. As long as they’re male.”

“Technically, you’re not male.” Meg turned back to Tom who had started groaning. “I think he’s coming to, ladies. Get ready.”

“Allie, stand behind me. We wouldn’t want him to get a good look at your glow. He might not buy that it’s a healthy radiance. Either that or it might jog his memory.” At Hilly’s insistence, Allie rose and crossed over to stand behind her. Hilly straightened to her full height, adjusted her badge pinned to her shirt and cleared her throat.

“Sir, are you all right?” Her manly voice resonated throughout the room.

Tom groaned again and, with Meg’s help, sat up. He slumped onto the sofa, one hand on his forehead. “What happened?” He squinted at Hilly, then moved his gaze to Allie. “Allie, are you all right?”

“I’m fine.” She wiggled her fingers at him over her sister’s shoulder.

“Mr...” Hilly glanced at her, keeping her deep voice. “His name?”

“This is Mr. Halloran. Tom Halloran.” Allie fought another smile. Not only did she like him as a person, she even liked saying his name.

“Mr. Halloran, it appears that you blacked out while having sexual relations with this young lady.” Hilly whipped out a pad and pencil. “Are you up to answering a few questions?”

Hilly always said a good offense is the best defense. Allie swallowed and hoped her sister wouldn’t push the act too far.

“Uh, yeah. I guess. What’s going on? You said I blacked out?” Again he looked to Allie and she nodded, backing up her sister’s claim. “I’ve never had anything like that happen before. Are you sure?”

Once again, Allie lied, the guilt twisting in her stomach. But she had to lie, for his sake as well as her sisters’. “It’s true. And you scared me half to death.”

“I feel like I’m the one who’s half dead.”

The sisters exchanged telling glances before turning their attention back to Tom.

“Well, all I can say is that I’m glad I found you when I did. I mean, Allie was just lying there, freaking out. If I hadn’t come looking for her, who knows what might have happened.” Meg tipped her head to stare into Tom’s eyes. “That’s all that happened. You don’t remember anything else. Do you understand?”

Tom frowned, a perplexed expression on his features that, at last, smoothed out. He nodded and repeated in a dull monotone. “I understand.”

Meg had played the scene like she was on a Broadway stage. But that was normal for Meg. Allie, however, couldn’t help but think he’d see the lies on her face.

“I’d say you’re one lucky man, Mr. Halloran. Now, if we can get down to the reason I stopped by...” Hilly, aka Officer Tally, pretended to read her notepad.

“Anyhoo, I think it’s time Allie and I got out of the way. Officer Tally, he’s all yours.” Meg hooked her arm in Allie’s, tugging her toward the door. Although Allie tried to wrench around to say goodbye to Tom, Hilly had already moved into her line of vision, blocking her from seeing him.

“Wait, Allie.”

The tug she felt in her abdomen was not only real, but intense. If Meg hadn’t had a firm hold on her arm and Hilly hadn’t been standing in the way, she would’ve rushed back to him.

“Mr. Halloran, I’m Officer Tally. I assume you know that you’re operating without a liquor license.”

“What? No. I have a license. In fact, it’s posted next to the bar.”

“I also heard that you were serving alcohol to minors.”

Allie frowned at Hilly’s back. Why was she making this so complicated? Why not just leave? Why was she harassing Tom?

"You must have heard wrong, officer. I promise you, we card everyone. At worst, it was a mistake or maybe a very good fake identification card. My employees would never knowingly serve anyone underage."

"Hilly," hissed Allie. She couldn't let her sister keep badgering Tom.

"Hilly?" Tom craned his neck to see Allie, but Officer Tally stepped in the way again.

"Very well, sir. I'll check for the license and, since we don't have solid evidence on the underage drinking charge, I'll let this go as a warning to you. You might want to double-check and make sure everything is on the up and up. As well as keeping your patrons out of your office. And remind your bartenders—"

"Mixologists." Allie cringed at the hard glare Hilly shot her.

"Remind your *mixologists* to verify a drinker's age before serving them." Her sister whirled on her heel, widening her eyes in an unmistakable "let's get out of here" expression, then gestured Meg and Allie into the hallway.

"Shoot, Hilly. I was hoping you'd cuff him and we'd have some fun."

"Meg, you're so mean," grumbled Allie.

"Just keep moving our butts out of here." Hilly's hands on their backs kept them striding down the hall until they made it to a side entrance.

Outside, they raced toward the car with Meg giggling as she slid into the driver's seat. Allie hopped into the back seat, grumbled a few choice words, then twisted around hoping to see that Tom had followed them.

"Put the pedal to the metal, Meg."

Tom burst through the door, his hand outstretched as though imploring them to stop. She pressed her hand against the rear windshield and wished she could call out to him. He gave a short wave, then rubbed his neck before dropping his hand seconds before the car rounded a corner.

"Allie, would you clean the counter while I fill this gentleman's order?"

Smiling at Hilly, Allie snatched the towel from her shoulder and mopped the crumbs off the counter and into the garbage, then stuck her tongue out at her sister's back.

Nag, nag, nag. *Allie, take your potion. Allie, clean the floors. Allie, don't you dare step out of this bakery.* If she heard Hilly bark one more order at her, she'd bop her sister over the head with a cake pan.

For the past two days, the only thing she'd done was work in the bakery. Neither Meg nor Hilly would let her out of their sight after the incident at the club. And, although a part of her agreed with them, the other side, the part of her that longed to see Tom again, couldn't stop thinking of ways to slip away. Not

that it would do her any good. They'd already caught her twice and had threatened to lock her in her room if she tried to sneak out again.

Allie leaned against the counter and stared out the front window. What would she do if she could get away? Find Tom and risk hurting him? Risk maybe even draining him? She wiped a tear from her eye. Her sisters were right, of course, to keep her from him. But she couldn't help it. She had to see him again. Next time, however, would be different. Next time, they'd keep their hands—not to mention every other body part—off each other. At least until she could find out how to have sex without draining a man's energy. She knew there was a way. After all, how else could her mother have been with her father?

Meg slipped beside her and wrapped an arm around her waist. "You're thinking about Tom again, aren't you?"

"Is it that obvious?"

"Yeah, pretty much. That dreamy face and the way you keep looking outside as though you expect him to show up at any moment kind of gives a big old clue." Meg leaned her head on Allie's shoulder. "I know it's hard, sis."

Allie wrenched away. "Do you? How can you possibly know? You get to have sex anytime you want. With any man you want. And if you ever found someone you wanted to stay with, to be with forever, you wouldn't have anything keeping you from making that happen."

"Except maybe the little fact that I'm a witch. Somehow I think more than a few guys would find that a hard pill to swallow. Why do you think I never get emotionally involved?"

She reached out for Meg's hand. "Damn. I'm sorry. I know it's rough for you, too. It's just that—"

"It's just that you think Tom is special, right? That he's the one?" Meg added air quotes to the words *the one*.

The image of Tom standing outside his club, a bewildered expression on his face, hit Allie hard, turning the emptiness in her stomach into a knot of anguish. "I don't think so. I know so."

"And you'd know this from your vast experience?" Meg chuckled, then quieted at Allie's hurt look.

"Whether he was my first or my thousandth, I'd know it. Just like Hilly said Mom knew the first minute she met Dad."

Meg tilted her head, her eyes wide with surprise. "Wow. You've really got it bad."

Allie fought back another tear and turned her attention to the street. She had it bad all right. As bad as it could get.

Meg's tone softened, filled with more compassion than Allie had ever heard from her play-it-easy sister. "Then I guess we'd better figure this thing out, huh?"

Allie's heart thumped against her chest and she grabbed Meg's hands. "Really? Will you let me go see him?"

Meg shook her head. "No. We can't. Not until you learn to control yourself."

The joy she'd felt a moment ago vanished. "Meg, please. I know I can handle it. I just have to remember not to touch him. Or to let him touch me."

Meg's gaze shifted toward the front window. "I sure hope you're right, because he's coming this way."

Chapter Seven

Allie whirled around to find Tom heading straight for her. Delight filled her, covering her face with a grin she couldn't have restrained if she'd tried. He was even better looking than she remembered. And his green eyes, oh, how they sparkled, pulling her in as though they'd thrown a lasso around her. His smile matched hers and the stubble on his strong jaw added to his overall masculine charisma.

"Tom."

"Hey, Allie."

He reached out and she had no choice but to reach out as well, forgetting her vow to not touch him. Meg, thankfully—or not?—stepped between them.

"Well lookie-lookie who's here." Meg clasped Tom's hand and shook it, forcing his attention away from Allie. "Long time no see. How's the club business going?"

"Oh, uh, it's fine. You must be Meg."

"I must be." Meg held his hand a little longer than Allie liked. But at least she seemed to be warming up to him.

Tom glanced around the bakery, taking in the numerous men hanging around. "I guess the bakery business isn't doing so badly either." He swallowed, then drew his body straighter. "I've been wrestling with how to handle this. But, although I'm embarrassed about what went down—about how I passed out—I wanted to apologize to you. To both of you. I don't know what was wrong with me. I went to the doctor the next day but he couldn't find anything wrong."

"Don't worry about it. Allie and I understand. People bite off more than they can handle." Meg pretended to down a shot of booze.

"She's right, Tom. Although not about drinking too much." Allie glared at her sister. "Believe me. You have nothing to be embarrassed about." She couldn't help but let her gaze slip to his crotch, then back to those mesmerizing eyes of his.

His relief brought out his dimples. "Good. Great. I'm glad you understand."

"Yeah. Great." Yes, everything about him was great. Allie drank him in, loving the easy way he wore his jeans and cotton shirt. She tried to sidestep around Meg, but her sister was too quick and blocked her path again.

"Mr. Halloran."

Allie cringed as Hilly moved up behind Tom, making him pivot around, putting his back to her. She glowered at her oldest sister, but Hilly ignored her. Why couldn't he have come when her sisters weren't around? Yet she had to concede. When were they not around?

"Ms. Tristan. It's Hilly, correct?"

Tom offered his hand to Hilly, who merely arched her eyebrow and crossed her arms. "That's right."

Tom glanced at Meg, then shot Allie a grin that told her to relax. Not that she could. Relaxing with him around was asking too much. Her nerves were a jumbled mess and the only cure for her jumbled nerves was to touch this delicious man.

"I'm happy to officially meet Allie's sisters." Tom slipped over to the counter to ostensibly study the various pastries and baked items. "I don't know how you three manage to stay so slim. If I had this good stuff around me all day, I'd weigh three hundred pounds."

"What can we do for you, Mr. Halloran?"

Allie had never felt like tearing anyone's hair out before, but Hilly was pushing it. Why did she have to act so mean to him? Unless, of course, she was trying to run him off. Instead of giving in to her darker side, Allie took a deep breath and prayed he wouldn't take offense.

"I told Allie—" his smile warmed her from her toes to her head, "—that I've always meant to drop by and check out the bakery, so I decided today was as good as any."

"That was sweet of him. Wasn't it, Hilly?" Allie swept behind the counter. "Would you like to try something? I'm very fond of the Red Velvet Dream cupcakes."

He met her eyes and took her bait. "Yeah, I would. Everything looks amazing. And the smell is nearly driving me crazy. How about I try a few different items? You know, to get a real taste of everything you have to offer." He paused on the word *you* just long enough to send a pleasing tingle along her spine.

"I thought you'd already gotten a taste." Meg giggled, slapping her hand over her mouth when Hilly narrowed her eyes at her.

His direct appraisal sent heat racing into Allie's cheeks. Blushing was one thing, but the craving spiraling outward from her core was another. Still, if she didn't touch him...

"Of course, Mr. Halloran. In fact, Allie, why don't you put several of our bestselling items in a takeout box? Then he can take it with him and enjoy them at home." Hilly thrust a carton toward her, her tone an unmistakable order. "On the house, of course."

Allie took the carton and began loading it with everything from cupcakes to croissants. In the process, she made a point of stepping on her sister's toe. Hilly yelped, then muttered a curse word under her breath.

Tom, however, appeared not to notice her sister's cry and took the box from Allie, letting his fingers graze hers. An electric current, familiar and tantalizing, flashed, leaving tiny wisps of yearning. "That's really nice of you. But I think I'm going to have a seat and enjoy these here. They look so good—" he gaze fell squarely on Allie, "—that I can't wait any longer."

Taking along a fistful of napkins, he shot her sisters a grin and walked over to the table in the middle of the store.

Hilly turned her back to him and took Allie's hand. "Do not, I repeat, *do not* go over there. I don't want to cause a scene by throwing him out, but if I have to, I will."

Allie hid the excitement building inside her. "Of course you can't throw him out. What would the other customers think? Besides, he's not doing anything wrong."

"Just be sure *you* don't do anything wrong, Allison Tristan."

"Come on, Hilly. Relax. It's not like he's going to jump her bones right here in our bakery." Meg winked at Allie. "He's harmless."

"He's hardly harmless. But I'm not worried about him jumping *her* bones."

"Seriously, I do have some control over my, uh, condition, you know." Did her sister really have so little trust in her? Yet after what happened at the club, could she trust herself?

Hilly's expression was anything but supportive. "Maybe so. But you stay away from him. Let him eat a couple of doughnuts, make gooey eyes at you, then leave. This—" she pointed at Tom, then at Allie, "—whatever it is, has to end today. One way or another. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Meg laughed and hugged Allie. "Don't worry, little sister. Her bark is much worse than her bite. Unless she changes into a Doberman, that is."

"Don't give her any ideas," muttered Allie. Yet her irritation dissipated in the second she raised her head to find Tom smiling at her. He'd come to see her at the bakery when he knew he'd run into her sisters. That had to mean something.

Keeping one eye on Tom and his all-too obvious slow and deliberate consumption of a jelly doughnut, Allie did her best to appear busy. First she wiped the counter clean. Then she pretended to notice a friend passing by and rushed to the window closest to Tom. She waved at an unknown young woman who lifted her hand in a half wave although her features were marred with bewilderment.

"Allie."

Hilly's growl of warning had Allie hurrying back to the counter. But not before she circled Tom's table to pick up the napkins he'd purposely dropped on the floor. Flushed simply from being close to him, she dumped the napkins into the trash can behind the counter and pointedly ignored the heat from Hilly's glare.

"You're not fooling anyone. I told you to stay away from him and I meant it."

"Gee, Hilly, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Like hell you don't." Meg skimmed her way around the two women. "Not that I blame you one bit. He's a hot one." A swat from Hilly had Meg scooting toward the ringing telephone at the end of the counter. "Sweet Nothings Bakery. What may I serve you?"

“Allie, you’d better be careful. He doesn’t need any encouragement from you.” Hilly pointed her finger at her, making her feel six years old again.

“Hilly, it’s for you.”

“I’m busy. Take a message.”

Hilly was about to launch into yet another warning, but Meg was insistent. “It’s that distributor you’ve been trying to reach.”

“Oh, my word. Talk about bad timing. Meg, we have to take this call in the office. I’ll need you to get on the other phone for a conference with him. You, Miss Allie, know what you’re supposed to do and especially what you’re not supposed to do. Got it? Do you promise you’ll behave this time?” Hilly placed her finger closer, getting within an inch of Allie’s nose.

Allie nodded her promise—although she mentally crossed her fingers—and breathed a sigh of relief. Thanks to the phone call, she wouldn’t have to suffer through another of Hilly’s lectures, not to mention the fact that the call got them out of the room.

She watched her sisters rush down the hallway to the office. Trying not to run, she hurried over to Tom’s table and slid into the chair beside him.

“Wow. Your sisters are harder to get past than two junkyard dogs.” His grin softened the words. “Not that I’m calling them names or anything.”

“I know. But it’s just because they love me.”

“I didn’t say I blamed them. After all, they’re guarding someone extraordinary.” He covered the hand she’d placed on the table. Warmth spread through her, ratcheting up her already growing yearning. She closed her eyes and concentrated on keeping the succubus hunger at bay.

“Allie, look at me.”

She couldn’t resist him and opened her eyes to find his emerald ones searching her. “Yes?”

“I’m not sure what happened at the club.” He paused as though trying to find the right words. “But I do know that it was something I’ve never experienced before.”

“I’m sure it was.” She wanted to bite her tongue at her slip. Surely he wasn’t talking about his passing out. “Uh, I mean, it was terrific for me, too.”

“You’re amazing, do you know that? You’re smart, beautiful and funny, too.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ve met plenty of other smart, beautiful and funny girls. Although probably not with their own pair of junkyard dogs.”

“Like I said. Funny.”

Tom’s laugh echoed in the small shop, drawing the closer attention of the other patrons and making her all too aware of where they were. She checked the hallway, unsure of how long the conference call would take.

"Thanks, but I've got to tell you the truth." Her heart ached, but she had to do it. For Tom's sake. At least until she gained more control of her hunger.

He grew serious, followed her gaze to the hallway and back. "Okay. So tell me the truth. Wait. Are you trying to tell me you're not interested?"

"Oh, hell, no!"

His dimples made an appearance, then disappeared. "Then that's great, isn't it? But I'm still not getting it."

Allie took a deep breath and made the plunge. "I don't think we can see each other. Not for a while anyway."

"But why not? You just said you were interested." He winced. "Is it because I passed out? Allie, I swear, that was a freak occurrence that won't be repeated."

"No. That wasn't your fault. It doesn't have anything to do with that."

"Then why? Because of your sisters?"

"Well, partly."

"But don't you think once they realize I'm not out to hurt you, they'll ease up?"

As if he could ever hurt her. At least not in the way she could hurt him. Allie smiled, then removed her hand from his, although she ached to smooth the frown lines on his forehead. "No, it's not that exactly. It's hard to explain, but I've, uh, I've got a condition. A physical condition."

Tom rested against the back of his chair and yet she knew he hadn't pulled away from her emotionally. "Really? You look healthy to me. Is it serious?" He leaned forward again, his hands reaching for hers, but she slipped them into her lap. "I'd like to help, if I can."

"Oh, I'm healthy, all right. I'm not sick. Not in the way you might think."

"Then tell me, Allie. I'm sure whatever it is, we can figure something out."

She wanted to kiss him, not to draw anything from him but to give a part of herself to this caring man. In fact, she wanted to give all of herself to him. Not just her body, but her heart as well. Instead, she dipped her head to avoid his gaze. "No, Tom. We can't. Please, it's too hard to explain. I mean, if I thought there was even a chance we could be together, then..."

"Then what, Allie? Talk to me. Is it about the sex?" He bent over, putting his head low enough to give her no option except to look at him. "I know we moved really fast, especially since it was your first time, so if you want to slow things down, we can. If all you want to do is hold hands, I'm fine with that. It'll be harder than hell, but I don't want you to think you have to do anything."

Could he have said any sweeter words? She doubted it. But then, he didn't know the real situation. "Tom, you're so nice. It's not that. It's complicated. But I don't want you to feel like you have to stick with me."

Tom took her chin and lifted her head, forcing her to meet his gaze straight on. “Trust me, Allie, the last thing I feel for you is obligated. Do you believe me? Do you believe that we can beat this thing, whatever it is?”

She wanted to believe him, could easily let herself believe him. Maybe if she told him she was a succubus he’d believe her and, even more, he’d help her find the answer. “I do.”

“Then tell me. What’s the problem?”

“Allie, Hilly needs you in the office. She has a question regarding the last delivery, the one that you signed for.”

Allie swiveled to face Meg. “Now? But—”

“Sorry, sis. No buts. And you’d better get back there pronto.”

Tom shook his head at her, then lowered his voice. “Go on. We’ll finish our conversation later. Until then, just trust me, okay?”

She’d resisted the impulse to kiss him from the moment he’d stepped into the shop. Now, however, she gave in. Taking his shirt, she tugged him closer and pressed her lips to his in a quick yet fervent kiss. “Okay. I’ll be back as soon as I can. Don’t go anywhere.” Allie jumped up and strode past Meg toward the office in the back.

Tom tilted his head and took in the view of Allie’s bottom as she scurried away. Not only did she have a smokin’ hot body, she also had an allure that he couldn’t pin down. Although he wouldn’t have considered himself a player, he’d had his share of women and none of them had captured his attention the way Allie did.

Had he really told her that he’d stick by her no matter what her “condition” was? What if she had herpes? Or a worse disease? He barely knew her, yet he wanted to discover everything about her, including whatever problem she had. Maybe it was like his uncle had told him. Meeting the right woman made everything and anything possible.

“Here’s a dollar.”

Startled out of his reverie, he stared at the bill lying on the table in front of him. Meg slipped into the chair Allie had vacated.

“Gee, thanks. But shouldn’t I be tipping you?”

She chuckled, then moved the money closer to him. “You know the old saying ‘A penny for your thoughts’, right? Well, I figure that after adjusting for inflation, that penny is now worth at least a dollar.”

“Depends on which exchange rate you’re using.” He slid the dollar toward her. “But I’m not sure I’m selling.”

“No problem. I can read what you’re thinking on your face.” She leaned forward, resting her forearms on the table. “As my dear old grandpa would say, you’re smitten.”

Was he that transparent? But he could see that it was no use to deny it. “Yeah, I am. Tell me, Meg, why don’t you and Hilly want me near her? What have you got against me?”

“We don’t have anything against you. In fact, we think you’re a pretty decent guy.”

“Then what’s up with the guard dog routine?”

“You mean like two junkyard dogs?”

How the hell had she known what he’d said?

“You know what I meant. Or at least I hope you did.”

“Yeah, I do. But that doesn’t change the facts, Tom. Hilly and I would rather you back off from pursuing Allie.”

“I still don’t get why. Is it because of her condition?”

From her startled expression, he’d surprised her.

“She told you about that? What exactly did she say?”

Should he pretend that he knew about Allie’s condition or should he tell the truth? As luck would have it, however, he didn’t have to make that choice.

“Okay, I’m back.”

“Allie.” He relaxed, relieved that her sudden appearance had interrupted her sister’s interrogation. “That didn’t take long.”

“Thankfully, no.” She swayed over to him and placed a hand on his shoulder. Yet, unlike the other times she’d touched him, the touch left him unmoved. “Hilly needs you again, Meg.”

Meg broke her focus away from Allie’s hand on his shoulder. “Yeah? Umm, I’m thinking maybe I’d better stick around out here.”

“Suit yourself. But Hilly’s back on the phone with that distributor and her face is getting really red. Like she’s about to blow her top. And you know what happens when she blows her top.”

“Stars and moon. All right, I’ll go calm her down.” She took Allie’s arm as she stood to leave, shooting her sister a look that said everything, yet nothing. “Be careful, okay?”

“Oh, my word. You know I’m always careful.”

Meg blinked, then furrowed her brow. “What did you say?”

“You’d better get going, Meg,” urged Allie.

“Fine. Just don’t do anything you’ll regret, *sister*.” Spinning on her heel, she rushed away.

“You three sure have a lot of excitement around here. If Hilly’s having trouble with a distributor, maybe I could—” But Allie’s hand over his mouth cut him off.

“Shh. Let’s get out of here before she comes back.”

He wasn’t about to argue. Instead, he let her lead him out of the bakery. She almost ran down the street, tugging him along, but he didn’t mind. Getting out of the bakery and away from her sisters was exactly what he wanted.

“Not that I don’t want to do this, but don’t you think your sisters are going to call out the Marines when they find you gone? Where are we going anyway?”

Allie whirled toward him, giving him no choice except to run into her. He grabbed her, keeping both of them from falling. She slipped her arms around his neck, bringing her lips close to his. He wrapped his arms around her and waited for the reaction her body always gave him.

Yet nothing happened. No heat, no zing of excitement. Nothing. Although he did his best to hide his disappointment, he couldn’t squash the tickle at the back of his mind. Something was wrong. Yet he couldn’t understand what it was. Instead, he shook the doubts from his mind and kissed her.

Again. Nothing. She broke free of the kiss and he looked at her mouth as though he could see the problem on her lips. Was he suddenly not attracted to her?

“Take me back to your place.”

His shaft twitched at the idea, but his mind fought against it. “Now?”

Allie’s exuberance dimmed. “Is there a problem?”

Although he wanted her to tell him about her condition, he decided the street wasn’t the place to do so. “Uh, no, no problem. Sure. Let’s go.”

Chapter Eight

“I’m back.” Allie turned the corner and skidded to a stop. Tom was no longer in the bakery. Instead, a bald fat man had taken his place and was eating Tom’s box of baked goods. “Where’s Tom?”

The man shook his head, not bothering to stop eating even as he spoke. “I non’t oh.”

“What? You don’t know?” At his nod, she whirled around, searching the small interior of the store. “But I don’t understand. Why would he leave?”

“Oh, did Tom take off?” Meg slipped behind the counter and waved a greeting to a mother with two children who’d walked through the door.

“I guess so.” Allie’s heart plummeted to the floor. Did Tom leave simply because he couldn’t wait for her any longer? Or had he used her departure as an opportunity to make a quick getaway from the girl with a problem? “I wish I could’ve at least said goodbye.”

Meg boxed up three cupcakes the lady ordered, then deposited the cash into the register. “I’m sure he had a good reason.”

“Yeah. Sure.” Yet, as hard as she wanted to believe what her sister said, she couldn’t.

“Don’t worry about him, Allie. Besides, you know you’re not allowed.”

Allie caught the strange expression on her sister’s face. “What’s going on, Meg? Where’s Hilly anyway? I figured she’d gone to check on a delivery so I waited for her in the office, but she never showed.”

Meg’s strange expression grew even stranger. “Hmm. Beats me. Maybe she left some paperwork at home and went to get it.”

“Hilly? Are you kidding? She never forgets anything.” Allie caught Meg behind the counter, cornering her. “What do you know? Don’t try to deny it because it’s written all over your face. Did Hilly make Tom leave?”

Meg dodged first left, then right, but couldn’t get past her. “How should I know?”

“Where were you when Tom left? You were still with him when I went to the back.” She flattened her hands on the counter behind Meg, holding her prisoner.

“Me? Oh, I, uh, had to refill the napkin holders so I went to the supply room.”

Allie put her face closer to her sister’s. “You’re lying, Meg Tristan. I can tell. Now I’m going to ask you one last time. Where did he go?”

"I ain't sayin' a word, you dirty copper, 'cause I ain't no snitch." Meg's humor fell flat and she dropped her act. "I'm warning you, Allie, if you don't get out of my way, I'll use a spell on you. And you know how that turned out last time."

Allie cringed, then strengthened her resolve. "Go ahead. Do all the damage you want. After changing me into a three-legged cat, I can handle whatever you dish out. Besides, Hilly made you promise to never use your craft on me again. Other than to keep me from draining a man too much."

"I don't think she'd mind a little magic right now."

Meg swished her hand in front of her before Allie could defend herself. An unseen force pulled her from behind, sliding her backwards. She ran in place, but it was no use. A couple of seconds later, she found her back pressed against the display case. Unable to break free of the invisible hold, Allie finally gave up.

She tipped her hand in the direction of their customers, a few of whom had confused expressions. "The display case hid my magical ride, but doing more might give you away. Undo the spell."

"Not a chance, little sister. Not until you promise to behave yourself."

"I will once you tell me where Hilly is."

Meg fisted her hands on her hips. "She's doing what she thinks is right. Let's leave it at that."

"What she thinks is right? Oh, hell, Meg, please tell me she's not hurting Tom."

"What? Don't be ridiculous. Hilly doesn't have a mean bone in her body. She'd never hurt anyone." Meg waved her hand again, releasing Allie.

"Meg, please. I'm begging you. Tell me what's going on." Allie's heart thundered in her chest. What could Hilly be up to?

Meg shifted from one foot to the other. "Damn, I hate it when you beg. And don't look at me with those sad eyes. You know I can't resist those."

"Please, Meg? Please?"

"Okay. But if Hilly asks later, tell her you forced it out of me." She tugged Allie aside, lowering her voice. "I know you're not going to like this, but Hilly thinks it's the best thing for you."

Allie's throat closed up, threatening to choke her. "Oh, God."

Meg took a deep breath, then let her words go. "Hilly changed into you and left with Tom."

"You mean she looks like me now? But why? What good will that do?" What scheme did Hilly have that had her resorting to taking Allie's form?

"You know she wants you two to stay away from each other, right?"

"Yeah. So?"

"Well, she figures if she tells him something really bad about you that she'll scare him off. Problem solved."

How could her sister be so sneaky? Would Tom believe her? And yet she knew without a doubt that he would. After all, it would be Allie telling him, not Hilly. “How can she be so mean?”

“Mean isn’t the right word. She’s just protecting you and him, too. Trust me, sis, she doesn’t like this any more than you do. But she doesn’t know what else to do.”

Allie narrowed her eyes at Meg. Her sister had told her the truth, but had she told her the whole truth? “What’s she going to tell him?”

“I can’t say.” Meg shook her head, a bewildered expression making Allie think twice.

“Meg,” she warned. “Spit it out. What’s she going to tell him?”

“I told you. I can’t say.”

Can’t or won’t? Either way, she didn’t think she’d get any more information out of Meg.

“I can’t let her do this. I have to stop her.” Allie lunged forward to leave, then almost fell over when her feet suddenly wouldn’t move. Stunned, she stared down at her feet. They were like cement blocks that had been built into the floor. “Meg, turn me loose!”

“Calm down, Allie. Once we figure out how you can be with a man without hurting him, you can tell Tom the truth and get back together. Until then, however, you’re stuck with me.”

“So here we are.” Tom gestured around his small apartment, watching Allie’s careful expression. “I know it’s not much, but I spend so much time at the club, why pay for more, right?”

“Oh, of course. Right.”

She pasted on a pleasant smile, but he could tell she was less than impressed as she turned, taking in his apartment. He resisted the impulse to ask her if she wanted to leave. Either that or do the white glove test. “I know. It’s a typical bachelor pad. If I’d known I was going to have company, I would’ve cleaned up.” Grabbing a pair of his underwear, he hoped she didn’t notice as he shoved them under a sofa cushion.

“It’s fine.”

“Thanks.” Did she mean his small apartment, his lack of housekeeping, or his trying to stash underwear in the couch?

Unable to resist the impulse to have her in his arms again, he swept over to her and pulled her into an embrace, forgetting his earlier resolution to take it slow. Kissing her hard, he tried to pour all the emotions he’d had since meeting her into one kiss. He groaned, wanting her, hoping she’d realize how much she meant to him. Yet, the voice in his head that had bothered him on their way home spoke up again. She was different. Irritated at the nagging voice, he let her push him away.

“Stop.” She glared at him, but then her expression softened. “Is everything okay, Tom?”

Tom crossed to the other side of the room. “Damn, Allie, I don’t know. I’m sorry, but you don’t seem like yourself. It’s like you changed after you came back from helping your sister in the back office.”

Her eyes flashed and she turned away. Why did he get the impression she had a secret?

"I'm the same as I always was." She straightened her back and faced him. "We need to talk." She tossed her golden hair defiantly. Almost as though she prepared for battle.

He studied her, trying to pick out the pieces of a puzzle that didn't fit. Allie was just as hot as she always was, so what the hell was wrong with him? Still, he couldn't shake the impression that something was off. Allie looked the same on the outside, but on the inside? He just didn't know. "Are you hungry? I think I have a few crackers and cheese. Or I could run out and pick something up." Tom stared into her eyes and, once again, was struck with the unsettling feeling.

This isn't right. He growled, hoping to turn off the inner voice. *Shut up. Shut up. Shut up.*

Maybe if he repeated the phrase enough times, like a television ticker running through his mind, it would keep the nagging ideas away. Yet the more he thought it, the stronger the unsettling sensation became.

"No, thanks. Let's just talk."

For a moment, he thought her face seemed to shimmer. He blinked several times and chalked the illusion up to his imagination. Still...had he seen Hilly's face?

She wrung her hands, suddenly very nervous. He took a step closer, reached out for her, but she shook her head and paced to the other side of the room.

"I don't know how to tell you this."

"Whatever it is, Allie, we'll handle it. As long as we're together, even when we're physically apart, we can conquer any problem."

Her mouth parted and her eyes narrowed, piercing him, diving inside him as though searching for the truth. "Do you really mean that?"

"Of course I do." Tom pushed all the sincerity he could into his tone. "You know I do."

"I don't know how to tell you this, but..." She lifted her head and jutted out her chin. "I have an STD."

The breath was knocked out of him as surely as though a wrecking ball had slammed into his stomach. "You have a sexually transmitted disease?"

"Yes."

"But how? I mean..."

She glared at him, her defiant demeanor hardening her apology. "I'm sorry and I know I shouldn't have. But I lied. I didn't want you to think I was easy like those other girls at the club."

Anger surged through him. "Don't you think you should've told me this before now? I can't remember everything we did the other day or even if we went all the way, but I think having a communicable disease should've been mentioned right from the first kiss."

At last the defiant edge was gone. Tears sprang to her eyes. “I know and I’m so sorry. I never wanted to hurt you and that’s why I didn’t want to tell you. I was afraid that you wouldn’t want me. But isn’t it better late than never?”

“Better late than never? Are you serious?” What had happened? Allie had gone from being a gorgeous sweet woman into a woman who’d lied to him. If she’d told him about the disease, he wouldn’t have let her down. But she hadn’t given him that chance. Since leaving the bakery, she’d come across as a different person, a girl he hardly recognized.

“Allie, I want you to leave. Now.”

“No, Tom. How can you do that? After what we’ve come to mean to each other?” She sobbed, almost breaking his heart. But he had to have time. Time to understand what had happened and where things had gone wrong.

“Allie, please leave.”

“So is this goodbye?”

He shook his head and his chest tightened, crushing his heart. “No. I mean, I don’t know. I need time to think. Go home, Allie.”

She hurried toward the door. “Fine. If that’s the way you want it, then I’m gone.” Whirling to face him, her hand on the doorknob, she lifted her chin. “But know this, Mr. Halloran, Allison Tristan is the best thing that could ever happen to you. Saying goodbye to her is your loss, not hers. I mean, mine.”

If he’d had a retort, he still wouldn’t have had time to say it before she slammed the door behind her. Still reeling, Tom plopped down on the couch and stared at the door. “Holy shit.”

“What did you do, Hilly?” The three sisters had quarreled many times before, but Allie couldn’t remember ever getting this angry. “I’ve tried calling him, but they keep telling me he isn’t available. And we all know what that means.”

“Damn it, Allie, you need to leave him alone.”

“I can’t, Hilly. I have to tell him everything. Are you sure you didn’t hurt him?”

“Oh, my word. Of course, I didn’t hurt him. You know me better than that. In fact, I’m trying to keep him from getting hurt. I simply made him see that a relationship with you is impossible. I’m sorry, Allie, but I did it for your own good. For his good, too.” Hilly paused, her back stiffening in defense, but her hand gripping the ladle shook. “You’ll be happier in the long run. I just know it.”

“But why did you do it? I promised I’d take it easy, that I’d keep my hands off him until we figured out a solution.”

“Based on your past experience, I couldn’t trust that you would. Face it, Allie. You weren’t going to stay away from him, so I had to make him stay away from you.” Hilly stirred the soup simmering in the pot and brushed off Allie’s attempt to turn her around to face her.

“And how did you make him see that we couldn’t be together?” She added air quotes around the word “make” but doubted her sister noticed. “Did you use one of Meg’s spells?”

“Hey, leave me out of this.” Meg continued to cut up the carrots for the soup. “I didn’t give her any potions, spells or do any witchcraft. I’m innocent, I tell ya.”

“I thought you said you didn’t know what she said to him.”

Meg winced, then offered a weak smile. “No, I didn’t. I said that I couldn’t say. And I couldn’t. Hilly swore me to secrecy.”

Allie slid onto the barstool next to the kitchen island and glared at them. If they’d made a pact not to spill the beans, then nothing would shake them.

“Allie, let it go. You barely know the man. Besides, he knows where you work and he hasn’t come in. Doesn’t that tell you where he stands?”

“Not if he’s under a spell. Or if you frightened him away.” Or had he simply lost interest? She struggled with the unpleasant idea, then pulled back her shoulders and met her sister’s questioning look. “I don’t know what to think. At least not until you tell me what you did.”

“I told you. I did nothing. I merely made him see that you aren’t right for him.” Hilly banged the ladle on the edge of the pot.

Meg ran a hand down Hilly’s back. “What do you know about him anyway, Allie? That he jumped on the chance to turn an old bar into a hot club? That he has women throwing themselves at him every night? That he’s a good kisser? Ooh, that he’s a lot more than a good kisser?”

Meg paused and Allie could see the wheels in her head turning with imagined sex with Tom. “Stop thinking about him.”

Meg laughed and tossed the carrots into the soup Hilly stirred. “Okay, okay. Don’t go getting possessive.”

Allie wanted to shake her sisters but of course that would do no good. “I know a lot more than you think I do. We talked for quite a while.”

“Is that right? Then tell us. What do you know?”

“Meg, don’t encourage her.”

“I know that he’s an only child and that his mother was a teacher and his father was a police officer. I know that they’re gone just like our parents.”

Another look passed between her sisters but this one was filled with pain. A pain she knew all too well. “I know that he was a straight-A student through high school and college. He also played on the football team and was captain of the debate team.”

“Great. So he’s intelligent and a jock. That’s a deadly combination.” Meg rolled her eyes, but it was obvious she was impressed. “What are you going to tell us next? That he’s found a cure for cancer. Or adopted an orphan from China?”

“No. But he does volunteer at the local teen outreach program.” Allie grinned, happy that she’d thrown a curve at her sister’s sarcasm. “Obviously he’s very ambitious. Plus he handles money well. He transformed the club on a shoestring budget and it’s already making a profit.”

Hilly shook soup drops from the ladle, then placed it on the counter before pivoting to face her. “And you got all this information from talking to him that one night?”

“Well, most of it anyway.”

Meg edged closer and arched one eyebrow. “Ooh, me thinketh there’s more.”

“Okay, I admit it. I Googled him.” Why did it matter how she’d gotten information? “But I got most of what I know about him from our conversation.”

“Now it’s getting interesting.” Meg’s blue eyes darkened. “So tell me. Does he have a Facebook page, too? Maybe with revealing photos?”

Allie shoved her sister’s arm. “No, everything I found about him was very positive. He’s a good guy. In fact, he’s the nicest, most caring man I’ve ever met.”

“Not that you’ve met many.”

“And whose fault is that, Meg?”

“Allie, we’re not putting Tom down. In fact, it’s because he’s a good guy that we don’t want you to see him again.” Hilly slipped her arm around her. “You haven’t learned how to control the hunger. And until you do, it’s not safe for him. He’s not someone you can feed on and then forget about.”

“I know and I’d die if I ever hurt him. But don’t you get it? I don’t want to feed on him. I want to love him.” She sniffed back a tear. “Why can’t I have what everyone else has? What Mom had?”

Meg softened to her sister’s plight, coming around to give her a hug. “We know how much you want him, Allie. And I believe he has the same thoughts for you. But even though I feel for you and Tom, Hilly’s right. If you really care about him, you’ll stay away.”

The tear tracked down Allie’s cheek before she could stop it. “But what if I can control it? What if I find out how Mother was able to keep from draining Father?”

“That’s a big *what if*, honey.” Hilly shook her head. “I’ve racked my brain trying to think of someone who might help. But I don’t know another succubus.”

“What about someone else? Someone who isn’t a succubus?”

Allie’s heart flipped over. “What do you mean, Meg?”

Meg ignored Hilly’s glare and paced to the other side of the kitchen. “Hilly didn’t want me to get your hopes up, but I think maybe another family member might have the answer.”

Allie broke free of Hilly and rushed to her sister. “Who? Come on, don’t hold out on me. Tell me.”

“Don’t get too excited. Meg doesn’t know that this person can help.”

“She’s right, Allie. I don’t. But if anyone would know what to do, Aunt Matilda might.”

“Oh, my God. Seriously?” She hugged Meg and planted a peck on her cheek. “So where is she? The last time I heard, Aunt Matilda was backpacking through Europe and then heading for Australia. No one knew how to reach her.”

“Calm down. I don’t know where to find her either.”

Allie’s hope deflated faster than a balloon in a room full of pins. “Oh.”

“But I am trying to find her.”

“Really, Meg?” She squeezed her sister again, then turned to Hilly. “And that’s all right with you?”

“Actually, it was Hilly’s idea.” Meg pushed her toward her older sister. “Why don’t you give her a hug, too?”

Feeling a little guilty about the way she’d spoken to her earlier, Allie gave Hilly an extra-long hug, trying to express her apologies through touch more than words. “Thank you so much.”

Hilly gripped her shoulders and held her at arms’ length. “I’m doing this for you. Not for you and Tom. I wouldn’t have even mentioned it—not that I was the one who did mention it—” she cast Meg an accusatory look, “—until I’d found her. Locating her may take weeks, maybe even months.”

Allie nodded, trying to keep her jubilation restrained. The fact that she had a chance was all she needed.

“Dude, what you’re doing is wrong on so many levels. Why the hell are you stalking this girl?” Monroe, a friend and employee of Tom’s, yelled. “Hey, watch it, man.”

Tom’s tug sent Monroe stumbling back into the alley, but all that Tom worried about was whether Hilly had seen him. “I’m not stalking anyone.”

“Sure seems that way to me. We’ve hidden in this alley for the past hour watching those girls in the bakery. Sure, they’re easy on the eyes, but wouldn’t we get a better look if we got closer? Like maybe sitting inside the place?”

“I’ve tried that.” Granted, he felt somewhat guilty spying on—not stalking—Allie, but he couldn’t think of another way to reach her. After spending the past few days thinking about her, trying to convince himself he didn’t want anything to do with her and even turning down her calls to the club, he’d finally come to the realization that he didn’t want to stop seeing her. Hell, he couldn’t stop thinking about her. Or dreaming about her. She had a hold on him he didn’t want to break. Yes, she’d lied to him, keeping the secret of her disease longer than she should have, but he could understand her fear in opening up to him. The more he thought about it, the more convinced he was that he had to forgive her. In fact, he’d forgive her anything.

But by the time he'd come to that realization, she'd stopped calling him and, whenever he called the bakery, one of her sisters always answered the phone. To make matters worse, her sisters never left her alone, and every time he'd gotten close to the bakery, they'd shuttled her out of the room so fast he couldn't get inside quick enough to see her. His only hope was to devise a scheme to get her out of the bakery and away from her sisters.

"Dude, if we're going to do this thing, then let's do it. And you're paying me back, right?"

Tom gave his plan another run-through, then nodded. "Right. Keep your phone on so I can hear. But remember. You have to keep the other two in the bakery and send Allie to the market. Got it?"

"Sure I have. You can count on me." Grinning, Monroe fist-bumped him, then strode around the corner toward Sweet Nothings Bakery.

Tom watched, mentally crossing his fingers. If his friend pulled this off, he'd treat him to a dinner and a raise. Monroe stopped at the door of the bakery and glanced back, then pushed the door open. Hilly greeted him as he entered and walked over to the counter. Tom held the phone to his ear, straining to hear.

"Hi, may I help you?" Hilly went on to explain a few of the specials but, as planned, Monroe got right to business.

"I need to place a very large order."

"Of course. What would you like?"

"I'd like six cakes, half chocolate, half white cake, and all with gumdrops on top."

Tom almost laughed when Hilly's smile faded. "Gumdrops? Oh, I'm sorry, but I don't have gumdrops. However, I'd be happy to put extra decoration on them. Maybe some sprinkles instead?"

"Nope. I've got to have gumdrops."

Meg hurried over to her sister's side. "Did I hear you say you wanted six cakes with gumdrops on top?"

"That's what he said. But as I was explaining to this gentleman, we don't have gumdrops."

Tom gripped the phone tighter. *Come on, ladies. Do what you need to do to make the sale.*

"But we could get gumdrops. Couldn't we, Hilly?"

"Actually, if you can get those gumdrops, make that an even dozen cakes." Monroe's excited face turned to look out the window—and he shot Tom a thumbs-up.

Tom cringed, then slinked behind the edge of the building. Had Monroe outed him? He peered around the corner, half expecting to find Hilly charging toward him. Fortunately, Hilly and Meg were too deep in a discussion to notice Monroe's blunder.

"Fine. Then it's settled. I'll take care of getting the rest of the cakes from the back and Allie can run to the market to buy the gumdrops." Meg turned her attention back to Monroe while a disgruntled-looking Hilly waved Allie over, handed her money and scooted her toward the door.

Chapter Nine

Allie strolled down the sidewalk toward the small market at the end of the street. Granted, her sisters would do almost anything to please a customer, but this was the first time she'd been ordered to buy gumdrops. Not that she minded, of course. For the first time since Hilly's encounter with Tom, she was free of her sisters and she intended to make the most of it.

As usual, her thoughts turned to Tom. Should she try to contact him? But all her calls to the club had not been returned, so why bother again? The ache in her chest, however, rejected the idea. She'd tried enough times to reach him, but had he done the same? Not even once. Maybe her sisters were right after all. Maybe what she'd felt for Tom wasn't real. Or worse, it was but he didn't feel the same way. She bit her lower lip and forced the tears not to fall. She'd already cried more than she should have and wasn't about to waste another tear on someone who didn't care about her.

"Allie."

Her breath caught in her throat as Tom slid beside her and took her arm. Although the warm *zing* his touch gave her was wonderful, she pulled away.

"Don't touch me." He let go of her, frowned, then took another step toward her, making her shuffle backward until her back was against the big picture window of the flower store.

"Allie, what's wrong?"

Damn, but she loved his green eyes. And the way his hair fell over his forehead made her want to run her fingers through it, pushing it back into place. Yet it was the concern in his voice that made her heart beat faster. "You know what's wrong."

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do."

"Are you talking about my apartment?" He lowered his voice. "I realize I didn't react well, and it's not much of an excuse, but you kind of blindsided me."

"I blindsided you?"

Tom offered his hand and tilted his head toward the park across the street. "Can we sit down and talk? Please?"

Should she trust him? Should she give him a chance to explain? Her sisters' words filtered in, but a stronger voice silenced them. If this was the last time she and Tom spoke, she wanted answers. Maybe then

she could stop thinking about him. Maybe then he would stop invading her dreams. “Fine. But only for a little while. I’m on an errand for my sisters.”

Tom’s slight smile spoke of a secret, one that she intended to make him tell her. “Great.”

He led her to a bench under a large shade tree. Allie sighed, thinking how romantic the spot was. Or at least how romantic it could be. If only she and Tom... “Okay, then, talk.”

He placed her hand in his and put his other hand on top of hers. That simple gesture sent exciting chills through her and she, regretfully, slipped her hand out. He frowned again but didn’t complain.

“Like I said, I was thrown the other day. I shouldn’t have reacted so badly, but please understand. I didn’t act that way because of your condition.”

She inhaled, not ready to go down that path. How could she tell him after he’d let her down? “You didn’t act like it bothered you.”

“I didn’t? I sure thought I did.” He waved away the pigeons starting to gather at their feet. “But let me explain.”

“That’s what I’m doing.” Would he hurt her more? Yet no matter how much it hurt, she wanted to hear what he had to say.

“I wish you’d told me earlier.”

“I sort of did.”

“Yes, I know you mentioned it, but you didn’t say anything about it being contagious. And you certainly didn’t say anything about having an STD. Even then, I think I would’ve acted better if you hadn’t seemed so, well, strange. That’s what really threw me.”

“What?” Her mouth fell open and she wasn’t sure she could ever close it again. “A sexually transmitted disease? Who? Me? I don’t have a STD.”

Tom’s blank stare said it all. *Oh, crap. Hilly.* Her sister had done this.

“That’s what you told me, remember? That day at my apartment?” He widened his eyes. “Don’t you remember?”

Anger flashed through her as the realization of what must have happened hit her. She’d known Hilly had taken her form with Tom, but she hadn’t realized the rest of what she’d done. Allie, aka Hilly, had dropped the STD bomb on him. No wonder he hadn’t contacted her!

“Tom, I have to come clean with you.” She winced at her bad choice of words.

He took her hand again and, this time, she let him keep it. “You can tell me anything you want. Trust me. This time I’m ready and I won’t let you down.”

If he’d answered any other way, she wasn’t sure she could have told him the truth. But the conviction in his tone let her know she was safe in his hands. “What I’m going to tell you is going to sound unbelievable. But it’s true.”

“I see. Go on.” He waited, giving her the time she needed to think of the right words.

“That wasn’t me in your apartment.”

“Yeah, well, you did seem odd. Different.” He smiled, showing the dimples she loved. “But that’s okay. We all have a day when we’re not ourselves.”

“No, you don’t understand. That literally wasn’t me.” She let out a breath, then took a big one and made the final leap to trust him. “That was Hilly.”

“Okay, now I’m confused. You’re saying that you weren’t in my apartment, but that the woman who looked like you was actually your sister?”

She could see that he didn’t understand, maybe could never understand, but it was too late to stop. “That’s right. You see, my sisters and I have magical powers.”

He froze with a blank expression on his face. Blinking once, he attempted to speak, then closed his mouth.

“I know it sounds crazy, but it’s true. Hilly is a shape-shifter. She can change into any form she wants, including changing her body to look like me.” She hurried on, afraid that once he regained his voice, he wouldn’t wait around for the rest. “Meg is a witch. Not a wiccan-type witch, but the kind that can cast spells and change people into animals. But she’s a good witch so don’t be afraid of her.”

He swallowed hard as though trying to swallow what she’d told him. “Okay, give me a sec. You’re claiming that Hilly can change her shape and that Meg’s a witch.”

“I’m not claiming anything. I’m telling you.” *Please let him believe me.*

“And that you have magical powers, too? So what are you? A vampire?”

The corners of his mouth twitched upward, but at least he hadn’t stopped touching her. Yet. “I’m serious, Tom, and no I’m not a vampire. I’m a succubus.”

“A succubus? You mean you suck the life out of people? And that’s your condition?”

She had to remind herself that he didn’t mean to be rude. He just needed time to understand. “Yes, that’s what I wanted to tell you. And I’m not a creature or an evil demon like most people think when they think of a succubus. I’m a person just like everyone else. The only difference is that I need a man’s energy to live.”

He studied her for a moment, then glanced at a young man who’d sat down on the grass a few yards from them. Several minutes passed before he turned back to her. “Allie, if you don’t want to see me anymore, then just say so. Don’t make up an outlandish story to try and scare me off.”

“I’m not making this up. I’m a succubus. I have sex with men and drain them of their energy.”

“So then you’ve had sex with lots of men? But I thought...”

The accusatory tone of his voice sliced through her, but she could see the struggle in his expression. “I only recently started needing to feed. But yes, I’ve had, um, *tried* having sex with other men. But you were the first to...you know. Are you saying you’ve never had sex with another woman?” She hadn’t wanted to use that tactic, but he had to get past the sex thing to understand the real problem.

"Okay, that's fair. I'm sorry that I said that. I'm just confused and... But to say you drain them of their energy... How am I supposed to believe something that wild?"

She studied the young man, the germ of an idea slowly forming. Her plan was risky, but losing Tom forever was unthinkable. Taking Tom's hand, she closed her eyes and willed him to be strong. She had to convince him once and for all. "I'm going to show you. But you have to promise that you'll stop me before it's too late."

"I don't understand. How will you show me? And stop you from what?"

She took his face in her hands, forcing his gaze on hers. "When you see the smoke, pull me away."

"Allie—"

"Tom. Promise me you'll pull me away. If you don't, I could kill him." He winced, then nodded, giving her the assurance she needed, but she could still see his doubt. "Watch and believe."

Rising, she strode over to the man on the grass, knelt in front of him and touched his cheek. She smiled at him, silently thanking him while she sent a quick prayer skyward. When she was sure, she leaned forward and kissed him. Immediately, he moaned, then wrapped his arms around her.

"Allie, what the hell are you doing?"

She ignored Tom and concentrated, blocking out the sounds of the town. The urge to feed filled her in a hot flash of hunger and, carefully, she let it take her over. Heat pulsated through her, calling to the man's life energy. Almost at once, the sweet taste filled her mouth to flow down her throat and spread through her body. Power swept through her, power that wanted to grow stronger, wilder. She moaned and pressed her body to him.

"Allie, stop!"

Strong hands broke the man's arms away from her, then slipped under hers. She resisted the attempts to pull her back, wanting nothing more than to keep drawing the elixir of life into her greedy body. A voice, barely breaking into her consciousness, called to her, begging her to stop.

"Allie, please, let him go!"

Tom? Is Tom okay? Does he need me? Allie opened her eyes and jerked, flinging her body away from the strange man who then slumped to the ground.

"Are you all right?" Tom knelt beside her, his hand on her cheek, his eyes filled with worry.

"I'm okay. Is he..." She couldn't ask the question. "Please tell me he's alive."

Tom checked the man for a pulse, his body heaving with a sigh of relief, then came back to her. "Yeah, he's alive and his pulse is strong. But should we get him to the hospital?" At that moment, the man moaned and rolled onto his back. "Wait. Is he snoring?"

Allie giggled, letting the man's life force spread throughout her body. She'd taken from the man but Tom had stopped her in time, proving that she could count on him. "I think he is. He'll sleep until his body

recovers. I doubt he'll remember what happened. And even if he does, he won't know whether or not to believe it."

Tom collapsed beside her and ran a shaky hand through his hair. "Holy crap, what the hell was that?"

"I told you. I'm a succubus and that's what I have to do to survive. I pulled his energy from him with my kiss." She started to reach out, then abruptly withdrew her hand. What if he wouldn't let her near him again? What if he was afraid of her now?

"I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes."

"That's why I had to show you."

The emerald of his eyes darkened as he searched her, seeking an answer she wasn't sure she could give. "Allie, have you done that to me?"

Shame flooded her, no longer allowing her to look at him. "Yes." She rushed on, her words stumbling out with the hope of making him understand and, if she was lucky enough, to forgive her. "But, unlike this time, I didn't mean to do that to you. I just wanted what every other girl has: a chance for sex, a chance for real love. When I met you, after we talked, I felt so close to you. I needed to be near you, to make love to you. Nothing more and nothing less."

"But you did *that* to me?" Tom focused on the man who was already beginning to stir. "Then why don't I remember?"

"Meg put a spell on you so you wouldn't."

He sat beside her and she could almost hear his thoughts. He struggled to come to grips with everything he'd learned. On top of that, he wrestled with the realization that they'd taken advantage of him, lied to him, put him under a spell. All because she hadn't controlled her need to feed.

"Tell me, Allie." He pivoted toward her, his features hardened. "Was I anything more than a source of energy?" His unyielding expression morphed into a hurt that broke her heart.

"I never wanted to do that to you. Never, Tom, I swear. You mean so much more to me. More than I could ever have hoped." Her vision blurred as the tears welled. "Please believe me. If I could change things, if I could change what I am, what I have to do, I would. But I don't know how else to be."

"Tell me, Allie, do care about me?"

She struggled not to fling herself at him and beg his forgiveness along with his love. "I know you probably don't feel the same way, especially after what I've done, but I do. I care for you so much. You're all I think about and everything I've ever wanted."

"But you don't have any control over this?"

"Not yet. Although I know there's a way. My mother was a succubus who fell in love, married and had children. The problem is that I don't know how she did it."

"Does anyone else know? Is there another succubus you can ask?" He laughed, the sound coming out in a bark. "I can't believe I'm even talking about this."

“Maybe. Meg’s trying to reach my aunt who’s a witch, too. We think she may know.”

They sat in silence for several minutes, then Tom rose and stood with his back to her. Allie bit her nails, her stomach churning, and waited for him to speak. He’d never want anything to do with her. She knew it but couldn’t ask the question. Instead, she’d wait and let him tell her. After that, who cared what happened? Yet, when he turned to face her again, she wasn’t prepared to hear what he had to say.

“Allie, if we have any chance at all, you can’t hide anything else from me. Not ever again. Do you understand?”

“I do and I swear from now on, I’ll tell you anything and everything you want to know.”

He studied her as though trying to see into her very soul. “Do you think we can move forward from here?”

“I want to.” She held her breath and watched as his decision played out across his face.

“I love you, Allie.”

Allie gasped, her hand coming to her throat. Had she heard him correctly? But how? How could he love her after what she and her sisters had done? “I’m sorry?”

He took her hand and drew her to him. “You heard me. I love you.”

“Oh my God.”

“I should be angry at you, even hate you, but I can’t. From the first minute I saw you I knew you were special. Granted, I didn’t know how special, but I had a gut feeling and I always listen to my gut.”

“And your gut’s always right.” She flattened her hands on his chest, amazed that he still cared.

“It always is.” He clasped her hands and squeezed. “But until we figure out what to do about this problem, we have to be careful. And no more letting your sisters pull any tricks. Agreed?”

She’d have agreed to anything if it meant having Tom with her.

“Agreed.” An ache tightened inside her chest, making her do what was right for the man she loved. “But this isn’t any way for you to live.” She leaned away, the pain of the separation shaking her to the core.

“You let me decide that.” He pulled her into his arms again and pressed his lips to hers.

She fell into the kiss and felt the urge to drain swelling inside her. But this time, she wasn’t the one to break their hold. Tom held her at arms’ length and blew out a breath. “We need to find your aunt, and find her pronto.”

Chapter Ten

“How long before Meg and Hilly figure out that you’re not coming back to the bakery?”

Allie clicked open the delete folder in Meg’s email, then glanced up from the computer to find Tom peeking out the bedroom window. “My guess is that Meg’s already performed a finding spell and knows I came home.”

“And Monroe’s probably blown his cover as the gumdrop man.”

“Then you’d better stop searching the street and start going through the papers on Meg’s desk.”

“I still don’t like this. Why not just ask Meg if she’s found your aunt?”

“Tom, you don’t know my sisters. They keep things from me and, after hearing them whispering this morning, I think they’re doing it again.”

“But why would they? They want you to learn to how to manage your urges, too, right?”

“Of course they do. But not until they’ve checked it out first and made sure it’s the way they want me to do it. I’m always the last to know and the last vote to be counted.” She clicked open another email, her gaze landing on the signature at the bottom of the message. “Oh my God. I was right. This message is from my Aunt Matilda. She and Meg have been emailing.”

Tom came to her side and read over her shoulder. “I guess you pegged them correctly. Hey, she’s in Raleigh.”

Elation filled Allie as she read the good news. “She says she knows how my mother managed to live with my father without hurting him.” Spinning around in the desk chair, she let the grin on her face spread wider. “How do you feel about taking a road trip?”

“Sounds good to me. Let’s get a move on.”

Minutes later, Allie sat on the passenger side of Tom’s convertible Mustang, enjoying the wind as it whipped through her hair. Dark sunglasses hid his eyes but she could imagine the sparkle in them. He was as excited as she was. “I can’t believe this is really happening.”

“Believe it, baby. In another hour, we’ll be knocking on your aunt’s hotel room door and finding the answer to our prayers.”

“Wow, in just a little while I’ll have a whole new life.”

“A whole new life with me, right?”

More than the rays of the sun warmed her. “A whole new life together sounds amazing.” So much had changed in so little time. They’d spent their time on the road talking, laughing, trading ideas for the future.

She couldn't believe how comfortable they were together, as though they'd already spent a lifetime by each other's side.

An hour of more talking and planning later, Tom pulled the car into a guest parking space at the hotel where her aunt was staying. Getting the room number from the desk clerk took a little haggling and some overt flirting by Allie but at last they stood outside her room.

"I'm afraid, Tom." Allie bit her lip and rechecked the number of the room.

"Why?" He slid his hand across her shoulders and tugged her closer. "This is what you wanted."

"I know. I'm being silly, right?" She took a deep breath, raised her hand and knocked three times. For one horrible moment, she didn't think anyone would answer. But then she heard movement and the door swung open.

Blue eyes much like her own twinkled in an oval face that reminded her of her mother's. Gray hair fell past the woman's shoulders, loosely tied back in a haphazard ponytail, and tendrils stuck out in odd angles around her cheeks. The mouth, pulled into a soft smile, was full and ripe despite the years that had bestowed wrinkles on the face. "Oh, cupcakes and molasses! Bernadette Tristan, is that you?"

"No, Aunt Matilda, I'm Allison Tristan. Bernadette was my mother."

Sadness diminished the smile but was followed by an even bigger one. "Hee-hee. How silly of me. Of course you're not my dear deceased sister, God rest her soul. But you do favor her so." The sharp gaze landed on Tom. "And who's this handsome devil?"

"My name's Tom Halloran. I'm a friend of Allie's." He stuck out his hand, but Matilda waved it away.

"Uh-uh-uh. I don't believe in handshakes." Opening her arms, she enveloped them in a group embrace. "Hugs are much better, don't you think? Come on in." She whirled on her heel, sending the bottom of her silk skirt floating around her. "It's been such a long time. Why you were just a youngster when I last saw you. Tell me about your sisters. Are they well? Do you still live in that little town?"

"They're fine, and yes, we're still in Cottageville." Allie waited for Matilda to clear the clutter off two chairs before she found a place to sit. Tom sat beside her and sent her an encouraging wink. "As much as I'd love to reminisce, I came here with a purpose."

Thankfully, instead of being offended, Matilda plopped down on the small sleeper sofa. "Now there's your father in you. Always impatient and wanting to get right to the point. What do you need, sweetie? Money? A love potion?" She crooked her finger at Tom. "No, I don't think that's what you want. Anyone can tell this one's already in love with you."

She could see that? But how? In the way he looked at her? By the fact that he was here? Did her aunt see the hot desire in his eyes? "Uh, no, not exactly. Auntie, you knew my mother was a succubus, didn't you?"

"Pish-tosh, of course I did. I'm her sister."

“And since you knew she’d married and had children, you knew she’d learned to manage the urge to feed.”

“Again, right on the money, honey.” Matilda leaned forward, her blue eyes cooling. “So that’s what this is about? You want to know how she did that without hurting your father. I’m right, aren’t I?” Her stark appraisal ran the length of Tom. “Have you two had problems in that area? Close calls, perhaps?”

Allie sensed that her aunt already knew the answers to her questions, but wanted Allie to voice them. “Too close, Auntie.”

Tom scooted his chair closer. “Can you tell us how she did it? We have to know.” He took Allie’s hand without turning his attention from the older woman.

Her smile disappeared. “Just because I can tell you, doesn’t mean I will.” Her aunt set her jaw, grim determination taking over.

Allie’s stomach flipped over. She’d never even considered the possibility that her aunt might not tell her. “But, Auntie, you have to help us. If you don’t…”

“Sweetie, it’s not that I don’t want to. But the answer involves a dangerous transformation.”

“What kind of transformation?”

“How dangerous?”

Although they’d both asked a question at the same time, her aunt decided to answer Tom’s first. “Extremely dangerous.”

Her aunt rose and paced to the window. “What you’re asking me is impossible. I won’t risk harming you, Allie. Believe me, if there was any other way, I’d help you.”

“But are you sure? How do you know it’s dangerous?” Allie couldn’t give up. Not when she was so close.

Aunt Matilda shuddered as though a cold breeze had blown over her. “I’ve tried three transformations. Two of the women were dear friends.”

Allie took Tom’s hand, needing the support he would give her. “What happened, Auntie?”

Aunt Matilda turned toward them. Her features hardened, not from anger, but from a great sadness that overtook her. The cheerful blue eyes grew glassy with a faraway gleam. “I failed my friends.”

Tom’s inhale matched her own. “How did you fail? Did each remain a succubus?”

Her aunt shook her head, the simple gesture filled with grief and remorse. “No, honey, they both died.”

Two had died trying to change? Would she risk her life to be with Tom? Allie looked at the man beside her and knew her answer. Her life would be nothing without Tom.

Tom squeezed her hand, yet even he couldn’t comfort her. She strengthened her resolve. “Why did they die, Auntie? Did something go wrong?”

Aunt Matilda returned to her seat, clasped her hands in front of her, then bowed her head. “No nothing went wrong. At least not in the way you think. Survival depends on the woman herself. Whether or not she’s strong enough to handle the change.”

“But Aunt Matilda—”

Her aunt glared at her. “After I lost Hettie, I never wanted to try the transformation again. But then Margaret talked me into it and I gave in. Oh, how I wished I hadn’t.”

“Still, it was their decision. They made the choice to take the chance. You can’t blame yourself.”

“I know.” She reached to take Allie’s other hand. “But that doesn’t make it any easier to lose someone you love.”

Allie grasped her hand with both of hers. “I know and I’m sorry you lost them. But you gave them what they wanted and they took the risk. They were willing to die in order to live the way they wanted to live. That’s what I want, too.”

The three of them sat in silence for several moments, each deep in reflection.

Allie released her aunt’s hands, determined to make her understand. “You said it happens often, but not every time, right? You’ve heard of others living through the transformation?”

“I have, sweetie. Still...”

“It doesn’t matter, Allie.” Tom rose to pace away from them. “If it’s that dangerous, then I won’t let you do it. I couldn’t. Not for me.”

“I’m sorry, but you don’t have the final say so. And it wouldn’t be just for you. I’ll do it for us, for me.” She could see the torment in him, but wouldn’t let that sway her. “I’m sorry, Tom, but this is my call.”

She knelt in front of her aunt. “This is my decision, isn’t it? Please, Aunt Matilda, give me this chance. If I can’t be with Tom, in every way, I don’t want to live at all.”

A tear rolled down her aunt’s face and she placed a hand on Allie’s cheek. “You have to understand all the consequences, sweetie. Not only do you tempt death, the transformation changes you. Not in appearance, but inside you.”

Allie waved off Tom’s protest and coaxed her aunt to continue. “Go on.”

“Your succubus power would be removed and you would become human.”

How many times had she wished she wasn’t a succubus? “But that’s exactly what I hope will happen. Trust me, I won’t miss being a succubus at all.”

Her aunt glanced at Tom, then back to Allie. “Neither did your mother. And I can see how much you love each other. More love than I’ve seen in two people in a long time. Since your mother and father, in fact.”

“Wait.” Hope lit up Allie’s heart. “You said you did three transformations. Who was the third?”

Aunt Matilda’s demeanor changed, the tension releasing from her body in waves. “You, my dear, are a smart one.”

"The third was my mother, wasn't it?" Allie grinned, unable to control her excitement at her aunt's brief nod. "Don't you see? My mother was strong and I'm strong, too. Give me the chance you gave my mother. Give me the life you gave her."

Aunt Matilda sought out Tom for help, the plea in her eyes unmistakable. Tom bent his head for a moment, and Allie could see the war raging inside him. "Tom, you have to believe this was meant to be. You have to trust that *we* were meant to be. Trust me, Tom. Can you do that?"

He lifted his gaze to meet hers. "I can't ask you to do this."

"You're not asking me." Allie gave him a quick kiss, then raised her eyebrows in question at her aunt. "So? Will you help us or not?"

Aunt Matilda let out a heavy sigh, resignation covering her features. "I want to, but I don't know. If I failed, I'd never forgive myself. And I doubt your sisters will agree to this."

"Please, Auntie. I'll do whatever it takes." Allie swallowed the fear threatening to clog her throat and straightened her back just like she steeled her resolve. "I'm going to do this, with or without my sisters."

"Like hell you will." Hilly burst into the room, followed by Meg. "Now you listen to me, Allison Tristan, and do as I tell you."

Allie stood, hands on her hips, ready to do battle. "No! You listen to me for once. This is my decision to make and not yours. Hilly, Meg, I love you more than I can ever say, but now's the time for me to stand on my own two feet."

"You don't know what you're getting into, Allie."

Stepping between her two sisters, Meg pleaded with them. "Now hold up and take a breath, everyone. In fact, let's all take a moment to calm down."

"Calming down won't change my mind. I'm doing the transformation whether you like it or not."

"You don't know that it'll even work, Allie." Hilly's anger was gone, replaced by the fear marring her features. "Aunt Matilda, tell her you won't do it."

"She doesn't have to. Allie, I won't let you do this." Tom sat in the chair and tugged Allie into the chair in front of him. She tried to argue but he placed his fingers over her mouth. "Please hear me out. When we first talked about this, I had no idea it would be so risky."

She pushed his hand away. "But I have to do this. If I don't, then what kind of life can we have together? Don't you still want me?"

He grew more serious than she'd ever seen him. "I want you more than I could ever have believed I'd want anyone. That's why I won't put you in harm's way." Taking her face in his hands, he placed a chaste kiss on her lips. "You're the sexiest woman I've ever known, but you're more than that. In the short time we've had together, I've grown to love you. Allie, as much as I want your body, I want your spirit and your heart more."

Allie forgot the women standing around them. All she dreamed of was right before her. "And I want you in the same ways. But I also want to give you a real life together, one that includes making love. I have to do this, Tom, as much for myself as for you."

"But I don't care if we never have sex. Having you in my life is enough and I don't want to chance losing you. Give us the time we need, Allie. Don't risk it all before we've even begun."

He'd give up a normal sex life for her? Did he love her that much? "You'd stay with me even if we could never make love?"

"Of course I would. Sex isn't the most important thing in a relationship. Love is."

Yet Allie knew what she had to do. If he could give her all his love, then she could give him the same. She squeezed his hand, then let it go and stroked his hair. "Tom, I love you. But if you refuse to let me do this, if you refuse to stick by me no matter what happens, then we're over."

"What? What are you saying?" His face drained of color. "You can't mean that."

She'd stunned him, torn at him, but this hurt was less than the hurt he'd suffer in a life void of physical contact. "I'm saying that either we have a full, rich life together, including sex, or we have no life together at all." She stood, pulling away from his hold, and turned to Aunt Matilda. "Can we do the transformation right now?"

"Allie, no."

Meg wrapped her arms around Hilly, holding her upright, as though her sister had suddenly lost the strength to stand. "I guess that means it's up to you, Auntie."

The older woman regarded Allie, not giving any clues to her decision. If her aunt wouldn't help her, who could she turn to? How would she find another witch as powerful and as wise as her aunt?

Aunt Matilda heaved a great sigh. "When your mother came to me and asked me to help her change, I told her no. But she kept coming back, bringing your father with her and, at last, she made me see the love that was between them. Your relationship is new and just getting started, but, God help me, I think she'd want me to give you the same chance that she had."

Allie's heart pounded in her chest, taking a little of her breath away with each beat. "Does that mean you'll change me?"

The great witch tightened the ribbon around her ponytail. "I will. But it won't be easy, sweetie. The pain is unimaginable."

Allie's determination grew stronger. "Living without Tom is unimaginable."

"Very well then. We have a transformation to do." Aunt Matilda turned to her sister. "Meg, how are you at transformation spells?"

"I'm not good, Aunt Matilda, but I do okay." Meg settled Hilly onto the edge of the bed. "What do you need me to do?"

"No, Aunt Matilda. No," moaned Hilly.

Tom came to Allie, wrapping his arms around her shoulders. She closed her eyes and sensed The Hunger rising like a dreaded enemy to the surface. *No. No more. I will not feed again.*

“Well, I do have my spell book with me. I mean, what witch worth her cauldron doesn’t carry her book with her? But I don’t have one of the other two ingredients I’ll need for the transformation.”

“Tell me what you need in detail and I’ll get it for you.” Allie grabbed a pad and pencil from the nightstand. “Okay, shoot.”

“Oh, there’s no need for a list, sweetie. First I need some seeds.”

“Seeds?” asked Meg and Allie in unison.

“Yes. Seeds. Which, as luck would have it, are my favorite snack.” Aunt Matilda rummaged through the top drawer of the dresser and pulled out a large sack. “I can’t live without my daily snack of sunflower seeds.”

“Great. Then what’s the second ingredient?” If her aunt told her she needed an elephant, Allie would steal one from the zoo. Whatever it took, she’d do it. Yet, as determined as she was, she couldn’t ignore the inkling of fear working its way into her.

“The second thing isn’t really an ingredient. It’s a candle. A very large white candle.”

“Whew. I think we can find a large white candle fairly easily, don’t you, Meg?”

“Now hold on a sec. Not any ordinary candle will do. The candle—” Aunt Matilda paused until everyone’s attention locked onto her, “—has to have a golden triskele engraved on it.”

“What’s a triskele?” Tom’s warm breath fluttered Allie’s hair, renewing her desire for him.

Taking the pad and pencil from Allie, the older woman drew the symbol, then held it up for everyone to see. “A triskele is the Celtic symbol of life and rebirth.”

Could she find a candle with that symbol? Allie frowned, unwilling to let doubt cloud her optimism. “It might take a little time, but I’ll find it.”

“Maybe you won’t have to.” Meg sat next to Hilly and took her hands. “Hilly, could you become the candle?”

“No!” Hilly jerked her hands away. “I can’t help her destroy herself. Maybe I can’t stop her, but I won’t help her, either.”

“Look, sis, I don’t want her to do this any more than you do, but she’s determined, and you know how she is when she’s made up her mind.” Meg grinned, taking her sister’s chin to make Hilly look at her. “She kind of takes after her you that way.”

Hilly’s worried gaze met Allie’s.

“Please, Hilly. Do this for me.”

“No, I can’t. I won’t.”

Allie couldn't blame her sister. Not when she knew how upset she was. But she wouldn't let her sister's unwillingness to help stop her, either. "Auntie, can the spell be performed without the candle? Or with an ordinary one with the symbol drawn on it?"

"It could, but I'd hate to do the spell without the proper candle. The transformation would be even more dangerous."

"I don't care. I saw candles in the gift shop we passed. I'll get one and draw a triskele on it with a magic marker." Allie glanced at each person, daring them to challenge her. "One way or another, I'm going to do this and do it now. Everyone, stay put while I buy a candle."

She'd taken only a few steps before Hilly stopped her. "No. Wait. I'll change into the candle." Her weak smile drifted over to Aunt Matilda. "Just make sure you don't burn too much of the wick. I like my hair the way it is."

The last doubt left Allie, confident now that both her sisters were on her side. "Thank you, Hilly."

"Okay, then. Let's get this show on the road. Everyone, follow me." Scooping up the bag of sunflower seeds, a small bottle and a rectangular electronic device, Aunt Matilda led the way out of the room.

"But, Auntie, where's your spell book?"

Aunt Matilda waved the device at Meg. "Right here. Don't you have your spell book on an eBook reader yet? No one uses the old print books anymore."

Meg shrugged. "I guess I'm old-fashioned that way."

Allie took Tom's hand and followed her aunt and sisters to the park across the street.

"Allie, I know I told you I'd help, but I have to ask one last time. Won't you please change your mind?"

Allie squinted at Hilly as the sun's setting rays formed a soft glow around her sister. She sighed. She was more than ready to go ahead with the transformation. If her mother could survive the spell, then so could she.

"I'm sorry, but I have to. How can you ask me to give up love now that I've found it? Please, Hilly, don't ask me to."

"I can ask because I don't want to lose you."

Allie wiped the tear from her sister's cheek. "I know. But I have to believe that this is what's meant to happen. This is what I want and I'm asking you to support me. With everyone's support—" she waved at Meg, who was listening intently to Aunt Matilda's instructions, "—I know nothing bad can happen."

Aunt Matilda took a deep breath, placed her hands palm to palm, closed her eyes and murmured words too softly for Allie to hear. A minute later, she opened her eyes and nodded in a satisfied way. "Okay, everyone. We're in luck. This is the best time of day for a transformation. Sweetie, come and stand beside me."

Tom pulled her into his arms for a kiss that was filled with hope, worry and trust. “I love you, Allie.”

“I love you, too.” She laughed and wiped her lipstick from his mouth. “I’m so glad we found each other.”

“Yeah.” He shot a rueful look at Hilly, who had the decency to cast her gaze to the ground, then centered his attention on Allie. “We found each other and wouldn’t let go.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek, then stood beside her aunt. She took in a couple of deep breaths and prepared herself. “Okay, I’m ready. Tell me what to do.”

“All you have to do is stand still.” Aunt Matilda ripped open the sack of seeds and scattered them in a circle around her. Finished, she handed the sack to Meg, then zeroed her intense gaze at her. “The transformation spell doesn’t look like anything to those of us on the outside of the circle. But on the inside, where the real change happens, it’ll feel as though the devil himself is ripping you apart. The pain will be unlike anything you’ve ever imagined. The heat, the burn, will make you think your flesh is dissolving, falling off your skin in shreds. But remember, Allie. No matter what happens, no matter how much it hurts, do not leave the circle. If you try, you’ll be lost.”

The apprehension she’d fought to keep at bay rushed into her, almost breaking her determination. She’d never dealt with pain very well. Could she handle this? Yet when Tom’s gaze met hers, she knew she could handle any kind of agony to stay with him.

“I won’t, Auntie.” Clasp ing her hands in front of her, she sought out her oldest sister. Hilly stood next to her aunt, her body slumped, worry etched in the lines of her face. “Hilly, I need you. I need both your talent and your strength.”

Hilly gave a slight nod. “Should I change now?”

Aunt Matilda took a step away from Hilly. “Yes, go ahead and change. But make certain that you don’t change back until I tell you to. If you do, then at best the spell won’t work.”

Allie swallowed, the knot in her throat going down hard. “And the worst-case scenario?”

“At the worst, the transformation will set your spirit free from this earth.”

“You mean she’ll die. No, Allie, I can’t do this. I can’t face losing you. It’s too big a risk.”

Tom started toward Allie, but she raised her hand, halting him. She couldn’t stop now. “Please, Tom, stay strong. For me and for us.”

He started to argue, then changed his mind and closed his mouth. “Remember. No matter what, I love you.”

Allie smiled. How could she fail when she had so much to gain? “Go on, Hilly.”

Hilly lifted her chin, regaining the strength Allie knew was always inside her sister. “Here I go.”

Seconds later, a large white candle with a golden triskele rested beside Aunt Matilda.

“Holy shit,” exclaimed Tom. “Allie told me what her sisters were, what they can do, but I guess I didn’t believe. Not until now, that is.”

“Believe.” Following Aunt Matilda’s instructions, Meg snapped her fingers, lighting the wick.

Aunt Matilda paced around the circle and Allie, and began chanting. A wall shot up from the seeds, forming a gauzy substance that ebbed and flowed around her. She tried to reach out and touch the barrier, but she couldn’t move her arms. She was paralyzed, unable to move or speak.

Fear gripped her, for the first time making her reconsider her decision. Yet when she saw how Tom watched her, waited for her, she knew she had to hold on. He’d had the faith and love to give her this chance, and she wouldn’t fail him. He was worth whatever the spell did to her. Determined to live her life with him, fully and completely, she gritted her teeth and forced the fear away.

Her aunt’s chanting grew louder, yet Allie didn’t recognize the language. Immediately, heat rose inside her, flaming brighter than her succubus need had ever burned. Flames leapt from her feet, coiling around her like a snake of fire. The scorching of her skin sent a scream to fill her throat, but it could move no farther. Would she burn to death before the change took place?

A ringing in her ears threatened to burst her eardrums, and along with the sound came the internal pain. Agony seared through her, moving outward from the middle of her torso to send sharp daggers to every part of her body. A heat, alive in its intensity, scorched her internally, threatening to liquefy her alive. The Hunger inside roared in anger.

She moaned soundlessly as tiny fissures opened up inside her, splitting her apart from the inside out. Her stomach roiled and bile rushed to her mouth, but she couldn’t open wide to let it spill forth. Instead she endured, a captive of her own body.

Unable to close her eyes, Allie stared straight ahead and watched the world around her disappear in a fog of pain. The last thing she saw was Tom watching her as Aunt Matilda and Meg paced around the circle. His mouth moved, but she couldn’t understand the words. Would she ever hear his voice again?

Tom. I’m still here. Oh, Tom, it hurts so much.

Why didn’t they seem upset? Couldn’t they see the torture she was in? Or was the gauzy wall hiding their view?

The fire spiraling around her slid over her face, burning her lips, her eyes, her skin. Acrid smoke filled her lungs, permeating the entire length of her. She was melting, her body disintegrating into a pool of ash. Was this what dying felt like?

Chapter Eleven

“Allie, are you all right? Please, baby, talk to me.”

“Sweetie, tell them you’re all right. You made it through.”

“Wake up, Allie. Stop scaring Hilly and me.”

Allie fought to open her eyes. She breathed in, delighting in the flow of fresh air into her lungs. Someone cradled her head while others took her hands and rubbed her feet.

“I thought you said she was fine. I thought you said this was over.”

Tom. His voice was harsher, more strained than she’d ever heard it. She had to open her eyes, if only to make sure he wasn’t in trouble.

“Allison Tristan, you’re freaking me out.”

I’m freaking Meg out. Allie grinned and yet she knew the smile didn’t reach her lips.

“Back away, everyone, and give the potion time to work. Give her some air.”

Aunt Matilda. Still in charge. Allie sensed that all but one of them moved away. The one holding her head stayed, stroking her hair, murmuring soft words of love.

“Please, Allie, wake up. Do it for me.”

She’d do anything for him. Had, in fact, done the hardest thing of all for him. And for her. What was one little thing like opening her eyes compared to that? And yet, her eyelids refuse to obey her command.

“Please, tell me she’ll be all right.”

Tom again. But why does he sound so afraid?

“She’s breathing now.” Matilda’s voice was strained, yet hopeful. “I think we got the potion to her in time. She’ll be as good as new in a few minutes.”

In time? Allie wanted to speak to them, to tell them she was all right. *I’m tired. Just very tired.* She tried again, sensing she had to do more, and forced her body to respond.

“Wait. I think I saw her eyelashes move.”

Tom again. My Tom. Allie opened her eyes to find his face gazing down at her. She blinked, making her eyes stay open even as the weight of them tried to drag them down, especially when the fear in his face eased and was replaced by a tentative smile.

“Hey, baby. You had us worried.”

Hilly knelt beside her and took her hand. Her features looked haggard as though she’d suffered a great strain. “Oh, Allie, we almost lost you.”

But how would they have lost her? Her mind, still fuzzy, cleared a bit more. She croaked out an answer, then took the sip of water he offered.

“Don’t talk. Just rest.”

Suddenly, the memory of what she’d experienced rushed back to her and she gasped, reaching to feel her body. Her clothes weren’t scorched and her skin was intact. In fact, nothing had changed. It was as though she’d never gone through the transformation.

“Oh, no. It didn’t work.”

“I think you ought to test that theory before you jump to any conclusions.”

Aunt Matilda followed her suggestion with a smile while Meg joined Hilly at her side, their faces sporting a variety of emotions.

“How?” Although her voice had grown stronger, her brain wasn’t clear of the torment she’d suffered.

“Kiss him, little sister.” Meg jerked a thumb at Tom. “Lay one on him and see how it makes you feel.”

“I think you’d better listen to your sister.” He ran a finger over her lips, sending a shiver into her, reawakening her. “Unless you’re not up to it.”

She had to know. Had to find out if she and Tom could stay together. Sliding her hand around his neck, she pulled him closer.

The kiss was soft, a tentative caress, yet the burn it sparked inside her flashed to a boiling point. Heat raced from her core outward, traveling into her stomach, her back, her breasts, then into her legs and arms. Energy flowed through her, thrilling her at how strong she felt. Her pussy tightened, ready for him, ready to take from him. She wanted him and she didn’t care where they were or who was watching.

Her lust drove her on, and she thrust her tongue inside his mouth, tasting him, drawing from him. Clutching the front of his shirt, she kept him there, holding him as her prisoner. She wanted him to fondle her breasts, to move his hand lower. And once he opened that path, she would wrap her legs around him, guiding him into her.

No! Allie wrenched away from Tom, panting at the strength it had taken to break free. “Oh, God, no. I was right. It didn’t work.”

The heartbreak was worse than the agony of the transformation. Everything she’d hoped for, all the dreams she’d had of a life with Tom shattered, leaving her struggling against the unbearable misery.

Hilly, her eyes filled with tears, pressed her lips to the back of Allie’s hand. “It’s okay. All that matters is that you survived. Don’t worry about anything else right now.”

“But I can’t... We can’t...” With Tom’s help, she sat up, then scooted away from him, fearful of the longing she still coursing through her. A sob racked her and she shook her head, refusing his outstretched arms. “Don’t touch me. Don’t ever come near me again. For your sake, Tom, please do as I say.”

“Allison Tristan, knock off the hysterics.”

Aunt Matilda stood, feet apart, a scowl plastered on her face as she shook a finger at Allie.

How could she be so cruel? Couldn't her aunt see that her heart was breaking?

"I don't blame you, Auntie. But, please, don't. Not now."

"Listen to me." Her aunt's voice dropped lower, became softer. "I'm not trying to be mean, sweetie, but you're wrong. I know you are."

"How can I be? I know what I'm feeling." She glanced at Tom and saw her own anguish echoed in him. "I want him. I want to take him and have sex with him until I get everything I need."

"And is that all?"

What could she mean? Wasn't that enough? "I don't understand. What more proof could you want that it didn't work?"

Aunt Matilda offered her hand and Allie took it, needing the extra support to stand. "Now listen, sweetie, and do as I say. First, I want you to take his hand."

"No. If I do—"

"Hush and obey your old auntie. Tom, take her hand and don't let go no matter what. Trust me, both of you."

She swallowed another sob and did as her aunt commanded, hesitantly placing her hand in his. The heat that had flowed through her at his kiss swept into her again. Yet, when she tried to yank her hand away, he held on, then took her other hand as well.

"Tom, let me go."

"No. I'm going to do what your aunt wants and you should, too." His green eyes darkened and she could see the challenge in them. "If there's still a chance, I won't let you throw it away." He turned to Aunt Matilda. "Unless this puts her in danger again?"

"No, it won't, Tom. The worst has passed."

Allie stared at their joined hands. She wanted nothing more than to touch him, to hold him. But how could she when she knew what would happen? The sweet spot between her legs ached, calling for him. She lifted her gaze to his and held it, fighting the surge of love that nearly buckled her legs.

"Allie, what are you feeling?"

She didn't want to say. Didn't want to give voice to the emotions, the sensations making her tremble. Yet she knew she had to. "I want him."

"More. Say it all. How much do you want him?"

Why was her aunt doing this to her? She cried out, tried again to jerk away from him and failed. "Please, Auntie."

"Answer her, Allie." Tom grabbed her, startling her in the way he shoved his body against hers.

She couldn't help it. She had to answer truthfully. "I want him more than I ever have. I want every part of him."

“Then take him.”

She gaped at her aunt, saw the determination in her face. “No, I won’t hurt him.”

“Do it, Allie.” He cupped the back of her neck and forced her to meet his gaze again. “Kiss me.”

“Kiss him, Allie. Try to draw his energy. Trust me and kiss him.”

Her sisters’ protests were drowned out by the force of his kiss. Unlike the earlier kiss, this one was powerful, possessing her, daring her to take from him. The need to have him raced through her, and she slid her arms around him and jumped, wrapping her legs around his waist. He groaned and moved his hands to grip her buttocks, holding her to him.

“Suck on him, Allie. Take his life force.”

She did as her aunt told her. He was hers and she would have him. And this time no one would stop her.

The kiss grew deeper, their tongues mingling together. Hands fondled her, caressed her, encouraged her.

“Tom, listen to me. Put her down now.”

She wanted to scream at her aunt, but couldn’t, wouldn’t, break the kiss. Tom growled, the sound reverberating in his throat and into his lips. Another louder growl tore out of him as he dropped her, pushing her hands off him. He staggered backward, putting several feet between them. Allie reached out for support and her sisters came to her side.

“Look at him, Allie.”

Bewildered, she studied him, trying to understand what her aunt wanted her to see. “I don’t get it. What happened?”

Tom nodded, then smiled at her aunt.

“He’s all right, isn’t he? He looks just fine. Look at him, Allie. Does he look like you took his energy?”

Incredulous, she studied him. He stood, straight and tall, and full of life. She gasped, almost too afraid to hope. “I didn’t drain anything from him?”

“Not one tiny bit.” Aunt Matilda clapped her hands together. “Sweetie, you’re transformed.”

“But I felt it. I felt myself wanting to take from him.” She had to be certain before she could really believe.

“I’m sure you did. But what else did you feel?”

“I don’t know.” Allie thought harder at her aunt’s skeptical look. “I guess... I guess this time was different.” The flutter in her heart picked up speed, renewing the dream she’d longed for. “I didn’t sense a darkness lying underneath the hunger or a fear of going too far. This was about love and nothing else.” The tears she’d shed before were replaced by fresh tears. But this time the pain was gone. “I changed. I really changed.”

“You sure did. What you’re experiencing when you’re with Tom now is good old love. Nothing more, but most assuredly nothing less.”

Tom came to her, lifting her into the air to spin her around, laughing as her sisters and Aunt Matilda laughed with them. “You did it, Allie.”

“We can stay together now. I’m changed. I’m not a succubus any longer.” Allie laid her head back, tears of joy streaming down her cheeks as she laughed.

Tom set her on the ground and grinned at her, his dimples teasing her as his eyes sparkled. “And you’re all mine.”

“You’ve got that right. I’m yours and you’re mine.” She giggled as he lifted her to spin her around again.

Epilogue

“Tom, we don’t have time for this. My sisters will be here soon and we have to get dressed.” Allie squealed as he picked her up and threw her on the bed.

“We always have time for this. Besides, you can’t walk around in the buff and not expect me to get all hot and bothered. In fact, I think that’s what you wanted all along. If I don’t have you right now, I think I’ll die.”

She took his face in her hands and frowned at him. “Don’t ever say that again.”

“What? That I’m horny?”

“You know what I’m talking about. Don’t talk about dying. Especially not about dying and sex at the same time.”

“I’m sorry. All I want is a little lovin’.”

“Then lovin’ you’ll have.”

He buried his face between her breasts, his breath warming her as much as his love did.

“Tom?”

“Hmm?”

“Are you happy?”

He lifted his head to look at her, bemused. “Of course I am. Can’t you tell?”

She playfully slapped him. “No, seriously. Are you happy with me?”

He feathered kisses along her shoulder. “Most definitely. Why do you ask? Aren’t you happy with me?”

“Happier than I ever thought possible.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“Well, we’ve been together for almost a year now and I was thinking...”

“Allie, are you about to pop the question?” He wiggled his eyebrows and tilted his head in question.

“Well...” His tongue sliding over her nipple almost derailed her train of thought. Almost. “Will you please stop that and pay attention?”

Grumbling, he propped his head on his hand and gave her what she wanted. “That’s asking a lot from me, but go ahead. Fire away.”

What was she so afraid of? They’d talked about marriage before and had agreed that they’d get married someday. So why not just ask? “What would you think about getting married?”

He recovered quickly from his surprise. “Well, sure. I mean we’ve already talked about it. That is where we’re headed, right?”

“Then what do you think? And what about kids? Do you want children?”

“Whoa. We fast-tracked through the marriage part, then the baby and straight into children. As in more than one.”

Had she pushed too fast? She bit her lip and tried to backpedal. “No, no. Later. I mean, if you’re not ready...” The discussion wasn’t going the way she’d hoped, but what choice did she have except to continue? “Tom, I need to ask you something.”

Yet before she could, he rolled over and opened his nightstand drawer. When he turned back, he had a small black box in his hand. A jewelry box.

“Oh, my God.” Allie sat up at the same time Tom did, her gaze locked on the box. “What is that?”

“I’ve had this for a while. I was planning on taking you to that restaurant you like so much and doing one of those sappy romantic moves like the ring in the dessert, but since you sort of brought up the subject...” He took her hand and squeezed. “Allie Tristan, there’s only one thing that could make me happier than I am.”

She giggled and asked coquettishly, “Really? Tell me so I can make sure you get it.”

“Would you marry me?”

“Oh, my God.” Her breath caught in her throat as he opened the box. A huge round ruby, circled by smaller diamonds sparkled against the black velvet.

“Did I do okay? I figured you’d want a ring that was different and since rubies are your favorite stone...”

“Oh, my God.”

“Allie, can you please say something besides ‘oh, my God’? I’m getting a bit worried. Are you saying yes or no?”

She held out her left hand and grinned. “Yes. Definitely yes.”

Tom slid the ring onto her finger, then leaned forward to kiss her. His lips lingered on hers, soft yet hungry, and she returned his kiss with eager fervor.

She wiggled the ring back and forth, getting used to the weight of it on her finger. He loved her. Of that she had no doubt. “I am the luckiest girl in the world.”

“And I’m the luckiest guy in the world.”

“No kidding.” She gave him a quick kiss before a giggle broke free. Could her life get any better than how it was right now? She doubted it, but if anything could make it better, marrying Tom could.

She pulled him in for another kiss. The lust she’d felt the day she’d gone through the transformation ripped through her again, but now she welcomed it. Now she recognized it as not only wanting to take from him, but to give him all that she was. Now she recognized it as love.

His tongue skimmed past her lips to meet hers. They savored each other, teasing each other, loving the taste of each other. Allie concentrated on the way his tongue moved, the texture of his mouth, the nip of pleasure when he caught her lower lip between his teeth. She sighed and pressed into the kiss as he gripped her hips.

His hands slid downward until he fondled her butt cheeks. Exploring the curve of her bottom, his tongue moved to explore her neck. She laid back her head and closed her eyes. Pressing against him, she flattened her breasts against his hard chest, then arched to increase the friction between them.

Tom moved his fingers into the crevice between her butt cheeks and skimmed his tongue along her shoulder. She slipped her palms along his shoulders, reveling in the rugged terrain of his back. He was more than she'd ever hoped for, and at times she still wondered how she'd gotten so lucky.

Tom ran his hands over the curves of her breasts. Green eyes met hers, telling her everything she wanted to know.

"I love you." His tender tone meant as much to her as his words did.

His hot gaze ran the length of her, heating her body and exciting her. She'd never tire of that look. "I love you, too."

"From the first moment I saw you, I wanted you here, in our bed, forever."

She inhaled as though she could take in him in and touched his lips with her fingertips. "I know," she quipped.

His laugh flowed over her, adding to her arousal. His tongue sneaked out to tickle her breast. Slowly, he walked his fingers over her breasts, then tenderly circled each nipple. She pushed her breasts at him, wanting to make him move faster, but he wouldn't be rushed. Tracing his fingers around her taut buds one last time, he took her nipple in his mouth and rubbed the other one with his thumb. The muscles between her legs tightened in anticipation.

Could she ever have believed she could love someone this much? His touch excited her, not only in a physical way, but mentally, emotionally. She closed her eyes, using her other senses to remember the way he felt, the way he moved, the way he made her feel. Her body reacted to his, already releasing the first orgasm. She breathed in deeply, relaxing, yet excited. Still, time wasn't on their side.

"Tom?" They needed to hurry. Her sisters were coming soon.

"Yeah?"

The desire in his eyes, however, made her forget everything and everyone else. "Never mind."

Pushing her breasts together, he pulled first one nipple then the other into his mouth. He tugged at her hardened bud and the tug echoed in her abdomen. She reached out to run her hand through this hair and let the softness flow through her fingers.

He ravished her nipples, giving them his full attention. She moaned, reveling in the sensation of his tongue on her skin, the strength of his hands holding her breasts.

“I love you, Allie.”

No matter how many times he said those same words, they never failed to send heat rushing from one end of her body to the other. He was her love and her life.

Without warning, he slipped lower, running his tongue between her breasts, down the middle of her stomach where he paused to kiss and nibble her belly button. She rested her hands on his shoulders, content to let his muscles ripple under her palms.

When he slid even lower, she gasped both at the path his tongue took and the way his fingers dug into her buttocks to lift her to him. He swiped his tongue over her mound, around it, but never too close to her folds.

“Tom, please.” She didn’t care that she begged. Hell, she’d beg more if she thought it would entice him. Instead, he looked up at her, the love in his eyes taking hold of her heart. They paused, perhaps waiting to see if the other would speak.

At last, he dipped his head and pulled her apart with his fingers. She jerked as his tongue slid over her, then down and around her clit. A whirlwind of lust barreled from her core into her abdomen to circle and spin her desire outward. He sucked on her, making her cry out and buck. The fire he spread every time he stroked her burst into a blaze only this one man could ever put out. Nipping, sucking, he took her to the edge until she didn’t think she could stand another moment of the sweet torture.

“Tom, oh, Tom.”

The climax shook her, sending shockwaves outward until they washed away her breath. She gasped and reached for him, but he ignored her. Instead, he lashed out at her, licking, drinking, pushing her up and over the orgasmic cliff time and time again.

“Wow. Please. Oh, wow.”

Keeping his gaze on hers, he repositioned her legs around his hips and, with a grin she wanted to kiss, slid into her.

She cried out, not in pain, but in ecstasy. Her body exhilarated with the feel of his shaft. Her vaginal walls clenched in the timeless effort to hold him, to keep him with her. His hands found her breasts and held on to them like a rider clinging to a wild horse.

“Allie, my Allie.”

Rocking into her, he held on, bringing her back when his powerful thrusts pushed her toward the headboard. He was fire and she was water, but they mixed, forming something different, something better. She clutched his hands that covered her breasts, pressing his hands harder against her.

“Look at me, baby.” She did as he told her, seeking the love she knew she would find in his eyes. “I want to watch your eyes as you come.”

She tracked her tongue over her upper lip. “And I’ll see you come.”

His pace steadied into a rhythmic pounding, and as much as she wanted to see him enter her time and again, she didn't want to miss the explosion in his eyes that she knew was coming.

He moved into her, fitting with her, making them one. Each thrust brought him closer to his release and she studied him, loving the way she could read him so well. Matching his thrust for thrust, she locked her feet behind him and held on.

Suddenly, he pulled out of her, removing his cock, and she yelped. Yet before she could complain, he unlocked her legs and pushed her knees to her chest. Diving between her legs, he took her again, using his tongue as he'd used his cock.

She cried out, not expecting the quick climax, and clutched at the comforter. He flattened his tongue against her, then scored it over her pussy. As his tongue moved in and out of her, his fingers massaged her throbbing nub, sending her into yet another release. She grabbed her knees and held on, unable to do anything else.

Shudder after shudder racked her and she thrashed her head back and forth, crying out his name. He continued his delicious torment until she begged him to stop, begged him to enter her. He refused, the warm air of his refusal sending shivers over her hot skin.

"Tom, please!"

He nodded then moved to his knees, pulled her legs over his shoulders and shoved into her, groaning as he filled her. Taking her nipple in his mouth, he pumped upward, driving into her. She rode him, clutching at his hair to keep from being bucked off.

She wouldn't have believed that she could still want him, but her body told her differently. Another climax, the biggest one of all, exploded in the same moment he plunged into her again. She tightened her muscles around him, determined to keep him inside her.

Nipping her shoulder, he adored her with his kisses and his words. "You're so beautiful, so loving. I want you more each day. Love me, Allie."

She pressed against him, molding her body to his, putting all her effort into voicelessly telling him how much she loved him. Tracking her fingers through his hair, she brought his mouth to hers, then bit and nibbled at his lower lip.

Soon, however, the muscles in his back tightened and his arms turned to steel, gripping her in a loving vise that wouldn't let go. His tension built, like a crescendo of desire until, at last, he rammed into her harder than ever. Calling her name, he released, his seed speeding into her.

Minutes later, she stretched and turned to peek at the alarm clock. "Uh-oh. My sisters should've been here already. Thank goodness they're late, but I bet they'll be here any minute." The doorbell ringing at that moment sent her flying out of the bed to toss on the first outfit she found in her closet. "Hurry up, Tom."

"I'm almost ready." She heard him curse as he stumbled out of the room, frantically pulling on his jeans and shirt. "You get dressed and I'll get the door."

Although she was sure she looked and smelled like terrific sex, Allie hurried into the living room to greet her sisters. Too many weeks had passed since she'd seen them and she was thrilled to find them happily chatting with Tom.

"Hey, little sister, Meg and I were just telling Tom about our plans to expand the bakery." Hilly wrapped her arms around her, hugging her tightly before finally turning her loose to let Meg do the same.

Meg stepped back, an intense expression on her face. "Hi, sis." Her eyes narrowed. "What's new?"

Allie reached for Tom. "How'd you know we have news?"

Her sister's scrutiny grew stronger. "I just have a feeling."

Hilly, however, beat her sister to the punch. "Oh, my word. Is that a ring on your finger?"

Allie lifted her left hand and wiggled her fingers. "Why, yes, it is. Tom and I are getting married!"

Hilly gasped, then brought both Tom and Allie into a giant hug. "I'm so happy for both of you."

Meg, however, kept her distance. "Congratulations. But that's not what I'm getting at."

Allie stared at her sister, then saw Hilly shrug. "Aren't you happy for us, Meg?"

"Of course I am." Slowly, as though a thought was dawning on her, Meg's face softened until a knowing smile filled her face. "Oh, Allie, honey. I'm ecstatic. But not just because of the marriage."

"Then why?" She was thankful for Tom's arm around her shoulder. What could Meg know?

"Little sister, I hope you're planning on eloping."

"Why would we elope? We're in no hurry." Tom made an "I haven't got a clue" face at Allie.

"Then I guess you'll just have to tell the kiddo that she was conceived before you got hitched. If that kind of thing matters to you."

Allie's eyes grew wide. Almost as wide as Tom's. "What are you talking about, Meg? What kiddo?"

Meg took one of her hands as well as one of Tom's. "I'm talking about your daughter, silly. Allie, don't you know yet?" She laughed at the expressions on their faces. "Honey, you're pregnant."

Allie's knees wobbled and Tom had her seated on the sofa before she could grasp what her sister had said. "What did you say?"

"I said you're going to have a baby."

"Tom, did you hear her?"

Tom, it seemed, had recovered faster than she had. He slid his arm around her and gazed into her eyes. "I did. We're going to have a baby girl. Am I right, Meg? You did say 'daughter', right?"

"Yep, you're having a baby girl. And there's more." Meg took a stunned Hilly by the hand, leading her to the loveseat across from the couple.

"What do you mean by more? Is she all right?" Worry eclipsed Allie's joy until Meg shook her head, reassuring her.

“Take it easy. She’s fine. But I’m glad you’re sitting down because, Allie, your little girl is a succubus.”

About the Author

To learn more about Beverly Rae, please visit www.beverlyrae.com. Send an email to Beverly at info@beverlyrae.com or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Beverly! http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Beverly_Rae_Fantasies/.

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When hunter becomes hostage, the only question is: Death by bite, or by bullet?

Running with the Pack

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Cannon Pack, Book 3

At night, Lauren Kade trades her white coat and dental drill for a black uniform and a gun. But not to hunt the shifters she once swore to eliminate. Driven by lingering guilt for killing a female shifter a year ago, she covertly throws other hunters off the trail. She's good at it, too...until she's taken hostage by a sexy werewolf whose thirst for revenge is even bigger and badder than his attitude.

Daniel Cannon tried everything to outrun the pain of his mate's murder, but when hunters take down another pack member, it's more than he can stand. Now that he's got one of them at his mercy, though, something strange is happening. Her day job may set his teeth on edge, but her luscious curves make him salivate. In spite of her past sins, she insists she's reformed into some kind of werewolf guardian angel.

Worse, his heart wants to believe her, and his body aches to mark her as his. Yet going against his instincts could turn him from lover to prisoner. Just when his pack needs him most...

Warning: Be advised. This is not a test. Your limits are about to be pushed. Your desires will be met. Your heart will burst with pleasure and your dreams will be fulfilled. Prepare yourself for sex hotter than the sun on the driest desert. And if you dare, then run with the pack.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Running with the Pack:

Lauren dropped to the back of the group and switched her gun's safety to the off position. If she had to, she could cause a diversion from the rear easier than in the front of the group. Halfway through the alley, John went down on one knee, waited for them to do the same, then pointed to a dark corner where one building met another. She squinted into the blackness and hoped she wouldn't see what she feared most.

A small werewolf bent over the prone body of a homeless man. The man, wearing rags and shoes with holes in the bottoms, was either asleep or unconscious. His hand, however, firmly clutched an empty whiskey bottle.

The poor man had no idea that a werewolf stood over him. Could she wake the man up without scaring the werewolf into biting him? If so, would John and the other hunters hold their fire to keep from hitting the man? Inching forward, she touched John's shoulder to warn him against shooting while an innocent human was in the line of fire, but she was too late. A shot blasted the silence apart, jolting her and sending her stumbling to the side.

The werewolf's screech of pain echoed around the alley. Wounded, the shifter landed on its feet but couldn't stand. Blood ran down its hind leg. The werewolf tried to stumble away, but lost its footing and slumped to the ground.

"Gah! What the fuck is this? Help! Someone get this thing away from me!" The man dropped his bottle to scuttle away from the growling creature. The other men rushed to John, cheering and slapping him on the back. Two hunters helped the man to his feet and retrieved his bottle, then led him down the alley toward the street. Pointing his rifle at the snarling werewolf, John stood back, his chest out and pride oozing from him. "Say nighty-night, shifter."

Lauren slowly regained her feet, tears stinging the backs of her eyes. Why couldn't she have acted faster? Disappointment mingled with guilt, tearing a hole in her stomach. But now was not the time to wallow in her feelings. She gritted her teeth and took a few steps toward the sickening scene and the great white hunter holding court over his doting subjects.

"Wait! Don't shoot!"

John and the others pivoted to her without placing their backs to the werewolf. "What, Lauren?" His eyes flashed above his gleeful grin.

She clenched her fists, resisting the urge to slap the stupid smile off his face. "You promised me I could shoot first." Why hadn't she remembered to say that earlier? Had their discussion about Cannon thrown her off? But maybe she wasn't too late.

"I did? I don't remember that." John's brow knitted and she prayed he'd taken his dumb pill today. He wasn't the brightest man on the block and she could usually convince him to do what she wanted without him knowing she'd bamboozled him.

"Yeah, you did. Granted, you were drunk." She got the expected snickers from the group. "But a promise is a promise. And now you go and blow it."

"Seriously, babe, I don't think—"

"You don't think and I don't care, John. Just answer the question. Are you going to give me what I want or not?" She pouted in the way John couldn't resist.

Hoots and laughter surrounded her. "Yeah, John-boy. Give her what she wants or one of us might have to give it to her." John punched the loudmouthed hunter in the arm.

She strode to the group and positioned her body between John and the werewolf. "So the way I see it, you owe me the kill." She turned to face the werewolf and widened her eyes, hoping to alert him to her plan. "Let me be the one to put him down."

She watched the battle in John's eyes and knew how much he wanted to kill the shifter. But, with the heckling of the others, he had little choice but to give in.

"Fine. Just make it quick."

She blew him a kiss along with a sexy smile and waved everyone back. "You guys might want to step away. Uh, you know. I'm not that good a shot."

"Ain't that the truth?"

"Back up, dudes. You never know where her bullet will go."

At least her bumbling hunter act was still holding up. She almost shook her head in disbelief. Almost a year and they still hadn't caught on? Wow.

She stepped closer to the bleeding wolf. If he was as intelligent as she thought werewolves were, he'd catch on. At last his gaze met hers and she gave him a huge no-way-can-you-miss-this-signal wink. He blinked, then tilted his head. She wasn't sure he understood what she was about to do, but he knew she was up to something. She aimed a couple of inches above him, allowing for the discharge from the rifle to miss him.

Get ready, wolf. Taking a breath, she squeezed the trigger. The shot rang out and, after only a moment's hesitation, the werewolf yelped, jerked, then fell silent. Taking the dirty blanket the homeless man had used, she flung it over the body of the werewolf in feigned disgust. "Good riddance."

The hunters shouted and John lifted her to twirl her around. "You finally killed one."

"Finally? But I killed the female. Remember?"

"Oh, sure. Yeah. I forgot. Never mind." John released her and turned to his men. "Grab the carcass for Lauren, men."

"No!" Her shout stunned them into inaction, giving her a moment to think. "Uh, I mean, it's my kill, right? Then I decide what to do with the hide. And I've decided that I want to leave it right where it is."

"But why waste a hide you could hang on your wall?"

Lauren took John by the arm and led him away from the werewolf. "You know I don't like trophies on my walls. Besides, it's a scrawny thing." She adopted an evil expression. "And I want it to stay here. I want to imagine the rats having a feast. I think that's the best way to dispose of a vile creature like that. It's my kill, my decision, right?"

"Whatever you say, Lauren. I'm just so damn proud of you. Men, group together."

Lauren swallowed the bile in her throat and returned his hug but didn't follow the others as they circled around John. Instead, she paced over to the werewolf, then bent down and lifted a corner of the blanket, pretending to examine the head. "Stay still until we leave. If I can, I'll come back to help you," she whispered. She would've sworn the shifter's lips pulled back into a smile.

She turned to face the group and a movement above her brought her to a standstill. The beautiful black werewolf who'd escaped with the injured female werewolf crouched on the roof above her, his lips curled back to expose deadly fangs. She took a moment to appreciate his magnificent body, then abruptly dropped her eyes. If she drew attention to him, John would start the hunt again, thrilled by the chance to bag two in one night. The magnetic pull emanating from the mystical animal, however, drew her attention

back, holding her spellbound. His eyes, brilliant amber, glowed against his black face and the dark night around him.

Lauren couldn't help but study him. His body was all muscles and packed action. This creature, this regal being, was more a true hunter than John could ever be. The werewolf tilted his head, reminding her of someone else. Suddenly, realization struck her, dazing her. *It's Daniel.* She smiled, a little embarrassed not to have made the connection before. She should have known. In either form, he had the same intensity, the same sexual pull, the same overpowering presence. She frowned. The same accusatory expression? But why was his fury focused on her and not the others? *Shit, he doesn't understand. He thinks I'm with them.*

Panic rolled through Lauren. She had to do something before John and the others noticed him. In the end, however, it was Daniel who drew their attention.

The werewolf on the roof turned toward the hunters and widened his snarl. A spine-tingling growl floated down to the hunters, and he crouched as though ready to attack.

Praying her idea would work, Lauren lifted her rifle, aimed and pulled the trigger.

Sensual water shifters meet volatile air shifters—there's a storm coming.

Stormy Seduction

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Pacific Passion, Book 2

As morning-afters go, this one is looking pretty bright. Both air shifter Laurin Marshal and water shifter/shaman Matthew Jentry are aware, though, that trouble won't be long in coming. And they're right—before they've barely begun to work out the details of their mystical bond, the People of the Air find them to challenge Laurin's right to choose Matt as her mate.

Fending off Laurin's would-be suitors is easier than Matt anticipated, but there's another dilemma still to face. His own people. Laurin is just beginning to trust that his heart and body are completely hers, a radical change after she's spent the past two years alone and on the run. What will happen when his skittish, innocent partner encounters the playful, sensual—even lusty—ways of the Otter Clan?

Especially since they are arriving at the peak of the traditional summer solstice fertility rituals. And tradition demands they be the main attraction...

Warning: Incoming extreme passion yielding one otherworldly adventure. Don't let the book length fool you—there's enough heat in this story to challenge global warming. Four plus two equals one ceremony so explosive it may throw the earth off its axis.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Stormy Seduction:

The kiss was soft, a blessing of his mouth against hers, his fingers tugging through her hair to allow him deeper access, his tongue dancing across the roof of her mouth. A moan of desire escaped her, the need for him to touch her growing by the second. Her breasts felt full and heavy, an aching emptiness between her legs.

It might be sexist, but watching him battle earlier, fighting on her behalf, had really turned her on.

He stroked her cheek. "We can set sail in the morning, and still make it to Bella Coola by dinner on Saturday. Does that give you enough time to prepare for teaching this coming week?"

She thought quickly. "All of Sunday to finish the final adjustments to my lesson plans? Fine by me. Will you be okay for setting up for visits?"

"Easily. Someone is arranging the general drop-in clinic ahead of time. I won't see individual patients until midweek." Matt lowered his hand to cup her butt again like he had at the start of the fight. His fingers traced the edge of the bikini bottom she'd pulled on after flying over to the ship. He whispered against her lips, "Why'd you get dressed?"

"I didn't think you wanted me hanging out while we were getting the *Stormchild* underway."

He nodded his understanding even as his fingers massaged her butt cheeks. “Well, for what it’s worth, rest assured I have no issues with you hanging out, ever, around me. No matter what we’re doing.”

Laurin popped open the button on his shorts. “Ditto. Well, I don’t think I want you naked when you’re treating patients.”

He caught her hands in his and pressed her open palms against his rising cock. “You want to play *doctor* with me?”

The image that popped into her mind had nothing to do with him in a lab coat, but everything to do with an intimate encounter. Did he want to play? Maybe he could take her from behind, pressing her against the raised decking, the glowing sunset shimmering off their bodies. She lowered his zipper and released his cock, smoothing a stroke down the hard length. Capturing the fluid leaking from the tip on her thumb, she lifted her hand to her mouth and sucked it.

He watched her, mesmerized. Pupils dilating. Breath increasing in pace.

The salty taste of his seed splashed over her tongue and she remembered the feel of taking him in her mouth earlier, during their first trip on the *Stormchild*. Of him filling her, controlling her, and she groaned out with need. She’d loved every second of it.

“Damn it, Laurin.” He dropped his head back and thrust into her fingers. “I can see what you’re thinking.”

What?

He hissed his pleasure out, cupping a hand around hers to tighten her grasp. Every rock of his groin forced his shaft through her fingers from tip to root. “It’s not your hand I see. It’s your mouth. I’m fucking your mouth and it’s so hot and wet and tight. I’m dying here.”

Laurin smiled. He had mentioned that yesterday, and this morning, that he saw her fantasies. She’d never heard of such a thing. Hmm, maybe this was something they should explore in more depth. A mischievous thought overtook her, and she pictured herself on her knees before him, breasts supported only by her bikini bra. Like watching a movie trailer, she zoomed in from a new angle, to see herself looking up, her tongue extending to touch the tip of his erection.

His body jerked at the moment of envisioned contact.

Under her fingers his cock was hot and hard. In her mind it glistened with her saliva as he plunged into her mouth repetitively. Matt groaned aloud, his head dropping to her shoulder, her hands encasing him.

“Oh God, it’s not enough. I need...” His words faded away, his rhythmic thrusts breaking tempo.

His breathing grew frantic but she wasn’t ready to stop. Her mind’s view changed to her lying face down over the raised section in the forward area of the *Stormchild*. She mentally opened her legs wide, showing him touching her from behind, his cock pressing into her slick opening.

Matt lost it. He pulled her hands from his body and lifted her into the air.

“Matt!”

It was only a few steps later he dropped her to the decking, twirling her around and yanking her against his body. He dragged a hand down her torso, caressing her breasts before fitting between her legs to cup her mound. The very obvious, and very full, length of his erection fit between the cheeks of her ass as he ground against her.

“I need to be in you, Moonshine, not simply watch the pretty pictures.” His fingers slipped to her hip, and he snapped the sides of her bikini with ease. The tatters of fabric fell to the ground. “No matter how incredible the pictures may be.”

He forced her forward, her upper body coming in contact with the smooth wood of the cabin roof. One hand between her shoulder blades locked her in place. He used his knees to separate her legs farther. Then his cock rested at her entrance and she held her breath. He’d placed her in the same position she’d imagined moments before.

“Show me,” Matt demanded.

The visual images returned, this time mixed with the very tactile additions of reality. Not only did she see herself bent over, ass in the air, ripe for his possession, she felt—everything. The solid wood under her torso as her body warmed it. The press of his hand on her back, the cooling breeze off the water dancing over her heated skin.

The exquisite pleasure of his shaft sliding into her sex.



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