



Bite Me

C.C. Wood

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Cover Design by Jena Brignola, Bibliophile Productions

Editing by Kerry Genova, Writer's Resource

Interior design by Angela McLaurin, Fictional Formats

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To Donna,

*It was fun spending time in your head. I hope I used the word fuck enough
to be realistic.*

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The light in the bar was dim but the patrons were loud. Between the music and the clientele, I could barely hear the order I was taking. Trying to ignore the way the guy's eyes were glued to my cleavage, I leaned a little closer.

"I'm sorry, what was that?" I asked.

He stared at my breasts, which weren't exactly impressive, as he answered, "Gin and tonic."

I really wanted to smack him on top of the head with my drink tray but just managed to refrain. Instead, I smiled brightly.

"No problem." I looked at the other two guys at the table, who were already pretty tipsy. "Anything for you?"

They both shook their heads, and I turned and headed toward the bar. Lauren, the bartender, started pouring the drink, looking as tired as I felt. I shifted my weight from foot to foot, trying to relieve the pain in my arches. It was almost one-thirty in the morning. Last call would be in another fifteen minutes, and I could not wait. The night hadn't been busy but steady. My feet and my head were killing me.

I glanced around the bar to see if any of the other patrons were ready for refills. For some reason, my eyes were drawn to the corner. It wasn't even my section, but I still looked. There was a table tucked away there, usually occupied by couples or those who wanted to the illusion of privacy. Tonight, a man sat at the table, hidden in the shadows. When my gaze reached him, he shifted forward into the dim light. I felt my chest tighten. He was beautiful, beyond beautiful. His hair was dark and long, almost to his shoulders. The bones of his face looked as though they had been sculpted by a master. His high cheekbones and strong jawline should have been considered works of art. However, it was his eyes, those piercing blue eyes that I couldn't look away from. I felt pinned.

“G and T, Donna.”

Lauren's voice jerked me out of the hot guy trance, and I turned to look at her. She smirked at me when she noticed who had distracted me.

“So you saw Jenna's hottie from last night?”

I blinked. I remember Jenna had been going on and on about some guy in her section last night and how he was gorgeous. Of course I had blown her off because she was twenty-two and tended to exaggerate.

“*That's* Jenna's hottie?” I asked incredulously.

Lauren nodded.

“Wow, I guess she didn't overstate it after all.”

We both laughed and I took the glass from the bar. As I walked back to deliver the drink, I could almost swear I felt the man's eyes on me still. I refused to look. I just knew that I would trip or do something equally embarrassing if I so much as glanced in his direction. I focused on my walk back to the table I was serving and tried to ignore the prickle on the back of my neck.

I set the gin and tonic on the table and gave the total to my cleavage ogler. Again, the three men all eyed me like a group of wild dogs would stare at a juicy steak. I was beginning to feel uncomfortable with their obvious staring.

“Anything else, gentlemen?” I asked. They all shook their heads. “All right, well last call is in fifteen minutes, so let me know if you need one more round.”

A table nearby was ready to cash out their tab, so I headed back to the bar to get their credit cards. I couldn’t stop my eyes from straying to the corner, but the man with piercing eyes was gone. Ignoring the vague feeling of disappointment, I served drinks for last call, cashed out tabs, and cleared tables. The table of three men cleared out soon after I served the gin and tonic. They even left me a very hefty tip. I decided I could deal with their staring if they were going to be such great tippers.

Finally, at two forty-five, Lauren, the other waitress Sandy, and I were finished with clean up. I walked out with them and climbed into my car. I was just about to follow them out of the parking lot when I realized that I had left my cell phone inside. I really didn’t want to go back in for it, but I needed it. I had cancelled my home phone service several months ago, and it was my only means of communication. Quickly, I whipped my car around to the back entrance. I checked the parking lot, which was still empty, and headed back into the bar. I was glad the manager trusted me enough to give me a key and the alarm code. Within a minute, I had my phone, rearmed the alarm, and locked the back door.

I finished locking the door, but when I turned to head back to my car I stopped short. The three men from earlier were shoulder to shoulder in front of a big, black SUV. The blood in my veins turned to ice. They did not look friendly, well, not the kind of friendly I would appreciate. This was not

good. Not only were their eyes crawling all over my body, I knew exactly how much alcohol they had that evening. It was enough to bolster their courage to do something stupid, but not enough to prevent them from raping me until they were tired of the game.

Muscles tense, I maneuvered my keys so they stuck out between my fingers like spikes. I cursed my own stupidity for not carrying the pepper spray key chain my friend Shannon had given me. It would have given me time to get into my car with the doors locked. The ringleader, Mr. G and T, stepped forward. I slid sideways away from the door, toward the road. Maybe I could make it to the street. There was a twenty-four hour diner half a block away.

My hopes were dashed as the other two men spread out to cut me off. Okay, obviously that wasn't going to work. I decided to try talking my way out of the situation, though I was smart enough to know it was likely futile.

"Hey, guys. Did you forget something back in the bar? I can call my manager and have him come down and let you in."

None of them spoke. They only continued to close in on me. Frantically, I tried to think of something I could say that would dissuade them.

"Well, it was nice to see you again, but I have to get going. My boyfriend is expecting me home in the next few minutes, and he's likely to show up looking for me if I don't get there soon. You know how paranoid cops are..." I trailed off. They weren't backing off at the mention of a boyfriend or the cops. Shit.

They were almost within arms' reach now. I tried to slow my breathing. I wouldn't have much of a chance to get away, so whatever move I was going to make was going to have to be quick, efficient, and effective. I tried not to think of how creepy it was that none of them were speaking or responding to me when I spoke. Almost like fucking robots.

The leader lunged toward me suddenly. I gasped but was shocked to see my hand come up and jab him in the face with my keys. Somehow I managed to do the right thing without thinking about it. He howled, covering his face with his hands. When he hit his knees, I darted around him, heading straight for my car and screaming as loud as I could. Maybe someone in the area would hear me and call the police. I heard the other two men scrambling to come after me.

I saw one of them heading toward me out of the corner of my eye and veered away from my driver's side door. Maybe I could make it to the passenger side or even one of the rear doors. Fingers closed over my shoulder and I knew that I'd never make it to my car. In a last burst of desperation, I managed to rip away from the clutching hand, but not in the direction I needed to go.

Now I was headed away from the street, toward the fence at the edge of the bar's parking lot. I would be cornered. I glanced over my shoulder and saw that all three of them were closing in fast. I had nowhere else to go. When I reached the fence, I whirled around to face the three men as they approached. G and T had gouges in his cheek and blood running down his jaw and neck. He also looked supremely pissed. I kept my back to the fence and squatted slightly, arms low and slightly away from my sides. I really wanted to reach for my cell and call for the police, but I couldn't risk taking even a sliver of attention away from the three men in front of me. I had a bad feeling they would be on me before I got the first number punched in.

Instead, I opened my mouth and shrieked as loud and long as I could. The men immediately moved in on me. I knew that I was going to get hurt, but I wasn't going down without a hell of a fight. The ringleader wisely stayed slightly back as the other two men grabbed for me. One gripped my left arm, and I used the keys still clutched in my right hand to punch him in

the throat. I didn't get as much force behind it as I wanted but it did make him step back and choke. I felt the other wrap his arms around my waist from behind me. I threw my head back and felt my skull make contact with something pointy. The man behind me groaned and his arms loosened. I felt a surge of satisfaction. I knew that it wouldn't be long before the three of them overpowered me, but I also knew that they would be feeling pain because of me and that was something.

G and T chose that moment to make his move, and his fist slammed into the side of my face with enough force to have black spots dancing in front of my eyes. I screamed again, this time in pain. I heard a scuffle but couldn't see past the darkness in my vision. The leader punched me again, this time in the stomach, and I had no more air for screaming. I started to crumple, but his hands grasped my upper arms so hard I knew they would leave bruises. He cursed when I started gagging and whipped me around so I was facing away from him. I guess he wasn't so hyped up at the idea that I would vomit on him. I managed to catch my breath just before his forearm pressed into my throat to yank me back to a standing position.

I dug my nails into his forearm, clawing at his skin. A short scream caught my attention. I looked up and saw a dark figure wrap around his hands around the head of one of my attackers. In less than a second, I heard a crack as the man's head twisted in an unnatural way. Then his body went limp and fell to the ground. I saw no sign of the third man in the group.

“Don't fucking move.”

I realized the man behind me had spoken for the first time since this entire nightmare began. He was speaking to the dark figure standing in front of us. I also realized that I had just watched a man have his neck broken right in front of me. Suddenly my body started shivering so hard I could

barely stay standing without the arm at my throat. The shadow in front of us shifted forward, into a small shaft of light.

G and T tightened his grip around my neck and I stopped breathing. It was the gorgeous stranger I had noticed earlier. He looked feral and dangerous and, if it was possible, sexier than before.

“Release her,” he hissed. Even though his voice was barely a whisper, somehow it surrounded us.

The arm holding me tightened even further. Apparently, G and T had more liquid courage in him than I thought. I dug my nails deeper into his arm.

“I mean it, asshole. Another step closer and I’ll break her neck.”

“I said, release her.” This time the stranger’s voice was heavier. I could practically feel it dripping off my skin. It was almost painful.

The arm around my neck stiffened before it slowly dropped away. What the fuck? Okay, apparently this guy had the magic touch because my attacker was listening to him.

Suddenly, the hot guy from the bar was no longer standing in front of us. I blinked twice, thinking I had momentarily passed out, but he was gone. G and T whined high in his throat. I stumbled away, falling onto the ground.

When I looked behind me, I thought I was hallucinating. The man who had been holding me was hanging limply from the arms of the beautiful stranger. The stranger was gripping the man by the neck. When he was released, my attacker hit the ground hard, his head tilted at a strange angle. Vaguely I realized that my beautiful stranger had broken this man’s neck also.

I scrambled back on my hands, dragging my ass across the pavement. My rescuer took a step toward me and extended his hand. I stared at him numbly, my gaze travelling up his arm to his face. He leaned forward, those

intense blue eyes on mine, and cupped my elbow to pull me to my feet. The dim light in the parking lot glinted off his eyes, making them shine like jewels. Mesmerized, I blinked but didn't speak.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

I felt my stomach tighten when he spoke. He had an accent, but it was so faint I couldn't quite place it. The timbre of his voice was hypnotic and as gorgeous as the rest of him. I nodded. Leave it to one good looking man to reduce me to a speechless puddle. Fuck, I had just faced down a group of three men intent upon horrible things without hesitation, but I couldn't string together a sentence for this guy.

He released my elbow and my knees buckled. He caught me again and smiled slightly. My eyes zeroed in on his mouth. My first thought was that it was completely unfair that a man as gorgeous as him had dimples and the whitest teeth I had ever seen. Then I realized that his canines were long and curved. As I watched they receded before my eyes. I blinked, and his teeth looked almost perfectly normal. His canines still seemed a little long but not frighteningly sharp. The crazy events of the last ten minutes must have addled my brain.

I made sure my feet were firmly beneath me before I pulled away from my rescuer. Satisfied I wouldn't collapse into a heap at his feet, I smoothed my skirt down and ran a hand over my hair. I was sure I looked awful.

"Thank you for helping me," I said, forcing myself to meet his eyes. Normally I had no problem talking to handsome men, but this guy was sex on a stick and he was making me nervous.

"I'm glad I made it in time. I'm Conner."

When I heard his name I realized that his accent was faintly Scottish, as though he'd been in America for a long time.

“I’m Donna.” I looked at the crumpled bodies of my three attackers and shuddered. “We should probably call the police.”

Conner shook his head. “That’s not necessary.”

I gaped at him. “What? Of course we need to call the police. I know at least one of these men is dead.”

The man may have been gorgeous, but now I was beginning to worry that he was as crazy as the other three.

“They’re all dead, sweetheart.” He leaned closer and stared deeply into my eyes. “There is no need to call the police.”

I stepped back. Conner was beginning to scare me a little with his intensity. “Um, I don’t know if you realized this, but Jedi mind tricks are fictional.”

It was his turn to blink at me. Suddenly his eyes seemed to glow even brighter, and he smiled. I watched in amazement as his canines lengthened and sharpened. My stomach dropped. I had to be imagining things. It was the stress or the adrenaline. Vampires didn’t exist. It had to be something chemical, maybe drugs. That had to be it. Maybe the three men who attacked me had injected me with something and I hadn’t noticed the effects until now.

“You won’t call the authorities,” he repeated.

I swallowed hard. “Okay, okay. I won’t call the cops if you don’t want me to.” I was lying like hell, but I wanted out of there. I had been relieved when he came to my rescue, but now I was more afraid of him than I was of the three men he apparently killed.

He studied me. “You’re lying.”

“No, no I’m not,” I stammered. “I won’t call the police if you don’t want me to.”

Conner tipped my chin up with his hand. “You are lying. I can tell. Just like I can tell you’ll be dialing 911 as soon as your ass lands in your car seat.” His face grew closer to mine and I couldn’t help flinching.

“Please don’t hurt me,” I whispered. If I wasn’t scared out of my mind, I would be pissed at the whine in my voice.

He ignored me and I felt my eyes bug out of my head. This was it. He was going to kill me. If I was lucky it would be quick and painless. If not, he was going to drink my blood and there was nothing I could do to stop him.

His face lowered, those bright blue eyes glowing, but not from the dim light around us. The light seemed to be coming from within them. I felt my body relax right before his mouth touched mine. Conner’s lips were scorching hot and I gasped. I expected him to feel cool, his being undead and all. I forgot about body temperatures because, when I gasped, his tongue slid into my mouth. My brain immediately shut down, and the tingle that began between my legs became a sharp ache.

My own tongue brushed one of his fangs, and I felt a little sting. He groaned and flattened me against his front. I realized I’d just cut my tongue, and he was tasting my blood. I yanked my head back.

I glared at him. “How did you make me do that?” I asked.

He kept my body against his, refusing to let me go when I tried to pull away. “How did I make you do what?”

I scowled. “How did you make me kiss you? Did you zap me with some kind of vampire mind control or something?”

His mouth quirked in amusement. It wasn’t quite a smile, more of a smirk, and it showed his dimples. I wanted to smack him.

“I didn’t compel you to kiss me,” he replied.

My eyebrows lowered and I felt my eyes get all squinty.

“Then why did I just kiss you? I would never do something like that without being coerced.”

“Coerced?” he asked, as though he couldn’t believe I knew what the word meant.

I growled in the back of my throat. Condescending, bloodsucking bastard.

“I believe it’s called chemistry not coercion.”

“Chemistry?” I repeated.

He wrapped an arm around my lower back and my hips connected with his. I felt what had to be a vampire penis poking me in the belly. Oh hell, no way was I playing sink the salami with a creature that would want to sink fangs into me too.

“No, no, no. There’s no chemistry here,” I declared.

His fingers snaked along my jawline. “That’s too bad, Donna, because I have to disagree.”

I felt a lot of pressure near my ear and then everything went black.

TWO

I really didn't want to wake up. I knew I was dreaming, but it was a fantastic dream. The beautiful stranger from work last night was holding me close. He smelled amazing and felt even better. Conner. His name was Conner. I snuggled closer, inhaling his scent. I just wanted to wallow in the warm, cozy feeling for a little longer. It had been way too long since a man slept with me.

Suddenly, my memory returned in a rush and I sat straight up in bed. My face throbbed with the movement.

“Son of a bitch!” I yelled.

I cupped the side of my face. Damn, that asshole last night must have hit me harder than I thought. Carefully, I turned to look around my bedroom. There was no sign of Conner, though I hadn't imagined his scent. It was all over me and my bed. I also realized the fucker had done something to knock me out the night before and it pissed me off. I growled under my breath, glad he wasn't there or I would have been tempted to do something stupid.

Moving slowly, I climbed out of bed. I realized I was dressed in my panties and a tank top that I liked to sleep in. My body flashed cold then hot when I realized that the most beautiful man I had ever met had seen me practically naked. Oh, fuck it. I couldn't think about that right now. I was more worried about the state of my body.

I made my way to the bathroom, limping a bit. My entire body ached. I turned on the light and moaned when I saw my face in the mirror. A bruise had formed on my cheekbone and alongside my eye. Scrapes and scratches covered my arms and legs. Though I didn't wear a lot of make-up, my mascara was smeared under my eyes. gingerly, I went to the sink and turned on the water. When I was finished washing the remnants of my make-up away, I examined the bruises on my skin in the mirror. The bruise on my cheekbone and the finger marks on my arms seemed to be the worst. My scrapes looked as though they had been cleaned and treated with ointment.

I wondered how I managed to sleep through that and the last sliver of memory from the night before returned. The last thing I remember was arguing about calling the police, that incredible kiss, his fingers putting pressure on the area near my ear, and then nothing. Well, not nothing. I also remembered believing he was a vampire, but I refused to think about it. It had to be the adrenaline and the shock after my attack. Vampires didn't exist. Or maybe I really was going crazy like several of my ex-boyfriends claimed I would.

Thank God I didn't have to work today. I couldn't afford to skip a day of work. My savings were substantial, but they wouldn't last forever on the salary I was making. Since my psycho boss fired me, I had been blackballed in the field of advertisement. All my coworkers told me not to rat him out, that he covered his tracks too well, but I didn't listen. When I realized he

was stealing from the company I contacted his boss. What I didn't realize was that his boss was in on the embezzlement. The evidence I turned in promptly disappeared, records were changed, and I was fired. Now, no one in advertising would hire me. Until my boss was caught with his hand in the cookie jar, I was stuck. I knew he would be caught eventually because he wasn't as smart as he believed. It still sucked to be me until that moment came.

After I was fired and realized that I wouldn't be able to get a job, I moved out of my spacious loft in Dallas and into a smaller one bedroom apartment. It wasn't a dump, but it lacked the shine that permeated my loft. Still, I wanted to stretch my savings as long as possible so I would do what I had to do to make it work. Here I was, in a small apartment, working a job that was fun but not as fulfilling as the one I had before.

I sighed at my reflection in the mirror. I was supposed to meet my girlfriends for dinner tonight but with all the bruises there was no way I could go. I didn't want to deal with the stares of strangers and the inevitable and unending questions from my girls. Then there would be the explanation. There was no way I could explain what had happened last night. Or why I hadn't called the cops. There was also no way I could tell them I thought I met a vampire last night. Ricki would have me committed, and the rest of the girls would start discussing who would get my shoe collection.

Digging in my medicine cabinet, I managed to find some over-the-counter pain reliever. I shook three out of the bottle and washed them down with water from the tap. Hopefully the pills would kick in soon. My entire body ached. I made my way back into the bedroom and stretched out on the bed. There was no way I was contacting the girls. I would end up mothered, bullied, and medicated within an inch of my life. I decided to rest up all

day, and then I would text them all at the last minute to let them know I wouldn't make it. I hated lying in general, but I knew that was the only way I could keep them from showing up and driving me crazy with questions and advice.

The pills I had taken were starting to kick in. I still hurt but I could deal with the pain. I rolled over and let myself drift into sleep. Then I dreamed about bright blue eyes and a beautiful vampire who held me as though I were made of glass.



I pried my eyes open. Something was making a horrible racket, and all I really wanted to do was sleep. I finally realized that the noise was my phone. I rolled over and groaned. My whole body was hurting again, which meant I had been asleep for a while. The phone finally stopped ringing for a bit, only to start up again seconds later. As quickly as I dared, I reached for it.

"Hello?" I cleared my throat because my voice sounded very rough.

"Donna?"

It was Ivie. I glanced at the clock on my bedside table. It was almost three in the afternoon. I had slept the day away.

"Hi, Ivie." I sounded a little better, but I really needed water. Moving like an old woman, I stood up and headed toward the kitchen.

"What the hell, girl? Are you okay? You sound awful!"

I hated to do it, but I was going to lie like hell. The girls would take one look at my face and the inquisition would begin.

"I'm really sick, sweetie. I know I'm supposed to meet y'all for dinner tonight, but I'm not going to make it."

Ivie, being the great friend she was, immediately said, “I can come by before. Do you need medicine or ice cream or something else?”

I walked into the kitchen and opened a cabinet for a glass. “No, Ivie. I appreciate it, but I’m going to drink some water and go back to bed. I just need sleep. Okay?”

“Are you sure, Donna? You sound really bad. It could be serious.”

I filled my glass with water while she spoke and gulped half of it down before I answered. “I’m not running a fever Ivie, just have a sore throat and a lot of body aches. I’ll call you next week when I’m better. We can get together then.”

She sighed. “Fine but I expect you to call me if you aren’t better by tomorrow and I can swing by and take you to the doctor.”

“I’m sure I’ll be better by tomorrow, Ivie. I’ve been sleeping most of the day, and I’ll probably sleep the rest of tonight too.”

Apparently, I was convincing enough because she relented. “Okay. Feel better soon.”

There was one more thing I needed to tell her. “Oh and Ivie, please don’t let the other girls call me tonight. I really am going to try and sleep so I’ll probably turn off my phone.”

Ivie was silent. I began to worry she was going to show up at my door later when she finally spoke again. “Okay, Donna. I mean it though, you call me if you get worse or you need anything.”

Trying to hide my relief, I kept my voice even. “Thanks, Ivie. I will. Have fun with the naughty posse tonight. I’ll talk to you soon.”

We said goodbye and I drank the rest of my water. I filled up my glass again and looked around for something to eat. Finally, I decided on one of the three containers of yogurt in my fridge. It was one of the few things I had that wouldn’t kill my throat when I ate it.

I took my water and yogurt into the living room and settled on the couch. A little reality television would help me feel better. Now that I was out of bed and had been moving for a few minutes, my body didn't feel so stiff and sore. After I ate my snack I would take some more over-the-counter meds for the pain and maybe drink some herbal tea. I normally couldn't stomach the stuff, but it sounded perfect for some reason.

I spent the rest of the day relaxing, watching brain rot on television, and icing my bruises. I hoped the ice would help them fade faster though I knew I probably waited too long. If I hadn't wanted the bruises to show so badly, I should have iced them immediately after. Too damn bad the gorgeous yet batshit crazy man who rescued me had knocked me out before I could do so. The girls texted me several times, even included several pictures of themselves engaging in questionable activities, but that was nothing new. They had a tendency to get a little crazy when they drank. I wished I could have gone out with them, but there was no way to disguise my injuries or the pain.

By bedtime, the muscle aches and bruises actually did seem better. I examined my face and torso in the mirror after I took a shower. The bruises on my face seemed lighter. A good coat of concealer and foundation would cover that, especially in the dim light of the bar. The scratches and marks on my body were still angry looking. I would have to wear a turtleneck to hide them at work the next day. My tips would be shit, but I wouldn't have to deal with questions.

Despite all the rest I had gotten that day, I had no trouble going to sleep that night and woke up feeling refreshed. I was a little surprised. Didn't people usually have nightmares after they had been attacked by three men? I guess my past doubts about my mental health and resilience had been unfounded.

When I walked into work that night, I was covered from the chin down with a tight black turtleneck, though I was wearing a short black skirt. I had to do something to keep my tips up, so it was a black miniskirt and lace-patterned black tights with the highest heels I owned. I hated to abuse my poor feet that way, but it was necessary for my financial well-being.

By eleven, the place was nearly dead. It was a Thursday night and usually the bar was packed. Tonight was eerily quiet. Eduardo, one of the assistant managers, sent Jenna home early because there were only a few tables of people drinking and she was whining about her tips. I liked Jenna a lot, but she did tend to whine a bit too much when she wasn't getting her way, so I didn't mind becoming the only waitress on duty. As the few tables emptied out, I concentrated on cleaning up for closing.

I was putting empty glasses and bottles on the bar when Lauren came to stand in front of me, polishing the bar top with a clean white towel.

"Hey Donna, isn't that Jenna's hottie from last night?" she asked.

I blinked at her for a moment. "What?"

No way could he be here. After last night, I never thought I would see him again. I did my best to act casually when I leaned against the bar.

"Where?"

Lauren looked at me closely. "Are you okay, Donna?"

I nodded. "Where is he sitting?"

She tilted her head toward the corner. "Corner table."

I didn't look even though I really, really wanted to. I was tempted to sneak out and call the police to report him, but I wasn't sure how I would explain the fact that I hadn't done so before. I really didn't want to end up getting hauled down to the station and questioned half the night. Besides, a very small part of me thought those fuckers got what they deserved.

I left my empties sitting on the bar for Lauren to deal with and headed for the ladies' room. I could literally feel Conner's eyes on me. My palms suddenly grew clammy, and my heart started to pound. Now that I knew he was there, his presence seemed to follow me like a shadow. Trying not to look as though I was running away, though really I was, I hustled into the hallway that led to the restrooms. Just as I entered the ladies room, two large hands grasped my waist. I didn't even have time to struggle as I was lifted and carried inside.

I kicked my legs and flailed but couldn't escape. I heard the lock on the door click and my blood froze in my veins. I was locked in a room with a man strong enough to lift me like I was weightless. I began to struggle harder, but it was futile. Somehow he managed to turn me and my back was pressed against the locked door. I looked up into my attacker's face, ready to spit, scream, bite, or do whatever else it might take to get the hell away. After last night, I was already on edge and I didn't want to go through that again. It was Conner. I went limp. Though I was freaked out to see him again, I didn't think he would hurt me. Which freaked me out even more.

"What are you doing here?" I whispered.

Conner used his hand to tip up my chin but he didn't answer. Instead he studied my face intently. I tried to pull away but only succeeded in bumping my head against the door. He released my face but didn't step away.

Scowling, I rubbed the back of my head. "What are you doing?"

His hand dropped to my neck. He tried to pull my turtleneck away from the skin. I started smacking at his hands.

"Stop! Seriously, what the hell do you think you're doing?"

Finally, he answered me. "I'm looking at your injuries. The bruise on your face looks better than when I left you."

His words reminded me of something very important.

“Speaking of when you left me, how the hell did you know where I lived?”

“I looked at your driver’s license, Donna.”

Goose bumps broke out on my skin when he said my name in that beautiful, accented voice. I suppressed a shiver. “And my clothes? I don’t remember taking them off.”

He smiled slightly. “I wanted to be sure you were comfortable.”

I frowned at him and shook my head. Forget it. I didn’t want to think about him handling my partially naked, unconscious body. It made me uncomfortable and turned me on at the same time. I wasn’t sure what that meant, so I let it go for now. I was sure I would brood over it later.

“What are you doing here tonight?” I asked again.

I met his eyes and felt my stomach drop. His eyes really were as blue as I remembered. A few strands of long dark hair framed his face.

“I wanted to see for myself that you were well. When you weren’t here last night, I worried until the young blonde woman told me it was your night off. Otherwise, I would have gone back to your apartment.”

I gaped at him. Why would he come to my apartment? The blonde woman he mentioned had to be Jenna. I was going to have to speak to Eduardo about her. She shouldn’t talk to patrons about the rest of us. It wasn’t right and could put one of us in danger.

“I’m fine, Conner. Why would you have come to my apartment?” Something else crossed my mind. “And what the hell did you do with those men that night? I know one of them was...” I swallowed hard, “dead but did you really kill the other two?”

I could tell by the way his body suddenly stilled that he didn’t want to answer. That alone was enough to tell me what I needed to know.

“They’re all dead, aren’t they?” I asked.

He sighed. "Yes. They are all dead. I was almost too late to help you. Judging by the equipment they had in their vehicle, I do not think it was their intention to leave you alive. They deserved what came to them."

I wanted to be upset that he had killed men, but I remembered how terrified I had been and the pain of being hit and thrown around. With those memories flying through my head, I wasn't sure exactly how I felt. I decided I would think about it later. Much, much later.

There was also another question bugging me.

"What exactly did you do to me that made me pass out?"

Again, he stilled completely. I wasn't sure if he was even breathing. It was becoming annoying. By his very lack of response he was telling me exactly what I wanted to know.

"Will you stop doing that?" I snapped.

He blinked. "Doing what?"

"The whole I-am-a-snake-in-the-grass thing! It's annoying. You get so still. I mean, are you even breathing?!"

He sucked in a deep breath immediately. "I do breathe. Sometimes I just don't breathe as deeply or as often as you." Conner studied me. "You can really feel that, when I go still?"

I nodded. "It's a little freaky, and it makes you as easy to read. I can tell when you don't want to answer my questions."

"That's because of you," he murmured, leaning closer.

I tilted my head a bit to keep some space between us. I couldn't keep my thoughts straight with his face hovering so close to mine.

"What's because of me?" God, he smelled good. I could barely remember why I needed to keep my distance. Oh yeah, lunatic who murdered three men. Still my hormones made it hard to remember that when they were screeching about jumping his bones.

He came closer still until we were eye to eye and I could swear the blue of his irises began to glow. “Only you think I’m easy to read. And with you, I am. You make me feel human for the first time in a long time.”

The sinking sensation in my stomach disappeared immediately. What the hell did he mean, I made him feel human? I jerked my head back before I could think and cracked the back of my skull against the door. Shit, I had forgotten the main reason I needed to stay away from this beautiful man. He wasn’t just a lunatic, he actually thought he was a vampire.

Conner’s large hand cupped the back of my head. “Are you okay?”

I nodded. “Conner, I need to get back to work.”

His hand didn’t leave my hair. “In just a moment. First, you need to agree to see me again.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I replied immediately.

Conner wrapped my hair around his hand and gently tugged my head back. “It is. Whatever you like, dinner, drinks, coffee. I want to see you again.”

I swallowed hard. “Um, I thought people like, uh, you didn’t eat or drink.”

This could blow up in my face. I didn’t want to feed his delusion, but I was also sure I didn’t want to go out on a date with a lunatic, no matter how pretty he was.

I felt Conner’s breath on my neck as his face dipped. “People like me? Do you mean vampires?”

“Yes,” I whispered. My heart started pounding. He may be delusional, but he had the whole dangerous charisma part of the act down extremely well.

“Do you truly believe I’m a vampire, Donna?” he asked.

I felt something sharp brush my neck and tensed. Then his tongue touched my skin and I squeaked.

“Do you?” he asked again, his lips brushing my neck as he spoke.

I shook my head. I couldn’t lie. My body was in turmoil. I wanted to run away, but I was also getting turned on.

“What would I have to do to convince you? Do I need to bite you? Or bite someone else while you watch?”

I squeezed my eyes shut. Somehow his suggestions seemed erotic rather than frightening. Surely it was because he spoke those words in that accented, deep voice. I wasn’t some tween who swooned over the idea of being bitten by a creature of the night.

“If you don’t believe I’m a vampire, I won’t try to convince you. Just say you’ll see me again.”

I hesitated. I felt the light burst of his breath on my neck and the slide of his cheek against mine. Conner seemed quite sane at the moment. In fact, I was beginning to question my sanity for even considering his proposal. I shouldn’t even be tempted. I watched him kill a man. Well, he’d only killed him to protect me, which made me even more tempted to say yes. He was a knight in shining armor, straight out of a girl’s dreams. God, my thoughts were in such a whirl and so disorganized that I wasn’t sure what to do or why I should do it.

His lips tickled my throat as he spoke again, “Don’t be afraid, Donna. I would never hurt you.”

“Yes.” The word was out of my mouth before I even realized what I was saying.

Conner moved back until our faces were only a few inches apart. He was smiling slightly. Shit, I couldn’t believe I agreed to go on a date with a man who believed he was a vampire. A little voice in my head whispered

that I had witnessed not only his fangs but his ability to move so quickly I couldn't follow him with my eyes, but I ignored it. That wasn't the voice of reason. That was the voice of my hormones lustng after such a hot guy. They were only trying to justify such obvious stupidity.

"When is your next evening off?" he asked.

I wanted to blurt out that I changed my mind, but those damn hormones responded for me again.

"Sunday."

Conner touched my cheek with the tips of his fingers. "Then we will have our date on Sunday. I will call you tomorrow and tell you what time I will pick you up."

That was definitely not my typical M.O. on a first date, but Conner already knew where I lived so it wouldn't exactly protect me if I told him I would meet him instead.

"Okay," I agreed.

He touched his lips to mine in a whisper of a kiss, and he was gone. I stood in the middle of the ladies' room and stared at my reflection in the mirror. How in the hell did I get myself into these messes and how the fuck would I get out of this one?

Three

By seven Sunday night, I was a nervous mess. Conner called me Friday after work, which was almost three in the morning. Apparently he took the whole ‘night predator’ persona very seriously. He said he would pick me up at seven on Sunday night. I asked him where we were going and his reply told me nothing.

“Just wear a dress,” he said.

After fretting all day Saturday over my date with Conner, I finally decided to go out with him once and then tell him I did not want to see him again. I figured he would be even more persistent if I didn’t even give him a chance. Most men were if they didn’t feel like you gave them a shot.

Of course I wouldn’t be telling him this in person. It would probably be a better plan to tell him all this over the phone and then maybe spend a few days with one of my girlfriends. Or consider moving. The idea that a loony toon knew where I lived made me very, very nervous. Shit, I would do the one date and then figure out what my next step should be. Satisfied with my decision, I went to work Saturday night with a much calmer mind.

So I spent the day Sunday sleeping in and giving myself an at-home facial and pedicure. I even curled my hair, which was not something I did on a regular basis. On a normal day I barely managed to put on make-up, much less spend a half hour on my hair style. I never primped much, which made my mother despair. She always said I looked better with a little lipstick.

Well, that night she would have been proud of me. By six forty-five, I was fully made up, including lipstick, hair styled, perfumed, and dressed to kill in my favorite little black dress. I even wore four inch heels. I wasn't sure why I was going all out for a man that had to be a little crazy. Well, the voices of my hormones were telling me they didn't care if he was crazy because he was beautiful and they wanted to ride him into the ground. Also, I was beginning to think I was a little crazy myself. Conner tempted me to believe him with his insane assertion that he was a vampire.

I checked my lipstick for the tenth time. Since I rarely wore it, I was paranoid it had smeared. Also, I wanted to be sure the bruise on my face was covered well. When my doorbell rang I jumped. I forced myself to stand still and take a deep breath. I hadn't been so nervous about a date in years. Slowly, I slid my hands down the side of my dress to smooth it and to make sure they weren't damp when I answered the door. After I grabbed my tiny "date night" purse, I went to the door.

I checked the peephole and saw Conner's face staring back at me. Again I took a slow deep breath before I opened the door. Conner's blue eyes traveled down my body and up again, making my skin tingle in their wake. The chemistry between us was stronger than I remembered. Hell, I finally understood what all those romance novels were talking about. The pull and the tension between us was almost tangible.

"Donna, you look beautiful," he said.

“Thank you,” I said primly.

I stepped out of my apartment and locked the door behind me. I noticed a smirk on his face when I turned back to face him, but he didn’t say anything. I ignored it and felt him place his hand in the hollow of my spine. I liked that. I felt protected and feminine as we walked down the stairs to the parking lot. I hesitated a moment when he led me toward a sleek gunmetal gray sports car. I didn’t know anything about cars, but I watched all the new James Bond movies and I knew exactly what kind of car he was driving. I also knew it didn’t come cheap.

Now I knew two things about Conner. He thought he was a vampire and he had some serious cash. I was beginning to think that his entire persona was an eccentric quirk. I tried to slide into the car gracefully, but it was a bit tricky since it sat low to the ground and I was wearing four inch heels. Somehow I managed it without making a fool of myself. As Conner walked around the hood, I buckled my seatbelt and, for the hundredth time, asked myself what the hell I was doing.

I caught a whiff of his scent when he climbed into the driver’s seat, and I remembered why. Fucking hormones. They had no common sense.

Conner started the car and steered out of the parking lot. I tried not to fidget but I was nervous. The silence in the car was unnerving, so I fiddled with my purse and wracked my brain for something to say.

“So where are we going this evening?” I asked. I wanted to smack myself in the forehead. That was only slightly less lame than discussing the weather.

“I thought you might enjoy dinner at Concord.”

I blinked. Concord was a five-star restaurants in the Dallas area. I had read reviews of the restaurant in the paper and the writer had practically offered to bear the chef’s children.

“That sounds wonderful.”

I cleared my throat. Apparently I wasn’t the only one on this date pulling out all the stops. It usually took weeks, sometimes even months to get a reservation at Concord. I wondered how many strings Conner had to pull in order to get us in so quickly.

We fell silent the rest of the drive to the restaurant, but I felt more comfortable. Well, I felt more comfortable until we got to Concord that is. When Conner pulled up to the valet station and the attendant jumped to open my door and help me out of the car, the butterflies returned. This was out of my realm of experience. Most of the men I dated took me to nice restaurants and opened my doors for me, but rarely could they afford to take me to a place like Concord.

Before I could wallow further in my momentary freak out, Conner came up behind me and trailed a hand down the back of my neck to the bare skin between my shoulder blades. My dress, while clingy and sexy in an understated way, was not very revealing, but the proprietary way Conner touched me made me feel as though I had too much skin exposed. His touch also made my mind go blank. I realized then I was in serious trouble.

Conner kept his palm on the bare skin of my back as we walked into the restaurant. The maitre d’ greeted us with a warm smile.

“Mr. Savage. How lovely to see you this evening. Your table will be ready in just a few moments. Would you like to have a drink at the bar while you wait?”

Savage? Was that even Scottish? I looked up Conner. Also I was surprised the maitre d’ knew him by name. Either he came here frequently, or he was even more loaded than I thought. Both thoughts made me uncomfortable since they meant that it was very likely he was way out of my league.

At Conner's slight nod, the maitre d' led us into the dim bar area. Conner ordered a scotch neat, which didn't surprise me, but ordered me champagne. I loved champagne, but I didn't necessarily care for a man ordering for me without asking me my preference first.

As though he sensed my irritation, Conner glanced down at me. I realized that his expression was softer now than it had been when he had been speaking to the maitre d' and his eyes looked warmer. Somehow he seemed less intimidating. It also made him appear even more handsome.

"I saw you had several unopened bottles of champagne in your apartment last week. I thought it must be your preference," he stated.

"Thank you," I said, "but I also appreciate being asked." I refused to acknowledge the melting sensation in my belly that he had taken note of something so trivial. In my experience, very few men were so attentive to details.

Conner smiled at me, drawing my eyes to those damn dimples again. "I understand."

The bartender delivered our drinks, and I took my first sip. The champagne was exceptional, probably the best I'd ever tasted. I saw Conner's eyes go to something behind me and heard footsteps. I turned and gaped a little. How is it that I never heard of all these gorgeous men in Dallas? I inanely wondered if all of Conner's friends were as beautiful as he was.

The man walking toward us was tall and blonde. I normally didn't go for blondes, but I would have made an exception for him. Every part of him seemed almost golden, from his hair to his skin, as though he had been dipped in honey. Even his eyes were a golden brown.

"Asher, how are you?" Conner reached around me to shake his hand. Then he placed his fingers on my shoulder, again on bare skin. "This is

Donna. Donna, this is my good friend, Asher Leroux.”

Trying to drool discreetly, I offered my hand. “Lovely to meet you, Mr. Leroux.” There, I remembered my manners. Full make-up and manners, my mother would be beyond proud.

Asher took my hand and surprised me when he brought it to his lips. It was an old-fashioned gesture, one I typically found corny and strange, but when he did it, Asher Leroux didn’t seem clichéd at all.

“Please, call me Asher and it is my pleasure to meet you, Donna. Welcome to my restaurant.” His thumb caressed my palm slightly as he released my hand and a tingle raced up my arm.

Conner squeezed my shoulder slightly, bringing me out of a slight daze. Wow, these men were too much. I felt as though I were standing in the middle of a photo shoot for a magazine. Asher’s words echoed in my head, and I realized how Conner got the reservation for Concord so quickly. I couldn’t decide if I was disappointed. I would think later, after I was away from the distracting presence of Conner and his friend.

Asher gestured toward the dining area. “Your table is ready, my friend. If you’ll follow me.”

Conner, in another demonstration of gentlemanly behavior, waited for me to go first and then pulled out my chair when we reached the table. Asher waited until we were both seated before he spoke again.

“Donna, it was a delight to meet you,” he said before turning to Conner. “Always good to see you, Conner. I will speak to you again soon.”

I watched Conner’s face shut down as it did when I asked a question he didn’t want to answer. He seemed distant and hard as a statue, his blue eyes shiny and cold like chips of ice. I felt an undercurrent of tension building between them before Asher once again smiled at me and walked away.

I took a fortifying sip of my champagne and opened my mouth to ask Conner what just happened. Before I could speak, our server arrived with the menu and began his spiel about the chef's signature dishes. By the time he finished, Conner seemed back to normal, though maybe a little more tense than he had been earlier. His face was no longer hard, and his eyes had darkened again. I wanted to ask him what exactly had happened earlier and why in the hell his eyes seemed to change color but I also didn't want to ruin the evening until after he bought me dessert. I would likely never be able to come to this restaurant again, so I wanted to make the most of it.

I decided to hang back and ask later, perhaps after he had another drink and was feeling a bit more mellow. Or after I had another drink and I was feeling more relaxed and less intimidated.

We briefly discussed the menu. He gave me recommendations but did not say a word when our server asked for my selections. I smiled at him after we had chosen our courses.

Feeling a bit more comfortable, I leaned back in my chair. "What should I know about you, Conner?" I asked. I had discovered years ago it was better to let my dates volunteer information rather than ask tons of questions. Not only did it make both of us more comfortable, what they chose to volunteer told me a great deal more about them than answers to generic questions.

Conner grinned at me. "I own several businesses, enjoy good food and drink, and find myself very intrigued by you."

I felt heat rise up my neck at the directness of his last words. "Intrigued?" My voice caught in my throat, so I sipped from the glass of water the waiter filled earlier.

Obviously enjoying himself, Conner tapped his fingers on the table. "Yes, I find you very intriguing." He didn't continue.

I wanted to ask him why but it felt a bit too much like fishing for compliments, so I changed the subject. “What kind of businesses do you own?” I asked.

“I own a nightclub, several apartment complexes, and a construction firm.”

My eyes widened. “That’s very impressive, especially since you’re, what, thirty-two, thirty-three?”

Somehow I had said the wrong thing because Conner seemed to withdraw. “You could say that.”

“I’m sorry, Conner, I only meant that you have accomplished a lot for someone so young.”

A light seemed to start behind his eyes, making them glow. “But I’m not that young. Don’t let appearances fool you.”

He was referring to his assertion that he was a vampire. I had honestly forgotten. He seemed so normal during the last half hour that I assumed he realized that I wasn’t going to fall for such a crazy idea and had decided to drop the charade. I felt myself getting a little angry and also a little frightened. I had never seen anyone’s eyes change the way his did moments before. Surely he was wearing contacts or it was some trick of the light.

I drained what was left of my champagne. Fine, I would address this head on.

“Okay, how old are you really?” I asked.

He stared at me for a moment and I could practically see him weighing his responses, deciding what to say. “The truth?” he asked.

I nodded.

“I am three hundred and forty years old, give or take a year or two. I never learned the exact year of my birth.”

I was still trying to decide how to respond when the server arrived with the bottle of wine that Conner requested. His gaze stayed level on me as the wine was opened and poured. Unable to meet his eyes any longer, I smiled at the waiter and took a healthy sip of excellent white wine.

When we were alone again, I finally looked at Conner. I doubted he'd moved a single centimeter. He also looked a little angry. That was fine. I was a little angry too.

"Why are you still pitching this?" I asked.

He cocked his head to the side. "Pitching?"

I sighed. "Pitching, pushing. Why should I believe you're a vampire?" I gestured to his scotch. "Vampires aren't supposed to be able to eat. Or drink anything other than blood. And what about sunlight? If you come out in the daytime don't you burst into flames or something?"

Suddenly Conner laughed. I stopped speaking, stunned. I realized I had never heard him laugh before, and I liked it. A lot. I felt the sound wash over my skin like water, leaving goose bumps in its wake.

He was still smiling widely when he responded, "Where did you get these ideas?"

Now I felt really uncomfortable. "Books, television, movies. I mean, I always thought that myths had a kernel of truth in them."

Conner leaned forward, his eyes serious now. "That is true. Most myths do have a core of reality. But not the ones you mentioned."

I barely stopped myself from rolling my eyes. Of course those wouldn't be true according to him. I was back to wondering what the hell I was doing on a date with this guy. Oh yeah, stupid hormones.

"Donna, I told you I wouldn't push you on this, but it seems that you are the one pushing me."

“This seems crazy to me. I realize that some people are turned on by the whole vampire thing, but not me. I just want to meet a decent man, get married, have babies, and fight about who has to wash dishes.”

We just looked at each other as the waiter returned with our first course. I wanted to cry. Until just a few moments ago, it had been one of the best dates of my life. Now I just wanted to go home and eat a pint of ice cream while I watched chick flicks.

Conner’s hand covered mine, warm and strong. “We can continue the discussion later. I will tell you whatever you want to know.”

I slid my hand from beneath his. “Maybe I should call a cab.”

His face grew distant and cold again. “If you would like to go home, I will take you.”

“I’m not comfortable with that, Conner.”

For a moment, I thought he looked hurt before his face became earnest. “I realize we don’t know each other well, Donna, but the last thing I want to do is hurt you. I would never do anything to harm you.”

I sucked in a breath, trying to sort out my thoughts.

Conner leaned back in his chair. “Why don’t we talk for a while? You can keep asking me questions if you like. I’ll answer all of them. Please don’t leave.”

I toyed with my fork, still unsure of what to do. I had never experienced anything like this before and Conner didn’t strike me as the type to compromise so quickly. It made me curious. I decided to chalk this up to the weirdest date in history. As strange as he seemed, I also thought Conner was being as honest as he was capable of without admitting he believed he was a mythical being. Also, he seemed close to pleading, which was completely at odds with his confident bearing.

“Okay. I’ll stay, and I will ask a lot of questions.”

I was surprised to see that Conner looked relieved. “Good. I will answer all of your questions if I can. There are some things I can’t tell you but mostly about the rest of my kind.”

He picked up his fork and I did the same. As we ate our first course, I discovered several things about Conner. First, he had impeccable table manners. He was also from Scotland, as I had previously thought. I tried not to show my interest in his heritage. I had always been a sucker for historical romance novels set in the Highlands of Scotland. I did love a man in a kilt. I also learned that Conner had a wicked sense of humor, one I appreciated.

He had a dry wit and seemed to enjoy sarcasm, which made me all the more attracted to him as sarcasm was like a second language to me. It really was too bad that I probably wouldn’t be going out with him again. I steered away from too many questions that would have him talking about vampirism, though I was very curious how far his delusion extended.

As we ate our second course, the conversation shifted. I told Conner a little about my past as an advertising executive and how I came to be working at the lounge. He actually laughed twice more as I told him stories about my co-workers at the bar and some of the patrons.

By dessert, I had relaxed slightly. The Conner that seemed normal was back. He spoke and reacted like a man I would have found attractive and wanted to spend more time with. After he paid the bill, he looked at me closely.

“Would you prefer to call a cab, Donna? Though I do not want you to, I will understand. I want you to feel safe with me.”

The Donna of my college days, the one who made bad decisions regarding questionable men, reared her head for the first time in years. Okay, so maybe she had come back days ago when I agreed to go to dinner with him. “I’ll let you take me home.”

Though I almost immediately regretted my words, he smiled, and I couldn't take them back. I rose from the table. "First, I need to freshen up," I said.

I walked to the ladies room and pulled out my phone. I texted Ricki, the most aggressive of my girlfriends, and told her I was on a date. If I disappeared or she didn't hear from me in a few hours, she wouldn't hesitate to go to the police to file a missing person report. She also would hound the detectives to be sure they kept looking for me.

Ricki, of course, wanted details, but I put her off with a promise of a phone call when I got home later in the evening. I did tell her Conner's name and that he had taken me to Concord. Strangely, she knew of Conner since her brother was in construction and had worked with his construction company several times in the past. That made me feel slightly better. Maybe I wasn't the queen of bad decisions after all.

After I finished the mad texting rush with Ricki, I checked my make-up and ran a comb through my hair. Even though I didn't plan on going out with Conner again, it didn't mean that I couldn't look good. Another little tidbit my girlfriends said all the time, "Always keep them wanting more."

When I returned to our table, Conner rose. "Ready?"

I nodded and let him guide me outside again. As we waited for the valet to bring his car around, Conner studied me for a moment. "You seem calmer."

I decided to be honest. "I texted a friend of mine while I was in the ladies' room. After the way this evening began, I thought it best if someone knew where I was and who I was with. When I told her your name, she had heard of you. Her brother has worked with your construction firm before."

He nodded. "Smart girl. I don't blame you. I knew it would be difficult to get you to understand who and what I am, though I underestimated your

stubbornness. I'm glad you talked to your friend." He paused. "Do you feel a little less frightened of me?"

It was my turn to search for words. I really wasn't afraid of him, just extremely wary. He had never threatened me. Hell, he'd actually protected me. "I'm not exactly frightened of you, Conner. I just think maybe you have issues only a great deal of therapy and several types of antipsychotics can fix."

Conner threw his head back and laughed. This time I could swear I saw a flash of fangs and it made a chill race down my spine. I didn't want to think about the alternatives if he wasn't actually delusional. Vampires real? I couldn't fathom it. Damn, I was beginning to worry that if I spent too much longer in Conner's company I would start believing in vampires too. Like a group hallucination.

The valet pulled up with the car, and Conner opened my door. As the attendant came around the hood, I saw Conner slip him a rather large tip. The attendant's eyes grew huge, and he stammered a thanks. Minutes later we were on our way to my apartment. Now that we were well and truly alone, I couldn't seem to stop myself from wanting to ask a million questions.

"Conner, you said I could ask you anything about vampires. Did you really mean that, or were you trying to placate me?"

He glanced at me sideways. "I meant it."

"Okay," I drawled. "If you really are a vampire, can you go out in the sunlight?"

Conner nodded. "I can. Because of the changes in my eyesight, however, bright sunlight is uncomfortable, so I tend to avoid it."

"Changes?" I asked.

His lips quirked. “My vision sharpened and my ability to see at night improved greatly when I was changed. Now I can see much better in the darkness, which makes me a better hunter. It also makes me more sensitive to bright lights.”

“What about food? You ate more than I did tonight.”

He seemed to relax as I kept asking him questions rather than tensing up. “I don’t eat often. I don’t need more than one meal every day or two. Even then I can skip them, but I do love the tastes and textures of well-prepared meals. A lot of us give up eating completely after a century or so, but I still find a fine meal enjoyable.”

Okay, that made sense, sort of. Though the idea of a vampire foodie was a bit unsettling. I’m sure I would think of other questions about his eating habits later. However, there were more important things on my mind now. “What about you’re fangs? I didn’t see them earlier, but outside the restaurant, when you laughed...” I trailed off. Here I was inviting him to sink deeper into his delusion, but if he honestly wanted me to believe he was a vampire, he was going to have to jump through some major hoops to prove it. Oh, who the hell was I kidding? If he was really a vampire, I didn’t know if I would be scared to death or think it was the coolest thing ever.

Conner pulled into my parking lot and slid into an empty spot near the front door. Slowly he turned to me. “Are you sure you want to do this, Donna? Once you know and believe, which I know you will, there is no going back.”

I tried to keep the skeptical expression off my face, but didn’t quite manage it. Conner sighed and shook his head. I recognized that look. It was the same one every man in my life got when they thought I was being a stubborn pain in the ass. A little miffed, I crossed my arms over my chest.

“All right,” he murmured. “Watch closely.”

In the dim light of the street lamps, he leaned forward a little, still facing me, and opened his mouth. I watched in disbelief as his slightly pointer than usual, but normal looking, canines gradually extended until they were twice as long and extremely sharp. It couldn't be real. It had to be a trick.

I met his eyes, forcing myself not to flinch when I realized they were glowing the way they had the night we met. Glowing as though the light was coming from within Conner himself. I raised a hand, moving slowly so he could see my intention. Very lightly I touched the tip of my finger to one of his fangs. I must have pressed harder than I intended because I felt a sharp pain and saw blood beading on my fingertip.

“Ouch,” I hissed.

I was about to pull my hand away when Conner's lips closed around my finger. His tongue slid across the wound as he sucked. I felt chills erupt on my skin. My entire body reacted to the feeling of his mouth around my finger. The light in his eyes intensified until I could barely meet his gaze. Finally, he released my hand.

I fell back against the door of the car, staring at Conner with wide eyes. I was panting and my nipples were so hard they hurt.

“Holy shit!” I tried to feel around the seat for my purse. I didn't want to take my eyes off Conner. “What the hell was that?”

I watched as he closed his eyes and took a slow deep breath. His lips were still slightly parted, and I thought my eyes would pop out of my skull as his fangs receded until his teeth looked normal. When Conner opened his eyes, they were no longer bright.

“Do you believe me now?” he asked.

For the first time in my life, I fainted.

Four

Something cold and wet slid across my forehead and cheeks. I flinched.

“Dammit, Donna, open your eyes.”

The voice was familiar and sexy. I was always a sucker for an accent. Especially a Scottish brogue.

Slowly, I opened my eyes and realized I was lying on my couch staring at my own ceiling. Conner’s concerned face hovered over mine. I gasped, jackknifing into a sitting position in the corner of my sofa.

“How did you get in here? I didn’t invite you in.”

Conner sighed and shook his head. “Did you forget I brought you home and changed your clothes last week? I don’t need an invitation to enter a home. Again that’s a myth.”

“Well, what am I supposed to think? The only thing I know about vampires is what I’ve read, seen on television, or in the movies and here you are telling me that all of it’s not true!”

He moved away from me to sit on the opposite end of my sofa. I felt my breath coming a little easier. “Not all of it is untrue. Fire, decapitation, and destruction or removal of the heart will kill vampires. We may not burst into

flames in the sun, but many of us are sensitive to the light, so we tend to avoid it.”

I pulled my knees to my chest and wrapped my arms around them. The entire situation felt surreal, as though I were dreaming and would never wake up.

“What about garlic and holy water? Or mirrors? I mean, do you have a reflection?” I hadn’t bothered to check when we were in the ladies room at work because I had thought he was insane at the time.

Conner ran his hands through his hair. I could tell he was frustrated, but he surprised me by answering my questions calmly.

“Holy water, crosses, and garlic have no affect on me. I do have a reflection.”

I threw my hands up in the air. “Is anything I know about vampires true?”

Conner leaned forward and put his elbows to his knees. “I know this is a lot to take in, Donna, and I will answer all your questions. Please calm down.”

Fuck that. I got to my feet, heading for my kitchen. “I need a drink.”

I kept a bottle of bourbon in the cabinet for cooking or for when my dad came to visit, and I definitely needed it right now. I grabbed a glass and dropped a couple ice cubes in it before pouring a pretty large amount of liquid from the bottle. After the first big gulp, which burned the entire way to my stomach, I glared at Conner.

“Okay, tell me the rest.”

He leaned against the counter, looking sophisticated and nonchalant. “The rest?”

I drank more of the bourbon and grimaced as it went down. “The rest of the truth about vampires. I want to be prepared when you do something

strange or that contradicts all the things us humans believe about your kind.”

Conner smiled slightly. “You are amusing, even when nearly hysterical.”

I made a noise low in my throat before I drained the rest of the liquor. I slammed the glass down on the counter. “Tell me, dammit!”

He laughed. “Fine, fine. Calm down. Though I have to say, you’re very entertaining when you’re like this.” He folded his arms across his chest, the dark fabric of his shirt hugging the muscles of his arms and chest. My mouth watered. Supernatural creature or not, he was still all kinds of hot. “As I said earlier, I do have a reflection. I can also be photographed. Holy items have no effect on vampires. Crosses, holy water, garlic, silver are all ineffective. Well, silver works if it’s in the form of a knife or bullet, but so does steel. Only complete destruction of the heart or decapitation will kill a vampire. The sun doesn’t make me burst into flame. Most vampires are sensitive to light, younger ones are weakened by it, but it won’t kill us.”

I poured a little more bourbon in the glass, but not nearly as much as before. “So you’re really not indestructible?” I asked.

Conner shook his head. “No, far from it. Most of what you know was clever propaganda or the ravings of drunken or mad writers. It is hard to kill us compared to you. We heal much faster, but not instantaneously. Serious injuries, such as internal bleeding and many broken bones can slow us down enough that we can be killed by other means. However, I wouldn’t suggest trying it. Vampires are faster and stronger than humans, and you should only attempt to kill one of us if you are extremely skilled, don’t care if you live or die, or have no other choice.”

I nodded. “So you’re faster and stronger. Are you immortal unless someone cuts off your head or cuts out your heart?”

“Pretty much.”

I drank the rest of my bourbon, the warmth from the liquor spreading throughout my body. I was beginning to feel even more buzzed. Between the wine I had at dinner and the liquor I was drinking now, I was headed straight toward drunk. I realized that would not be the smartest decision I could make with an actual vampire in my house.

Carefully, I screwed the lid back on the bourbon and placed it back in the cabinet. I also set my glass in the sink. I realized I had not offered Conner anything to drink and laughed. That would be a risky proposition, asking a vampire if he would like something to drink while he was standing right next to me.

“What’s so funny?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Sorry, private joke.” I sighed. “I don’t think I can handle any more epiphanies tonight.” A seriously scary thought hit me. “Fuck, you told me all this and you can’t brainwash me. Does this mean you’re going to kill me?”

Without being obvious, I shifted slightly toward the counter top where my knife block sat. I doubted I could win an arm wrestling match with Conner, but I refused to go down without a fight. Even if he were only human, the man was eight inches and at least fifty pounds heavier than me. I had no chance.

Conner raised his hands slowly in a gesture of surrender and moved toward me. “No, Donna. I’m not going to kill you. I knew days ago that I couldn’t control your thoughts, yet I told you all this anyway.”

He reached me and placed his hands on my shoulders. “I want you to know me, Donna. I want you to understand what I am.”

I stared up at him, into his beautiful blue eyes. “But why?”

Conner pulled me closer to him so the front of our bodies brushed. His hands slid down my back, pressing me against him. Damn, that felt good.

“Don’t you feel it? We have a connection.”

Oh, I felt it alright, but I had a feeling that Conner was being poetic rather than literal.

“I am extremely attracted to you, Conner, but I don’t think it’s smart to trust me so much after such a short time.”

He grinned at me. “That alone is proof that you are trustworthy. Also, I may not be able to control your mind or your body but I can feel some of your emotions and impressions of your thoughts. I know that you feel the same pull I feel. You can’t deny it.”

I scowled at him. “Is there anything else I should know about vampires?” I asked.

Conner’s grin widened. “I thought you couldn’t handle any more information tonight?”

“You’re right. I can’t deal with anymore tonight.” I rolled my eyes.

Conner cupped the back of my head in one of his hands, tilting my face upward a bit more. He studied me with warm blue eyes.

“Okay, I can see that you are overwhelmed. I will leave tonight, but I want to see you again.”

Before I could object, he placed a finger over my lips. “Please don’t say no right away. Think for a day or two. I’ll call you.”

I nodded.

“Good. Now, please walk me to the door.”

I followed Conner back through my small living room to the front door. Once we were there he didn’t open it immediately. Instead, he pulled me back into his arms. I rested my hands on his shoulders, confused.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

Conner gave my waist a gentle squeeze. “It isn’t a date without a goodnight kiss.”

What? This had to have been the strangest date in history. It wasn’t horrible, just odd. Now he was talking about a goodnight kiss. I couldn’t decide whether I was looking forward to it or completely freaked out. Or both.

While I was trying to make up my mind, Conner leaned forward. Before I could organize my thoughts, his mouth was on mine and I stopped thinking completely. Just like when he kissed me before, I felt all the strength drain out of my muscles. His tongue tangled with mine as his hands cupped my hips. A simple kiss suddenly seemed like an erotic dance as he moved against me. The muscles between my thighs clenched. God, he could kiss. I imagined what his tongue could do to other parts of my body and shivered.

Conner groaned and pulled me even closer until I felt the hard length of his erection against my belly. My hands moved from his shoulders to his hair. I fisted both of them into the strands at the base of his neck. Suddenly he picked me up and pressed my back against the wall. I wrapped my legs around his waist. The spark between us exploded into an inferno. I sank my teeth into Conner’s bottom lip, tugging his hair.

He lifted his head and hissed, but his hips stayed plastered to mine. I rocked against him. I felt hot, like my skin was on fire. While Conner followed my rhythm and continued that delicious friction, I flicked open the first few buttons of his shirt with shaking hands. The smooth, tan skin of his throat and upper chest was revealed. I leaned forward, touching my lips to his collarbone, then I used my teeth and tongue on the smooth skin of his throat.

It had been way too long since I had sex. For a split second I felt like maybe I was the vampire. With the lust pouring through me, I wanted to eat Conner alive. I licked his neck, moving up to his ear. When I nipped the lobe, I could have sworn that he growled. Conner put both of his palms to my ass and yanked me away from the wall. As he carried me down the short hall to my bedroom, I fought with the rest of the buttons on his shirt.

He set me on my feet next to the bed. Within seconds, Conner had unzipped my dress and it lay pooled at my feet. Dressed only in my silky pink panties and black bra, I struggled with his shirt. I yanked it from his waistband and managed to get the last few buttons undone before Conner took over. He ripped the material from his shoulders, and I heard the buttons at his cuffs pop off and bounce on the floor. His pants quickly followed, leaving him wearing nothing but the dim light of my bedside lamp. Apparently Conner preferred to go commando.

He was beautiful. His skin gleamed in the lamplight, surprisingly tan. I saw he had several scars across his torso, one looked particularly vicious, and it rode low on his abdomen. Feeling as though I were in a trance, I lifted my hand and traced the scar. Conner watched me closely as I explored the puckered skin on his chest. I flattened my hand against his pectoral and dragged my hand downward to his waist. I felt the muscles jump under my palm. I sucked in a breath as my eyes travelled down and I saw his cock for the first time. He really was perfect; long, thick, and hard. I suddenly felt like slowing things down so I could savor every inch. I reached for him but, before I could even blink, I was on the bed and Conner was on top of me. I released the breath I had been holding.

“Please warn me before you do that again,” I whispered.

He smiled slightly and kissed me. The earlier desperation had settled, and now I wanted to enjoy every second and every touch. I ran my hands

over his shoulders and back, feeling more thin scars. I wondered for a moment what Conner did before he became a vampire. He had so many scars. I never had a chance to ask because he pulled the straps of my bra down my arms and unhooked it. As soon as it was gone, Conner sucked one of my nipples into his mouth and all I could concentrate on were the sensations he created. I couldn't stop myself from pulling at his hair as he licked and sucked both my nipples.

Conner moved his mouth up my neck, and I felt something sharp scrape my skin. I flinched and froze. Oh God, was he going to bite me? Was this all some sort of elaborate set up so he could fuck me then kill me?

He lifted his head. "What's wrong, Donna?"

I swallowed hard. "Please don't bite me," I whispered.

Conner's eyes flared, and I saw the tips of his fangs as his lips parted. I fought the instinct to cringe. He smoothed the hair away from my face. "I will never bite you if you don't want me to. I can control myself. You are safe with me."

My eyes flicked down to his mouth. The tips of his fangs were still visible. He knew what held my attention.

"I need you to trust me." He pressed a light kiss to my lips. "I won't always be able to control my responses to you, but I promise that I won't take your blood unless you ask it of me."

His Scottish accent thickened as he spoke and I felt goose bumps break out on my skin. It was nearly impossible not to believe him when he sounded like that.

"I trust you, Conner."

I lifted my head so that I could kiss him again. It seemed that my reign as the Queen of Bad Decisions had yet to end. Conner's hands wandered down my sides to toy with the elastic of my panties. He sat back on his

calves and yanked the underwear down my legs. Now all I wore were my sexy black stilettos. Conner grasped my ankles and spread my legs, pushing them up so my knees were bent.

When I tried to close my knees, Conner just shook his head. “Don’t move.”

I felt incredibly exposed, but anticipation curled in the pit of my stomach. I watched as he lifted one of my ankles and unbuckled the strap of my shoe. When he was finished, he placed my bare foot back on the mattress and lifted my other leg for the same treatment. I gripped the comforter in my fists as he replaced my leg.

“Spread them wider.”

Jesus, this was intense, especially for our first time. Still, I gripped the underside of my knees and pulled my legs wider apart. Conner’s eyes began to glow brighter as he studied me. He leaned forward, his shoulders forcing me to spread wider. I gasped when I felt his tongue lick the inside of my thigh and my leg twitched.

“Hold still,” he said.

Easy for him to say. He didn’t feel like his insides were going up in flames. I whimpered as he licked me again, this time in the crease where my thigh met my hip. Then his lips closed over my clit, and I heard a high, keening sound. As his hot mouth worked me, I heard the sound again and realized it was coming from my throat. My hips arched as he slid two fingers inside me. I tried to hold myself as still as possible, but it felt too good. I bucked under the sensations. Conner removed his fingers from between my legs and I moaned. His hard hands pressed my ass into the mattress, keeping me from writhing as his tongue swirled over my clitoris over and over again.

Without warning, an orgasm burst inside of me. I'd never come so fast or hard. Before I had a chance to catch my breath, Conner was sprawled on top of me, sliding his cock against me. My hips bucked as each stroke seemed to draw out my climax. Then he reached between us and in a single slow thrust he guided himself inside me. My internal muscles quivered around him.

I grabbed Conner's shoulders, feeling the muscles bunch beneath my fingers, as he began to move. His eyes were so bright I could barely stand to meet them. He moved harder and faster, his pubic bone grinding against my clit with each stroke. This time I felt the orgasm building low in my belly. I tucked my knees high against his sides, lifting my hips to meet each thrust. Conner threw his head back, and I knew he was close too. He shifted his hips, and he was suddenly rubbing a spot inside me that intensified the pleasure and there was no holding back.

White exploded behind my eyes as I came. I was barely aware of sinking my teeth into his flesh where his shoulder met his neck. He groaned, and I knew he was coming with me.

I was breathing hard and damp with sweat when Conner rolled us to our sides. I opened my eyes and immediately saw the mark my teeth had left on his shoulder. I watched in amazement as the dark red depressions in his skin lightened to pink and then gradually disappeared.

My gaze flew to his. "I am so sorry, Conner. I didn't mean to bite you. I'm not sure what came over me."

His smile was lazy and satisfied. "It's fine, Donna. More than fine. Your bite would be considered foreplay by most vampires. It was extremely arousing."

Okay, that may be true but it wasn't exactly fair. "But I wouldn't let you bite me. It wasn't right for me to mark you like that, even if it healed almost

immediately.”

Conner’s expression grew even more smug, if that was possible. “I did not ask you to promise not to bite me. In fact, you may bite me as much as you like.” He ran a hand down my side, and I had to force myself not to stretch under his touch like a cat. “One day you will trust me enough to allow me the privilege of tasting your blood. Until then, I will enjoy tasting you in other ways.”

With that, he lifted my hand from his chest and slid my index finger into his mouth, sucking it gently. I felt the touch of his tongue all over my body. Good God, this man, or vampire, was dangerous as hell. He gripped my ass and rolled us again until I was astride him, staring down at his face. I felt his erection and wiggled a little.

“Again?” I asked.

He grinned, flashing that damn dimple at me. “Yes, again.” He smacked my ass playfully. “This time you get to do all the work.”

It looked like there would be one great perk to dating a vampire; quick recovery time. I smiled and moved against him. Time for Round Two.

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Five

I woke up the next morning and stretched under the sheet. My muscles were sore, but I couldn't stop the smile that spread across my face. If all vampires were as amazing in bed as Conner, I wasn't surprised they kept their existence a secret. Women everywhere would be plotting to kidnap them and keep them as sex slaves.

I reached out and encountered empty air. I jerked into a sitting position. All of Conner's clothes were gone from the floor. Sucking in a sharp breath, I threw back the blankets and climbed out of bed naked. My stomach clenched as I grabbed my robe from the closet. I didn't bother to call Conner's name as I walked down the short hallway to my living room. Somehow my apartment just felt empty. I knew he was gone. A quick glance around assured me that my instincts were correct.

Anger and hurt roiled in my gut. I went back to the bedroom and checked the bed and the nightstand to see if maybe there was a note. Of course, there wasn't. The hurt bubbling inside me disappeared, leaving only ire. Who the fuck did Conner Savage think he was? I guess refusing to let

the vampire suck my blood on the first date meant he wouldn't be around in the morning. What an asshole.

Since screaming my head off to release my anger wasn't an option, I stripped off my robe and threw on some running clothes. A nice long run would help me let off steam and keep me from calling him and reaming his ass. I connected my earbuds to my smartphone and headed out the door. I pushed myself harder and faster than I had in months. I don't know what drove me the most, my feelings toward Conner or the irritation I felt with myself for my gullibility.

By the time I circled back around to my apartment, I was soaked in sweat and I must have run at least five miles. Exhausted, I dragged myself back through my door and drank a huge glass of water. I set coffee to brew while I peeled off my clothes and headed to the shower.

As I stepped under the spray, I caught a whiff of Conner's scent and then the pain and disappointment hit. The vampire bastard had used me, and I had naively thought that we had something more meaningful between us than a one night stand. I knew that tears were running down my face, but I refused to admit even to myself that I was crying. Instead, I washed my hair and my body until every trace of my night with a vampire was gone. By the time I shut off the water, my tears were over, and I refused to shed any more over a fucking man, vampire or not.

I had to work that night, so I spent the day doing laundry and reading. First, I washed the sheets and blankets on my bed. I didn't need any reminders of my gullibility. Or the unbelievably sexy scent of Scottish vampire. While I waited for each load, I read a gruesome murder mystery by one of my favorite authors. The romance novel I started a few days ago was only pissing me off, so I decided blood and guts would have to do. I also enjoyed the fact that the girlfriend had killed her lying, cheating

scumbag of a man and gotten away with it. It suited my negative feelings about men perfectly. I barely managed to finish my last load of clothes before I had to get dressed and head to the bar.

My crankiness had not lessened a bit when I walked into the lounge that night. Jenna and Lauren were both on duty and waved at me when I entered. Marissa, one of the other waitresses, was there. My pet name for her was Psycho-bitch from Hell, or PBH for short. She was pretty enough, but not as gorgeous as she liked to believe. Also, her head really was too big for her body. Whenever she was acting particularly entitled and bitchy, I liked to fantasize about squeezing her neck until her lollipop-shaped skull popped off. The image always made me smile.

As I made my way to the back room to stow my purse and grab an apron, Marissa flounced up to me. “Donna, can you cover for me next Friday?” She smiled pleasantly, making an effort to be nice now that she needed something from me. I knew it wouldn’t last long when she heard my response.

“Sorry Marissa, I have plans. You’ll have to ask someone else.”

Her sweet expression immediately melted into a scowl. “No one else can do it. C’mon Donna, don’t be a bitch. I have something important to do.”

I figured that her important thing to do was well-dressed, well-off, and well on his way to getting into her pants and sneaking out before she woke up the next day. Because of this, I didn’t feel too guilty about my reply.

“No, Marissa.”

It quickly became apparent she wasn’t going to let this go when she fisted her hand on her hip and tossed her hair. “It’s not like you have a date or anything.”

I ignored the clench in my stomach at her words. The first date I'd had in months was last night and I'd been screwed literally and figuratively. Still, she didn't need to know that.

"Actually Marissa, I do have a date." I just didn't mention that it was with my five girlfriends.

She narrowed her eyes, obviously not believing what I said. "Fine. Whatever." With that parting comment, she tossed her long, bleached blond hair again and walked away.

I rolled my eyes and saw Jenna standing nearby, her finger circling near her temple in the international sign for batshit crazy. Unable to help myself, I laughed and headed into the break room.

Lauren and Jenna seemed to sense my bad mood and were in fine form that night in an effort to perk me up. By the end of the night, my hurt and anger were no longer as sharp, and I was laughing at their antics. Marissa was still sour-faced and in a foul temper, but even her raging case of cuntitis couldn't dampen our mood.

By closing time I'd almost forgotten that a smoking hot vampire had given me four amazing orgasms the night before and left me high and dry in the morning. I blew the girls kisses, well except for Marissa, and drove home in a much better mood than I had started the day. I kept my eyes peeled as I pulled into my apartment complex parking lot. My experience of almost being kidnapped by three men made me much more wary than I had ever been before. I kept my head up and my new pepper spray ready in my hand.

I went up the stairs to the outdoor walkway that ran in front of my apartment. As I rounded the corner, a large form dressed in dark clothes appeared in front of me. I gasped and my arm came up, my finger already depressing the trigger of the pepper spray, when I realized that it was

Conner. I almost went ahead and sprayed the shit straight into his eyes just to be spiteful, but didn't bother since I knew it wouldn't hurt him very badly. It wouldn't be worth the price of a new bottle of spray.

By the time I had come to this conclusion, Conner had gripped my wrist and pulled me quickly down the hallway to my apartment door. Now that I stared his sculpted face, blue eyes, and thick dark hair, my good mood disappeared. The emotions I felt that morning returned.

"Why are you here, Conner?" I asked bluntly. It may have been a bad idea to mouth off to a vampire, but I'd already realized that Conner brought out the side of me that made stupid choices.

He seemed surprised that I was unhappy with his presence, but it was difficult to tell. Conner was suddenly doing a good job of masking his emotions behind a blank face. I realized it was actually his complete lack of reaction that always gave him away with me. I took a careful step back. Angry vampires were a bad thing, and Conner looked a little miffed. Okay, more than a little miffed.

Of course, Conner noticed my retreat and his face relaxed. "I'm here to see you."

I quickly sidestepped him and headed toward my door. "Really?" I was proud of myself. I sounded completely disinterested.

Focused on unlocking my door, I jolted when I felt Conner's hand clasp the nape of my neck. His lips brushed my ear when he spoke. "Are you going to tell me why you're so angry, Donna?"

"I'm not angry," I lied.

Conner's hand squeezed my neck lightly. "Don't lie to me. I can't hear your thoughts or control you, but you do broadcast your emotions. I can feel that you're angry and hurt. Why are you angry and hurt?"

I wanted to shrug off his hand, but I already knew how much stronger than me he was, so I kept my head down. “When I woke up alone this morning, I assumed that was a sign you were done pursuing me.”

Conner turned me to face him so that my back was to the door. I refused to look away from his gorgeous blue eyes. He may have superior strength and speed but I would be damned if I would quail before him. He studied me intently.

“I am beginning to see that I made a mistake. I had business to attend to early this morning, but I didn’t want to wake you, so I left.”

I barely managed to keep myself from snorting. Apparently men were all the same, no matter what century they were from. As if it would ever be okay to just leave a woman’s bed first thing in the morning without even saying goodbye. It was obvious even several hundred years of living didn’t mean a man would understand women any better.

Conner scowled at me. “Don’t look at me that way. I was trying to be courteous.”

I really wanted to tell him what he could do with his brand of courtesy, but I was a little afraid of what he might do to me.

His scowl didn’t fade. “Okay, what exactly did I do wrong?”

I sighed. He couldn’t be asking me for an honest answer, could he? “Look, Conner. It’s after three in the morning, and I’m tired. Can’t we discuss this tomorrow?”

An absolutely wicked smile spread across his face, and I felt my stomach quiver. “You’re right. We can talk about this tomorrow.”

He had us both inside my apartment before I even had a chance to blink. Oh fuck no, this wasn’t happening. I wasn’t some booty call. Been there, done that during my stupid, wild college years. It was fun then, but now it just made me feel cheap and I didn’t like that.

I put my hand on Conner's chest, and he backed up. "No."

Conner blinked. "No what?"

"No to whatever it is you're thinking. I am not a booty call, your fuck buddy, or some tramp you can use when you feel like it. You want a girl who doesn't mind if you're not there the next morning, call my coworker, Marissa. You buy her some dinner or a nice handbag and she won't care what you do. Me, I have different expectations, and those include respect not designer gear."

Inside, I was shaking in my boots but, on the outside, I sounded calm. At least I would get flattened with some dignity intact.

To my surprise, Conner smiled at me, flashing his dimple. "There you are."

Say what? "What does that mean?" I asked.

"I watched you, Donna. I watched you for two nights. You are vibrant, honest, and real. You hold nothing back. That's what I want from you. In my life, too many things must be held back or left unsaid. I'm disgusted with it. You are what life is made of and I want to feel alive again. I don't want you to bite back your thoughts out of fear. I want to know you and I want you to know me."

I took a step back. "Are you saying you aren't going to suck me dry if I tell you that leaving without a word is something a dickhead would do?"

Conner laughed, the sound was like warm velvet. I loved it. "No. I want you to tell me what you are thinking. I can't see into your mind. I need you to be honest with me."

I tried to ignore the warm feeling that was spreading through my belly. I knew nothing about this man, er, vampire. Conner seemed to bring out Donna, the Queen of Bad Decisions. Also, no man I had ever met wanted real honesty. They wanted convenient honesty about things that weren't

really that important. No one really enjoyed getting called out on bad behavior, but most of the men I met became more defensive than a corrupt politician if I politely mentioned that they had their head up their ass.

Conner leaned in and kissed me lightly. “I can see your skepticism, but I assure you that I am sincere.”

With his slight accent, Conner’s words sounded even more prim and proper. I wanted to smile. Even though he looked as though he were in his early thirties, his old-fashioned way of speaking was beginning to give away his true age.

“Fine. You’ll get honesty but don’t blame me if you don’t always like what you hear.”

He grinned at me. “I’m over three hundred years old and long past the stage where a few truthful words will cripple my ego.”

I allowed myself to smile back right before I let loose a huge, jaw-cracking yawn that I barely had time to cover with my hand.

Conner chuckled. “Tired?” he asked.

I nodded. “Someone kept me up way past my bedtime last night.”

“Am I forgiven for leaving this morning?”

He smirked a little as he asked and looked so mischievous that I couldn’t keep from smiling back.

“Yes, you’re forgiven.”

I wasn’t sure what to do or say next. I wanted to ask him to stay the night but I felt awkward. Conner was different from all the men I had known in the past. He made me feel itchy. Unsettled. I hadn’t felt this unsure of myself since my teenage years.

“Would you, uh, like to stay?” I really wanted to roll my eyes at my own lack of sophistication, but it was too late to take it back now.

Conner's dimple popped out when he grinned at me. "I would like that very much, Donna."

My stomach chose that moment to growl. Conner laughed. "Did you eat dinner?"

I shook my head. My appetite had been non-existent during my dinner break, so I had skipped out on food and just sipped a soda.

"Why don't I order a pizza while you take a shower?" he asked.

That sounded fantastic, and my stomach growled again in agreement. I knew my face was turning red, but I ignored it. "That sounds great. Thank you."

I walked toward my bedroom before my stomach could growl again. I wasn't sure that I liked how much lighter and happier I felt after Conner apologized and how upset I had been when I woke up to an empty bed that morning. One date, one night of hot sex, and I was beginning to care too much about him. Hell, my determination to only go on one date with him had disappeared sometime between orgasms two and three last night. There was so much I didn't know or understand. Apparently all the vampire lore I was familiar with was well-thought out propaganda or outright bullshit and that was in regards to *what* he was. There was even more I didn't know about *who* he was.

I mulled all this over as I turned on the shower in my bathroom and stripped off my work clothes. Getting involved with Conner was much more dangerous than dating the men I usually spent time with. He was a vampire. I'm sure he could snap me in half without breaking a sweat. That alone was enough to make me think twice about seeing him. Then there was the fact that, in one date he proved that he could, and would, treat me better than any other man I had ever been with. And that included mind-blowing,

leg-numbing sex. All of those things combined made him incredibly dangerous to me. Not just my physical safety but the safety of my heart.

Twenty minutes later, I was clean but no closer to figuring out what to do. I dried off and slipped into yoga pants and a huge t-shirt. I decided I could be confused tomorrow when I was alone again. Right now I had company that may not be able to read my mind but he probably felt all the emotional turmoil swirling around in my head.

I left my bedroom and the smell of melted cheese and spicy pepperoni greeted me. My stomach reminded me yet again that it was empty. Conner was stretched out on my couch, two boxes of pizza on the table in front of him, along with an open bottle of red wine and two glasses. Conner smiled when I sat down next to him. I felt a little self-conscious in my lounging clothes, but it would have been stupid for me to do a full hair and make-up job at three in the morning.

I didn't question how Conner got the pizza here at such a crazy hour. I was just grateful to have something to eat. While he poured wine, I opened the pizza box and snagged a piece. I almost moaned at the first bite of melted cheese and pepperoni. Conner set my glass in front of me but took a sip from his. He leaned back against the arm of the couch, his torso twisted to face me and one knee bent on the seat cushion. He looked as though he were straight out of a GQ photo spread.

I wiped my mouth with a napkin he had thoughtfully left on the table. "You aren't hungry?" I asked.

Conner shook his head. "No, I'm not hungry."

I could almost hear his unspoken words, *for food*. My stomach clenched, and I snatched up my wine for a deep gulp. After last night, I wasn't sure if he would be hungry for blood or maybe something else. The thought made me squeeze my thighs together.

I must have broadcast my feelings loudly because Conner's face shifted into a deliciously wicked grin. Resolutely, I ignored him and ate another slice of pizza. Once I finished my second slice, I drank more wine and felt my muscles relaxing. Conner was a nice dining companion. I didn't feel odd eating while he sat drinking wine. He asked me questions about my day at work and chuckled when I told him about Lauren and Jenna's antics that night. When I briefly mentioned Marissa, he seemed to understand that she wasn't my favorite person and didn't ask any questions about her.

It was nearly four in the morning when I glanced at the clock and sighed. "I need to get to bed. I have to work again tomorrow."

Conner took my wine glass. "Go get ready and I will put away the food."

I did as he said, wanting to get rid of my pizza breath. I brushed my teeth and used a soft rubber band to pull my hair into a loose ponytail. I hated waking up with hair covering my face. When I came out of the bathroom, Conner was already in the bed, his clothes neatly laid out on the chair in the corner of my bedroom. I ditched my yoga pants, but kept my t-shirt on as I slid under the sheets. I shouldn't have bothered, because as soon as I got within arm's reach, Conner yanked it over my head and threw it on the end of the bed so that I was dressed only in my panties.

He pulled me down into the crook of his arm, tucking my face against his shoulder. I placed my hand on his chest, surprised that he seemed to want to go to sleep immediately. I figured we might fool around a little.

Conner turned us so suddenly that I squealed. "If you wanted to play, you only had to say so, Donna."

I guess he could read my mind after all.

Six

I was drunk. Sloshed. Trashed. Hammered.

I was also having the best time. Of course, I always had a great time when I hung out with my girlfriends. The five of us were probably our waiter's worst nightmare. He was young, probably early twenties, and adorable. After a few cocktails, the girls and I became extremely verbal in our appreciation of his assets. Shannon and Ricki in particular seemed to enjoy discussing his resemblance to Adam Levine.

Upon my insistence, we ordered a variety of appetizers. With the amount of alcohol we were consuming, I knew we needed to put some food on our stomachs before things became too crazy. As we plowed through nachos, hot wings, and other fattening fare, the conversation turned from work to men.

“I swear it’s been so long since I had an orgasm with someone other than myself, I’m afraid I won’t be able to do it with someone else in the room. Sort of like a shy bladder or some shit,” Ivie complained.

We all giggled and Kerry popped off, “So you have shy orgasms?”

Our giggles became raucous laughter. As we calmed down, Ivie's eyes turned toward me. *Oh, shit*, I thought. She was about to ask me about my love life. I might be able to get away to fibbing to one of the girls, but all four of them together were better than any lie detector used by the FBI, CIA, or any other alphabet soup intelligence agency.

"So Donna, have you met anyone lately?" she asked.

My thoughts scattered wildly. Fuck me. I quickly decided that partial truth was better than outright lie.

"I met a guy, but I'm not sure how serious it is." That was complete truth. "We've only been out a couple of times." That was mostly a lie.

After our dinner at Concord, Conner met me at my apartment almost every night after work and stayed all night. He did take me out for a more casual meal on my next night off, but my schedule and his dictated that most of our time together was spent at my apartment. I was beginning to get upset that he had never invited me to his place.

We had been spending tons of time together over the last ten days and not once had he asked me if I wanted to come to his home after work. While he didn't act as though I was his dirty little secret, I mean he had introduced me to Asher Leroux, he still seemed content to keep me away from the more personal aspects of his life. Well, with the exception of one.

All four ladies were staring at me with wide eyes and I realized that I had been sitting there staring off into space.

"If your face is any indication," Ricki said, "it's a lot more serious than you just said."

I felt heat rising in my cheeks but ignored the blush. If I gave an inch, Ricki would have me singing like a canary before our next round.

"I honestly don't know if it's serious, but I do know he is seriously hot."

The girls all leaned in. "How hot?" Shannon asked.

“Details, woman!” This was from Ricki.

I sucked back the last of my lemon drop and caught our waiter’s eye. I raised my glass and he nodded.

“Well, he has the tall, dark, and handsome shtick down.”

They all glared at me and I sighed.

“Fine. He is tall, and he has long dark hair. It’s almost black and it nearly touches his shoulders. He has fantastic bone structure, but he’s not what I would call traditionally handsome. I guess the best way to describe him is that he’s all man. I swear testosterone drips from his pores.” I paused, but they were still looking at me expectantly, so I continued. “He has the most beautiful blue eyes. I’ve never seen anything like them.”

The waiter arrived with my lemon drop and the rest of the girls ordered another round. I sighed in relief. Time to change the subject.

“What about you, Ricki? How’s it going with Craig?” I asked.

“Do not even get me started,” she said. Of course she continued, which made me smile as usual. “He’s a dog. A horny dog. I called him a few days ago and some woman answered. I didn’t freak because, hell, it could have been his mother or something. When I asked to speak to him, *she* went off. Asking me who I was and what I wanted. I told her I was Craig’s girlfriend, and it turns out I can’t be his fucking girlfriend because *she* is his girlfriend. I told her that was fine that I didn’t want his ass since he seemed to be happy to dip his dick into any skank that seemed interested.”

“Wait, are you calling yourself a skank?” Kerry asked. Leave it to her to sneak in a smart ass remark when we least expected it.

The entire table burst into gales of laughter. Even Ricki.

The evening continued on that vein. As midnight approached, I’m pretty sure we ran our waiter ragged. He seemed a little wide-eyed as our conversation continued to become raunchier and probably too loud. At one

point I thought we were going to be asked to leave the restaurant. Somehow Ivie had found a video of goats screaming. Within minutes, we all had the video downloaded on our phones and were playing them at top volume. When we saw the manager approaching the table, we were like a bunch of twelve year old boys with porn, desperately trying to stop the video or hide our phones. By this time, we were so tipsy that it was a useless endeavor.

Fortunately the manager seemed amused by our antics rather than intent on kicking us out of his restaurant.

“Good evening, ladies. I’m David, the manager. I just wanted to come by and see how everything was tonight.”

We all nodded and assured him we were having a wonderful time. Shannon jumped as someone’s phone continued to play the sounds of screaming goats.

As he walked away, I looked at my friends. “I think it’s time to call it a night. I’m pretty sure our Adam Levine look-alike called the boss on us.”

There was a chorus of boos but they started pulling out their wallets and cell phones. Since we only got to do girls’ night with all of us once every few weeks, we usually took cabs to the restaurant. It wasn’t cheap, but neither was a DUI. I gave out tipsy hugs and kisses before I climbed into my cab. A couple of the other girls lived close enough to each other to share a cab, but since I downsized I lived a good fifteen minutes from all of them.

I paid for my cab and managed to make it up the stairs to my apartment. As I tried to fit my key into the lock, a long-fingered hand took it and opened the door. I shot a look over my shoulder, but I already knew who was there. I could smell his delicious scent before I looked. Conner met my eyes with an amused look of his own.

As he ushered me into the apartment, he asked, “How drunk are you exactly?”

He sounded as though he were suppressing a laugh. I gave him a haughty look down my nose, but I was pretty sure I ruined it by tripping and falling onto the couch.

His eyes twinkled, and his dimples popped out as he stared down at me. “I guess that’s my answer then.”

I leaned back against the couch cushions. “What are you doing here, Conner? I thought you weren’t coming by tonight.”

He stretched out onto the sofa next to me, his arms crossed behind his head. I tried not to drool and focused on what he was saying.

“I finished with my business early and decided to see if you made it home safely.”

I didn’t want to find that sweet, but I did. After two weeks of spending almost every night together, he constantly surprised me with his thoughtfulness and sweet gestures. I never thought a three hundred year old vampire would be such a gentleman. During the time he was born, women were little better than property. I’m sure some men of the time were nice to their women, but I doubted they were as considerate as Conner. The only problem was that I was beginning to feel a little like a shameful secret. I had never been to his home. He rarely wanted to go out in public. If he wasn’t so attentive and sweet I would have believed that I was a short-term fling for him. Hell, even though he was all those things, I was beginning to wonder exactly what his motives were.

I leaned my head back against the couch and cursed silently as the room started to spin.

“Thank you, Conner.” I stifled a sigh.

If I made any little noise he seemed to notice. It was both refreshing and annoying. The fact that he paid attention was wonderful, but I was a thinker,

so I tended to mull things over. If I got too quiet or sighed while I was thinking, he noticed.

I still wasn't sure what to think about him. Now that I was spending more time with Conner, I was beginning to realize that he wasn't as transparent as I thought before. He had a fucking awesome poker face when he put his mind to it.

I realized I had been contemplating the back of my eyelids for a while and that Conner was silent. I opened my eyes and saw that he was watching me closely.

"What's on your mind, Donna? I can practically see the wheels of your brain turning."

"Do you want the honest answer or the tactful one?" I asked flippantly.

Conner just rested his elbow on the back of the couch, propping his head on his hand, and raised an eyebrow at me. I decided that meant he wanted an honest answer.

"I'm just thinking about you and your motives."

His face started to shut down, but he fought it. I knew I had surprised him.

"What do you mean?" His accent was a bit stronger, which was both sexy and concerning. His accent thickened when we had sex or the few times I heard him get upset. I was pretty sure he wasn't turned on at the moment, which meant he was getting annoyed.

"Well, I don't know how things are in the vampire world but I do know how they are in my world. We've been having sex for two weeks, but we've only been out in public together twice. And I've never been to your home. Again, women like you may not be offended by that, but a modern human woman like me would wonder if you wanted to keep me on the down low.

If that's the case, you should also understand that the modern human woman won't appreciate being treated like that. Especially me."

Conner actually looked surprised at my words. "You think I'm ashamed of you?" His Scottish brogue was almost full force, and I was beginning to feel a little anxious.

"Never mind," I muttered. "I didn't want to upset you. Forget I said anything."

"The hell I will," he said.

Well now he was definitely pissed. Shit, damn, and motherfucking hell. I really didn't want to argue. He asked me for honesty and now he was upset that he got it. "Seriously, forget I said anything. I really didn't want to make you angry. You wanted honesty, which I gave you, but I also don't want to fight."

"We're no' fighting," he stated, "and I'm not angry." The fact that he sounded like he just gotten off the boat from Scotland did not help support his statement.

It was my turn to raise an eyebrow. "You certainly sound angry."

Conner pinched the bridge of his nose as though I made his head hurt. I wondered inanely if vampires got headaches.

"Okay, I am angry but I don't want to fight either," he said. He removed his hand and pinned me with an intense look. "Do you really think I'm ashamed of you?"

I shrugged. "I'm not sure what to think, Conner. You come here, we have sex and sleep, and then you go. We've only gone out together twice and spent time at my place in two in a half weeks. As I said, I'm not sure how things are in the vampire world but I do know that behavior like that is usually a bad sign in my experience."

Leaning closer, Conner laid a hand on my knee. “Donna, things are very complicated for me.”

I rolled my eyes. “Sure.”

Conner’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t,” he said, his voice deepening.

“Don’t what, Conner? Don’t tell you that I think that is bullshit?”

His face filled my vision suddenly. “Don’t speak to me like that.”

My heart rate doubled, but I stood my ground. I knew that if I backed down an inch I would lose more than the argument. I would lose my self-respect and probably his respect also.

“You can’t have it both ways, Conner. Either you want me to be honest with you or you want me to tell you what you want to hear.”

Everything inside me quailed as he just continued to stare at me with those bright blue eyes. I knew he was angry, but I had no clue what else he might be planning. Maybe he was thinking of sucking me dry and disposing of the body, I didn’t know, but it was more than a little frightening. Though we had been having sex, a lot of sex, over the last weeks, I still didn’t want him to bite me. Amazingly he seemed to respect that and didn’t push me.

Slowly, he sat back, out of my space. “You’re absolutely right. I told you to be honest with me and you were. But I need you to understand, Donna, that things are complicated. Please don’t misunderstand. Most vampires view humans only as food. Especially those who are my age. Rarely do they engage in relationships of any kind with humans. Those of us that are younger or newly made often continue their relationships for a time but it becomes difficult after more than a few years. How do you explain why you do not age to your siblings and parents when they are turning old and grey and you still look as you did decades ago?” He paused. “Some choose to plant false memories of themselves aging in their family’s

mind, but many find it too difficult to see their relatives wither and die. It becomes easier to cut ties.”

I blinked at him. I realized that I might not know much about Conner, but I knew more than most.

“Why did you tell me?” I asked.

The corner of his mouth kicked up. “The answer to that question is complicated too.”

“Try to explain it to me then.”

He grinned. “I guess the best way to explain it would be for me to tell you that you’re special.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Everybody’s special, Conner. Care to go into detail?”

“There are a lot of things I enjoy about you, Donna.”

My eyes rolled again. “Are you referring to sex?” I scoffed.

Conner shook his head. “No. I think you know as well as I do that there’s more between us than sex.”

I thought that but couldn’t help feeling relieved that he felt that way too. God now I felt like I was in high school and agonizing over every little word and action of the guy I was crushing on.

“Is there anything else we need to discuss?” he asked.

I decided to let the subject rest for the time being. Though I wasn’t crazy about all the secrecy, I was beginning to understand that Conner was keeping me separate from his normal life, not out of embarrassment, but with the intention of protecting me. It sounded like I would not enjoy meeting many of his fellow vampires if they viewed me as little better than a meal on heels.

“I have more questions, but they can wait until I’m sober,” I replied.

Conner laughed. “That would be my preference as well. Are you ready for bed?”

My buzz had faded from almost shitfaced to comfortably tipsy. I was ready to go into the bedroom, but not to sleep.

Conner’s expression grew hungry, and I realized that he could feel my lust. The bad girl in me really liked that look and encouraged me to tease him a little. I stood up and faced him. Slowly, I started to unbutton my shirt. I slid the material off my shoulders and let it drop to the floor behind me. I placed one foot on the coffee table in front of me and unzipped my high heeled boots. After I kicked it off, I repeated the same process with the other boot.

His eyes brightened, almost to the point that they glowed. I began to unbutton my jeans and started backing toward the short hall that led to the bedroom. Conner rose fluidly to his feet, stalking slowly toward me. Something in his expression excited me, but also caused a shiver of trepidation up my spine. He looked every inch the predator that I often forgot he was. Bad Girl Donna whispered for me to run, to see if he would chase me.

Without thinking it through, I whirled and dashed a few steps down the hall to my bedroom. I barely made it through the door when he was on me. His arms wrapped around me from behind, one of his hands cupping my chin to tilt my head back and to the side. Conner’s lips slid up my neck to my ear.

“You shouldn’t have done that, Donna. Never run from a vampire. Like any predator, if you run from one of us, we will chase you.” His voice was dark.

My heart started pounding as his other hand moved up my torso to cup my breast through my bra. I gasped when I felt the sharp scrape of his fangs

on my neck. Since the first night we made love, he was careful not to get his teeth near my skin. I appreciated his restraint, but I had woken the beast within tonight, and he seemed hungry.

While he kissed my neck and scraped the skin with his teeth, Conner's hands drifted down to my stomach and started pushing my jeans down. I helped him until I was standing with my back to him, clad only in my underwear. My bra loosened and the straps fell down my arms. I let it fall to the floor before I turned to face him.

When I saw his face, my knees weakened. His eyes were literally two burning orbs of blue and his fangs had lengthened so that they dented his bottom lip.

“Get on the bed.”

I shivered. His accent was back full force. I moved to the bed and lay back on the pillows. Never taking his eyes off me, Conner unbuttoned his shirt. He shrugged out of silky material before his hands went to his belt. A few seconds later he was naked. With his muscular body and thin white scars crisscrossing his torso, he looked every inch the Scottish warrior and hotter than any Magic Mike extra I could imagine. My nipples hardened.

Conner's gaze moved to my breasts. He started to move toward me but stopped and took a deep breath. Somehow I knew he was hanging onto his control by a thin thread. I shivered again but this time in trepidation. Usually I loved when the man I was with lost control and things in the bedroom got wild. Conner was different. If he lost control, he could hurt me badly.

“Take off your underwear,” he said. His voice was deeper than usual.

I slid off my panties and tossed them over the side of the bed. Unsure of what to do with my hands, I put one above my head and rested the other on my thigh.

Conner studied me for a moment, and I squeezed my thighs together. I wasn't sure what he was thinking, but he was by far the most creative lover I had ever had. Whatever he came up with, I was pretty sure I would thoroughly enjoy it.

"Put your hands behind your head, bend your knees, and spread your legs."

Even though we had been lovers for a couple of weeks, I hesitated.

"Do it now, Donna."

I brought my other hand behind my head and laced my fingers together. I bent my knees and moved my feet apart.

"Wider," Conner growled.

Feeling exposed but still extremely turned on, I moved my feet as far apart as I could. My chest heaved because I was practically panting. Suddenly he was on top of me, our chests pressed together. I started to move my hands so I could grab his shoulders, but Conner put his hands over my elbows and pinned my arms down.

"Don't move."

I froze.

"Until I tell you otherwise, do not move your hands or your legs," he ordered.

I watched him as he lowered his head toward my chest. I gasped as his mouth opened over my nipple, and I felt a slight sting as he began to suck. I realized that the little pain was from his fangs. He moved his mouth to my other nipple as his hand slid down my inner thigh. My hips bucked when he slid one long finger inside of me.

"Conner," I whimpered.

"Quiet," he stated.

He never stopped what he was doing. As his finger moved inside of me, his thumb slid over my clit. The muscles in my abdomen clenched. I squirmed against him.

His hand stopped moving. “Keep still. You ran from me. My instincts are screaming at me that you are prey. I’m in control but barely.”

I swallowed. “Do you want to hurt me?” I asked.

Conner closed his eyes and shook his head. “No, I don’t want to hurt you. When you fled, the part of me that is completely inhuman wanted to run you down and claim you. To fuck you senseless. To bite you.”

As he said those words, his mouth lowered to my neck, sucking hard, and he suddenly thrust two fingers into me as he rubbed my clit harder, mimicking what he described. I made a keening sound and let my head fall back.

Conner continued to suck on my neck, and I knew he was marking me. I felt everything inside of me tighten. If he didn’t stop I was going to come. He moved his hips between my thighs and replaced his fingers with a part of him I liked even more. His cock was long, thick, and perfect as he slid inside of me. Conner shoved his hand beneath my back and cupped the back of my neck, pulling me into his thrusts. He was rough. I knew he was leaving bruises, but I didn’t care.

I was mindless, lost in the intense pleasure until I couldn’t stand it any longer. I wrapped my legs around Conner’s waist and buried my hands in his hair. On the edge of what I knew would be one of the best orgasms of my life, I vaguely heard Conner snarl just before I felt his teeth break through the skin of my neck. The pain was sharp but over quickly.

When he took the first long pull of my blood, the climax burst over me so strong I felt like I was being turned inside out. My nails tore into his back as I thrashed in his arms and I think I screamed. The pleasure felt like

it would never end, that it would kill me if it continued, but I was willing to go.

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Seven

I awoke to someone licking my neck in long strokes. My eyes drifted open, and I realized what happened. Conner lifted his head, his eyes no longer burning.

“God, Donna. I am so sorry. I warned you to stay still but that is no excuse. I never should have touched you until I knew I was in control.”

I just blinked up at him, still trying to get my brain working properly again.

He cupped my face. “Please say something. I realize this is little consolation but I only took a small amount of your blood and my saliva will help heal the wound. You will be fine.”

“Holy shit,” I croaked. “Does your bite feel like that every time?”

It was Conner’s turn to seem shocked. He stared at me. “Most would find my bite pleasurable but only you could experience that kind of ecstasy.”

My brain was still foggy, or I would have paid more attention to his exact words.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I asked.

Conner's face was serious. "I wanted you to trust me. If I had to convince or coerce you it wouldn't be the same as you giving me your trust freely."

I ran my fingers through his hair. "I understand."

"Are you very angry with me?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I'm not angry. I've been thinking about it the last few days. I wasn't quite ready yet but I was already considering it. Even though you say you were out of control, you were present enough not to cause lasting damage or even truly hurt me. Now I know without a doubt that I can trust you. I also know that I enjoy your bite tremendously."

Conner kissed me and pulled away smiling. "I am sorry that I broke my promise to you, but I have to say I'm relieved that you aren't angry with me."

I ran my hands down his back. "If all my orgasms are like the last one, I'll only be mad at you if you don't bite me."

Laughing, he rolled us out of the bed and pulled me toward the bathroom. "Time for a shower."

I stopped short when I saw streaks of blood on his back and light pink lines slowly fading into his skin.

"What happened to your back?" I asked. It dawned on me that I had scratched him. "Did I do that to you?"

He glanced over his shoulder at his back with a smirk. "Yes. You must have dug deeply into my skin. Otherwise it would have been healed by now." When he saw the horrified look on my face, he laughed again. "Don't worry, Donna. I enjoyed it almost as much as you enjoyed being bitten."

I was still staring at him, completely bewildered, when he turned on the shower full force and shoved me under the cold spray. The only reason my neighbors didn't hear my shriek was because he was kissing me.



Two days later I had another night off. Conner invited me to his place for the first time. I appreciated it. After our conversation, he immediately made an effort to show me that he didn't want to keep me away from his home or out of his life.

That night at about six forty-five, I was pulling into an older, upper class neighborhood. I wanted to giggle. Apparently my vampire lived in an area with a homeowners' association. As I followed the directions on my GPS, I also realized that Conner didn't just live in an upper class area. He was in the most expensive part of Dallas. The homes gradually seemed larger and larger. I gaped at the mansions along the tree lined streets.

My GPS instructed me to turn right into the next drive. This wasn't a house. It was an *estate*, a gated estate. I rolled down my window and pulled up the intercom. As soon as I pressed the button, the huge, ornate wrought iron gate slowly slid open. I followed the driveway up to the house. After I parked the car, I just sat and gawked at the massive stone structure. Dear God, my vampire boyfriend wasn't just hot. He was hot and loaded.

I knew some women would kill to have a man with money. Marissa was one of them. The thought of Conner rubbing elbows with society just made me uncomfortable. Until I lost my job, I did very well financially, but never on this level.

One of the double front doors opened and Conner stepped out. Grabbing my purse, I climbed out of the car.

"I wasn't sure if I was in the right place," I joked as I walked up the front steps toward him.

Conner stepped to the side to let me enter the house first. I struggled not to openly stare as I took in the foyer. His home was every bit as gorgeous on the inside as it was on the exterior.

I turned to face him when I heard the door shut. “Your home is absolutely beautiful, Conner.”

He stepped into me and gave me a light kiss. “I’ll give you a tour after I pour you a glass of wine. Let’s go into the kitchen.”

I followed him down a short hallway into my dream kitchen. The cabinets were oak, topped with grey granite counter tops. The upper doors had glass fronts. All the appliances were stainless steel, even the huge six burner stove. While I admired his kitchen, Conner pulled a bottle of white wine out of the fridge, quickly uncorked it, and poured two glasses.

I took a sip of the wine and hummed in the back of my throat. It was good. Better than what I usually kept on hand at home.

“I think this is my favorite room in the house,” I told him.

He smirked. “It’s the only room you’ve seen so far.”

I shrugged. “I like to cook, and I’ve always wanted a big kitchen with great appliances.”

“I’m glad that you like this room then,” he said. “But I still think you should see the rest of the house.”

“I’d like that, too.”

He gestured for me to follow him. The living room was not what I expected. I thought that it would be a dark man cave. Instead, it was light and relaxing. With all the windows, I was sure it got a lot of sun during the day. I guess Conner was old enough not to be overly affected by the sun. Or he just slept most of the day away in a coffin in his basement. I smirked at the thought of Conner in the clichéd subterranean coffin.

“What’s amusing you now?” Conner asked.

I watched as he set his wineglass on a table and moved toward me.

“Just that your home is not at all what I pictured.”

He slid his arms around me, pulling me closer. This was another aspect of my relationship with Conner that I liked a lot more than I should. He was very affectionate, constantly touching me in some way.

“What did you picture?” he asked.

I shrugged but couldn’t resist a little sarcasm. “I don’t know, bats and cobwebs. Lots of heavy black curtains, candelabras, and red lights.”

Conner laughed, something he was doing more and more often in the last couple of weeks. I loved making him laugh because I quickly realized that I was one of the few people who could.

He tilted his head and kissed me. It constantly surprised me, how much our relationship resembled one I would have had with a normal man. Conner was over three hundred years old. I thought that someone living for three centuries would have a ton of emotional baggage, but he was attentive, affectionate, and, in a lot of ways, a typical man.

The kiss was heating up when Conner suddenly stiffened. Before I understood what was going on, he maneuvered me behind him and faced the door to the den. I clutched his sides. Every muscle in his torso felt rock hard.

Suddenly a woman and two men rounded the corner from the hallway into the den. I peeked over Conner’s shoulder and tried to keep my eyes from bulging out. I never heard them enter or even their footsteps on the wood floor in the hall. The woman was brunette, tall, and curvy in all the right places. She knew it too because she wore a clingy dress that drew attention to her tiny waist and full bust and hips. The two men with her gave me the heebie-jeebies. They could have been twins with their dark hair, golden skin, and dead eyes.

“Well, what do we have here?” The woman’s voice was as sensual and attractive as the rest of her. Her eyes were piercing as they met mine. The hazel color of her irises brightened several shades and I quickly realized that she was a vampire like Conner.

“Vanessa,” Conner said. “Good evening. I believe that I asked you not to drop by unexpectedly anymore.” He nodded to the men with her but did not greet them by name.

The seductive expression on the female vampire’s face remained, but her eyes grew both colder and brighter. It made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. Without thinking, I moved closer into Conner’s back and clutched his sides tightly.

Vanessa studied me like a cat might study a dead bug, with vague curiosity and disdain. After a few moments she blinked, and I wasn’t certain but I thought she looked surprised. I realized that she must have been trying to read my mind. My anxiety ratcheted up another notch. Shit. This was not good.

Conner reached down and grasped my hand at his side, bringing it around his waist. He laced our fingers together so that my palm was pressed to his stomach above his belt. I knew he was feeling my fear and trying to comfort me.

Vanessa sauntered to the couch. She lounged back on the cushions, crossing her legs in a way that caused her skirt to ride up and almost show her hoochah. I barely kept the grimace off my face. She stretched an arm across the back of the sofa. I had to admit she looked like she belonged there.

“So who is your little pet, Conner?” she asked.

I really did not like her tone, but I remembered what Conner had told me about other vampires and that many of them viewed humans as food

only. I had a strong suspicion that Vanessa fell into this category. I also had a feeling that she wouldn't hesitate in flattening me like a pancake. So instead of opening my mouth to make a sarcastic comment as I normally would, I glanced at Conner to let him handle the situation. I may have been the Queen of Snark, but I wasn't a dummy. This bitch was looking for a reason to chew me up and spit me out, and I refused to give it to her.

Conner pulled me around to his side and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. He led me to the sofa facing Vanessa. We sat and Conner kept his arm resting along the back of the couch behind me. The men that came in with Vanessa remained in the doorway with their hands clasped in front of them. I realized they were her bodyguards. No wonder Conner was treading carefully. She must be important if she rated two body guards.

"Vanessa, this is Donna." He glanced at me. "Donna, this is Vanessa Santino. She is a...colleague."

He deliberately paused before calling her his colleague, so I understood immediately that he was trying to tell me that she was a vampire. I squeezed his knee lightly to let him know that I got the message. As soon as I did, Vanessa's eyes focused on my hand on his leg. Her eyes began to glow, and I realized that she did not like the fact that Conner and I were being so openly affectionate in front of her.

I plastered a polite smile on my face. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Vanessa," I murmured.

She merely nodded at me before turning her attention back to Conner. "I've been trying to reach you for several days, Conner. There are some things we need to discuss."

"I think we've had enough discussion, Vanessa," Conner countered. "As I recall, I told you I was not interested in your proposal on more than one occasion."

Vanessa's expression didn't change, but I could swear the air around her filled with anger.

"Perhaps we should continue this in private." Her gaze shifted to me. "Donna, is it? Would you mind giving us a few minutes alone?"

I froze. I really wanted to tell her hell no, especially after I glanced at the Dead-eye Twins, but I was pretty sure that wouldn't go over well. Thank God Conner came to my rescue.

"No, Vanessa. You have entered my home uninvited and unannounced to continue a conversation that I ended two weeks ago. I gave you my answer to your proposal. Take it with grace."

Finally, a sliver of emotion escaped the female vamp's careful façade. Her brows lowered as she scowled at us.

"You refused me for this little human?" She sneered the final word, as though being human were one step up from dog shit. Vanessa rose from the couch and tossed her long dark hair. "We'll see what the council has to say about this and how long it takes them to rescind your appointment."

Conner threw his head back and laughed, but it was a humorless sound. When he finished, he stared at her, colder than I had ever seen him. It was disconcerting to see the warm, affectionate man I knew turn into little more than a marble statue.

"I'm afraid you'll have no luck there, Vanessa. How big of a fool do you want to appear? You pushed for my appointment to the council in hopes that I would ally myself with you. If you begin singing a different tune now, you will look idiotic."

Gone was the seductive grace Vanessa displayed earlier. She nodded stiffly at him. "You have a point, Conner, but there are other ways for me to convince the council from appointing you, and they do not require my direct involvement."

Suddenly, Conner was standing less than a foot from her and, from her gasp, I don't think even Vanessa saw it coming. Her body guards each drew a weapon from beneath their jackets before I blinked, but one word from Conner kept them from taking further action.

Damn, my man was a badass.

I couldn't hear exactly what he was saying to Vanessa, but I knew she didn't like it. After a few tense moments, her hazel eyes met mine over his shoulder, and they were so bright it hurt. Still, I refused to look away. She might be stronger than me, but I wasn't about to back down.

Finally, she turned away from Conner and said something in another language to the two men at the door. A few seconds later they were gone. I didn't hear them leave, but knew they had left the property when Conner finally relaxed and faced me.

Tremors began in my limbs until I was shaking so hard my teeth chattered. Vaguely I realized that I was reacting to all the adrenaline coursing through my system.

"Wh-what the hell just happened?" I asked.

Conner sat beside me and pulled me into his lap. I hated that I was falling apart, but something about the entire scene made me feel as though I were in danger.

"This is why I kept you away from my home, Donna. There are currently some things happening in vampire society that worry me and involve me directly. I wanted to keep you safe. Now that Vanessa knows about you, my opposition and enemies will know about you too. She will be sure to share every small detail she can with them in an effort to enlist them into doing her dirty work."

I tucked my head under his chin as the trembling in my limbs lessened. "So I'm not crazy to think that I was in mortal danger a few minutes ago?"

Conner hesitated so long that I lifted my head to stare him in the eye.

“Tell me, Conner.”

He sighed. “No, Donna, you aren’t crazy to think that situation was verging on violence. Vanessa is notorious for finding a way to get what she wants or destroy those who stand in her way.”

I studied his face for a moment. “I get the feeling you aren’t being completely honest with me. What are you leaving out?” I asked.

He cursed under his breath, and I knew I was right.

“Fuck, Conner. Just tell me. Leaving me in the dark will only make it worse.”

Carefully, Conner removed me from his lap and retrieved the wine bottle and our glasses from the table. He came back to the sofa, refilled both of our glasses, and handed one to me.

He took a large sip of his wine before speaking.

“A few weeks ago, just before I met you, Vanessa approached me about joining the Council.”

“What Council?” I asked. I hated to interrupt but I wanted to completely understand what he was telling me.

“In my society, we have laws much like in the human world. They protect us from each other and from exposure. The Council makes the laws, oversees trials of those who break them, and metes out punishment. Currently there are six members of various ages and they are attempting to replace their seventh. She stepped down a month ago. After a century on the Council, she decided that it was time to let another take over her duties.”

I sipped my wine. “So they asked you to replace her?”

He nodded. “It’s a little more complicated than that. The Council has to agree on a candidate and then hold an open forum so that other vampires

may speak on my behalf or against my joining. After the forum, the Council votes on my status as a member.”

“That sounds very democratic.”

Conner smirked. “I realize that the media portrays us as tyrannical, evil beings with no souls but in reality we discovered many, many years ago that the best way to run our society would be as a democracy. There is very little infighting but, just like human society, we occasionally have someone who desires power. Vanessa is one of those people.”

“How does she intend to gain power by having you on the Council with her?”

He cleared his throat and took another large drink from his glass. “Vanessa approached me a few weeks ago, before I met you, with the offer of a seat. She also included an attractive proposal of a more personal nature.”

I managed to swallow back the bile that rose in my throat. “You slept with her?”

He cursed and shook his head. “No, that’s not what I meant. Vampire culture isn’t completely like human culture. We do marry, though it is rare because our version of divorce is very difficult to obtain. Much more often, two vampires will enter a contracted relationship with a stipulated time span. If, at the end of that time, they wish to continue their relationship they may renew the contract. Vanessa offered me a contractual relationship for the time period of twenty years along with monetary incentive and a no-monogamy clause.”

I couldn’t stop the look of disgust that crossed my face. “A ‘no-monogamy clause’?”

Conner laughed a little. “I’m sure it’s not much different than a marriage of convenience.”

He had a point but I still rolled my eyes. I thought marriages of convenience were bullshit anyway. Someone was always inconvenienced because their expectations were not in line with what they got.

“Why didn’t you agree?” I asked.

His face grew serious. “I met you.”

“But, if she offered you a no-monogamy clause, why didn’t you accept her offer?”

Conner’s eyebrows lowered. “I’m almost certain that you would never speak to me again if you discovered that, not only am I a vampire, but I was also involved with another woman.”

I nodded.

“That’s why I refused her.”

“But you barely knew me, Conner.”

He sighed and set his wineglass on the coffee table. “The first time I saw you, I was intrigued.” He trailed off.

“And?” I prompted.

“Then the night I saved you from those three men, I tasted your blood, and I knew.”

He didn’t continue and my frustration exploded. It wasn’t like him to be hesitant, and it was freaking me out.

“Dammit, Conner! Just tell me!”

“To me, you taste different from any other human. Better. Sweeter. It’s a phenomenon among vampires. To a vampire, it’s a sign that we are meant to be together. With each taste of you, the less I want of others and I begin to crave only you and your blood. It’s very rare between vampires and humans.”

I raised my hand. “Whoa. Hang on, are you saying that vampires drink human *and* vampire blood?”

With his usual patience, Conner explained. “Blood is blood, Donna. Vampires usually need human blood to replenish their bodies, but we find biting to be an erotic experience. We can, and often do, drink blood from each other. Sometimes it’s part of ritual or legal proceedings, but most of the time it’s part of sex for us. In a situation like ours, I would need only your blood. If we were both vampire, then we could survive mostly on the blood of one another. That’s why it’s very rare and considered a precious bond.”

I shook my head. “If I wasn’t afraid one of your friends would show up and kill me in my sleep, I would write a book correcting all the misinformation that humans believe about vampires.” I didn’t respond to his comment about the taste of my blood. “So now Vanessa knows why you refused her offer?”

He nodded.

“And she’s not happy about it, right?”

Conner just raised an eyebrow at me.

“Ok, that was a stupid question,” I said as I sat back to drain my wineglass. My brain felt overloaded from all the information. I didn’t know what to think. I did know that I hated Vanessa Santino, and I wanted to snatch all that long dark hair out of her head.

It also pissed me off that the night had been ruined. The first night Conner invited me to his home and some snooty vampire had to come in and act bitchy. The fact that she wanted to hump my guy just made it worse. Conner’s hand cupped the back of my neck and distracted me from my unhappy thoughts.

“Are you okay, Donna?”

I just looked at him. I really wasn’t.

He winced. “I guess it was my turn to ask a stupid question.”

I didn't quite laugh, more like a huge sigh. I put my empty glass on the coffee table and stood.

"I think I should go, Conner."

He rose to stand next to me. "Why?"

I barely refrained from rolling my eyes. Jesus. Men of all ages, even over three hundred, were the same. Oblivious.

"I just need some time to think."

"What do you need to think about?" he asked. His accent was noticeably thicker and I knew he was getting angry.

I crossed my arms over my chest. "Let's see...you have some female vampire lusting after you and it's obvious you think she might be a danger to me, or you wouldn't have prevented me from being alone with Tweedledee and Tweedledum while you talked to her. Oh, and let's not forget, you basically said that the taste of my blood is a sign that we're soul mates."

I forgot about keeping a defensive posture and threw my hands up in air. "I'm freaked out! I don't know how to deal with this, and I just need some time to process it all!"

Conner studied me for a moment. "Okay, Donna. I understand. Take all the time you need."

The subtext of that was that he had all the time in the world to wait. I honestly wasn't sure if that made me happy or scared the shit out of me.

Eight

Three days later, I dragged myself through the door of my apartment at four in the morning. The last couple of nights at work had been insane. I practically ran my feet off and spent another hour and half cleaning up every night. I couldn't complain too much because my tips were great, but it was still exhausting.

I hadn't called Conner since I left his house. I knew I wasn't being fair, but I just couldn't wrap my brain around the things that I learned. The whole contracted relationship gave me the heebie-jeebies. It was a little too much like a marriage of convenience and most of those did not end well. Maybe vampires who had lived for centuries could deal with it, but most of the human marriages of convenience I knew of ended with at least one party unhappy with the state of their life. Sometimes both spouses were completely miserable, though it was rare.

Then the whole *soul mates* thing was freaking me out. Conner and I hadn't been together for long. I wouldn't even say we were dating since we rarely went out in public together. For him to throw out the words soul mate made my skin itch.

As the days passed, I began to think of all the obstacles to our relationship. I barely knew him and, technically, he was way too old for me though you could never tell. Then it began to sink in that he was immortal, and I definitely was not. Would he continue to be young, broody, and hot as I withered away to dust and blew away?

Obviously I was fragile in comparison to him. What happened if Vanessa decided she wanted to snap me in half? Even if Conner went crazy and demanded her death or punishment, it wouldn't make me any less dead. Or what if he had other enemies that wanted to hurt him. Certainly it would be easy to use me to make a point.

I never considered myself a coward, but all of these thoughts were scaring the crap out of me. Sure, a relationship with a vampire sounded romantic in movies and books, but in reality, it was fucking terrifying. Deep down, I knew that I should be talking to Conner about all this, but I couldn't do it. I had known him less than a month. What did I really know about him? For all his talk about how I made him feel human again, he mostly kept his thoughts and feelings to himself. Of course I resolutely ignored the little voice in my head that said I didn't exactly share my feelings with him either. Fucking common sense.

I had decided not to call Conner until I thought it all through. Unfortunately, it was three days later and I was still confused as hell. Since four o'clock in the morning was not the time to deal with my confusion, I made up my mind to deal with it after I woke up in the afternoon. It wasn't right for me to leave things as they were with Conner. He was being incredibly patient but it wasn't fair for me to leave him in the dark.

When I finally got my door unlocked, I sighed and stumbled into my apartment. After I dropped my bag and my keys on my side table, I flipped on my lights and shrieked. Conner sat on my couch, legs crossed, and his

arm stretched along the back of the couch. Dressed in gray slacks and a dark blue shirt, he looked like he belonged in a GQ photo spread. I quickly shut my front door and hoped none of my neighbors heard my scream.

“What are you doing here?”

My throat felt tight when I spoke, probably because Conner scared the shit out of me. When I looked more closely, my blood chilled. He was looking at me with the same vaguely disdainful gaze that his pal Vanessa had used on me a few days before. Conner had never looked at me like that before.

“Hello, Donna. I’m glad to see you are well. I’m doing fine, thank you for asking,” he stated quietly.

I hadn’t realized how open Conner was with his thoughts and emotions until now. His face was cold and devoid of expression. I hated it.

“Excuse me for not asking after your health, Conner, but I certainly wasn’t expecting to have someone waiting for me in the dark. How did you get in here?”

He smiled but it was humorless. More like a baring of his teeth.

“I’ve lived a very long time, sweetheart. You learn a lot of things most people never do.” He paused. “By the way, your lock is shit. I believe I’ll be having a word with your landlord about that.”

My mouth dropped open and I was speechless, which rarely happened. What the fuck?

“Excuse me?” I asked, my voice rising about three octaves. “I don’t believe I asked you to have a word with my landlord about my locks, and I damn sure didn’t give you a key so you shouldn’t even be in my apartment without my express invitation!” I stopped when I realized I was yelling and forced myself to take several deep breaths.

Conner stared at me for a moment before he responded. “I should put you over my knee.”

He said it so calmly I almost missed his exact words.

“What?!” I yelled.

Again, Conner’s response was completely calm, almost emotionless. “You said you needed time. I assumed you would at least call me or possibly even text within twenty-four hours. Even if it was just to tell me you needed another day or so to think. Instead, I don’t hear from you for three days. Never mind that I might be worried about you, it was just plain fucking rude.”

I winced. Conner didn’t curse very often in my presence. I thought it was because of his age. Most men of that time would have been somewhat circumspect in the company of women. And not only was he cursing at me, he was chastising me for my behavior, and he was justified.

“I’m sorry, Conner. You’re right, it was horrible of me not to call you. It’s just...” I trailed off as I tried to decide what to say. “I’m not sure how to deal with all this. I mean you’re a vampire, which is hard enough to wrap my head around. You also have a very jealous almost-ex-girlfriend. Oh, and somehow you’ll grow to crave the taste of my blood.”

He stared at me for a few moments, and the cold, immobile expression left his face. The warmth and affection I was more accustomed to seeing returned.

“You’re feeling overwhelmed,” he said.

Major understatement. “Yes Conner, to say I’m overwhelmed is the least of it.”

He stood. “You handled the knowledge of what I am so well that I never considered that night might have been too much for you.”

I watched him warily as he approached me. He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me closer so that my head rested on his shoulder. Gently, he rubbed my back, and I felt all the tension leak out of my limbs. This was the Conner I knew.

“It’s just a lot to handle.” I felt tears prick the back of my eyes, and I blinked several times. This wasn’t worth crying over. “And the more I thought about all this, the more it hit home with me that you’re immortal. I’m obviously not. I hate to bring this up after just a few weeks together, but, what happens if our relationship progresses? Do I just continue to get older and eventually die while you stay the same age? I’m not sure how sexy you would find me if I were eighty years old and covered in wrinkles.”

He didn’t say anything. He only kept rubbing slow circles on my back. Irritated, I pulled away slightly so I could see his face. “Any response?” Conner dropped his arms. “I think you covered all the angles, Donna.”

I only stared at him with narrowed eyes until he sighed. Oh yeah, no matter the species men were the same. The Look worked on them all, even if it annoyed them.

“You’re right, things are moving too fast for you. I have all the time in the world. Waiting a few months or even years for you to be comfortable won’t kill me.”

Now it was my turn to be silent but for different reasons. Good God, Conner was talking about our relationship in terms of years. My heart started hammering. I wasn’t exactly a commitmentphobe, but we were moving at the speed of freaking light.

Conner tilted his head to the side. “Now why did that make your heart speed up and anxiety to start leaking out of your pores?”

“You think we’ll be together for years?” The question burst out of me before I could stop it.

“You don’t?” he shot back.

I threw my hands up in the air. “That’s my whole point, Conner. I’ve known you for a few weeks. I don’t know how I’ll feel in another month, much less another year.” I didn’t mention the fact that I felt more for him than anyone else in the past. I wanted him to understand how crazy it was to be thinking about years together in such a short time, not encourage him.

“Donna, you seem to have forgotten that I’ve lived a very long time. I knew with one look at you that you were special, different. I knew that I would do whatever it took to have you in my life, even if I had to court you as though I were human.”

“You mean you were going to lie to me?!” I yelled.

Conner’s hands closed over my shoulders, and he shook me lightly. “Dammit, woman, that’s not important. I didn’t have to lie to you and, now that I know you better, I never would. What I am telling you is that in three centuries, you are the first woman to make me want to plan for years together.”

His accent had thickened as our conversation continued. I knew that meant he was getting angry but hearing his Scottish brogue turned me on, which sucked. How was I supposed to stay focused on our argument when he sounded like that? It also sucked because I knew he could feel my lust.

Sure enough he looked at me oddly. “I don’t think I will ever understand women, even if I live another millennia and could read your thoughts.”

I couldn’t help but laugh because he sounded so confounded.

“How can your mood change from angry to lustful so quickly?”

I rarely blushed but I felt heat creeping into my cheeks. “It’s your accent. When you get angry, your accent gets stronger. I, uh, really like that.”

Now it was Conner's turn to laugh. "I suppose that makes sense," he said, "I'll keep that in mind for other times." He kissed me lightly. "In regards to our other conversation, how about this: let's take it a day at a time for a while. When you feel more comfortable we can discuss the future."

I hesitated but eventually nodded. One day at a time sounded better than the freak out I had been entertaining for the last three days.

"Good," he said, "then let's go to bed. I've missed you when I've gone to sleep the last few nights."

"I've missed you too," I replied.

It amazed me how quickly I grew accustomed to having Conner beside me at night. I hadn't slept well since the last night we spent together. I followed him down the hall to my bedroom and got ready for bed. Conner pulled me close and, to my surprise, went to sleep.



Before he left in the morning, Conner asked me to come to his house later. When I arrived I noticed a new security pad and gate at the entrance to the driveway. It seemed Conner wanted to be sure that Ms. Bitchface and company didn't come in uninvited again. Conner buzzed me in and told me the front door was open.

I parked my car in front of the house and went into the house.

"Conner?" I called.

"In the kitchen."

I wandered back to the kitchen and was surprised at what I saw. Conner was standing over the stove, stirring something in a pot. I had seen the cold

side of Conner and the sweet. Now I was seeing the domesticated part of my man. Whatever he was making smelled fantastic.

“I didn’t realize that you cooked,” I commented.

He shot me a wry look. “I’ve lived for over three hundred years, Donna. Of course I know how to cook.”

I sneered at him but without heat. “But you said yourself you don’t have to eat.”

Conner took a glass from the cabinet and filled it from an open bottle of red wine on the counter.

“Yes, but I also said that I enjoyed good food. There are times that I have to cook it for myself.”

I took the glass from him with a smirk. “I think I like this side of you.”

When we sat down at the counter to eat a little later, I decided that his three hundred years were well spent. He served me chicken in a rich creamy sauce, green beans, and risotto. It was delicious.

“Oh my God, Conner. This is fantastic.” I couldn’t resist dragging a finger through the sauce left on my plate and licking it clean.

I started to do it again when Conner’s hand shot out and grabbed mine. He lifted my finger to his mouth and sucked it between his lips. Suddenly my mind wasn’t on how incredible the food tasted. I started panting as his teeth nipped the pad of my finger. I leaned closer and he released my hand so he could kiss me. I saw a flash of fang just before his mouth settled on mine and knew Conner was turned on too.

Our tongues tangled, and the kiss turned almost violent. I knew my lips would be bruised later. Conner pulled back, his hair mussed from my hands and hanging in his face. He shoved the plates off the counter. I vaguely heard them crash to floor and shatter before he grabbed my waist and lifted me onto the granite counter top.

He shoved my skirt up around my waist and pressed my thighs open roughly. His thumbs pressed onto my clit and, even through my underwear, it felt incredible. I grabbed the edge of the counter and my back arched. Conner's lips hit my inner thigh, followed by the scrape of his fangs. I gasped.

As his mouth teased me, never moving to the place I needed it most, Conner wrapped a hand around each of my ankles and set them on the bar stools on either side of him. His hot breath seeped through my panties and I whimpered. A ripping sound filled the air, and felt his lips on my bare skin. I realized he had torn my panties down the middle, and every muscle below my waist clenched.

Conner was usually a gentle lover, rarely leaving bruises despite his greater strength. I loved it but I was also thoroughly enjoying the rougher side of him. After he bit me the week before, he finally realized that I wasn't lying when I said wanted him to be harder, harsher.

Conner's eyes met mine as his mouth descended. I couldn't tear my gaze away as his tongue swirled firmly over my clit. My thigh muscles shivered as I tried not to close my legs around his head. Conner liked for me to remain still if he positioned me a certain way.

Our eyes stayed locked as he continued to lick and suck at my clitoris. Of their own volition, my hands released the counter and fisted in his hair. As the orgasm started to crest, I saw Conner's mouth open just before his fangs pierced my flesh. I threw my head back and screamed as the climax intensified. Black dots danced in front of my eyes.

My chest heaved as my vision cleared. I felt Conner's hips between mine just before he thrust inside of me. My hands were still in his hair, and I couldn't stop myself from yanking hard as he began to move deep and fast.

Conner kissed me almost brutally, and I could taste myself on his mouth. We both moaned when I sank my teeth into his bottom lip. Not only did Conner like to bite me during sex, I discovered that he loved it when I bit him in return.

My orgasm began to build again as his pubic bone ground against my clit with every thrust. Desperate to feel his skin, I ripped at his shirt until I could put my mouth on his chest. I felt his mouth trail down my neck and knew what was coming. The knowledge that he was going to bite me again and give me one of those brain-numbing orgasms just turned me on even more.

His lips moved against my skin as he spoke. “I want you to come all over my dick, Donna, but not until I tell you.”

I made a sound I didn’t recognize. His voice was rough and his accent strong. I felt his words vibrate against my neck.

Conner fisted a hand in my hair and pulled my head back so that I had to look into his eyes.

“Do you understand me?” he asked, never slowing his pace and bringing me closer and closer to the pinnacle.

“Yes, Conner. Don’t stop!” God, if he didn’t let me come soon, I was going to pass out. Or die.

He gave my hair a slight yank. “Did I give you permission to come?”

I was desperate and did a little hair pulling of my own since my hands were still buried in his dark brown strands.

“Please,” I begged. Any longer and I wouldn’t be able to hold back. Before Conner, if a man tried to boss me around like this I would have punched him in the throat or laughed in his face. Somehow it felt sexy as hell when Conner did it.

His eyes flared, glowing so intensely that I could no longer meet his gaze. I realized he knew exactly how close I was to the edge. Before I could say anything, he used his grip on my hair to arch my neck, baring my throat to him.

“Come now, Donna,” he commanded just before he bit into my skin.

As he drank deeply, the orgasm burst within me until I felt like I was being turned inside out. I screamed again. Conner continued to suck at my neck, prolonging the pleasure until I didn’t think I could take it anymore. Just as I thought I was about to pass out, he stopped and began to lick my neck to help the wound heal.

I panted as Conner kept thrusting inside of me slowly. Since the first time he bit me, I had allowed him to take blood from me as often as he wished during sex. I never offered to allow him to feed from me at any other time, and he never asked. Still, I couldn’t turn down such incredible mutual pleasure.

Finally, he stopped moving, and we both stared at each other, chests heaving.

“I don’t think I will ever get used to that,” I said. “I’m amazed you aren’t being hounded by all the women from your past.”

Conner cupped my hips with his hands and lifted me off the counter. He walked to the sink, set me down next to it, and grabbed a clean towel out of a drawer. Still deep inside me, he damped the towel with warm water. He slowly pulled out of me and began to clean me with the towel. I took over the task so he could straighten his clothes.

“It isn’t like that every time, Donna,” he said.

I looked up at him in confusion and he continued. “The sex isn’t as intense with others.”

It dawned on me what he was trying to say, and I appreciated his attempt at tact. “Is this another one of those soul mate things?” I asked.

He nodded and focused on redressing. I felt my heart rate pick up but decided to think about it later. We agreed to take this one day at a time, and that’s exactly what I would do. If that meant I was deep in denial, then so be it.

After he zipped up his pants, Conner looked at his shirt and started to laugh.

“What?” I asked.

He held the edges of the material out for me to see. I realized that he was missing several buttons from his shirt. Apparently in my desperation to touch his skin, I had destroyed a very expensive garment.

I giggled. “I’m sorry.”

Conner helped me down from the counter and removed my destroyed panties.

“Don’t be. I like that you are so passionate.” He walked to a door and threw the dirty towel into what I realized was a laundry room. “Now, how would you like to finish the tour of my house, ending with my bedroom?”

I was still smiling when I put my hand in his and let him lead me out of the kitchen. Maybe this whole ‘one day at a time’ thing would work out after all.

Nine

The next day I was soaking in Conner's fantastic bathtub when my cell rang. After I glanced at the Caller ID, I answered and shoved my phone between my ear and shoulder.

"Hello?"

"Hey, bitch! It's time for Girls' Night Out. When's your next night off?" Ricki's voice was so loud I almost dropped my phone into my bath water.

"Hey, Ricki. Girl, I don't think I'll be able to hang out for a while."

"I call bullshit. It's been a couple of weeks since our last night out. I want my girl time!" She paused. "It's that guy, isn't it? Conner Savage? Are you still seeing him?"

I sucked in a deep breath. Goddammit I hated to lie to my friends, but I couldn't exactly tell them the truth either. "I am still dating him but it's pretty casual. We don't spend that much time together. I do want to hang out with you guys, but I've been slammed at work and haven't had the energy to go out."

"Don't be such a pussy, Donna. I want to go out and have fun with my girls!"

I stared at my bright red toenails. I was beginning to see another drawback of dating Conner. I had never gone this long without spending time with my friends. It wasn't because Conner told me not to, but I couldn't exactly tell them all about my new boyfriend. I was also a terrible liar. I wouldn't be able to make up anything believable to hide the truth.

"I can't, Ricki. Maybe in a few weeks, okay?"

She grumbled for a few seconds but accepted my evasion. We chatted for a few minutes before I ended the call. Aggravated, I tossed my phone onto the small table next to the tub and slid down until the hot water closed over my head.

When I surfaced, I yelled. Conner was sitting on the edge of his tub with a concerned expression on his face.

"Jesus, Conner. Wear a bell or whistle or something when you sneak up on me. I'll live longer that way."

He didn't smile. In fact, he didn't just look concerned, he looked irritated.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Why haven't you told your friends about us?"

I smoothed my wet hair back from my face. "Well, you told me that secrecy was important. I can't exactly announce to them that you're a vampire."

He scowled at me. "I wouldn't expect you to. You can tell your friends that we are together without telling them what I am."

"I can't lie to my friends, Conner."

"I'm not asking you to lie to them, Donna, only to omit a small piece of information."

I sighed. "No, what I mean is that I *can't* lie to my friends. They can always tell when I'm lying, and I can assure you that the Spanish

Inquisition would have loved to have these girls on their side. Also, they'll get suspicious when they don't get to meet you."

"Why in the hell wouldn't they meet me, woman?"

Dammit, he was yelling now. I didn't understand why he was so upset.

"I just assumed that you shouldn't meet them. I mean, what happens if they see you in five or ten years and realize that you haven't aged a day since the first time you met."

"Unless they are like you, which is unlikely, I can merely plant the thought that I'm aging well in their minds."

I hadn't thought of that. "Oh," I murmured, "that makes sense."

By his expression I couldn't tell if Conner wanted to throttle me or laugh.

"What?!" I said.

He shook his head. The look on his face said he thought I was completely goofy. Before I even had a chance to think it through, I reached out, snagged the back of this belt with my hand, and yanked him ass first into the tub with me.

"Oh you'll pay for that, lass," he said as he lunged for me, splashing water all over the floor.

I squealed when he landed on top of me. A few minutes later I decided that the price of getting Conner wet was one I would pay anytime. Especially since he called me lass in that sexy accent.



Conner and I spent a nice, lazy day together. Considering it was a weekday, I asked Conner why he wasn't at work.

“That’s why I’m the boss. I hire and train people to take care of things when I can’t or don’t want to be there and then I drop in unexpectedly to be sure they are doing their jobs.”

I could see the logic in that.

It was late afternoon before I left to go back to my apartment. Conner had a dinner meeting. He wanted me to stay so we could spend time together once he got home, but I didn’t want to sit around waiting for him. I had plenty to do around my place. Also, the idea of being the ‘little woman’ waiting around for her man made my skin crawl.

“I’ll come by after my meeting,” he said as he opened the front door for me.

I smiled. “That sounds good.”

He kissed me, much too passionately for a simple good-bye, but I liked it. It was almost as if he needed the contact to carry him through the few hours until he would see me again. It was sexy and it was sweet.

I was still basking in the afterglow when I unlocked the door to my apartment. I froze just inside the threshold.

Lounging on my sofa, wearing a skin-tight red dress and a cold smile, was Vanessa Santino.

“Are you going to come in, Donna, or are you going to stand there all day?”

My heart started thudding in my chest. That little voice of self-preservation in my head yelled for me to skip choices A and B and make a run for my life. Unfortunately, the voice of my pride was louder and said that I shouldn’t back down. Though Vanessa was a vampire, she was first and foremost a woman. A woman who craved power and was extremely strong. A woman like that would find retreat cowardly and never take me seriously. And I wanted her to take me seriously.

Every moment I spent with Conner pulled me closer and closer to the edge of falling in love with him. When that happened, I knew that it would be only a matter of time before he turned me and then I would be forced to deal with the likes of Vanessa Santino on a regular basis. I couldn't afford for her to see me as weaker, even if I truly was.

I stiffened my spine, lifted my chin, and shut the front door behind me. Though it was difficult, I forced my breathing to remain even, and my heart rate began to slow. After I tossed my keys and purse on the small side table, I went to my overstuffed chair and sat facing her but still out of arms' reach. It felt safer even though I knew it was just an illusion. Vanessa could move as quickly as Conner and probably be across the room tearing my throat out before I could blink.

"Hello, Vanessa. What can I do for you?" I asked. I was surprised my voice was so steady.

She watched me with narrowed eyes. "That is odd," she murmured. "I thought perhaps Conner was blocking me from reading you a few days ago, but I still can't hear what's going on in that little head of yours."

I cleared my suddenly dry throat. I wasn't sure exactly what she was thinking either, but I knew I probably wouldn't like it.

"It seems I have some natural immunity to the vampire ability to read minds."

She studied me. "I see."

She took a deep breath and her eyes began to lighten and glow. I realized what she intended to do and knew I had only a split second to decide what course to take. Should I show her my ability to resist or should I obey whatever commands she threw at me?

"Come here," she demanded.

Shit, fuck, and damn. I immediately decided to do as she said. I knew she was dangerous and I needed all the advantages I could get. She knew she couldn't read my mind, but perhaps she wouldn't see me as such a threat if she thought she could control me.

I slowly rose from my chair and went to sit near her on the couch.

With a smug expression on her face, her eyes stopped their otherworldly glow. "You are not immune from all vampire abilities it would seem."

It was a struggle to keep my expression blank when I really wanted to sneer at her. She continued to look at me as though she were trying to see inside my head.

"Nothing. I can't hear your thoughts or even sense your emotions."

She couldn't feel my emotions? Maybe Conner was the only vampire who could. If that was the case, then that would certainly help me when dealing with other vampires. I wasn't sure if she expected a response, so I remained silent.

"You may speak," she said.

God, I wanted to roll my eyes at her superior tone. "What would you like me to say?" I asked.

She tilted her head to the side. Shit, maybe that response had been too flippant.

"You have a point," she responded. "You don't have to say anything, only listen to what I am about to tell you."

Her eyes brightened from hazel to a piercing amber color. "You will stay away from Conner Savage. You find him distasteful and repugnant."

I wanted to laugh but kept a straight face. "I will stay away from Conner Savage." I repeated her words because I wasn't sure exactly how a person under vampire mind control would actually behave.

She nodded and rose from the sofa. “Good. I’m glad that’s settled.” Vanessa stared at me for a few more moments. “I wonder if it would be worth it to drain you dry just so he understands that he shouldn’t have refused my very generous contract.”

My blood ran cold, but I remained still. Conner’s words not to run from a vampire echoed through my head.

“No, I think your rejection of him will be much more satisfying.”

I watched her walk out my door, thinking that it was a great thing she couldn’t read my thoughts. How fucking stupid could she be? If she thought she could brainwash me into hating Conner, what was to stop him from just undoing her handiwork? No wonder she needed to partner up with him. It was obvious she couldn’t think for herself.

My next thoughts were that I had to find some freaking vampire repellent to keep the damn things from breaking into my house, and that I needed to call Conner now. I jumped up from the sofa and went to lock the door and grab my cell.

My hands were shaking slightly as I scrolled to Conner’s name and placed the call.

“Hello, Donna. As lovely as it is for you to call, I can’t really speak right now.” I could hear noises in the background and guessed he was already at his meeting.

“I know, Conner. I wouldn’t be calling except Vanessa was just here, in my apartment, waiting for me when I got home.”

He was silent for a long moment. I heard him speaking to someone, I assume to excuse himself from the table with his dining companion.

“Tell me exactly what happened. Don’t leave anything out, even if it seems inconsequential.”

I described the short scene to him, including her comment about draining me dry and that I played along with her mind-control attempt.

When I finished, Conner was quiet for so long that I thought he had hung up.

“Conner, are you there?”

“Yes, I’m here. I’m choosing my next words to you carefully because I want, no, I need you to do exactly what I ask you to do. You are an independent woman, which I admire, but I want you to understand exactly how much danger you are in.”

I swallowed hard. Apparently I should take Vanessa’s threat to drain me dry very seriously. “Okay, what do you need me to do?”

“You need to pack some things. Enough for at least two weeks and then drive to your work. I will meet you there.”

“My work?” I asked.

“Please do as I tell you, Donna. I will explain later.”

That rubbed me the wrong way but I didn’t argue. I knew in my gut that he was right. I was in danger.

“Okay. How long before you can meet me?” I asked.

“Half an hour. Pack quickly.”

I disconnected the call and hurried to my bedroom. Within twenty minutes I managed to pack two suitcases and small duffel full of clothes, shoes, and toiletries. It was amazing what I could do with the right incentive, like a threat to my life. I loaded up my car and drove to the lounge.

Conner was waiting next to his SUV when I pulled into the parking lot behind the bar. He loaded my bags into the back of his vehicle.

“We need to hurry,” he said. “Vanessa sent someone to keep an eye on you. My friend distracted them long enough for you to get here without

being followed, but we need to move.”

I started to get into the passenger seat, but he stopped me. “Get in the backseat and lie down. I don’t want them to know you are with me.”

Now I was beginning to really freak out. Without a word, I climbed into the back and stretched out across the seat. Conner shut the door behind me, and within seconds we were moving. The drive from the bar to his house should have only taken twenty to thirty minutes tops, but it felt like we drove around for over an hour.

Finally, we pulled into Conner’s garage. I climbed out of the SUV on shaky legs. As Conner unloaded my bags, I grabbed my purse and one of my suitcases.

“Why exactly are we driving around like a couple of characters out of a spy movie?” I asked after we entered his house.

“I assume Vanessa wanted confirmation that you would leave me. She had one of her men waiting at your apartment when you left.”

“But I didn’t see anyone following me,” I responded.

Conner was leading me through his house to the library at the center of the structure. He glanced over his shoulder at me, a skeptical expression on his face.

“I wouldn’t expect you to, Donna. Her man is good and I doubt you were really looking for someone tailing you.”

I shrugged. “Okay, so I wouldn’t know how to check for a tail. Why are you acting like we’re under an imminent terrorist threat?”

I watched as he walked to his desk and opened a drawer. He reached inside and I heard a loud click. A portion of the shelving opened inward, revealing a well-lit hallway.

“What the hell?” I asked.

Conner gestured for me to follow him, which I did with my mouth hanging open. He actually had a secret fucking passage in his house.

We entered the hallway, the shelf shutting behind us. As we walked down the hall, he finally answered my question.

“I hear disdain and dismissal in your voice and feel it coming from you when you talk about Vanessa. It would be very dangerous to underestimate her. She believes that her desires are the only ones that matter. If she thinks that you are preventing her from getting what she wants, even by mere existence, she will kill you.”

“I realize that she is as cold as a snake, but we’re not talking about a rocket scientist here. She obviously isn’t very smart. And who the fuck kills someone over a man?”

He grunted but shot me an angry look over his shoulder. “She may not be as smart as you, but she is devious and devoid of any conscience. Her IQ doesn’t have to be high in order for her to snap your neck. It won’t take her long to realize that her little visit didn’t work. I refuse to leave you alone to make her think it was effective. Now that others know of your existence, both friends and enemies, it isn’t safe for me to leave you unprotected.” He paused. “And there are many vampires who would kill a human if they had something that they wanted.”

The hallway ended abruptly in two flights of steps that led to a huge steel door. Conner typed in a security code and pricked his finger on a small needle before the door opened.

I looked at him incredulously. “You have a *blood* lock?”

“As I said, blood is important to vampires. Only those who carry my blood can enter this door.”

I stayed on his heels as he went through the door. “What is this place?” I asked, distracted from our discussion of how Vanessa Santino would like to

rip my head from my body. And do so over a man, no less.

“This is my safe room,” he replied just before he turned on the lights.

I gawked at the huge room before me. Though it didn’t run the entire length and width of the house, the room was still enormous and contained living and dining areas and a kitchen, all of which were open to one another. There were other doors at the other end of the area, probably for a bathroom or bedroom.

“Safe room?” I repeated.

He walked to one of the doors on the other end of the room and opened it, carrying my bags inside. I followed him and saw it actually was a bedroom.

I threw my duffel bag and purse on the bed and decided to return to the important point, Vanessa Bitchface.

“Let’s rewind a second. How do you plan to keep me protected?”

I desperately wanted to believe that he was exaggerating the severity of her reaction when she realized that her brainwashing wasn’t effective, but I had to be realistic. Just for being around Conner, she wanted to kill me. If she thought that I was thumbing my nose at her by openly continuing my relationship with him, she probably would kill me in a slow, painful manner and make sure my body was never found.

“You will stay here with me and won’t go anywhere off the grounds without me or another vampire I trust,” he replied.

“Wait a minute. What about work? I have bills to pay. What if this takes more than a few days to resolve? I won’t be able to make my rent!” I ran a hand through my hair. “And how does staying underground protect me?”

He nodded. “If I keep you here, Vanessa won’t be able to get to you, even if she breaches the security measures to enter the house. As for your rent, I’ll take care of it. You don’t need to worry.”

I shook my head. “No, Conner. I need to work and pay my own bills. It’s important to me that I can support myself.”

Suddenly he was right in my face, his eyes two pools of blue fire, and I couldn’t help flinching. “What’s more important, Donna, your pride or your fucking life? You don’t seem to grasp that Vanessa doesn’t see you the way I do. I treat you as an equal because to me you are. To her you’re nothing more than an obstacle in her path. She will flatten you without a second thought.”

He had a very good point. My life was more valuable to me than my pride.

“Okay, Conner. You’re right. We can work something out.”

Conner raised an eyebrow, still looking extremely pissed. “Damn right we will. Also realize that I will do whatever is necessary to keep you safe, even holding you prisoner here.”

All the contrition I was feeling vanished. “Excuse me?” I asked, all attitude with a hand on my hip.

He grabbed my arms and jerked me up on my toes. He wasn’t hurting me, but he definitely had my full attention. And succeeded in making me forget about the attitude I was about to serve up.

“You are more valuable to me than my own desires. If I have to keep you here against your will and watch you walk away when it’s over, I will. Whatever it takes, Donna, I will do it. My heart belongs to you and anything that would harm you will harm me.”

I stared open-mouthed at Conner. I had never seen him so upset. And I could swear he just admitted that he was in love with me.

He shook me slightly. “Do you understand me?” he barked, his accent so thick that I almost didn’t comprehend his words.

Frightened and angry, I nodded.

Conner released me. “Good. Stay here and unpack. I will be back later after I no longer feel like throttling you.”

Before I could react, he stormed out of the room, and I heard the huge steel door in the great room clang shut behind him a scant second later. I ran out of the bedroom to the door and tried to pull it open. It wouldn’t budge. I kicked the door and yelped when the impact vibrated all the way from my toes to my hipbone.

The bastard had locked me in.

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Ten

Three hours later, my clothes were unpacked and I was pacing the length of the great room with the television tuned to some true crime show about women who killed their husbands or boyfriends. The way I was feeling now, I could relate.

Immediately after Conner left, I ranted to myself for a while as I took all my clothes out of my suitcases. A half hour into that endeavor, I began to feel guilty for giving him such a hard time. He was only trying to protect me, and I acted like a spoiled brat.

That lasted for about an hour and a half. As time passed and Conner still did not return, my anger came back. I understood that he needed a little time to cool off, but three hours locked in his fucking basement was beginning to damage my calm.

Finally, two hours later it was two in the morning, and my ire had cooled considerably. In fact, I was beginning to worry Conner would leave me locked up in the basement for a day or two before he came back. I made him very angry, and now that I had time to think about it, I felt badly. He all but admitted he loved me. I basically threw his feelings back in his face,

telling him I didn't need him to take care of me. I might not want to be a kept woman, but I understood the desire to do things to help someone you loved, to take care of them.

It was almost three when I gave up waiting for him to return and got ready for bed. While I was not longer seething with anger, irritation still bubbled up in me, overriding my regret. Before I climbed in bed, a small, petty part of me demanded I lock the bedroom door. I ignored the little voice of reason in my head that said it was a bad idea to try and lock Conner out of his own bedroom. I decided he deserved what he got for leaving me locked in the fucking basement for five hours. Exhaustion weighed me down as I snuggled into the luxurious bedding. Within minutes I was asleep.

I woke with a start sometime later. I wasn't sure what exactly woke me up, but somehow I just knew I was no longer in the bedroom alone. I sat up in the bed and reached for the lamp.

“Don’t.”

My hand stopped in mid-air. Oh shit, he sounded even more pissed than he had before he left earlier. I almost ignored him and turned the light on anyway because it was pitch black in the bedroom. Considering how angry he sounded, I wanted to be able to see his face. I felt so vulnerable knowing he could see me, but I couldn't see him.

“Conner?” I asked quietly.

“Who else would it be, my dear?”

I jumped because his voice was right next to my ear and his brogue made shivers run down my spine. Not because it was sexy, which it was, but because I knew he was enraged, and I was pretty sure I knew why.

“Why are you still angry?” I kept my voice soft in an effort not to provoke him.

Conner shifted on the mattress. I thought to the end of the bed. I tried to keep track of his movements, but it was pitch black in the bedroom and I couldn't rely on my eyes.

"Oh but I wasn't angry when I came back downstairs, Donna. I was calm. It wasn't until I tried to enter *my* fucking bedroom that I became angry again."

I winced when he placed emphasis on 'my'. I should have listened to that little voice earlier when she told me not to lock the door. She had her shit together. I obviously did not since I kept making the wrong decisions when it came to Conner.

"Um, listen, Conner, about that..."

"Don't say another word." His voice was low. "I can feel what you are feeling. I see what's in your heart even if you don't want to admit it. I won't let you push me away, no matter how hard you try or how frustrated I get." He paused. "Though I do think it's only fair that I do the same for you."

I had no idea what he was talking about, but I was a little scared to speak. Finally, my curiosity got the better of me. "What do you mean, the same for me?" I asked.

"Frustrate you. Give you a taste of what you want but never truly give it to you until you're ready to beg."

The blanket over me began to slide down my body. I looked toward the place where I thought Conner was sitting.

"I still don't understand," I said.

Conner didn't reply. Soon the blanket was completely gone, and I was lying on the bed in nothing but one of his T-shirts and a pair of panties. I jumped when I felt warm breath on my ankles, followed by the press of Conner's lips to my skin. His hand cupped my foot and he pressed one thumb into the arch, giving my foot a firm caress from the arch to the

bottom of my toes. His mouth moved up my leg to the side of my knee and goose bumps broke out on my skin. He repeated the process with my other leg, his mouth touching sensitive spots on my legs as his thumbs continued to work their magic on my feet. I never knew feet could be an erogenous zone.

I groaned softly as Conner released my feet and his hands slowly slid up the outside of my legs until they reached my panties. There was a sharp tug, and the material was gone. The hot swipe of his tongue ran up my thigh to my hipbone. I reached for him, but he moved away. His hands ran up my torso, moving the shirt up to my shoulders. I shivered when his fingers ran lightly over my breasts. Conner didn't linger, only pulled the shirt off me.

Again I tried to put my hands on him, but he only evaded my touch.
“Conner,” I whispered.

He never replied. His hands glided over my skin, grazing my most sensitive areas with a whisper soft touch. I began to whimper because it felt wonderful, but he never gave more attention to any part of me than another. Every time I tried to touch him or guide his hands to where I wanted, he would move out of reach.

Just when I was ready to scream with frustration and arousal, he put his mouth to my breasts. Conner sucked one of my nipples into his mouth then released it and moved to the other. I arched my back, but he only licked a path from beneath my breast to the inside curve. I felt like my skin was on fire. This was torture.

Then his mouth was at my hip, sucking the skin. I knew he was marking me, and my legs moved restlessly. Though he could bite me and drink my blood, he seemed to enjoy leaving his mark on my skin. He did it regularly. Conner wrapped his hands around my thighs and shoved them apart. I clawed the sheets as his tongue slid over my clitoris.

“Ah!” My back left the bed as he sucked hard. It was almost too much to bear.

Suddenly he grabbed my hips and flipped me over to my stomach. Conner pulled me up on my knees, caging my legs between his, right before he thrust into me. I think I screamed. He moved, pulling out and moving in even deeper than before.

After the teasing touches and torture, this felt incredibly intense, as though he were trying to conquer me. Within seconds, I came.

Conner finally spoke. “Again,” he demanded, his hand moving the front of my body so he could press a finger onto my clit.

It usually took some time for me climax after the first orgasm, but Conner had built the heat inside me to the point that I came again almost immediately. I cried out and tried to crawl away. It was too much, so pleasurable it was almost painful. Conner curved his body over mine, holding me in place with his weight.

“You will take it, Donna. I want you to feel what I feel,” he said, his voice low and rough.

I tossed my head, throwing my hair out of my face. “It’s too much, Conner. Please.”

Another orgasm was building, almost burning inside me. I wasn’t sure I would survive it. I panted as Conner’s hips slammed into mine, so deep I could almost feel him in my throat. His mouth clamped over my neck and he sucked without breaking the skin with his fangs, and I knew he was leaving another mark on my skin.

“Please, Conner,” I begged.

“What, Donna?” he asked, his lips moving against my neck. “What do you want me to do?”

“Bite me. Please bite me.” Somehow the words tumbled from my mouth before I had a chance to think about what I was saying. Even though I craved the feelings his bite created, I feared what it would do to me. I hovered on the edge, desperate for the pleasure but afraid that it would be too much.

He chuckled but it was an evil sound. I shuddered as he sank his fangs into my neck and the orgasm slammed into me. It felt like Conner was ripping the pleasure from my body. I reached behind me and fisted a hand in his hair, holding his mouth against my throat. My entire body bucked beneath him, and I couldn’t hold back a scream.

Conner kept thrusting, drawing out the climax on a razor’s edge, never letting the pleasure end completely. He groaned deep in his throat as he came.

“You’re mine, Donna. You belong to me.”

In my passion-fogged mind, I agreed wholeheartedly, but I couldn’t bring myself to say it. Conner’s lips closed over the wound on my neck as he gently licked and sucked, using his saliva to help it heal. With each stroke of his mouth, my body shook uncontrollably from the aftershocks.

Conner rolled us so that he was stretched out on his back and I sprawled over his chest facedown. I rested my cheek on his pectoral and heard his heart beating. After a while, as my breathing returned to normal, I realized that vampires weren’t supposed to have heart beats. I moved so that my chin rested on my hands and I could look in the direction of his face. It was still too dark for me to see him, but I knew he could see me.

“How is your heart beating?” I asked. “I thought you wouldn’t have one.” I was also surprised I hadn’t noticed before, but I was usually too exhausted after sex to be my usual observant self.

He sighed and shifted beneath me. I could tell that my refusal to talk about what just happened between us was irritating him. The lamp on the nightstand clicked on and I squeezed my eyes shut. After spending all that time in complete darkness, even the dim light from the lamp seemed brilliant.

A few seconds later I was able to open my eyes into slits and glare at him.

“I’m not actually undead, Donna. I need blood to survive, but the blood still needs to circulate through my body or my limbs will start to decay. The entire process is complicated and extremely scientific. My body works differently than yours, but I can pass for human in many ways. Our ability to blend in has allowed vampire society to survive for millennia.” Even though he had been furious not long before, now Conner was infinitely patient with my questions about vampires, even though he had to give me the same answers repeatedly.

I continued to stare at Conner. Finally, I managed to gather my courage and my thoughts. I didn’t know why, but talking about my feelings never came naturally to me the way it did so many of my girlfriends.

“What you said earlier, about me belonging to you. You know that the belonging goes both ways, right? If I belong to you then you belong to me.” I sucked in a deep breath. Jesus, why was this so hard? “We belong to each other.”

Conner smiled at me slightly and ran a hand over my cheek before threading his fingers through my hair. “Yes, we do,” he answered.

I traced a finger over his pectoral, making random shapes on his skin. “There’s a lot I don’t know and understand about you, Conner. Not just you personally, but vampires in general.”

He sighed. “I haven’t educated you enough about the world I live in.”

I managed to meet his eyes. “I need to know now. I think I’ll be around for a while.”

“Awhile?” he asked, grinning at me.

“Yes, awhile.” I sounded defensive, but that was as far as I was willing to go in terms of commitment.

Conner pulled my face down to his for a kiss. “I guess that will do for now.”

I turned my head and rested my cheek on Conner’s chest. “Thank you.”

His hands stroked down my hair and my back and I relaxed into his body. “For what?” he asked.

“For not being pushy or annoyed because I need more time.” I sighed deeply, enjoying the feel of being petted like a cat.

Conner continued to run his hands through my hair. “I have plenty of time.”

Exhausted from the orgasms and relaxed from his soothing touch, my eyes began to get heavy.

As I drifted off to sleep, I heard him say, “Just don’t make me wait too long, my love.”



I woke up the next day with Conner behind me, his arms wrapped around me and holding me close. He must have turned the lights off after I fell asleep the night before because the room was pitch black again. That sucked because I was desperate to pee. I tried to wiggle out from Conner’s hold, but his grip only tightened and he buried his face into my hair. I patted at his arm but he kept sleeping.

“Conner, I need to get up.”

He grunted, and his arms loosened so I could move to the edge of the bed and turn on the lamp. I darted into the bathroom and took care of pressing business. After I washed my hands and face, I walked back out into the bedroom. Conner was face down on the bed, the sheets pooled just below his waist. I took a moment to appreciate the view before I went out into the living area. I had no clue what time it was, so I turned on the television and was shocked to see it was one in the afternoon.

I sighed and went ahead and made coffee anyway. After last night, I needed it. While I waited for the pot to brew, I grabbed my cell phone out of my bag and called my boss. I told him my grandmother was very sick and likely to pass away soon. I explained that I would need to be off work for a while, around two weeks, because I would need to help my mother care for her. My manager was sympathetic, but I could also tell he wasn't happy to short a waitress. I just prayed that this whole mess was straightened out before I had to go back to work. Otherwise, I would be out of a job. I knew Conner was serious about taking care of my bills, but I really didn't want to go there. Just the thought made me tense.

After the coffee finished brewing, I sat at the bar to drink my first cup. I realized that my entire life had changed within the course of days. I was basically living with a vampire and, despite my best efforts not to, I had fallen in love with him. It was scary as hell. Eventually Conner would want to turn me, and I would let him. I thought about what he'd said to me about cutting ties with my family. My parents were still alive. Would they have to someday think that their daughter was dead because they would start to catch on that I wasn't aging? Then there were my friends. Ivie, Ricki, Shannon, and Kerry were like sisters to me. I would have to leave them behind as well. I loved them like sisters. The thought of giving them up made my heart ache.

My eyes misted over with tears. I would also be giving up my ability to have children. I always thought I had time, and there was no rush, but kids had still been in my future plans. Now I wouldn't have any at all. I would miss out on all the things normal people did without second thought.

Though if I had children I would have to let them make the choice to grow old and die or to turn vampire. If I was even allowed to make my children vampires. Goddammit, there were too many things about vampire culture that I didn't know. I hated being ignorant of things that I knew would be important. I sniffed and wiped away a tear that fell from my eye. I also hated to fucking cry. I sucked in a deep breath and tried to will away the wetness in my eyes.

I was so wrapped up in my thoughts that I never heard Conner come up behind me. Though the damned man moved like a cat, so I doubt I would have heard him even if I had been listening. He wrapped both arms around my waist, cocooning me with his warm, naked torso.

“Why are you crying, Donna?”

He rested his chin on my shoulder, pressing his cheek to mine. I blinked hard.

“I’m not crying.”

Conner chuckled softly. “Don’t lie to me. I know you’re crying. Now, why are you sad?”

I shrugged. I hated all this ‘let’s talk about our emotions’ shit. Things happen, you dealt with it the best you know how, and you move on. I hated to cry much less talk about why I wanted to cry in the first place.

Conner gave me a small shake. “Tell me,” he demanded.

“I’m just thinking about all the things that will be changing in my life now.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Things are going to be different now that you and I are together,” I explained.

“I thought we already were together,” he said, sounding confused.

“I mean, now that we’re getting serious.”

I couldn’t see his face, but I knew he was getting annoyed when Conner’s arms tightened slightly.

“I’ve been serious since the beginning,” he said. “Do you not feel the same way?”

I turned to face him, forcing him to loosen his hold. “Conner, you have to remember that I thought you were a nutcase during our first date. It wasn’t until later that I realized you were telling me the truth.”

“And?” he prompted.

“I decided not to get emotionally invested.”

Conner smirked. “Then why were you so angry when I left without saying goodbye the next morning?”

I frowned at him. “I didn’t say I did a good job of it. I was upset and that scared me, which made me even more determined to just take things one day at a time and not think about the future.”

“I can understand that, Donna. Now what does that have to do with you crying when I woke up this morning?”

I took a deep breath. “Because I did too good of a job of ignoring the future. Now I can’t ignore it anymore, and it hit me harder than I expected.” That was an understatement. The epiphanies were akin to being run down by a garbage truck.

“What exactly is ‘it’?” he asked.

“The future. The things that will change for me. Good things I’ll have and then the good things I’ll have to give up.”

Conner released me and sat on the barstool next to mine, holding my hands in his. “What are you worried about giving up?”

I sighed. “My family. I know someday you will probably want to turn me. My parents are still alive. If you turn me before they die, then eventually I’ll have to cut all ties to them.”

Conner stared at me for a moment. “Donna, did you forget what we discussed?”

I looked at him in confusion.

“Once you are turned, you can merely plant the thought that you are aging in your parents’ minds.”

“Maybe. But what if I inherited my, um, immunity to vampire powers from one of them?” I sucked in a shaky breath. “Or I can’t stand to see them growing old and I want to turn them?”

He blinked. “Then we deal with it when and if it happens. There are rules about turning humans, but it has been known for some of us to turn family members if they are willing. What else about the future upset you?”

“Children. I won’t have children. I was never really in a hurry to have them, but I always thought I would. Now I never will.”

Conner smiled slightly. “I wouldn’t say that.”

Now it was my turn to blink at him. “What does that mean?”

“You will be able to bear children, Donna. I told you, our bodies function in a similar way to humans. That is how we maintained secrecy for so long, because we had the ability to blend in with society. This includes having children. It can take a little longer for us to procreate, but it is possible.”

I gaped at him. “You have got to be kidding me?”

He shook his head.

“I can’t get pregnant now, can I? Jesus, if I had known it was possible I would have made you wear a condom!”

Conner chuckled. “No, I can’t impregnate you while you’re still human. When you turn, it will be possible.”

“Fuck me, I need to write a book. I guess I could call it *No Bullshit Facts about Vampires*.”

He outright laughed, his dimples popping out.

“Seriously, I need to learn more about vampires. I feel so stupid. Everything that I thought I knew from books and movies is wrong. It’s annoying.”

He laughed again. “Okay then. Your education begins today.” He pulled me to my feet. “But first we take a shower.”

Before I could blink he threw me over his shoulder and had us in the bathroom.

“Dammit, Conner, stop with the super speed shit!” I saw what he was about to do. “No, no! Not again. Don’t you dare shove me under cold water again, Conner Savage. I don’t care if you are immortal your balls are sensitive just like any other man’s”

His laughter turned evil as he turned on the water full blast and shoved me beneath it. I don’t care how great his fucking laugh was, this shit had to stop.

“That’s it, Conner! No more sex for at least three days! You have got to stop shoving me under cold water!”

His big, naked body crowded me into the wall of the shower. “We’ll just see about that.”

I decided I could live with starting my shower in cold water every morning if the sex was that outstanding. I might even learn to love them.

Eleven

Four days later, I was going stir crazy. For the most part Conner stayed home with me, giving me lessons in vampire history and etiquette, but he wouldn't allow me out of the basement for more than an hour or two a day. He wouldn't allow me out of the house at all. When I complained, he explained that the basement was practically impenetrable and the safest place for me to be if Vanessa should decide to try to get rid of me as she had threatened. Since I had firsthand knowledge of how easily she and her two goons had gotten into his house, I didn't argue long.

In that time I learned that vampires had such similar physiology to humans that only blood tests and autopsy would reveal it. Which was why vampires were still almost unknown despite their prolonged existence. Also, all the misinformation spread by novels and movies made it harder to spot a true vampire. I didn't tell Conner, but I was seriously thinking about writing a book with the truth about the fanged population.

The characteristics were actually the simplest part of understanding vampires. The etiquette and history between vampires are what became complicated. Vampire etiquette sounded more complex than tax law.

Conner explained to me that the most powerful of vampires were older and therefore tended to be more antiquated in their behavior and expectations. While bowing and curtsying were no longer expected, saying things like ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ were a must. Also cursing in mixed company was a no-no, whether you were male or female. I told him that might be a problem because fuck was my favorite word. He laughed but said I would have to curb my filthy mouth at formal gatherings.

He tried to explain vampire history to me but soon gave up because I drove him nuts with sarcastic comments and constant questions.

Finally, Conner said, “I think it would be best if my friend Alexander explained all this to you. He is several centuries older than I. He would probably have more patience with your questions.”

He said it as though I were annoying, which I wasn’t, and that only someone who’d had centuries to practice patience could handle me. Also untrue. I just hated the misogynistic themes in the stories he told me. Surely female vampires weren’t such doormats. I remembered that Vanessa, while powerful, felt she needed Conner to make her stronger. It was yet another issue I had with possibly being turned. I said as much to him.

He sighed. “I would love to tell you that we have enough young vampires that the attitudes have changed, but it would be a lie. Most of the vampires, both male and female, are over a century old. Some are over five hundred years old and have difficulty thinking of females as little more than property. It is improving but slowly.”

I looked at him at that point. “You are almost three hundred and fifty years old, and you definitely seem to see me as an equal.”

Conner grinned. “I was blessed with a mother who despised the way women of her time were treated. She taught me early, and well, to give my woman respect and affection. It didn’t hurt that she told me I could take my

pick of women if I treated them like queens. As a randy young lad of sixteen, I took her advice to heart.”

I stuck my tongue out at him. “Pig!”

“That’s not what you were saying a moment ago,” he teased.

“Oh bite me, fang boy,” I retorted.

Our history-slash-etiquette lesson ended shortly thereafter because Conner took me quite literally. I would have to remember never to tell a vampire to bite me unless I really wanted him to. Though I did enjoy myself thoroughly, so I didn’t complain long.

However, only so many orgasms would distract a girl from a predicament like a vampire psychobitch who wanted to kill her. When I asked Conner what was going on, he put me off with a vague, ‘Give me a couple of days, and I should have something to tell you.’

That had been two days ago. I was done with waiting. I wanted to know what the hell was going on. Conner went upstairs to the study to meet a colleague about his plan to deal with Vanessa. I told him I wanted to go and participate in the discussion, but he put me off yet again. Rather than start a rip-roaring fight as I wanted, I acquiesced. After he went upstairs, I gave it ten minutes and then snuck up after him. He might treat me like a queen, but in some ways Conner was just as antiquated as the older vampires he told me about. If he thought I was going to play the little woman and sit quietly downstairs, he was damned wrong.

I climbed the steps from the basement to the main floor of the house and tried to move as silently as possible. I just hoped that Conner would be too involved with his meeting to hear me as I tiptoed down the hallway. I assumed that he would hold this meeting in the study so I moved to the front of the house. The door to the study was open, and I could hear a man speaking as I approached.

“Well you could always formally claim her to the council. Then it would be suicide for Vanessa to lay a fang on her.”

I didn’t recognize his voice but stopped moving when Conner responded.

“Dammit, Finn. I wanted to give her time. She’s struggling with the changes she’ll face when she turns. I wanted to allow her time to consider and come to terms with that before I push for a Claiming.”

What the fuck was a Claiming? I could tell by the emphasis he put on the word that it was claiming with a capital C, and it was important to him. I decided to eavesdrop a little more before I revealed my presence. Ever so slowly, I crept closer to the open doorway and leaned against the wall a couple of feet from it.

“It’s your only option. Otherwise vampire law leaves her vulnerable to Vanessa’s machinations.”

There was a pause then I heard something hit the wall next to my head. I barely managed to choke back my gasp, but I did jump about a foot off the floor at the unexpected noise. The wall literally vibrated with the impact.

The men inside the study were silent. I jumped again when the man Conner called Finn called out, “Little one, we know you are there.”

Well shit. I straightened from my hunched position and walked to the door. I came around the corner and thought, once again, that all of Conner’s vampire friends were hot as hell. I wondered if there was a rule against ugly vampires. Finn had to be as tall as Conner, though he was leaner. His hair was light brown and long. It fell slightly below his shoulders in a smooth curtain. His face was beautiful, almost angelic, without being effeminate, but it was his eyes that were the most arresting feature. I knew Conner’s eyes were the most gorgeous blue I had ever seen but Finn’s were a close second. His eyes were so deep and dark in color that they were almost

purple. Even sitting in a chair, ankle propped on his knee, I could see Finn clad in leather and fur with blue paint on his skin. He looked like a Pict warrior and, with a name like Finn, he was possibly he had been.

I moved further into the room, ignoring the angry look on Conner's face, and extended my hand to Finn. "Hello, my name is Donna Perry." I wanted to be on my best behavior in case this was one of the vampires who liked good manners, as Conner had mentioned earlier in the week.

Finn rose and damn he was tall. He had to be at least six-five and a lot broader than I realized. He still wasn't the solid wall of muscle that Conner was, but he looked as though he could hold his own. I swallowed as his huge hand clasped mine and we shook. He looked to Conner.

"You weren't exaggerating were you?"

Conner shook his head, still glaring at me with blue eyes that were beginning to glow. I stared him down. Tough shit if he was mad. I had a right to know what was going on in regards to my life and my safety. Just because I couldn't defend myself against a vampire didn't mean that I should be in the fucking dark. Apparently he realized I wasn't going to back off because he closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. It was a pose I had seen before when I was really working his last nerve. I would have to remember to ask him if vampire's got headaches. I meant to do it a while ago but forgot.

I turned my attention back to Finn. "What didn't he exaggerate?"

Finn's eyes began to glow as Conner's had. The intense blue color did look purple as the light over took the iris. I knew from my vampire lessons earlier in the week that Finn was either angry, horny, or using his vampiric powers. Since I had done nothing to irritate him or turn him on, I assumed he was attempting to read my mind. I realized that he still had my hand in his grip and tried to extract it without seeming rude.

“Stop,” he commanded. I felt the weight of his voice and knew he was trying to control me. Goddamn but he must be old because it took everything I had not to obey. It literally felt as though someone were holding onto my arm, trying to force me to stay still. However, I managed to slip my hand from his, though it was slow and almost painful.

All at once the heaviness I felt from his eyes and his voice disappeared, and he stepped back. Looking over at Conner, Finn shook his head.

“I can’t believe it,” he said. “I haven’t met a human in over three centuries who could withstand the kind of power I was throwing at her. Many of the young vampires I know would have had difficulty resisting my commands and attempts to read their thoughts.”

His words snagged my attention. “You can control other vampires?” I asked.

He nodded. “Yes, I can also read the thoughts of the youngest of my kind. As they get older, their mental abilities grow, and they are able to try to block me, though most don’t succeed.” He turned to Conner. “She will be a formidable vampire, my friend. If she can resist the most powerful of us now, she will be an impenetrable fortress once her mental abilities are in place.”

I made a mental note that Finn referred to himself as one of the oldest of vampires. I would question Conner about it later, but right now I wanted to know exactly what a Claiming was and I doubted I would like the answer.

I walked to the other chair facing Conner’s desk and sat down. “So what is a Claiming?”

Conner glared at me. His face cleared before he sighed and leaned back in his chair. “I was hoping we would have a while before we discussed this.” He rubbed his face with his hands before he looked at me again. “A Claiming occurs when a vampire wishes to take a human as a companion

and eventually turn them. It is similar to being engaged only the commitment is deeper and harder to dissolve. The human lives with the vampire and serves as their source of blood. A sexual relationship is not necessary but is typically part of the commitment. After a period of no more than five years, the human must either be turned or released from the relationship.”

Until Conner said the last sentence, I didn’t think that a Claiming would upset me that much. However, if I agreed to a Claiming now, he would have to turn me in five years. I wasn’t sure if I would be ready to be turned in five years or less. I would have to begin separating myself from my parents, and my friends. Life as I knew it. I would be able to see them, but eventually I would have to watch them wither and die. Why couldn’t I have fallen in love with someone normal, like a covert operative or a superhero? At least then I wouldn’t have to abandon my friends and family, only lie to them. I wouldn’t enjoy the lies, but at least they would still be in my life.

Finn sat down in the chair next to mine. “Little one, I can see that you are torn. Please understand I would not suggest this unless there was another way. Any other sort of relationship and Vanessa could hurt you and face very few, if any, consequences. A Claiming is a serious relationship to a vampire. If Vanessa hurt or killed you, the penalty would be death. I think that will be the only deterrent for her. She is power hungry and conniving, and I believe she will do whatever it takes to get what she wants, which is complete control over the council.”

Normally, the shit with Finn calling me Little One would piss me off, but, compared to him, I was little. I looked at Conner. “Do you agree?” I asked, sounding much calmer than I felt.

He nodded. “Finn speaks the truth. For some reason, Vanessa feels that a union between she and I will grant her the power she desires among

vampire kind. Now that she realizes you did not do as she commanded, she will feel that getting rid of you completely will be the quickest way to gain what she wants.”

“So basically she’ll kill me just for being in the position she wants?” I asked.

Both men nodded. Jesus. Sociopathic much? I stood and started pacing the length of the study. It was a lot to wrap my mind around. I didn’t know anyone who thought that a human life was worth so little that it should be snuffed out just because the person had what you wanted.

“Donna, I tried to explain to you earlier in the week. A lot of vampires, especially those over one hundred, think that humans are only food. Do you agonize over every steak or piece of chicken you eat?”

Because he made a good point, I shot him an ugly look that had Finn bursting into laughter.

“She doesn’t make it easy for you, does she my friend?” Finn said.

“No, she doesn’t,” Conner answered, smiling slightly.

God, men were so perverse. One minute my attitude was giving him a headache and the next he seemed to enjoy it.

“Back to the Claiming,” I said. “What would I have to do to get out of it after the five year period?”

That question wiped the self-satisfied smirk off of Conner’s face. His eyebrows lowered and his expression was thunderous. “What the fuck do you mean, get out of it?”

I raised my hands, palm out, in a gesture of surrender. “Well I was thinking that we could do the Claiming now to buy some time and, if I wasn’t ready to be turned in five years, we could terminate it until I was ready. Then we could do another Claiming.”

Both men shook their heads. “It doesn’t work like that, Donna,” Finn said. “Once a Claiming is ended, that’s it. The council would forbid another Claiming between the same couple. The bond is considered almost sacred and to be respected. Much like marriage for humans, but without the ability to divorce.”

“Well shit.” I threw my hands up. “What are my other options?” I asked.

Conner looked to Finn. “You tell her,” he said.

Fuck, I wasn’t going to like my other options either.

With a sigh, Finn crossed his legs, setting his ankle on his knee. “How fond are you of Conner’s basement?”

Oh fuck no, that wouldn’t work. “Are you very, very, *very* sure that Vanessa will kill me?” I asked.

Finn looked grim. “Yes she would. I spent some time with her this week and I was able to read some of her thoughts. She is not only planning to kill you, she plans to make an example of you. Even though she knows Conner will never give her what she wants if she hurts you, she wants all of our kind to understand the lengths she will go to in order to get what she wants.”

I paced a little more before I stopped and faced a wall. As I stared at a beautiful painting on the study wall without truly seeing it, I understood my choice was really no choice at all. I was falling in love with Conner. I had just been thinking about letting him turn me sometime in the future. This entire situation only brought the future that much closer. I turned back to the men.

“Okay. What do I have to do to go through with a Claiming?” I asked.

Conner rose from behind his desk. “Give us a moment, Finn,” he said as he walked toward me.

Finn smiled at me, though it wasn't a happy one, before he left the study. Conner stood in front of me and cupped my face with his hands.

"I'm truly sorry that this is the way it has to be, lass. I wanted our Claiming to be a happy time for you."

I looked up into his face and realized that I wasn't falling in love with Conner. I *was* in love with him. Time after time he proved that he wasn't just a soulless creature. He retained his humanity, his empathy. He treated me as though I were precious to him, and he would do anything for me. It was rare in a man of any species, much less a man who had been born during a time when a woman was nothing more than property to be traded and exploited. His willingness to put my feelings first never ceased to amaze me.

"It's okay," I said. And it was. It really was.

He leaned back slightly, studying my face. "You truly mean that, don't you?"

I nodded.

Conner touched his lips to mine. "You are an amazing woman. I could not have chosen a better place to let my heart rest than in your hands."

Before I thought better of it, I opened my mouth and said, "I love you too."

In a flash, Conner had swept me up into his arms and buried his face against my neck. "You are generous beyond what I deserve and I do love you. Thank you."

As usual, I couldn't handle the mushy stuff. "Yeah, well now you owe me."

He chuckled into my neck. "I'm sure I'll find a pleasurable way to repay you."

I shivered, which made him laugh louder. I couldn't help but look forward to his attempts at pay back. I pulled away from his embrace a little.

"Okay, so we need to start making plans, right?" I asked.

He nodded. "I realize you may not feel like a huge celebration, but I would like to have a Claiming ceremony."

I sucked in a deep breath. "Okay. I would like that too but what kind of ceremony are we discussing? A wedding type ceremony? Or maybe more like a small party?"

Conner smiled. "It will be small. We will save the larger ceremony for when we get married."

I gulped. All right, I loved the man. Vampire. Whatever. Still, marriage was a huge step.

He shook me gently. "I can literally see your brain overheating from anxiety, Donna. Marriage can wait a while. Let's focus on the Claiming ceremony and neutralizing the threat Vanessa poses before we discuss anything long term."

Long term? He didn't consider five years long term? Then I remembered that he was over three hundred years old, and five years probably didn't seem very long to him.

"Okay, I can do that," I said. "Just one more question."

"Go ahead."

"Do I have to wear a dress?"

Twelve

A week later I was shopping for a dress for the Claiming ceremony. The ceremony was in twenty-four hours, but Conner wouldn't let me out of the house to shop for a dress until the day before. I tried to talk him out of coming with me, but he refused to let me go alone. He pointed out that Vanessa likely knew where to find me after the announcement of our Claiming ceremony went out.

"What kind of dress am I buying?" I asked. I was a little worried about the price. I had a feeling Conner wasn't planning on taking me to Macy's.

Ever the gentlemen, Conner opened the car door for me. After he came around the car and settled in the driver's seat, he faced me.

"Okay, you are going to want to argue with what I'm about to say. So let's skip the disagreement. I asked you to do the Claiming ceremony, and I will buy your dress."

Of course I immediately opened my mouth to disagree, but Conner placed his finger over my lips. "No, Donna. I will not argue with you about this. If you want to pick out your dress, you will just nod your head. If not, I

know your size so I will go buy your dress, and that's what you'll wear. Even if I have to put you in it myself.”

I scowled at him and had to lock down the urge to bite his finger. “Fine,” I mumbled against his skin.

He smiled and removed his hand. “Good.”

After Conner started the car, we drove to the most expensive mall in the city. I glared at him as we headed inside. As we walked into the store, he threw an arm around my shoulders.

“Try not to look so excited,” he teased.

I rolled my eyes over to him. “I’m sorry. I just have a problem with the idea that you’re my sugar daddy.”

Conner pulled us to a stop. “Don’t speak like that.” His face was serious. “If I wanted to take you to a movie, or dinner, or buy you a gift that cost fifty dollars, would you object?”

I shook my head. “But that’s not the same as a dress that will probably cost at least a thousand dollars.”

“Why?” he asked.

“Ugh! Because a thousand dollars is what most people make in an entire paycheck. It’s not pocket change.”

His irises brightened, glowing slightly. “That may be true for most people, Donna, but it isn’t true for me. This won’t put me in a financial bind, and it will make me happy.”

On a sigh, I said, “Fine. Just don’t make a habit of this.”

Conner laughed long and loud. “I’m so glad you obviously don’t want me for my money.”

“No, I want you for your big dick and your ability to use it,” I responded.

Of course an ultra-classy, stick-thin woman in her forties happened to walk by us as I said it and she made a choking sound before shooting me a nasty look.

I stared back at her. “What? He does!”

The woman made a sound of disgust and stomped away as loudly as her stilettos would allow her. Conner was still chuckling as he pulled me through the store to the evening dresses. I tried not to pout, but it was difficult. Dressing up was not my favorite thing. I preferred boots and jeans. A chic young woman in head-to-toe black and bright red lipstick approached us.

“Good evening, my name is Stephanie. May I help you find something?”

I wanted to tell her to find me my fucking backbone, but Conner gave my neck a warning squeeze. So instead I kept my mouth shut and allowed him to do the talking.

“Hello, Stephanie. We need a selection of evening gowns in red and purple, size six please.”

She smiled politely at both of us. I had to give her points for not drooling all over Conner. “Of course. Would you like a glass of wine while you wait?”

A few minutes later, Conner and I were sipping champagne as Stephanie flitted around the department, bringing dress after dress into a private dressing room. She even asked my shoe size and called someone to bring me a selection of stiletto heels to match the dresses.

I knew a lot of women would enjoy such treatment, but it just made my skin crawl. I would rather have a book, a good glass of wine, and a quiet place to read than a personal shopper. Finally, Stephanie came to get me and the entire process began.

The first dress I tried on was dark purple. It made my small frame look gaunt and my skin sallow. Goddammit, this was why I hated shopping.

As soon as Conner saw me in it, he shook his head. “Stephanie, I do believe that dark purple is not Donna’s color. Please remove those dresses from the selections.”

Oh thank God, ten less dresses to try on. Next, I slipped into a bold red satin dress that wasn’t half bad, but it just didn’t seem like me. But Conner shook his head as soon as he saw it. When I went back into the dressing room I forced myself to really look at the garments. I chose a dark crimson dress that was the color of blood in a vial. Cut on the bias, the dress looked as though it were straight out of the 1930’s. Well except for the halter neckline that left most of my back bare.

I despaired that the material didn’t allow for underwear. I was totally against visible panty lines, and even my thong wasn’t skimpy enough to be unnoticeable under the satin. I cursed silently but pulled them down my legs anyway. This was the most promising of the entire group Stephanie had brought into the dressing room. I checked the fall of the fabric again, wondering if Conner would notice I wasn’t wearing panties. Fuck it. I slid my feet into a pair of gold strappy sandals.

When I came out of the dressing room, Conner looked me up and down silently. I waited a moment, but when he didn’t say anything, I smoothed my hands down the skirt.

“Well?” I asked.

“Turn around,” he said.

I slowly turned so he could see the back then completed the circle so I was facing him again. Stephanie was standing behind him, smiling. In a completely incongruous gesture to her outward appearance, she gave me a semi-dorky thumbs up. I smiled back at her.

Conner stood from his chair. "This is the one," he stated. "You look beautiful, Donna."

I turned my smile to him. "Thank you."

He glanced over his shoulder at Stephanie. "Please ring up the dress and the shoes."

I was so grateful to be done with the shopping torture that I didn't even argue about the shoes. I just hurried into the dressing room, carefully removed the dress and shoes, and threw on my own clothes. When I came out of the dressing room, Conner was waiting for me with a leather jacket thrown over his arm.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Don't we need to wait for her to ring up the dress and shoes and take them with us?"

Conner shook his head. "No. They'll be delivered tomorrow. I'm just glad that the dress needed no alterations."

I seconded that. I couldn't imagine having to stand still while they pinned and fitted the damn thing. He held the jacket out so I could put my arms through. I just looked at him blankly.

"Um, Conner, that's not my jacket."

He smirked. "Yes it is."

"No, it's not," I argued.

Still holding it out, he continued to grin at me. "It is."

"It is not!"

I realized that heads were turning in nearby areas and felt my cheeks heat up. Shit, take me to a nice store and I turned into a crazy person.

I stepped closer to Conner. "What the hell are you doing? Trying to drive me crazy?"

“No. I noticed that your jacket is getting rather worn, so I asked Stephanie to bring me several jackets in a similar style and your size. I chose this one. If you don’t like it, we can always go look.”

“No, no, it’s a very nice jacket,” I said, sliding one arm then the other into the sleeves. No way in hell was I subjecting myself to more shopping in a store where most of the items cost more than my monthly rent.

After Conner draped it over my shoulders I realized that was the truth. The black leather was supple and it was cut to fit me as though it were made for me. It was also exactly what I would have chosen for myself.

I stroked the soft leather. “Thank you.”

Conner kissed my cheek. “You’re welcome,” he said.

As we walked out to his car, I asked, “They’re going to deliver the dress tomorrow?”

He nodded.

“Isn’t that a pretty tight schedule? What if something happens? A car accident, nuclear attack, anything. If they can’t get the dress to your house in time, does that mean I get to wear my jeans?”

Conner laughed. “No. I know you have a dress in the luggage I packed for you so you will wear a fucking dress.”

I wrinkled my nose at him. “Fine.”

What could I say, I hated dressing up. Skirts and casual dresses, yes. Evening gowns that made me feel like a kid playing dress-up, no.

As Conner opened my car door, he said, “Don’t worry. You only have to wear something formal for the Claiming ceremony and our wedding.”

I decided to drop the dress argument since it was obvious that I wasn’t going to win. I wanted to ask Conner to take me to a restaurant. This was the first time I had left his house in the last two weeks, and I had a newfound appreciation for simple things like going out to eat or running to

the grocery store for milk. Conner assured me that I would have my freedom back after the Claiming ceremony.

When we arrived back at his house, Conner headed into the kitchen.

“Come keep me company while I cook,” he demanded.

Normally I would have given him shit for bossing me around, but I was just glad he wasn’t sending me back down to the basement. I followed him into the kitchen and poured us both a glass of wine while he started prepping vegetables to go with our supper.

As he scrubbed and peeled carrots, he glanced at me. “There’s something I need to talk to you about.”

A little alarm went off in my mind. Though his face and voice were bland, something told me that I wasn’t going to like what he had to say. And of course that smug little bitchy voice was right. What he said next pissed me right off.

“After the ceremony, you can’t go back to work at the lounge,” he said.

I choked on my wine. Excuse me? After a few minutes of hacking pinot noir out of my lungs, I sucked in a breath and said, “Excuse me?”

Conner set down the knife he was using to slice the carrots with a sigh. “I know I didn’t say that well, but I need you to understand. If you want to work, I will make sure you have a job at one of my companies. I just can’t allow you to work at the lounge any longer.”

Obviously dementia was still possible in vampires otherwise he would never have said that last sentence.

“Allow me?” My voice was about three octaves higher than usual. My brain whirled in an attempt to wrap itself around what he was saying and decide on a response.

Conner scrubbed his face with his hands. “Dammit, I know I’m fucking this up.” He came around the island so that he was standing in front of me

at the bar where I was seated. “Donna, as my Claimed, there will be certain expectations. Other vampires will expect me to provide for you in all ways. That is the way a Claiming works. You will live with me, and I am supposed to provide for each and every one of your needs. If I do not then others will see me as a weak mate and attempt to lure you away at the end of the five year Claiming period.”

Was he for real? “Seriously?” I asked.

When he nodded, I snatched up my wineglass and drained it. Then I quickly set it back on the counter before my white-knuckled grip cracked the crystal.

“I don’t like this, Conner. I mean, what the fuck? You just spring all this on me now! I knew that I would have to move in with you, but I was okay with that because I prefer living with you to whatever Vanessa would dream up for me. But quitting my job? You can’t just demand that I quit.”

He came around the bar so he towered over me as I sat on the barstool. “You’re right. I can’t demand it, and that’s not what I was trying to do. Somehow I seem to say the wrong things. If you want to work, I don’t have a problem with that. But I need you to work for me in some way.” He held up a hand when I started to argue. “You don’t have to work *directly* for me but at one of my businesses.”

I scowled fiercely at him. “Great. Then everyone I work with will have something to discuss behind my back, how I’m sleeping my way to the top.”

He shook his head. “No, that won’t happen. Most of my employees are vampires. They expect me to hire you. It makes me happy that you don’t want a job you’re not qualified for or a token position.”

I growled low in my throat and Conner laughed.

“You’re cute when you’re angry,” he said.

I poked him in the chest hard. “Don’t patronize me, fang boy. I am not comfortable with this, but I’ll do it. I draw the line at you buying me a bunch of stuff though. I will buy my own clothes and cars, thank you.”

I could tell he didn’t like it, but Conner nodded in agreement.

“You worked in advertisement before you got your job at the lounge, correct?” he asked.

“Yes and I was damn good at it.”

He reached over the bar to the bottle of pinot noir and refilled my wineglass. “Well, I own several companies, and I’m sure one of them has an opening in the marketing department. Or a department that is too overloaded.” He handed the glass to me. “Or, since you have experience at a bar, you could be an assistant manager at my nightclub and work your way up to manager.”

That was tempting, but I missed my job in advertising. I wasn’t exaggerating when I told him that I was good at my job. I enjoyed the challenges and the deadlines. I thrived on them.

“I’d prefer a job in marketing or advertising, but only if you have a position available,” I answered.

Conner kissed me lightly. “Good. Thank you.”

I sipped my wine. “Oh, and as long as you’re not my boss.”

He went back to the cutting board to finish prepping for dinner. “Technically I am your boss if I own the company, but I have a feeling that’s not what you’re talking about.”

“No, just not my direct boss. I think that it would get old very quickly.”

Conner threw the vegetables in the wok on the stove top. “I agree. I won’t be your boss in that sense.” He stirred the contents of the wok. “Back to what you said in regards to my purchasing things for you. I will agree not

to buy you a car for now but I will want to buy you gifts when the mood strikes me. And I'm sure it will strike me a lot.”

“For fuck’s sake, Conner!” I yelled. “Can we please do this in a way that doesn’t make me feel like a fucking prostitute?”

In a flash he was in front of me, right in my face. “I don’t ever want to hear you talk about yourself like that again.”

Holy shit he was pissed. He sounded like Chris Hemsworth in that Snow White flick. As scary as he was in his fury, he was also hot as hell.

“First, I don’t think of you like that. To you this may not seem right but, to me, this is expected, and I want to do these things for you. Second, you don’t seem to realize how deep a Claiming is. It is like marriage for us and damned hard to get out of before the period is over. Most vampires who Claim a human don’t bother with a marriage ceremony because, in our society, this is just as deep and important. So when you reject certain aspects of that relationship, it’s a slap in the fucking face to me.”

I knew my eyes were huge. I hadn’t realized how big of a deal this was to him. He kept talking about marriage in the future, so I assumed this was more like an engagement party. Hell, he’d described it as a type of engagement. I certainly didn’t want to make him feel the way he did.

“I’m sorry, Conner. I wasn’t trying to belittle you or our relationship. You described the Claiming as sort of an engagement. Now you’re describing it more like a marriage. I’m confused.”

He leaned back and took a deep breath. “I know. I was trying not to scare you away when I brought it up. You were worried about how fast we were moving, and I was concerned you would run for the hills or do something stupid and land right in Vanessa’s hands.”

I placed a hand on his chest. “I really am sorry. I’ll try to be more open-minded, but I want you to understand how hard this is for me. I’m used to

taking care of myself. I've never been dependent on a man." I took a deep breath. "I won't throw your gifts back in your face as long as you take it easy and don't start buying me tons of stuff."

Conner pulled me close, hugging me to his chest. "I can do that." He rubbed my back. "I do have a question though."

"What's that?" I murmured against his pectoral.

"Explain to me why you get horny every time I get angry."

I jerked away. "What?" I scowled at him. We already discussed this and it was embarrassing enough the first time. "That's not a question," I deflected.

He grinned at me so broadly that his dimples made an appearance. "Every time I get angry, I can feel it. You get turned on. You're practically broadcasting it."

I knew my face was turning beet red with embarrassment. "Um, didn't you already ask me this question and didn't I already answer it?" When he nodded, I continued, "Well, then you know the answer."

Conner threw his head back and roared with laughter. When he stopped chuckling long enough to speak, he leaned in so his cheek was against mine, and his lips were right by my ear. "Well, lass, since it affects you so much I suppose I'll have to cater to your fetish."

I shivered in his arms. Fucking hell. He had purposefully thickened his accent, and it was fucking hot! Of their own volition, my hands wandered to his waist, and started to slide up the back of his shirt.

"Ah, no' now, dearest. I have dinner to cook. Dessert will have to wait," he said, smiling wickedly before he sauntered back to the stove to finish the stir-fry in the wok.

Motherfucker. Now the man had my number, and somehow I knew I was screwed, literally and figuratively. I wondered what it said about me

that his arrogance made me wet.

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Thirteen

At five o'clock the next evening I was a complete and utter mess. Conner definitely had understated the importance of the Claiming ceremony. Caterers had arrived at noon to start prepping for dinner to be served at seven-thirty. I knew we would be having a reception with food after the ceremony, but I didn't realize there were almost seventy-five people coming. Well, seventy-five vampires and assorted supernatural beings. The other species being werewolves, fairies, and even fucking witches and wizards. It was too much for me to process, so I resolutely shoved the knowledge to the back of my mind and focused on what I needed to do to prepare.

My dress arrived earlier in the day, but I was surprised at five p.m. when two women showed up on the doorstep claiming to be my hairstylist and make-up artist.

I looked over the two women, both dressed in sleek black pants, white shirts, and scary pointy-toed black boots. "Hang on just a sec," I said before I shut the door in their faces. I stomped down the hall toward the study, where I knew Conner was handling some business and last minute details.

“Conner, dammit, why the hell do I have a hairstylist and fucking make-up artist here to ‘do me up’?” I shouted.

One of the men who was helping with the set up in Conner’s ballroom, yes the man had a ballroom, was walking by me with a stack of tablecloths in his hands. He snorted with laughter. I glared at him and he straightened his face, but his eyes were still twinkling with suppressed humor.

I stuck my head in the study door. Conner was standing by his desk, speaking with the party planner. How he’d managed to hire her with only a week to plan the party, I don’t know, but he’d done it. Both of them turned their heads to look at me.

“Why exactly are there two women here to fix my hair and my face?” I asked belligerently.

The party planner’s face tightened. For some reason I rubbed her the wrong way. The feeling was mutual. I was pretty sure that she thought I wasn’t classy enough for a man like Conner. I didn’t really give a shit though. From the way Conner spoke to her, I guessed that they had known each other for a while.

“Where are they?” she asked.

I rolled my eyes. “Waiting at the front door,” I replied. I was under express orders from Conner not to allow people into the house without his permission. Since I knew it was for my own safety I hadn’t argued.

“For crying out loud,” she muttered as she rushed by me, likely to let them in and stroke their delicate egos.

“I do not like that woman,” I said, glaring at Conner. “Tell me again why she’s planning this shindig.”

He smiled at me slightly. “I’ve known Erica for years. She does a fantastic job, and she happened to be available at the last minute.”

“More like she made sure she became available when you called,” I mumbled.

“I heard that,” Conner said.

“I meant you to.” I leaned against the doorjamb and crossed my arms over my chest. “She doesn’t like me.”

He came over to me. “No, she doesn’t.”

“Way to soothe my ego, fang boy,” I retorted.

Running a finger down my cheek, Conner leaned in and kissed me. “Does it help your vanity to know she’s so jealous of you she can’t see straight?”

I perked up. “Actually, yes it does.”

Conner chuckled. “You are such a complex creature.”

He kissed me again and his tongue slid against mine. I wrapped my arms around his neck and managed to plaster most of my body against his. When he nipped my bottom lip, I moaned. I grasped his hair, yanking it firmly. He growled low in his throat. As Conner’s hands moved down my back to cup my ass, my own hands mirrored his movements. He had the most deliciously firm backside. I would never admit it to anyone but my girlfriends, but I really wanted to take a bite out of it.

I vaguely heard someone clearing their throat behind us, but I ignored it. I was making out with the hottest vampire on the planet. Whoever it was could suck an egg.

“Ahem.” The cough was a lot less subtle.

Reluctantly Conner pulled away from me and looked over my shoulder. “Yes, Erica.”

“The stylists are waiting for Ms. Perry.” Her voice was stiff, and I knew if I looked at her that her face would be pinched and judgey.

When I looked up at Conner I realized that he had kissed me so passionately in order to make it clear to Erica that he was off-limits. If I hadn't already been in love with him, I would have fallen in that moment. Even though I had joked about her, I couldn't help but wonder if she and Conner had once had a more intimate relationship. She was chic and well-put together, exactly the kind of woman I would have expected him to prefer. She expected that as well. The fact that Conner was willing to make it clear to her that he desired me made me very happy.

I stepped back. "Coming." I smiled at Conner and knew he picked up on my emotions. Even if he couldn't feel what I was feeling, he would have known that I loved him just from the expression on my face. I watched in awe as his eyes warmed, and I saw his love for me shining there.

Just like that, all the stress I felt that afternoon left me. I knew without a doubt that I was doing the right thing. I loved Conner and he loved me. Making this commitment to him wasn't a mistake. I turned and saw all three women standing in the middle of the hallway. Erica's face was angry and disgusted. The other two women looked at Conner with longing and a little lust.

"Alright, ladies. Let's see if you can make me beautiful."



At seven o'clock on the dot, the two stylists were done with me. They hadn't allowed me to look in the mirror the entire time they were working. I was dying to know how it looked. Even after they finished with my hair and make-up, Anna and Gina insisted on helping me into my dress before they would let me look at the finished product. Something about getting the full impact.

They even helped me put on my shoes. I was about to turn to look in the mirror when Anna stopped me.

“Whoa there, girl. We can’t have VPL’s. Panties off now!”

Shit, I had forgotten. I bent over and tried to pull my panties off without flashing both of them. I semi-succeeded. Finally, I managed to pull them off over my shoes. Feeling stupid I balled them up and tossed them on top of my other clothes.

“Can I please look in a mirror now?” I asked impatiently.

Gina smirked. “Go ahead.”

I turned to face the huge mirror leaning against the far wall, and my mind went blank. The woman staring back at me looked like a stranger. My mouth fell open. I looked amazing. My reddish blonde hair gleamed and fell in smooth waves over my back and shoulders. The deep crimson of the dress made my skin glow. They had painted my mouth the same color as the dress. My eyes were dusted with a light gold shadow and lined in black liquid liner. I looked like I had stepped right off a film from the 1930’s or 40’s.

“Holy shitballs,” I muttered. “I didn’t know I could look like this.”

Both girls burst into laughter and high-fived each other. Gina was still grinning when she said, “You have a great foundation to work with. It didn’t take much.”

I kind of disagreed with her. My getting ready routine was all of a half hour. They had been curling, powdering, and painting me for two hours. I didn’t say that out loud.

“Thanks, Gina.” I turned to look at Anna. “Thank you.”

Anna smiled at me too. “Our pleasure, Donna. I hope you have a great night with that incredible man.”

I didn't get a chance to reply because there was a sharp knock on the door. Without waiting for an invitation, Conner opened the door and stopped short. My heart quit beating for a few seconds. The man was wearing a kilt and white shirt with a plaid affixed over his shoulder. He wasn't in full formal dress, but the man still looked incredible. I was immediately horny as hell. Seeing him dressed like that was more of a turn on than his accent. Apparently he felt the same.

"My God," he said as he looked at me incredulously. "I knew you were lovely, but tonight you are the most gorgeous creature I've ever seen."

I heard Anna whisper to Gina, "Holy cow, his accent is sexy."

Since I agreed with her, I didn't bother to throw a dirty look over my shoulder. I smiled at Conner. "Thank you. You look very handsome." And I was so going to enjoy removing those clothes later.

He came farther into the room. "Ladies," he said, nodding to Anna and Gina. "Could we have a moment?"

They immediately cleared out. I noticed for the first time that he was holding two black jewelry boxes in his hands.

As he approached, Conner smirked. "I take it you like the kilt."

Shit, I guess he hadn't been distracted enough by my dress. He knew I really, *really* liked his attire. He had seen all the historical romance novels on my bookshelves with shirtless men in kilts on the covers. I'm sure that was a big clue that I was a sucker for Highlanders.

"Yes, I do like the kilt. I'll show you how much later."

His feet paused for a moment before he resumed his approach. "I like the sound of that."

I just hoped he didn't mind if I ruined what had to be a very expensive shirt.

“I have a gift for you,” Conner said. “It’s tradition on the night of the Claiming for vampires to give a gift to their intended.” He flipped open the lid on what appeared to be a bracelet box. “I thought these would suit you.”

My mouth dropped open. Inside the box was a diamond bracelet. Three rows of diamonds stacked on top of one another and they were all brilliant. They were also set in what I was pretty sure was platinum. It had to be worth more than a modest-sized home. My jaw worked, but no words came out as he clasped the piece of jewelry around my left wrist.

Before I could regain my composure, he opened the other box and revealed a pair of diamond chandelier earrings, also set in platinum. They were gorgeous.

“I think it’s best if you put these in yourself,” he said, taking the earrings out of the box and placing them in my hand.

I just stared at them for a moment. The man had just put at least a hundred thousand dollars worth of jewelry on me, and he was acting like it was no big deal. It was then that I realized I had underestimated what my loaded boyfriend was really worth. Wordlessly I slipped the posts for the earrings in my ears. Thank God they had screw-on backs, which attested to their value.

After I finished I looked back up at Conner. “I know that telling you this is too much will be useless, so I guess I can only say thank you.” I rose up on my tiptoes. Even in my skyscraper heels he was several inches taller than me. I kissed him. “Thank you for the beautiful gifts.”

He looked relieved which made me feel horrible for being so bitchy about his desire to buy things for me. I decided that I would be better about it in the future. For some odd reason, he seemed to enjoy giving me stuff, the more expensive the better. I resigned myself to a closet full of clothes and jewelry with price tags that would make me flinch.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

I nodded.

He held out an arm. “Then let’s go. Our guests are waiting.”

Conner escorted me out of the bedroom and down the hallway to the staircase. We descended the stairs. I could hear the hum of voices coming from the ballroom and soft string music. My nerves started jangling, and it wasn’t butterflies I felt in my stomach. It was giant bats. I wouldn’t know any of these people, and I was about to commit myself to Conner in front of them.

Conner pulled me to a stop and waited until I looked up at him.

“Please don’t be nervous. With the exception of Vanessa and her bodyguards, these people are well-known to me, and most are those I consider friends or even family.”

His words did little to calm me, but I knew I had to get a grip. Vanessa Santino was here, and I wouldn’t give her the satisfaction of seeing me squirm. I had thrown a fit when Conner told me he had invited her, but I knew he had to. She was on the council, and it was expected that she be invited. When I had continued to resist, Conner reminded me about the value older vampires placed on good manners. To invite everyone on the council but her would have been the height of rudeness and probably would have ruined his chances at the open council position.

I had relented but only after I said, “If she kills me at this damn ceremony, I’m haunting you until you die, which will probably be eternity. You’ll never sleep or get laid again.”

Conner had laughed before he turned serious. “I will never let anything happen to you, Donna. You are more precious to me than anything else in this world.”

As he began to lead me down the hall to the ballroom, I turned that memory over and over in my mind and began to calm down. Even though I only knew three or four of the beings at this ceremony, I trusted Conner. He promised never to let anything happen to me, and I knew he meant it.

We paused just outside the doorway at Erica's insistence. She signaled someone inside the ballroom, and the music stopped. Within a few moments the trio began to play again. This time it was a piece I recognized, but I couldn't recall the name. Erica gestured for us to continue and Conner led me into the room. The front half of the ballroom was set up as though for a wedding ceremony. A raised dais was surrounded by a semi-circle of seats. The back half of the ballroom held round tables for the dinner that would be served after the ceremony.

Conner led me down the long white carpet set up in the center of the room. It led from the door of the ballroom, through the tables, all the way to the dais at the front of the room. Somehow I managed to walk without stumbling.

When we reached the small raised platform, Conner helped me climb the two steps. We had rehearsed this part of the ceremony last night, but I hadn't counted on being quite so nervous. I took a deep breath and focused on Conner's face and not the fact that there were seventy-five people staring at us like animals in the zoo.

He smiled at me and I knew he understood what was going on in my head. Though he couldn't read my mind, Conner managed to have better insight into my personality than anyone before. He held my hands in his but looked up at our audience.

"I welcome you and express my gratitude for your witness of my Claim on this human."

I didn't necessarily like the wording but Conner had explained that a Claiming had tradition and formality to express the seriousness of the commitment we were making. I also didn't agree, but I kept my mouth shut. Apparently Claiming ceremonies were centuries old, so I knew it would be stupid to argue with hundreds of years of tradition.

Conner looked back to me. "I claim you, Donna Perry, as mine. I share with you my wealth, my blood, and my immortality."

He lifted a hand to his mouth and pierced his index finger with an extended fang. Then he offered his hand to me, palm up. I wanted to hesitate, but I knew I could not because the wound would close too quickly. Conner had explained that to me when we discussed this part of the ceremony last night.

I grasped his wrist and lifted his hand to my mouth. He slid his finger between my lips and I sucked. The taste of his blood was surprisingly sweet and held the slight tang of copper. It didn't taste like human blood. I swept my tongue over the cut on the pad of his finger, and his eyes began to light up, the bright electric blue glow telling me how much he enjoyed my touch. I felt my body beginning to heat just before Conner gently pulled his finger from my mouth.

I sucked in a deep breath because now it was my turn. I knew without a doubt that this moment would change my life forever. Literally.

"I accept your Claim, Conner Savage. I am yours. I give you all that I have and all that I am."

As a modern woman, I should have been completely offended by those words. They implied ownership. Still a small part of me reveled in them. I was giving him the most important gift I could: my body, heart, and soul. I probably would never say the words out loud, but he did own me. Not because he was more powerful, but because I gave him that ownership.

I lifted my hand, also palm up, to him. He grasped my wrist and pulled my index finger into his mouth. I pressed my fingertip against one of his fangs until I felt the sting of the tip piercing my skin. Then Conner sucked on my finger as I had his. When his tongue swirled over my fingertip, I felt my nipples tighten. I was grateful for the adhesive bra cups that Stephanie had found for me last night. The light padding in the cups hid my body's reaction to the heat and suction of Conner's mouth.

He released my finger and, just like that, the ceremony was complete. As soon as I lowered my hand the room erupted into applause and catcalls. I knew there were some werewolves there because there was also some howling. Though it wasn't part of the ceremony, Conner grabbed me and kissed me thoroughly, which meant the catcalls continued.

Conner released me and helped me down from the dais. People rose from their chairs and came to offer their congratulations. Several people introduced themselves, but there were so many faces I knew I would forget half the names.

Suddenly, I was facing Asher and Finn, two faces I did know. I smiled at both of them, relieved to see someone I knew. Asher took my hand, kissing the knuckles, and then leaned forward to kiss my cheek.

"You look ravishing," he said.

I blushed a little at the compliment and the admiring looks I was getting from both him and Finn.

Finn pulled me away from Asher and shocked the hell out of me by giving me a warm hug and a kiss on my cheek as well. "For once, my friend Asher does not exaggerate. It's too bad Conner saw you first or I would have to steal you away."

I had to laugh at his words. Conner's arm came around me and pulled me into his side.

“Stop flirting with her, Finn. She’s mine now.” He said it with such warmth and affection I didn’t have the heart to throw an elbow in his ribs as I normally would have. Also, I didn’t want to undermine him in front of all these people. Somehow I had a feeling it would be very bad if they perceived he had a weak spot when it came to me.

“It’s too bad,” Finn said, a devilish gleam in his eyes. “I think she could have done better, say me.”

Conner laughed but didn’t reply.

“Oh, I don’t know, Finn. I don’t know if a woman could do better than a man like Conner.”

I stiffened when I heard the low, sultry voice right behind us. We all turned to look at Vanessa. She was dressed head to toe in black as though she were attending a funeral. I wanted to tell her to get over herself.

She came forward and placed a hand on Conner’s chest so she could lean in and kiss his cheek. In the process of giving him a congratulatory kiss, she managed to rub her breasts all over his chest. I managed to suppress the urge to punch her in the throat. The fucking bitch.

“Congratulations, Conner.” She never even bothered to glance at me. “I hope you’re happy with your choice in the future.”

That didn’t necessarily sound like a blessing to me, but I couldn’t criticize. I wouldn’t have many nice things to say to her either.

“Oh, I will be,” he assured her.

Her cryptic response was, “We’ll see.”

I really didn’t like that. It made the hairs on my arms stand up. Somehow she made those two words sound like a veiled threat. She spared me a glance that should have killed me on the spot before she turned and walked away.

I decided then and there to have a talk with Conner about her in the very near future. I had a bad feeling that Claiming or no, she had plans for me, and I wouldn't like them. I lifted my eyes to Conner's face and saw he was staring after her, eyes glowing and a muscle in his jaw ticking. Apparently he shared my feelings because he did not look happy.

After everyone congratulated us, we were all seated for the dinner service. Though I really didn't care for Erica, I had to admire her taste. The tables were covered by white tablecloths, but the chargers beneath the place settings were almost the exact color of my dress. As were the flowers at the center of each table and the wineglasses. I could see why Conner insisted on a red or purple gown. The color scheme that Erica used mirrored that exactly.

As the meal was served by discreet wait staff, the string trio continued to play. The atmosphere was nice, with quiet conversation and soft laughter, but it was so tame. For our wedding, Conner was going to have to suck it up and have a dance floor and DJ. For something as big and important as my wedding, I wanted to fucking celebrate.

I noticed several young men and women moving amongst tables with red wrist and armbands. As I started watching them I realized that several of the vampires were discreetly feeding on blood rather than food. While it didn't gross me out as I thought it would, it did make me a little uncomfortable. Then I remembered that Conner said a lot of older vampires didn't eat food any longer. It would be rude for me to eat and expect them not to. Or at least that's how I justified it to myself.

I also noticed some of the guests ate a great deal more than the rest. I assumed that they were the werewolves. Conner had explained to me that weres had a very fast metabolism and needed to eat a great deal of food to support their systems. I tried not to stare as one gorgeous woman with black

hair signaled the wait staff for her third plate of food. I also tried not to be jealous because she was slim, toned, but curvy in all the right places.

My observations were interrupted when I felt Conner's warm, callused hand sliding up my leg where the front of my dress had a modest slit. In just an instant my curiosity about the people around us disappeared under a tide of lust. Between his kilt and the sensuous way his mouth had suckled my finger, my libido had been simmering all evening. Now that his hand was moving up my thigh, slowly drawing closer and closer to the place where I wanted it most, my blood went from warm to boiling hot.

I looked over at him. "Can we get out of here without offending everyone?" I asked.

Obviously feeling playful, Conner dragged his fingertips back down my leg until they reached my knee. Then his hand journeyed higher again. I squeezed my thighs together and squirmed in my seat.

"Conner," I warned.

He leaned over my chair and put his lips to my ear. "Yes." Conner rose from his chair and grabbed my hand. We walked toward the door to the ballroom and I saw a lot of knowing smiles on faces as we passed. Fortunately I was so distracted by the fire in my blood that I didn't care.

Tonight I planned to fulfill a longtime fantasy: ravishing my very own Highlander.

Fourteen

As soon as we were out of the ballroom, Conner swept me up in his arms. He carried me through the house and up to his bedroom faster than any human man could have. Within seconds we were inside the huge room, and the door closed behind us.

Conner set me on my feet and locked the door. His eyes were predatory as he looked at me but he was wrong if he thought he got to be in control tonight. I had plans, and they included driving him absolutely crazy with desire before the night was over.

He moved toward me, lifting a hand.

“Stop,” I commanded.

Though his eyebrows arched, he did as I asked.

“Don’t move.”

The predatory light in his gaze turned speculative as I moved toward him. I stalked around him, tracing a line from the top of his shoulder to his wrist with my fingertip. When I stood in front of him again, I unpinned his plaid. Folding it carefully, I walked across the room to place it on the dresser.

When I faced Conner again, he was still standing in the middle of the room, like a statue. I approached him again, aware of how the satin felt against my skin and the fact that I was naked beneath it. My skin broke out in a light sweat. I raised my hands and placed them on his chest. He felt hot beneath my palms. Slowly my fingers moved to the buttons on his shirt. I slipped two buttons loose before I paused.

Conner stared at me, his eyes burning like two blue flames. I grasped his shirt with both hands and yanked as hard as I could, never taking my eyes from his. Buttons flew across the room. I vaguely heard them bouncing off the floor. I spread the material to reveal his bare skin. As I watched, Conner's fangs extended farther until they dented his bottom lip. His eyes never left mine as I leaned forward and placed my mouth on his skin.

I licked his nipple slowly with the flat of my tongue just before I sank my teeth into his pectoral. From our time together over the last few weeks I learned that giving and receiving bites was a form of foreplay for vampires. I sucked hard enough to leave a mark, leaving the edge of my teeth against his skin.

Every muscle in his body went rigid, but Conner remained still. Feeling powerful and incredibly turned on, I stepped back.

“Take off your shoes.”

Without a word he leaned forward and removed his boots. I knew they weren't traditional in terms of Highland dress, but I thought boots and a kilt were fucking hot and seeing him dressed that way hadn't changed my mind.

“Now your kilt,” I demanded.

A moment later his kilt hit the floor and Conner was standing before me naked and hard. Still he waited for my next instruction. Having this gorgeous man under my command was exhilarating, so I decided to carry this as far as I could.

“Get on the bed.”

He went to the bed and reclined slightly against the pillows piled at the headboard. He cocked one leg to the side and raised the other so that his forearm rested on his bent knee. To me he looked like a men’s underwear ad without the underwear. Once he settled, I took just a moment to admire him.

“Don’t move,” I said. He inclined his head to let me know he understood, but he still didn’t speak.

I reached up and untied the halter from behind my neck. Without the straps to hold it up, the dress slithered to the ground. Conner’s eyes narrowed and his hands fisted.

“Fuck me,” he whispered hoarsely. “You’ve been walking around all night without underwear.”

I just smiled and removed the adhesive bra cups from my breasts. I threw them on the floor. I stood before Conner in nothing but the diamonds he gave me and gold stiletto sandals. As I walked toward the bed, his eyes devoured me. I felt sexy and powerful, more so than I ever had before.

I crawled from the bottom of the huge four-poster bed until I reached him. I pushed his knee down so I could reach my destination. Keeping my eyes on his, I grasped his cock in my hand and leaned down. When he realized my intention, his hands moved to my hair.

I pulled back slightly. “Nuh-uh. Hands off.” I thought I heard his teeth grinding as he fisted his hands and put them on the bed next to his thighs.

I went back to what I was doing. Taking my time, I stroked him firmly and used my other hand to cup his balls. Conner hissed out a breath and his hips bucked slightly. He sucked in air but settled back onto the bed.

Leaning forward I opened my mouth and stroked my tongue over the head of his dick. Wanting to keep him off balance I lunged forward and took as much of his length in my mouth as I could and I sucked hard.

“Fucking hell!” he exclaimed. But he kept his hands at his side.

As a reward, I continued to suck as I bobbed my head. I used my hand to grasp the base of his cock and moved it up and down with a twisting motion. He groaned. I glanced up and saw that his head had fallen back, and his chest was heaving. When I knew he was close to coming, I slowed my movements before I sat up.

Wrapping my hands around his wrists, I climbed into his lap and placed his hands on my breasts. “Touch me,” I said.

As though he had been waiting for an eternity, Conner cupped my breasts and pinched my nipples between his thumb and forefingers. He pulled lightly and my back arched. The intense pleasure bordered on pain, my skin almost burning beneath his touch.

I combed my fingers through the hair at the nape of his neck and fisted them, tugging his head back. I attacked his mouth with mine, feeling the prick of his fangs in my bottom lip. Conner moved his hands around to my back and slid them down to cup my ass. He shifted so his erection ground between my legs, and he used his grip on me to move my body against his. Now it was my head that fell back as our positions put pressure on my clit.

I knew I was losing control when Conner’s lips sealed over the skin of my throat, sucking and nibbling. He was marking me as he often did during sex. His hands grew more insistent, controlling the motion of my hips.

I lifted up and grasped his cock, positioning him. My body was so wet and ready that he slid inside easily until I was fully seated on his thighs. When his fingers bit into the skin of my ass, I knew they were leaving bruises and realized that he was losing control just as much as I had. Deliberately, I dislodged his mouth from my neck so I could lean forward and nip his throat with my teeth. Immediately, his hands became more

demanding, slamming me down on his cock until everything inside me began to tighten.

I loved this side of Conner when we made love. He usually controlled the pace, hell the entire process, but it was always mind-blowing when he lost control. I panted as my orgasm hovered just out of reach.

Just as he always did, Conner knew I was close. His movements slowed, and one of his hands drifted up to brush my hair away from my neck. I tilted my head back, knowing what was coming.

“What do you want, Donna?” he whispered, his lips grazing the skin of my throat as he spoke.

He often did this as well. Since the first time he had bitten me without permission, he liked for me to ask, sometimes even beg, for him to bite me again.

“Bite me, Conner. Please bite me.”

His hands dove into my hair, pulling my head back to an almost painful angle. He was so rarely rough with me that it affected me intensely when he was. My breaths sounded like sobs as my hips continued to move over his, up and down.

Just as the climax swept over me, he repeated the words he had spoken at the ceremony, “I claim you as mine.”

Then he sank his fangs into my neck. With each pull of his mouth, it felt as though he were sucking on my clit. The orgasm swelled like a wave and each time I thought it would recede, he would pull on the wound from my throat. Finally it became too much and I screamed. Beneath me, Conner’s hips bucked harder and faster until he groaned against my throat as he came.

As our bodies stopped moving and our breathing slowed, Conner released his grip on my neck and gently licked the wound to help it heal. He

also let go of my hair and I let my head fall on his shoulder.

We stayed in that position for a long time, Conner still buried deep inside me as I sat on his lap. He held me close and stroked my back with lazy sweeps of his hand. I inhaled his scent, trying to memorize this moment. Despite the wild intensity of our lovemaking, this was what I wanted to remember. A perfect moment as we began our life together.

I sighed against his skin. “I love you, Conner.”

“And I love you,” he responded.

Absolutely perfect.



A couple of hours later, I lay sprawled across Conner’s chest in what was now our huge bed. We had been lying silently together for a while. I enjoyed the sensation of his arms around me and being able to do nothing but lie there and breathe in his scent. He seemed content to maintain the silence as well.

Unfortunately, one thought forced its way into my brain. I didn’t want to bring it up, but the echo of Vanessa’s words at the reception haunted me. Tracing random patterns on his chest, I tried to decide how to voice my concerns.

“What’s on your mind?” Conner asked me quietly.

I rolled so I could fold my hands on his chest and rest my chin on them. I liked this position because I could look into his face while cuddling with him.

“What Vanessa said at the reception this evening. It sounded almost like a threat,” I answered.

Conner trailed his fingers over my bare back and looked up at the ceiling. “I know.”

I waited but he didn’t say anything else. “Should I be worried?” I really didn’t want to be stuck at home any longer.

My whirling thoughts screeched to a halt when I realized I was already thinking of Conner’s mansion as home, and I had been for the last week. Apparently my subconscious had accepted my status as his Claimed faster than my brain.

“I’m not sure.”

I refocused my attention on him. “Please don’t tell me I’m going to be stuck in this house for another month. I’d almost rather face the prospect of death at Vanessa’s perfectly manicured claws,” I joked.

Conner frowned at me. “That’s not funny.”

I stared at him, eyeball-to-eyeball, “No, it’s not, but it is fucking true. Hiding away in a basement is no way to live.”

He sighed. “You’re right.” He didn’t speak for a moment. “How about this: I won’t insist you stay home and locked in the basement and you don’t throw a tantrum when I hire some personal security for you.”

Oh, he was good. After so long stuck in his house, he knew I would do just about anything to be able to get the hell out.

“Fine,” I responded, biting off the word as I rolled my eyes heavenward. I really didn’t like it but I refused to spend another day locked up like a prisoner.

Conner tugged a hank of my hair to get my attention. “Don’t pout.”

Even though I knew I was, I said, “I’m not.”

“You are, but it’s cute so forget I told you not to.” He smirked as he said it.

I pinched his side in retaliation but settled back into position on his chest. There were other things on my mind as well.

“What else?” he asked. The damn vampire really did know me well.

“My job. I hate to quit without notice.”

Conner’s face hardened. “We discussed this yesterday and agreed.”

I interrupted him, “I know. I’m not trying to change your mind. If I could tell my manager that I have another job lined up in my old field and they wanted me to start right away, I think that they would be more inclined to forgive me. It sounds so fucking flaky for me to suddenly quit when I start dating a guy, who happens to be loaded, and then leave them high and dry.”

“What’s your point, Donna?” he asked, sounding impatient.

“Could you look into a position for me at one of your companies soon?”

Fuck but I hated asking him for a job, but I hated telling my boss I was quitting with no notice even more. I knew he wouldn’t hold it against me if it was a job in my field because he knew a little of my history and that I had been blackballed.

“You’ve been worried about this today, haven’t you?” he asked.

I nodded.

“I’m sorry. I have already begun inquiries within a couple of my businesses. One of my marketing presidents is extremely overloaded, and I imagine he will need a vice-president soon. The only other qualified person in that department is leaving for a job elsewhere so an outside applicant would have to be hired regardless.”

My chest no longer felt tight. I realized that he was setting me up for the smoothest transition possible. The situation he described meant that I was unlikely to encounter workplace hostility and problems with my both my coworkers and new boss.

I grinned at him and gave him a loud smacking kiss on the cheek.
“Thank you.”

He chuckled. I cupped his cheek as my smile faded.

“Really. I mean it. Thank you. You could have created a job or fired someone and just shoved me in their position. Instead, you made it harder on yourself but easier on me. I appreciate it.”

I might not like the fact that I had to work for him, but I did appreciate how considerate he was. Conner really wasn’t lying when he said his mother had raised him to treat his woman like a queen.

“Your happiness is as important to me as my own,” he said simply.

My heart melted at his words. “You don’t have to sweet talk me, Conner. I’m a sure thing.”

Laughing, he rolled us so that his body rested on top of mine. “Good to know.”

I wrapped my legs around his hips. “So what do you plan to do about it?”

Apparently he planned to kiss me breathless because that’s exactly what he did.

Fifteen

After two weeks neither Conner nor I heard a peep from Vanessa Santino. I was beginning to think I had imagined the veiled threat at the Claiming. I told Conner that I thought I had overreacted but he just shook his head.

“You still get a security team,” he said.

The fucking man knew me too well, but that was okay because I knew him too. I spent the entire evening playing eighties music at top volume while we cooked dinner. Every time he would go by the stereo, he would turn it down. Unfortunately for him, Conner didn’t realize I had the remote in my pocket. After the third time I discreetly turned up the volume, he finally looked at me with a gleam in his eye. Being the bad girl I was I made a break for it. Conner said never to run from a vampire, but there were some rules that were just made to be broken.

After only fourteen days I was shocked at how easily our lives fell in sync. I began to understand why Conner was so confident in our relationship so early on. Within days we had a routine, and it felt comfortable rather than awkward.

What had been awkward was my call to my boss at the lounge. When I called he immediately asked about my grandmother, which was incredibly sweet. Since my cantankerous grandmother had actually been dead for a very long time, I merely said that she had passed away but it was expected and that she was at peace. Then I explained that I received a job offer during my time away from the lounge and that they wanted me to start immediately after the funeral. I was positive that I was going to hell for all the lies I told, but I couldn't exactly say, "Hey, I kind of married a fucking rich vampire but not really married, more like living in sin."

Conner hadn't been lying when he told me the marketing department in one of his companies needed help. The company made computer software. It wasn't as sexy as my job at the advertising agency had been, but I found out right away that it would be challenging. The marketing president was fastidious and extremely well-organized. What he was not was creative. I had a feeling it would be an uphill battle to get him to loosen up enough to listen to my suggestions, but I enjoyed a challenge.

Three weeks after the Claiming, I was happily installed in my new vice-president's office at Savage Technology. The marketing department was a mess. I felt actual excitement at the idea of being involved with more than just the advertising. I would actually get to develop entire marketing plans. Well, if my new boss would let me. He wasn't a complete asshole but I got the sense he was reserving judgment. Even though my resume showed me to be qualified, I sensed that he wondered exactly how I had gotten the job. Especially since Conner showed up on my first day to take me to lunch.

I was engrossed with familiarizing myself with past marketing plans and the previous vice-president's computer files when there was a knock on my door.

"Come in," I called.

The door opened to reveal Conner clad in the same dark gray pinstripe suit I watched him put on that very morning. Just the memory made my chest and face flush.

Most men were sexiest when they removed their clothing. However, watching Conner don snug black boxer briefs, pants, and then a teal shirt that made his blue eyes look almost green; it had been one of the hottest things I'd ever seen. Even watching him put on socks and shoes was erotic. I decided then and there to try and watch him get ready for work every morning. It wasn't until he put on his tie that he realized I was staring.

I couldn't keep my eyes off his hands as he knotted the silk and imagining those same fingers tying my wrists with the material currently around his neck. I had experimented with light bondage in the past with a boyfriend, but it had been more amusing than arousing. Picturing Conner doing those same things to me, and more, made me wet. I licked my suddenly dry lips.

I blinked and Conner's face filled my vision. I gasped and tried to pull back. I hated it when he moved faster than I could see. His hands kept me in place as his eyes searched mine. I could see that he sensed the lust coursing through my veins. The blue of his eyes intensified until it was electric.

“What are you thinking about?”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. It felt like the temperature of the room had shot up fifty degrees. “You and that tie.”

“What about my tie?” he prompted.

“I see you,” I paused to lick my lips again before I continued, “using that tie on my wrists. I’m at your mercy but...” I couldn’t finish.

Conner’s expression turned wicked. “But I don’t have any mercy.”

“Yes,” I whispered.

Deliberately, he set me away from him and went back to getting ready without a word. I stared at him in confusion. He didn't seem angry. In fact, if the bulge in the front of his pants was anything to go by, he was ready to act out my dirty little fantasy. After he slipped into his jacket he turned back to me.

His fingers wrapped around my wrists as he backed me against the wall of the bedroom. After my spine touched wood, he slowly lifted my hands over my head and pinned them there. My confusion disappeared under a tide of arousal, and I panted when he used his body weight to pin me in place. I always thought of myself as completely vanilla, no matter the kink I read, but this dominant side of Conner flipped my switch.

"When we get home tonight," he said, "I'll show you how unmerciful I can be." With those words he released me.

He walked casually toward the door of the bedroom, leaving me practically boneless against the wall. Just before he left the room, he looked back at me. "Be sure that Carter is with you at all times when you are not in your office or our home."

That was the last I had seen of him before now.

As though he knew exactly where my brain wandered, Conner grinned and looked every inch the devil in a pinstripe suit.

"Are you ready to go to lunch?" he asked politely.

I wanted to throw my empty coffee cup at his head. Instead, I stood up from behind my desk and smoothed my dress. I had a weapon of my own to tease him with.

"That sounds great," I said.

I grabbed my purse, stealthily pulling out my surprise for Conner. As I brushed by him in my doorway, I slid my hand into his pocket and left his present there. I kept walking even as he began to pull it out of his jacket.

“Fucking hell,” he said, his voice raspy.

I smiled as I continued down the hall toward the elevator. Within seconds he was by my side again.

“You will pay for that,” he whispered in my ear.

“Well you said you planned to show me no mercy later tonight. I thought I should do something to deserve a little punishment.” I couldn’t quite believe that I had the gumption to say that out loud but I was glad I did.

A dark flush crept up his neck as we entered the elevator car. I saw his hand creep into his pocket and knew he was touching the black lace of the panties I’d removed earlier after I had overheard the company receptionist mention that Conner was in the building.

He didn’t speak again as we rode down to the first floor and walked out to his car. The silence continued to stretch out as he drove us to a restaurant. Finally, after the waiter came by and took our drink orders, Conner seemed to snap out of his reverie.

“How is your first day going?” he asked.

I sipped my water, still feeling hot from the way he had looked at me earlier in the elevator. “It’s going well. I’m looking forward to doing more than designing an advertising campaign. I just hope that my new boss will be open to my ideas.”

“I could have a word with him,” Conner offered.

I shook my head vehemently. “Please don’t. It’s important to me that I do this on my own as much as possible. If you intervene after just one day, no one in that company will take me seriously. Since you placed me in a management position it’s important that they respect me or I’ll never be able to get anything done.”

He nodded. “I understand. I won’t speak to him.”

I smiled slightly. “Thank you.”

We began talking then, but lunch was still heavy with sexual tension. Every so often I would see his hand stray to his jacket, brushing the pocket that contained my panties. Each time he did it, I became acutely aware of the fact that I was naked beneath my dress. God, by the time we got home in the evening, I wouldn’t need any preparation. This was foreplay enough.

After we ate, Conner dropped me off back at the office with nothing more than a chaste kiss on my cheek but his eyes promised a hell of a lot more once we were alone. I practically floated up the elevator and into my office. I was so distracted that when my cell phone rang I didn’t check the caller ID.

My mind still on Conner, I answered, “Hello?”

“Donna! It’s Parker. How are you?”

I jerked the phone away from ear and stared at it like it had grown fangs. Holy fucking hell it was my ex-boss. More curious than anything, I put the receiver back to my ear.

“Parker? Why are you calling me?”

Sounding jovial as if he had never screwed me over, Parker continued, “Well, some things have come to light, and the higher ups have realized that the unfortunate incidents leading up to your termination were nothing more than a misunderstanding.”

What the fuck was he talking about? My *termination*, as he called it, was his damn fault.

“Get to the point.” My words were clipped.

“Well, the board discussed it and they would like to hire you back.”

This conversation was getting stranger and stranger. Why the hell would the board be discussing me? I had just been an executive. Sure I was on the track for a promotion, but it had still been a few years away.

“Hire me back?” I repeated.

“Yes. In the last few months it’s become very clear to the partners, and the rest of us at the firm, how important your work was to the company. They are offering you a promotion from your previous position and a twenty percent raise.” Parker rattled all this off as though it hadn’t been over three months since I had been unceremoniously fired from my job and escorted off the property.

“That’s a very tempting offer, Parker, but I just started another job. I’m the senior vice-president of marketing for Savage Technology, and my pay is a lot more than the twenty percent raise you’re offering me.” I took unholy glee in what I got to say next. “You have a nice day, fuckwad.” Then I hung up.

I tossed my phone on my desk and stared at it for a moment. Then I just shook my head and got to work. At least Parker’s call had distracted me from the insane sexual haze Conner had created in my mind during our lunch.

The next time I looked up from my computer it was almost five in the afternoon. When I realized how late it was, my heart started pounding in my chest. Time to go home. To Conner. I couldn’t decide if I hoped he would finish what he started, or if I was scared he would. It was time to find out.

I shut down my computer and collected my purse and laptop case. I said good-bye to my temporary assistant. I made a mental note to put out a company-wide memo that I was looking for a permanent executive assistant. If no one in the company applied for the position, I would have to take out an ad.

Distracted by my thoughts and mental to-do list, I didn’t hear the voice calling my name as I walked out of the building into the parking lot. When the hand came down on my shoulder, I couldn’t stifle the small scream that

crawled up my throat. I whirled around and found myself face-to-face with my old boss, Parker Hanes.

Breathing hard, I put a hand to my chest. “You scared the shit out of me, Parker!”

He stood back, hands in air in mock surrender. “Sorry, Donna. I called your name several times but you kept walking.”

My heart rate was returning to normal. “I have a lot on my mind.” I stared at him for a moment. “What are you doing here?”

Parker’s expression settled into the amiable, good-ole-boy mask that he liked to wear around clients. It didn’t fool me for a second. The man was a weasel in a thousand dollar suit. I immediately knew he was buttering me up for something.

“I thought maybe if I came to ask you in person, you would reconsider coming back to work for the firm.”

“Are you serious?” I asked incredulously.

Parker nodded. “As a heart attack.”

More like desperate, I thought to myself. After the way I had spoken to him on the phone earlier, the man should have gotten the hint. Yet here he was, standing in the parking lot of my new workplace. I couldn’t believe he had the gall to act as though I should be interested in coming back to work for him after he threw me under the bus.

“I told you earlier, Parker. I’m not interested. My job here pays better, and I’m pretty sure my boss won’t embezzle money from the company and then fire me to cover it up.”

The friendly mask he wore remained in place but his eyes changed. They grew cold and distant. It was extremely disconcerting to see. It also gave me a very bad feeling that Parker wasn’t asking me to come back to my job because of pressure from the firm’s partners. More like he was

hoping to screw me over again. For some reason, Parker was desperate to have me back at the firm and I was sure his reasons didn't include a happy ending for me. I decided it was time to end the conversation.

"You don't understand, Donna. You have to come back," he said.

"I don't have to do a fucking thing," I shot back. I turned on my heel and started heading for my car.

His hand closed over my wrist, gripping me hard, and he pulled me to a stop. "Don't make me do this," he said, "I don't want to."

I had no clue what he was talking about. "I'm not making you do anything, Parker. And it seems to me you *do* want to, or you wouldn't be holding my arm." I stared him down, keeping my back straight and my gaze focused solely on his eyes. "Now let go of me. This conversation is over."

The thought crossed my mind that Carter, my security, was absent. Surely if he saw what was happening, he would intervene. That's what Conner hired him for. I looked around briefly and saw no sign of my bodyguard. My blood ran cold. There was no way he would abandon me without a good reason.

Carter was Conner's friend, but he also said that my man threatened to castrate him if he let anything happen to me. I had laughed when he said it, but he hadn't. He assured me that Conner knew what he was doing in that respect, and I realized he wasn't joking.

Parker jerked my arm, bringing my attention back to him. "I don't have a choice, Donna. You have to come with me." He sounded desperate and scared.

I struggled, trying to yank my wrist out of his hand, but he merely tightened his grip until it was so painful that I cried out. I knew that things were taking a nasty turn. Because it had worked before and Parker was little

more than a string bean in a suit, I maneuvered my keys so that they stuck out like spikes and struck out.

Surprisingly, he evaded my blows and started dragging me through the parking lot. Though I wasn't wearing stilettos, my two inch heels provided no traction as I tried to pull away.

"What the fuck are you doing, Parker? Let me go now!"

He only shook his head and continued away from the building, nearly pulling my shoulder out of socket.

I kicked him in the knee, but the blow was weak because he had me so off balance. I realized that we were headed directly toward a black, windowless van and my heart almost stopped. Jesus, the fucker was going to kidnap me.

Suddenly, I remembered something my friend Shannon had told me. She taught a self-defense class once a month. She always said the best thing to do in the event of attack wasn't just to fight back, but to bring attention to what was happening. So, I sucked in a huge breath and loosed the loudest scream I could muster.

Parker turned quickly, something square and black in his hand. I felt it touch my skin, a sizzle, then the world went dark.

Sixteen

My first thought when I woke up was that it had happened again. I had passed out or been knocked out more in the last few weeks than I had my entire life. Hell, I'd never been rendered unconscious before I met Conner. Now, after less than two months with him, it had happened numerous times.

I tried not to whimper as a sharp pain shot through my skull. I wondered what the fuck Parker had hit me with. Whatever it was, I really wanted to turn it up on its highest setting, shove it up his ass, and let him have it. When I tried to put my hand to my head, it wouldn't cooperate.

My eyelids felt like they were glued shut when I made the effort to open them. Finally I managed to lift them and I saw that I was in the conference room at the advertising agency where I had once worked. I also saw that the reason my hands wouldn't move was that they were secured to the arms of the chair I was seated in. Not exactly the way I imagined being tied up that night.

Completely disoriented and feeling slightly sick, I glanced around the room. It was empty but my purse lay on its side on the conference table. Through the glass walls, I could see Parker near his office, facing a large

man. The big guy had his back to me, but Parker seemed to be arguing with him about something.

I didn't see anyone else around. I decided not to wait to find out what those two were arguing about. Looking down at my wrists, I noticed that whoever had taped me to the chair hadn't done a very good job. Hell, the end of the tape was on top of my right wrist. I figured Parker had been the one to secure me because he tended to do things half-assed and without a lot of thought anyway. With another quick glance at Parker and the stranger to be sure they didn't know I was awake, I leaned down and managed to get the end of the tape between my teeth. It took some doing but I was able to pull it free.

I couldn't unwrap my wrist completely but I did manage to loosen the tape enough to yank my arm out. I barely managed to keep a scream inside. That hurt like a motherfucker. I looked back over and Parker and the man were gone. Wildly, I turned the chair to look for them but I didn't see them anywhere. As fast as I could, I freed my left hand and jumped to my feet. My head swam and I had to swallow back the bile that rose in my throat but I wanted the hell out of there.

After I grabbed my purse, I removed my pumps. Heels were not the best footwear for stealth. Carrying my shoes and bag, I snuck out of the conference room as quietly as possible and ducked into the first cubicle I came to. I listened for a moment and didn't hear anyone else in the office. Staying low, I peeked around the corner of the cubicle. The stairs were ten feet away. Satisfied there was no one close enough to see me, I dashed to the door and opened it carefully.

I slipped through and made sure the door shut silently behind me. Barefoot, I raced down the steps to the first floor. Thank God the advertising agency was only on the third floor. When I reached the bottom I

had to squelch the urge to fly out of the stairwell and across the lobby. In case Parker and the man were still there, I nudged the door open. The lobby was deserted.

Desperate to get the hell out of that building, I threw open the stairwell door and ran flat out across the lobby. When I burst through the door into the cool night air, I took my first deep breath since I woke up in that chair. I remembered there was a convenience store two blocks away. I slid my feet into my heels, grateful that I had worn low pumps that day, and took off at a very brisk walk.

It took me almost ten minutes to reach the store and I felt like I had a huge target on my back the entire way. It took everything I had not to collapse when I entered the building. Plastering a fake smile on my face, I nodded to the clerk and headed straight to the women's restroom. It wasn't until I locked myself inside that I started to shake.

My hands were trembling so badly that I could barely open my bag. I managed to fish out my cell phone before I dropped the purse. I ignored all the stuff that spilled out when it hit the floor and focused on making the call I needed to make.

I hit the wrong icon on the touch screen three times before I was able to still my hands long enough to bring up my contact list. Seconds later I selected the name, and the line rang.

It wasn't until I heard Conner's voice say, "Donna. Thank God. Where are you?", that I knew everything would be okay.

"Conner, I'm at the convenience store on the corner of Preston and Parker. Please, please come get me." Tears ran down my face and I was sure he could hear them in my voice.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

“No, just sore and feeling a little sick from whatever they used to knock me out.”

He was silent for a moment before he spoke again. “I’m only a short distance away. I will be there in less than five minutes. Will you be safe until I get there?”

My chest shuddered as I took my next breath. “I’m locked in the women’s restroom.”

“Good. Stay put until I get there. Do not open the door for anyone but me,” he commanded.

“Okay.” I cleared my throat. “Will you stay on the phone with me until you get here?” I asked.

“Of course.”

He sounded so calm, so strong that my heart rate finally began to slow down. I took one deep breath, then another.

“Are you still there?” he asked.

“Yes,” I croaked. My mouth felt as though I had gargled with sand. I went to the sink and ran cool water into my palm. I scooped the water up with my hand and drank several large sips. “Are you almost here?”

“Yes. I am just a couple of blocks away.”

Knowing that he was so close, I bent down and gathered up the things that had spilled out of my purse, shoving them back inside. I jumped up and squeaked when the door knob jiggled. There was a sharp knock on the door. I didn’t say anything. Then another knock only this time louder.

A female voice called, “Is there anyone in there?”

My voice was three octaves higher than usual when I answered, “Yes. Sorry. I’ll be out in a few minutes.”

I heard the woman complaining under her breath but couldn’t understand what she was saying and then the door of the men’s room open

and slam shut.

Conner's voice was sharp in my ear. "Who was that?"

"A woman wanting to use the restroom. She went into the men's room next door."

He fell silent for a moment then I heard the ding and a slam and knew he had gotten out of his car.

"Are you here?" I asked eagerly.

"Yes. Do not open the door until I knock on it and you are sure it is me."

"Okay." I waited for several tense moments before I heard a soft rap on the door. "Is that you?" I asked.

"Yes."

I threw open the door and practically fell into Conner's arms. "Thank God you're here. I was scared out of my mind."

Without another word, he lifted me off my feet and carried me out to the car. I didn't even complain about him carrying me. For the first time since I had woken up in my old office, I felt safe.

Once I was in the passenger seat and the car was on the road, I relaxed into the seat, letting the headrest cradle my skull. With the fear and adrenaline draining out of my body, I felt like I could sleep for a year. Then I remembered Carter and sat straight up in the seat.

"Carter. What happened to Carter?"

Conner's grip tightened on the steering wheel but his voice was deceptively calm, "What makes you think something happened to Carter?"

I threw him a disgusted glance. "There is no way he would have abandoned me to that asshole Parker. Something bad must have happened to him if he didn't come to my rescue."

"He was severely injured," Conner stated. "He should survive but even with his vampire healing it will be at least a week before he is back on his

feet.”

My eyes widened. He must have been nearly killed if it was going to take that long for him to heal.

“Who is Parker?” Conner asked.

“My ex-boss. He called me earlier today to see if I wanted my old job back. I turned him down. I told him I was working for Savage Technology. When I saw him in the parking lot after work, I just thought he was being a douche. When he started to drag me toward his van and I fought back, he knocked me out with something.”

“Something?”

I closed my eyes and tried to picture it. “It was square, black, and had two silver prongs.”

Conner growled. “He hit you with a stun gun.”

“That would certainly explain why my head hurts, and my stomach feels like it’s been twisted in a ton of knots,” I commented as I leaned my head back on the seat once again.

He reached over and put his hand on mine but remained silent for the remainder of the drive home. When we pulled into the garage, he climbed out of the car, walked around to my side, and lifted me out without a word. I just rested my head in the crook of his neck and let me sweep me up the stairs to our bedroom.

Conner set me on the end of the bed. “Don’t move,” he admonished before he disappeared into the adjoining bathroom.

There was no chance of that. With all the adrenaline out of my body, I felt as though my limbs were boneless and out of my control.

I heard the water come on in the bathtub before a shirtless Conner appeared. After he clipped my hair to the top of my head, he helped me stand and proceeded to strip my clothes off until I stood before him naked

and shaking just a little. He gathered me in his arms and took me into the bathroom. Gently he set me in the steaming water. It smelled like lavender and I realized he must have put some bath salts in the tub.

He rose. "Lean back and relax for a moment. I'll be right back."

I did as he said. A few seconds later I sighed as the trembling in my arms and legs began to subside and the heat seeped into my bones. My eyelids were getting heavy when he returned with a half-filled decanter and brandy glass in his hand. Conner splashed a little of the honey colored liquor into the glass and knelt by the tub. Carefully, he cupped the back of my head and brought the glass to my lips.

Obediently I took a sip, keeping my eyes on him. The liquid felt warm going down and the heat spread to my extremities as I took another drink.

I leaned back in the tub. "What is that?" I asked.

He set the glass on the table next to the tub. "Cognac. It will help with the shock."

At his words, it struck me that the distant, shaky feeling I was experiencing actually was shock. I began to shiver again. Taking one of my cleansing wipes, he removed what was left of my make-up.

Conner gathered a washcloth and a bottle of bath gel. He wet the cloth, poured some gel into it, and worked it into lather. Leisurely he began to wash my arms and chest. He motioned for me to lean forward and then washed my back in long, relaxing strokes.

"I was kidnapped tonight," I murmured, my fear beginning to build again.

"Shhh." Conner's voice was soothing as he continued to wash me. He moved from my back and shoulders to my chest and abdomen. "Stand up," he said.

In smooth motions he washed my legs and even between them.

“Lie back in the water.”

I followed his terse instructions, allowing him to care for me as though I were a child. He made sure all the lather was rinsed from my skin. I rose from the water again with his help. Conner wrapped a huge bath sheet around me and began to dry my skin with soft strokes. Once I was almost dry, he draped the towel over my shoulders and brought the brandy glass to my lips again.

“Drink just a little more.”

I took the glass from his hands and drained the last bit of liquid from it. I felt the heat of the liquor spread across my chest as it went down. Once I finished, Conner put the glass on the counter and lifted me again. He set me next to the bed and removed the towel. He must have turned down the bed when he went to get the cognac because the duvet was at the foot of the mattress.

“Get in the center of the bed and lie on your stomach. I’m going to give you a rubdown,” he said.

I did as he said, more obedient than I had ever been in my life, and closed my eyes. I heard him go back into the bathroom. A few seconds later he returned and the mattress shifted as he climbed onto the bed. He straddled my buttocks and I realized he was no longer wearing his slacks, only his boxer briefs. I heard the click of a bottle top.

After a few moments Conner’s palms touched my back right over my shoulder blades. He must have warmed the oil up before putting his hands on me because it was almost hot. I sighed deeply as he gently caressed my skin. Then, as I relaxed more, he began to dig deeper into the muscle, working the knots with his fingers and thumbs. When he hit a particularly tight spot, I tensed a little and sucked in a breath.

The pressure lessened a little as his thumb continued to work the knot. “Just breathe slowly and deeply,” he instructed.

I did as he said and the muscle finally relaxed. After a while, he moved his attentions down to my legs. With long, sure strokes of his fingers, he worked the tightness out of my calves and hamstrings.

Once he finished with my legs he worked his way up my back, then outward to my arms and neck. I wasn’t sure how long he massaged me but by the time he was finished, I was boneless and felt as though I would just melt through the bed.

I hovered on the edge of sleep as Conner used something to wipe the excess oil off my skin. I heard the lamp click off before his body stretched out next to mine. Rolling me onto my side, he curved his body around me from behind. There was not one inch of me that wasn’t in contact with his skin. My shoulders against his chest, my lower back and buttocks against his pelvis, and the backs of my thighs and calves were curved around the front of his legs.

“Sleep,” he said. And like all his other commands that night, I obeyed. The darkness was welcome as it rose up to meet me.

Sometime later the darkness was no longer serene. Something was waiting for me in the black. I turned away, searching for even a pinprick of light to help me find escape. I heard the scrape of shoes behind me and immediately took flight. Panicked, I ran through the darkness, tripping and staggering as I brushed past objects. In horror I realized that I was passing bodies and arms and hands tried to snag my clothing and limbs, to capture me.

Finally grasping hands did catch me. I thrashed wildly, desperate to escape.

I heard Conner’s voice, “Donna!”

I turned my head. "I'm here! Help me, Conner."

The hands holding me shook me hard. I screamed and fought with everything I had.

"Wake up now," Conner demanded, his voice stern.

I opened my eyes and stared up at his face. Panting, my eyes darted to the room around me and I realized I was in our bed. When I realized I was home and that I was safe, my face crumpled, and the first sob felt like it was being ripped out of my lungs.

Conner sat up and easily shifted my body so I was curled up in his lap. He rocked me like a child as my tears fell against his chest. I had never cried so hard in my life. I clenched my hand over his shoulder and wailed. All the pain and fear that had built within me that evening poured out, washed away by a storm of tears. As quickly as it came over me, the storm died. My breathing was harsh as the last of the terror faded away, leaving me hollow and exhausted.

When he sensed I was better, Conner moved me off his lap and pulled the covers up to my chest as I reclined on the pillows. He climbed out of bed and went into the bathroom. I noticed he had left the light on and the door cracked so that the bedroom had not been in complete darkness as we slept. Almost as if he knew the nightmares would come.

A few minutes later, he returned with a damp washcloth and a small cup of water. He started to dab my face with the cloth but I stilled his hand. I took the cloth myself and pressed it lightly to my swollen eyes before I wiped the last streaks of drying tears from my face.

A slight smile appeared on his face as he handed me the cup of water. Tired beyond comprehension, I drained the cup and gave it back to him.

"Why are you smiling?" I asked as I leaned back and placed the cloth back over my eyes.

“You’re returning to your normal self,” he commented.

I wanted to glare at him, but the cool cloth felt wonderful and I didn’t want to move it so that I could see his arrogant face.

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

I felt Conner’s fingers brushing my hair back from my face. He must have removed my clip sometime in the night because my hair was loose and clinging to my forehead.

“When we arrived earlier tonight, you allowed me to care for you as I would a child. I bathed you, even held a glass to your lips. Now you are exerting your independence as you typically do, insisting on doing everything for yourself even though you are almost too tired to hold your eyes open. I’m glad to see it.”

I snorted but didn’t respond. He did have a point. It had driven several of my boyfriends crazy in the past, my need to do things for myself and maintain my independence. Realizing I was about to fall asleep, I slid the washcloth off my face and handed it back to him.

His smile spread across his face fully when he saw my expression. “I see that your spirit was only subdued by tonight’s events and not broken.”

“That’s me, tough as nails,” I quipped, throwing my arm over my eyes. “Can we talk later? I just want to sleep for a year or two.”

I heard Conner moving around before he pulled me to him again. I tucked my forehead against his throat, put my hand over his heart, and threw my thigh over his leg. This was my favorite sleeping position with my big Highlander.

“As you wish,” he said.

Only Conner could surprise me by quoting my favorite movie. I was still smiling as I fell asleep, no longer fearing the darkness or the nightmares that had chased me earlier.

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Seventeen

“Goddammit, Donna. You are staying home today.”

Wearing only a lacy black bra and panties, I put my hands on my hips and stared at the big, stupid vampire standing between me and my clothes.

“Of course I’m going to work. It’s only my second day on the job. How the fuck would I look if I don’t show up?”

Conner growled at me and, coupled with the fact he was damp and wearing only a towel, my lady parts vibrated with interest. Silently I told my hormones to stand down. I needed to convince him that I would be fine.

“I don’t give a fuck how it looks,” he said, his accent thickening, “Your safety is my first and only concern.”

That was the only reason I wasn’t currently throwing objects at his head. I knew Conner’s bossy behavior was stemming from his worry for me. After the kidnapping attempt on Friday, he hadn’t let me out of his sight. His men hadn’t been able to find Parker or the man who I had seen Parker arguing with. Conner was convinced that Vanessa Santino had something to do with the whole situation but he wouldn’t have proof unless he found

Parker. Fucking Parker Hanes. I wish I had kicked him in the balls when I had the chance.

The only way Conner was going to be able to keep me at home was if he stayed here with me. However he had meetings today that he couldn't miss and I intended to go to work.

"Conner, I'll be fine."

"Damn right you will, lass, even if I have to haul you down to the basement and lock you in again."

I screamed in frustration and threw my hands in the air. It appeared we were having our first official fight as a couple.

"You don't understand. I have to do this. I can't live my life afraid and hiding every time something bad happens," I said.

"And I can't stay focused on finding that walking dead man you used to call a boss if I'm constantly worried for your safety," he retorted.

I huffed out a hard breath. This was getting me nowhere. Instead, I decided to try a different tack. I walked to Conner and laid a hand on his chest.

"Can't we come to some sort of compromise?" I pleaded. I hated to beg, but I knew I would go crazy if he started locking me in his McMansion again.

He studied me as though he were trying to read my thoughts. Maybe he was. Or maybe he was just trying to read my emotions. Finally, the tension went out of his shoulders and he sighed.

"We can come to a compromise but on my terms."

"Um, Conner, that is the exact opposite of a compromise. If you're the only one who gets your way it isn't compromise, it's fascism."

He gave a short bark of laughter before his face turned serious again. "No. I am going to give a little. You come with me to my office while I

conduct my meeting. I'll call your boss at Savage Technology and tell him that I needed you for a temporary assignment this morning. This afternoon we will work out of your office."

"We?" I asked.

"If you think I'm letting you go anywhere without me after Friday, you're bonkers."

I giggled at the term he used. "Bonkers?"

"Mad. Insane. Loony."

I supposed that this was the best I was going to get without ending up in the basement apartment again.

"Okay, but it's going to look pretty strange if you start coming to work with me every day."

Conner sighed. "Well, Savage Technology hasn't been performing very well this year. I've intended to investigate ways to improve things within the company. This is as good a time as any for me to look into company efficiency and perhaps meet with my Marketing President and Senior Vice-President to design a marketing plan."

I smiled widely at him. He really did intend to compromise. I rose on tiptoe and kissed his cheek.

"You're going to have to do better than that to make it up to me," he muttered darkly.

I leaned into him, letting my hand trail down his side to his hip where the towel met skin. "Do you remember that tie you were wearing Friday?" I asked.

He nodded, his eyes flaring. Their color lightened to the electric blue that I had grown to love. It meant that I was pushing him to the limits of his control.

I put my mouth to his ear, my body pressed to his from shoulder to hip. “Do you remember what I wanted you to do to me with that tie?”

He growled low in his throat and I felt the vibration of it against my chest. Oh he remembered all right.

“If we do that tonight, will we be even?” I asked, leaning back and batting my eyelashes at him.

Conner grabbed me and kissed me hard and thoroughly. He set me away. “No. We won’t be even.”

I pouted. “What do I have to do?”

He touched my cheek with the back of his hand. “You make it worth it just by being you. I may tease you that you owe me but there will never be debts between us. Even if there were, I would not want you to feel you had to repay them with your body.”

I blinked at him, tears threatening to fill my eyes. “Stop being so fucking sweet,” I demanded.

He threw his head back and laughed. “You’re the only woman in the world who would hate sweetness from her lover.”

I stomped on his foot before I slipped around him and headed toward my half of the enormous walk-in closet.

Conner’s arms wrapped around me from behind, holding me hard and fast. His voice was low and rough in my ear when he spoke. “Since you dislike sweetness, perhaps I should turn you over my knee and see if that improves your disposition.”

A shiver ran through me, and my nipples hardened. I’d never had a man spank me before but hearing Conner say those words in that accented voice, well, it made me want to jump him then and there.

He dragged his nose up the length of my neck and inhaled deeply. “You smell like arousal and fear. There’s no better combination to a vampire.

Have I discovered a secret fetish?"

God he was turning me inside out. I opened my mouth to speak but had to clear my throat. "I don't know. I've never had a man spank me before."

"But you would like to."

It wasn't a question so I didn't respond.

As suddenly as his arms had come around me, Conner released me and swatted me on the ass. I jumped and stifled a moan. Jesus, who knew I had a little kinky streak?

"Get dressed or we'll be late for my meeting," he said.

I glanced over my shoulder and saw the unholy gleam in his eyes. Fuck. He was going to torture me all day. I could tell just by looking at him.

It was my turn to growl at him, not out of arousal but anger. "Fine, fangboy. Just know that two can play this game."

His amusement seemed to hang in the very air as we both dressed in silence. After we finished getting ready, I made toast for myself while Conner left a message for my boss on his voicemail.

Since I had moved in, I noticed that Conner hadn't been lying when he said he rarely ate. He almost never ate breakfast with me. Even when he made dinner, he often just sat with me at the table and drank a glass of wine while I ate. He said he found it erotic to watch me enjoy a meal he prepared with such gusto.

He did drink coffee though, so I made us both travel mugs for our drive into his office downtown. It felt very domestic to do a little chore like that for him. I liked getting ready with him in the morning, and I realized that I liked climbing into the car with him to drive to work. Instead of listening to crappy morning radio shows, we bickered and laughed. I had never experienced this level of intimacy with a man before.

Sure I had boyfriends, but they didn't inspire the closeness I felt to Conner. Everything just clicked. That's when I knew that I had made the right decision to agree to the Claiming, even after such a short time together. It wasn't about the big things. Sure, Conner was gorgeous, had more money than God, and made my legs numb with pleasure when we made love, but that hadn't convinced me. It was the little things. Him cooking dinner for me several nights a week. Treating me so gently after the kidnapping attempt. Appreciating the deep-seated independent streak in my personality and the sarcasm that inevitably flowed from my mouth without a second thought.

I looked at Conner with new eyes as he wove through the downtown Dallas traffic. He glanced over at me.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

Yet another reason I made the right decision. He honestly cared about my feelings.

"I love you," I said.

Somehow he knew I'd just had an epiphany because he took a moment to really look at me when he said, "And I love you."

A little devil perched on my shoulder and I couldn't resist goading him a little. After a heartfelt moment, I needed to lighten things up. Traffic was heavy and moving slowly so I knew I would have time to tease him a bit.

"So Savage isn't a very Scottish surname. How did you come by it?" I asked.

He gave me a strange look at the quick change of subject. "Pardon?"

"Well, your last name is Savage. That's not Scottish. How did you end up with that name?"

Conner shook his head. "Your mind works in the strangest ways," he commented, "and the name Savage is actually Scottish. It just wasn't the

name I was born with.”

I sipped my coffee. “Are you gonna answer me or what?”

He sighed. “My friend, Asher, he’s French.” He paused.

I just waited and stared at him. When he realized I wasn’t going to let the subject drop, he finally continued. “When I met Asher, I was wild and in a bit of trouble. It was the early eighteen hundreds, and I had done some things in Paris that made me very unpopular with a certain crowd. I met Asher when I was attempting to escape a particularly murderous mob. He was kind enough to help me out.”

“But how did you end up with name?” I prodded.

“Back then I was a bit wild. I was a little over a hundred years old and still intoxicated with my immortality. When he was helping me to escape France, Asher suggested I change my name. He said I was *sauvage*. That’s Old French and he explained that it roughly translates to wild or untamed. So I chose the name Savage. It was Scottish in origin so it wouldn’t seem at odds with my accent, and it was fairly accurate. Asher was right. It was a good fit.”

I fiddled with my coffee mug. “So what was the name you were born with?”

Conner grinned. “Nothing so exotic sounding. My surname was Robertson as my father was named Robert.”

I resisted rolling my eyes. “Donna Robertson doesn’t sound so bad, but Donna Savage does have a nicer ring to it.”

Traffic had finally thinned out, and we were pulling into the parking garage below his office building downtown. Well, the building where his office was located. Then again, he may have owned the whole building. I wasn’t sure.

He pulled into his parking spot. It had his name on it and everything. After he shut off his car, he looked over at me.

“Are you saying you’ll marry me?”

“I don’t recall being asked,” I said. “I was just making a comment.”

He grinned. I had been caught and we both knew it. For all my hemming and hawing about not wanting to consider marriage for a while longer, maybe years longer, I was obviously thinking about it.

“That’s okay,” he said. “You can wait until you’re asked.”

I shot him an ugly look.

“Well I won’t say yes unless you’ve met my family and my girls.”

“Your girls?” he asked as we climbed out of his car.

I got into the elevator and stood next to him. “Yes, my girls: Ivie, Ricki, Shannon, and Kerry. We try to go out together once or twice a month and get into as much trouble as possible without going to jail. They’re like the sisters I never had. Or the spawns of Satan. It depends on the time of the month.”

Conner laughed as the elevator rose up to the thirtieth floor. Not quite the top but close. I guess he didn’t own the building after all.

“I can’t wait to meet your friends. Why don’t you set something up for next week?”

I gawked at him. “Are you sure? I mean you’re the one concerned about one of your fellow bloodsuckers trying to make sure I stop breathing.”

“Well, invite them to the house,” he said.

I moved so that I was standing directly in front of him and pulled him down by his tie so that we were at eye level. “Seriously, you don’t know what you’re saying. If I invite them to your house, I’m worried they’ll either try to move in or lock me in the basement so they can chain you to the bed and use you as their sex slave.”

His eyes twinkled. “Surely you’re exaggerating. I mean it’s only four women.”

I let go of his tie, smoothing it down his chest, before I resumed my position standing beside him. “And I think you’re underestimating the creativity of four horny women. Especially when there’s alcohol involved, which there always is.”

“Now I’m completely intrigued. Please invite them over for dinner or maybe a pool party. I imagine it will be entertaining.”

I sighed. Conner’s indoor pool would provide a temptation I knew none of my friends could resist. “Okay. Just know that if we have a pool party there will be nudity. I doubt Ricki could resist skinny dipping in that hedonistic water feature you call a pool. I mean it rivals the grotto at the Playboy Mansion for crying out loud.”

He was still laughing when the elevator doors opened. When we stepped off, I saw that heads had swiveled toward us and there were several mouths hanging open in shock. Conner walked through the office smiling and saying hello to people. Even his assistant was gaping at him when he greeted her.

“Hello, Courtney. Please hold my calls for about half an hour. I have to prep for my nine o’clock meeting.” He paused before he opened the door to the office. “Oh, and this is Donna, my fiancée.”

Courtney’s eyes widened until I thought they were going to pop out of her skull. I noticed as I followed Conner into the office that she snatched up her phone and was punching numbers rapidly. I guess the gossip was going to spread quickly that Conner Savage not only had a woman, he had a *fiancée*.

I closed the office door behind me. “Do you ever laugh when you’re at work?”

Conner was already checking his email and his phone messages at his desk. “What?” he asked distractedly.

I walked to his desk and rested a hip on it. I placed a foot on his chair and gave it a light shove to get his attention. “When your people realized that it was you laughing on that elevator, the office went completely silent. Didn’t you notice?”

He gave me a blank look. “I don’t understand.”

I laughed. “Conner, those people acted like they had never seen you smile much less laugh. Are you really that intimidating when you’re at work?”

Conner suddenly grew serious. “Donna, until I met you, I think it had been six months since I found something humorous enough to laugh.”

I stared at him in disbelief. I had sensed that he wasn’t a man given to expression of emotion when I met him, but six months was a long damn time. “You hadn’t laughed in six months?” I asked incredulously.

Conner shook his head and I realized that every smile, every laugh I managed to wring from him really was a gift. His smile and his laugh were both beautiful and it seemed he shared them mostly with me.

He got to his feet and stood in front of me. “Do you understand now why I said you made me feel human for the first time in over a century? Before I was turned, I was as savage as the name Asher chose for me. I was also passionate and loved to carouse. Through the centuries I learned not show emotions, such as anger and sadness, even joy. When one lives as long as I have, one makes enemies. With you I don’t have to repress that part of myself.”

Conner cupped my face. “You are the other part of my soul.”

I leaned forward to kiss him but the phone on his desk buzzed. He sighed and stepped away from me.

Pressing a button on the handset he said, “Yes, Courtney?”

“I’m sorry to bother you, Mr. Savage, but Mr. Barnes is here.”

He gave me a rueful look. “Thank you. Please give me a few minutes and I’ll be out to greet Mr. Barnes. See if he would like some refreshment while he waits.”

I straightened from my reclining position at the desk. “Is there an empty office or conference room I can use while I wait for you? I have some things I need to do for work and I need to start organizing that pool party.”

Conner grinned broadly enough to have his dimples popping out. “I can’t wait. Follow me.”

He walked to a door on the opposite side of the office. I assumed it led to a private restroom but instead it led to a bedroom. I looked at him with arched brows and he shrugged.

“Sometimes I work late and it’s easier to stay at the office than go home.” He pointed to a desk against the far wall. “I thought you could work at the desk in here until the meeting is over, and then I will take you to your office and you can relegate me to a corner as well.”

I smirked. “I don’t have a desk in the corner of my office. You’ll have to sit in the floor.”

“Anything for you.”

Eighteen

I watched Ricki, Ivie, Kerry, and Shannon stare in awe as they walked up the steps to Conner's McMansion. My chest felt tight from nerves. I was a little worried how the girls would react to the palatial home that I was now living in. Actually I was more worried about how they would react when they found out I was living here and that I let the lease go on my apartment. I could see this night descending into a clusterfuck of epic proportions.

“Don’t be so nervous, Donna. The ladies love me.”

I was sure that most women did. I shot him a sidelong look. “I’m not sure my friends qualify as ladies and they will love you.” I paused. “Eventually.”

“Well I could always make them think they love me.”

I elbowed him. “No mindfucking my girls.”

When I threw open the front door to welcome them, Conner was still laughing. All three of them stopped short and stared.

Ricki was the first to speak. “Holy fucking shit, I think I just had an orgasm.”

Leave it to Ricki to vocalize exactly how I felt the first time I saw Conner laugh.

They all stared at Conner like he was a god. I think a couple of them drooled. I snapped my fingers in front of their faces and they woke up from their trance.

“Hi, girls. This is Conner, my boyfriend. Conner, this is Ivie, Ricki, Kerry, and Shannon.”

He nodded to them. “Ladies, welcome to my home. Please come in.”

I gestured the women to follow me. I knew that they were staring at the obvious wealth around them just as I had the first time I came to his home. Conner’s house was tastefully done but the furnishings were obviously expensive. They were nudging each other and whispering. I knew that I would be getting the third degree as soon as we were all alone together.

We trouped into the kitchen where Conner and I had set out plates of cheese, crackers, and fruit. I had also mixed two pitchers of sangria, one of which I had hidden in the refrigerator. If I put all the booze out at the beginning of the night, the girls would drink it all and start in on whatever else was handy. Conner’s bar was well-stocked with expensive hard liquors. As much as I loved my girls, I didn’t want the very first girls’ night in at Conner’s to cost him hundreds of dollars in alcohol. He might never let them visit me again.

I poured everyone a glass, including Conner. Pleasantries were exchanged.

Out of nowhere, Shannon burst out, “My God, you’re the sexiest man I’ve ever seen.”

I rolled my eyes and waited to see how Conner would handle this. I knew my girlfriends well enough to stay the hell out of it.

He glanced at me and realized immediately that I would be no help.
“Why thank you, Shannon.”

Ivie looked at me. “I like his accent. Do you make him talk dirty to you during sex with that accent? I bet that would be hot.”

Ricki popped a piece of cheese into her mouth. “I think his ass is hotter.”

“Is he hung?” Kerry asked.

It was the last question that got a reaction out of Conner. He choked on his sangria. All my girls dissolved into gales of laughter.

I looked at him and said, “I warned you.”

“Warned him about what?” Ricki teased.

I looked at them. “About you crazy bitches.”

“Hey!” Ivie exclaimed.

Things were about to descend into a good-natured catfight when Conner interrupted, “Would you ladies like a tour?”

“Good idea,” I said, “the next thing you know they’ll be asking you how much money you make and what your five year plan consists of.”

There was a chorus of denials from my friends and good natured ribbing. After everyone calmed down and topped off their glasses of sangria, Conner began the tour. They loved the light in the living room and the dark wood paneling in the study. There was a lot of oohing and ahing over his ballroom.

Conner was even kind enough to show them the guest rooms upstairs.

He even chuckled when Shannon threw herself on the bed in what I jokingly called the ‘White Room’.

“It’s like lying in a cloud,” she sighed. “Can I move in with you? I’ll pay rent and be very, very quiet.”

That's when Kerry spouted off, "Yeah right. As soon as you found out where his bedroom was you'd try to sneak into his bed."

That's when Shannon's head popped up. "Can I see your room?" she asked shamelessly.

I dragged her off the bed. "Okay, that's enough. Tour over. Time to swim."

The girls groaned but didn't argue as Conner led them downstairs to the indoor pool. When we reached the pool, the girls squealed. I didn't blame them. The pool was gorgeous with tile mosaics on the walls and lush green plants. It was decided that we would move the party in there.

We went back to the kitchen to collect their bags and, of course, the food and sangria. When we all settled back in the indoor pool area, the girls began to grill Conner. Ricki knew about his businesses but they were merciless in their quest for dirt.

"Have you ever been married?" Kerry asked.

Conner only shook his head.

"Killed any ex-lovers and buried them in the backyard?" This was from Shannon. I was pretty sure that the sangria was kicking her ass.

He grinned but didn't respond.

Of course, Ivie had to be the most outrageous. "Threesomes or orgies?"

"I prefer to keep things simple," he said.

Ivie looked at me. "Notice he didn't answer."

I waved a hand in the air. "Oh I don't care what he did before he met me as long as he keeps his dick in his pants now."

My friends looked at him expectantly.

"Why would I want another woman when I have Donna?"

With that charming statement he passed the test. The girls laid off of him and decided to change and go swimming. Conner told them he would

see them later and let us catch up. They said good-bye to him and disappeared into the dressing room.

He stood and leaned over my chair to give me a kiss. "I have some things to take care of. I'll see you later."

"You did well," I told him. "But if I were you I would prepare for the Spanish Inquisition when they find out I'm living here. Or maybe something more akin to the Salem Witch Trials."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because I've only known you for about two months. They're going to think that I acted impetuously."

"You did," he said simply.

I glared at him and change the subject. "Does this business include hunting down my ex-boss?"

"Yes," he answered. "It also includes finding a way to prove that Vanessa was a part of it. If I can find that proof, then it will be so much easier to deal with her."

"Deal with her how?" I asked.

He leveled his bright blue eyes at me and they were cold as the Antarctic. "Permanently."

I shivered and watched him stride out of the room. That vampire was on a mission and God help Parker when Conner got his hands on him. I tried to summon some empathy for my ex-boss but was sadly short. He screwed me over and gotten me fired and then he kidnapped me and planned to do God knew what to me.

"Is this a party or what?" Shannon asked as she came out of the dressing room in her suit.

I hauled myself out of my chair and went to turn on some music. Soon we were all sitting in the enormous hot tub, catching up.

After a while, the girls focused their conversation on me.

“I bet it’s hard to go back to your apartment after spending a few nights here,” Ivie commented.

Shit. I had hoped I could skip telling the girls about moving in with Conner.

“I let the lease on the apartment go.” I took a huge gulp of my wine and waited.

“Well, where are you living?” Ricki asked.

“Here.”

“What?!” Shannon screeched.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” This was Ricki chiming in again. “You’ve known this guy, what, all of six weeks? And now you’re living with him?”

I drained the rest of my glass and reached out an arm to snag the pitcher holding the sangria. I refilled my glass.

“Yes, I’m living with him,” I answered.

Kerry interrupted the third degree. “Girls, leave Donna alone.”

The rest of the group gaped at her, me included.

“She never makes decisions without thinking them through. I’m sure she gave it a lot of thought before she took such a huge step.”

Kerry wasn’t exactly right, but I decided to take the out she was giving me.

“This is serious,” I said. “I’m in love with him.”

Even though I could tell that Ricki wanted to continue to lecture me, they all fell silent.

Shannon broke first, “How in the hell did you manage to snag such a sexy son of a bitch anyway? I’m tempted to knock you out and put you on a ship to Kathmandu so I can steal him.”

The tension of the moment disappeared and my perverted girlfriends were back.

“So... do you see God when you guys have sex?” Kerry asked with fake innocence.



Two hours later, the party was winding down. The plates of food had been consumed and the pitchers of sangria drained. I hadn't realized how much I missed hanging out with my friends. I vowed to be sure and make time for them in the future when I didn't have a psychotic vampire that wanted me dead and an ex-boss that had kidnapped me for reasons unknown.

Ivie and I waved as Kerry drove Shannon and Ricki away from the house. Ivie had driven her own vehicle since she lived in the opposite direction of the other girls.

I was walking her to her car when she stopped suddenly. “I’m sorry I gave you a hard time about living with Conner.”

I shrugged. “You really didn’t. I know you just don’t want me to get hurt.”

Ivie threw her bag in the passenger seat of her car. “I don’t, and this guy just seems so out of our league.”

“Our?” I asked.

She looked at me sideways. “You know what I mean.”

I did. Conner was out of my league. Way, way out. I made good money when I worked in advertising and I would again but I didn’t have the pedigree that someone with Conner’s money and standing normally would have socialized with. Though Conner was a vampire, which changed a lot.

He hadn't started out with this kind of money, and it had taken him centuries to acquire it.

Unfortunately, I couldn't tell her that. Instead I said, "I do know what you mean but understand me when I say that Conner's different."

She nodded. "Okay. You know him better than I do and he seems like an okay guy, so I trust your judgment." She stopped and acted as though she wanted to say something. "There is something different about him, though."

I froze. Surely she didn't suspect. I mean it would be ludicrous for her to make the assumption that he was a vampire.

"The way he moves. It's almost animalistic. So graceful and quick. Like a big cat."

If she only knew. Conner was a predator down to his bones.

"You would tell me if something was going on, right?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Okay. Well, I'm going to head home."

I leaned over and hugged her. "Text me when you get there. It's late."

She laughed and headed around the car. "Yes, Mom."

I turned to go back into the house and heard a high pitched noise that made all the hair on my body stand up. I whirled around and saw the same huge guy that had been arguing with Parker on Friday. He had Ivie's limp body draped over his shoulder.

"Ivie!" I screamed, running down the steps.

I saw another man turning toward me and the light glinting off his fangs. Shit. Vampires. I turned back to go into the house to get Conner. I hated to abandon her but there was no way I could rescue Ivie from two vampires by myself. Conner could, but I would only end up as a blood donor.

In less than two steps the other vampire was on me. His arms wrapped around me from behind.

“Where ya goin’ in such a hurry, girlie?” he whispered in my ear. I opened my mouth to scream again, but his hand slapped over it. “None of that. Now I’d love to stay and woo you more, but we need to get out of here before your man comes out. The boys in the house can only keep him occupied for so long.”

With that, he lifted me as though I were no heavier than a bag of potatoes and carried me to a van. He moved with supernatural speed, and I felt my stomach rise. For a moment I thought I would vomit, but I forced it back. I wouldn’t give them the satisfaction of seeing me weak.

He practically threw me in the back of the van next to Ivie’s limp body. I tried to sit up, to move back to the door, when I felt something jab my leg. I looked down and saw that he held a syringe in his hand, and the needle was buried in my thigh.

My head swam. “Motherfucking, cocksucking son of a bitch. Not again,” I said. Seriously, this had to stop.

The last thing I saw was his narrow, smiling face before the darkness closed over my head.

Nineteen

I heard the murmur of voices as I awoke. My stomach churned violently. I choked and gagged but somehow managed not to vomit. Jesus, what the fuck had they given me? My head rolled back on my shoulders, and I looked around the dim room.

“Ah, look who decided to join us.”

I turned my head toward the voice and blinked to clear my vision. I recognized the woman speaking but I wanted to look her in the eye. I might be in a position of weakness, but I wasn’t fucking weak.

The smug face of that bitch Vanessa Santino greeted me. She sat in a chair a few feet to my right, long legs crossed. The dark pink dress she wore looked phenomenal against her olive skin. It struck me that she would be an extremely beautiful woman if she wasn’t such a fucking psycho. Seeing that she had my full attention Vanessa rose from her chair and smoothed down her dress. I noticed that she was wearing gorgeous Louboutins. They were golden and glittery. I wanted those shoes badly.

I wondered if I had brain damage from being knocked out so many times recently. What woman in her right mind would covet expensive

designer shoes when her life was in danger? Either I wasn't in my right mind or those shoes were totally worth it.

Vanessa snapped her perfectly manicured fingers in front of my face and I had to squash the urge to bite them. The bitch had fangs, and it would hurt a lot more if she bit me back.

"I need your complete attention, dear."

I gritted my teeth at her condescending tone. If she was going to kill me, my last wish was that I wouldn't have to listen to her speak before she did so.

When she saw that my focus was back on her, Vanessa smiled a cat-like smile. "Thank you. I'm sorry, what was your name again?"

I stared at her. She honestly wanted to play this game? I decided that silence would be my friend here. I was afraid what I would say to her if I opened my mouth. I was also concerned what the consequences might be.

When I didn't answer she just went on as though I had. "I'm glad you're awake so that we can have a little chat."

She prowled around my chair and the hair on the back of my neck stood up on end.

"Why, after my very explicit directive, did you continue to see Conner?" she asked. "You shouldn't have been able to do that." She bent over so that she was eye to eye with me. "Explain."

I felt my heart jump into my throat and swallowed hard. Her dark eyes were devoid of emotion. They were dead, like a snake's. Pure predatory, animalistic instinct. She would kill me and feel no shred of remorse because that's just who she was.

"Um, what do you want me to explain?"

"I compelled you to stay away from Conner Savage, yet somehow you were Claimed by him. How did that happen?"

I decided my safest bet was to play dumb. I didn't want her to understand that I could resist vampire mind control.

"I don't know what you're talking about. I only remember meeting you at Conner's house a few weeks ago." I sent a silent prayer to heaven that she would come to the conclusion I wanted her to.

She straightened and tapped the toe of her fabulous shoes. "It must have been Conner. He must have wiped our little meeting from your mind."

Thank God. Vanessa really wasn't as smart as she liked to think if she fell for that.

She crossed her arms. "It's too bad that he couldn't have just let you go. It would have been so much easier for everyone."

I heard a scuffle. I looked around the room to see where the sound was coming from. I realized that I was in a plain cinder block room. The only furniture in it were the chairs that Vanessa and I had been sitting in.

The big vampire I had seen talking to Parker came through the door on the far wall. In front of him was Ivie. He shoved her through the door with a hand on the nape of her neck and another on her shoulder. She was trying to yank out of his grasp, but it was a futile effort. I wanted to tell her that but knew she wouldn't understand why.

When Ivie saw me she cried out, "Oh thank God you're okay!"

The big vampire released her and she dashed across the room to me. Vanessa watched her with absolutely no concern. She fell to her knees and threw her arms around me.

"Are you okay?" Ivie whispered.

I hugged her back. "I'm alright."

She leaned back. "Do you know what they want?"

Unsure how to explain it, I shrugged. "I think they want money."

Her face grew even more distressed. "We don't have any money."

I smiled sadly and smoothed a few sweaty strands of hair off her forehead. “We don’t, but Conner does. I wasn’t exactly honest with you guys tonight about our relationship. We’re kind of engaged. I think they want him to pay a ransom for us.”

Her eyes grew huge. “If we weren’t in deep shit right now, I would totally bitch slap you for not telling me. And what does ‘sort of engaged’ mean?”

I sighed. “We want to get married but we’re not in a huge hurry. I told him I didn’t want to jump into it and he’s respecting my wishes.”

Vanessa interrupted our whispered conversation. “This is touching, but we have other things to discuss.”

Ivie looked over at her. “Whatever you want, I’m sure that her man will pay it or get it for you.”

Vanessa’s answering smile was cold. “Oh I’m sure he will.” She looked over at the big vampire. “Otto, why don’t you make Donna’s little friend more comfortable?”

Ivie stiffened. “I’m fine. I would like to stay with my friend, please.”

I was proud of her calm response, but I had a bad feeling that Vanessa’s idea of comfortable was the exact opposite.

Otto and Vanessa chuckled and ignored her.

“Yes, Ms. Santino,” he answered.

With that he came and grabbed Ivie by her hair this time. She cried out and reached up to grab his hand with both of hers. He started dragging her toward the door.

“No!” Ivied screamed.

I started to get up from my chair. The cocky bitch hadn’t even tied me to the chair this time. Vanessa was suddenly standing in front of me, and I fell back in the seat.

"Oh no, Donna. I have other plans for you. I'm sure Otto and your friend will be just fine." She glanced over her shoulder. "Otto dear?"

He stopped and looked at her.

"Have fun. You have carte blanche."

He grinned and yanked Ivie's hair viciously. She screamed, her back arching at an unnatural angle. Then I watched helplessly as he dragged my friend out the door.

I looked at Vanessa. "She doesn't have anything to do with this. Just let her go," I said. "I'll do whatever you want if you'll just let her leave safely."

I heard another high pitched scream from my friend, and my blood ran cold. Oh God, they were going to kill her and all she had done was come to see me at Conner's house. Tears welled up in my eyes. I had never felt so hopeless. I had no way to defend myself or my friend from these vampires. It crossed my mind that I should have let Conner turn me weeks ago. I would have been able to at least fight them.

Vanessa laughed. "It's too late for that now, Donna. I'm afraid that neither of you will be going home."

The door opened again only this time Parker Hanes was standing there rather than Otto and Ivie. I heard another scream but farther away and knew that my friend was in trouble. I wanted to scream in frustration myself.

Vanessa beckoned him and Parker came into the room, his face strangely devoid of emotion.

"Yes, Mistress," he said.

I rolled my eyes. Jesus Christ, he sounded like a vampire flunky from a bad horror movie. I had to fight back another gag as he came to her and kissed her hand reverently.

"What can I do for you this evening, Mistress? Would you like a foot massage or perhaps some blood?"

I realized that Parker *was* a flunkie straight out of a bad horror movie. Vanessa had brainwashed him.

“No thank you, Parker. Did you do the other task I set for you?”

He nodded eagerly. “Yes, Mistress. I emailed the pictures to Mr. Savage.”

“Good boy,” she said. “Now come back in an hour for further instruction.”

He bowed. He freaking bowed at her! “Yes, Mistress.”

Parker left the room and I gaped after him. I was beginning to get an idea of why he had kidnapped me last week. My ex-boss wasn’t the psycho, Vanessa was.

After he left the room, Vanessa looked back to me. “Your boss is a lovely, malleable man. It was so easy to get into his mind and bend him to my will.” She paused. “Though he did have some rather disturbing fantasies about you that involved handcuffs and a razor blade.”

I blinked but couldn’t stop the sarcastic response from escaping my lips. “I always thought he wanted to kill me.”

She arched a single eyebrow. I hated it. She looked so superior. It made me want to bitch slap her. “My dear, he wasn’t using the razor blade to kill you. In fact, he’s quite fond of you.”

When I realized what she was saying, I felt bile rise up in my throat. No wonder it was so easy for her to convince him to hurt me. He already wanted to. Not only did he want to, but the thought of hurting me turned him on. I decided then and there that, if I got out of this situation, I would tell Conner. Whatever he chose to do with Parker, I didn’t want to know. What I did know is that I didn’t ever want to see him ever again.

“What are you planning?” I asked Vanessa.

“I just want to teach Conner a lesson about crossing a woman like me.”

Teach him a lesson? “I thought that hurting the Claimed of another vampire was punishable by death.”

She waved a hand nonchalantly. “Oh it is. But you see, I’m not going to kill you. Parker is going to kill you. After he does that he will kill himself. Well, Otto will kill him, but he has become quite adept at making murder appear like suicide. Conner and eventually the police will find a shrine devoted to you in his home. Pictures, personal information, and journals detailing his intense desire to carve his name into your skin will be found there.”

I figured Conner would see straight through that plan, but he might have difficulty proving it to the council. Especially since his only human witness would be dead. Then again he might forgo the Council’s input and just kill Vanessa.

“I see you’ve got it all planned out,” I said.

She looked very proud of herself. Though I still didn’t think she was the genius that she thought she was, I did have to admit that her plan was logical and sound.

I realized I hadn’t heard Ivie scream again for a while, and my heart dropped. I really wasn’t sure if God existed, but if He did then I figured He would lend a hand. I prayed that she was still alive. While I was at it, I prayed that Conner would find us before Vanessa had Parker kill me and Otto killed Ivie.

Tears threatened to spill, but I forced them back. I would be damned if she would see me cry again.

She looked so fucking smug when I looked back at her that I really wanted to leap out of my chair and cunt punt her. Unfortunately, I knew that there was no way I could move quickly enough to catch her off guard, and if I attempted it she would probably snap my neck.

"Now, you wait here like a good girl. After Conner answers Parker's ransom demand, we'll move to the next stage of my little plan."

She swayed to the door on her expensive stilettos and left me alone in the cold, ugly cinder block room. I waited about ten minutes after she left before I hopped up and went to the door. Trying to be quiet about it, I put my hand on the doorknob. It was locked. I don't know what I had intended to do if it was open, but I couldn't just sit on my ass.

I prayed again that Ivie would be okay. I didn't want to imagine what Otto was doing to her. Since I couldn't go out that door, I looked around the room I was in. It was windowless. There was one other door near the corner. I had a sinking feeling it was a closet. I went to it and saw that I was right. There were cleaning supplies stacked on shelves.

I wished I knew more about chemistry. Then I could have built a bomb, blown a hole in the wall, and saved myself and Ivie. Unfortunately, that wasn't going to happen. I really wanted to remove one of the wooden mop handles to use as a weapon, but I knew all it would likely do was piss a vampire off. I could break it off to use as a stake, but I wasn't really clear on where I'd have to stab someone to hit the heart. If I were only dealing with Parker or humans, I wouldn't have hesitated to try to defend myself. I wasn't dealing with humans though. I was dealing with vampires, and they were faster, stronger, and far more likely to kill me. When it came to being a badass, I sucked.

With a sigh, I shut the closet door and went back to the chair in the middle of the room. As much as I hated it, my only option was to wait. Wait for Conner to come save me. Damsels in distress weren't my favorite kind of heroines in the romance novels I read. I preferred the woman who would fight tooth and nail for her happy ending. But in this situation I couldn't

fight. All I could do was have faith that Conner would do whatever it took to get me back safely.

I sat in that stupid fucking chair and waited. While I waited, I relived every single moment I had with Conner in the last two months. All the wonderful things and even the not-so-wonderful stuff. It seemed like an eternity before the door opened again. This time it was Parker and the skinny vampire that had thrown me in the van at Conner's house.

I glared at them both. Parker seemed unfazed, and the vampire just smirked at me. I had an urge to pick up my chair and try to break it over his head. I managed to hold it back. The vampire hung back by the door, and I realized that my ex-boss was on the phone.

"I want five million USD for her. You have twenty-four hours to get the money. I'll call you with further instructions," Parker said robotically.

I realized that Vanessa must have given him very explicit instructions on what to say. She'd made him her fucking puppet. Even knowing what he fantasized about me, I didn't think Parker honestly wanted to physically hurt me. Thinking about something and doing it were two different things. I also knew that Conner wouldn't give a shit about that and would probably snap his neck anyway. I tried to feel sorry for him, but all I could remember was the self-satisfied smirk on his face the day he fired me. Maybe I wasn't as good a person as I thought.

I was almost certain that Conner was on the other end of Parker's line. I was correct because Parker continued, "Yes, I have proof of life." With that he hit a couple of buttons on his touch screen and turned the phone toward me. I saw Conner's angry face staring back at me. He was holding his own phone close so I couldn't see where he was. I hoped that meant he was on his way to come get my ass.

"Donna, are you physically hurt?" he asked.

“No, I’m okay, but they have Ivie.”

He nodded. “I know. I’m working on it. I will get you out of there.”

I knew he would do everything in his power. I just hoped it was enough. Desperate to let him know Vanessa was involved, I said, “You know that issue we were discussing after the Claiming. Well, it’s a given now.”

I knew he got the hint when his eyes narrowed. “Very well. I will take care of this as quickly as possible. You’ll be home by tomorrow night.”

If Vanessa got her way I wouldn’t and I think Conner understood that.

“I love you, Conner,” I said. Just in case.

“And I you. I will see you soon.”

I really, really hoped that meant before tomorrow night. Parker came forward and snatched the phone out of my hand. “Satisfied?” he asked snidely, looking into the camera without fear.

“I am satisfied that she is unharmed but not about anything else,” Conner replied.

Parker sneered. “Well that’s too bad. Five million U.S. dollars by tomorrow night.”

“I understand,” Conner answered.

My ex-boss shut off his phone. The skinny male vampire stopped lingering by the door and entered the room completely. I realized he was trying to stay out of the camera range of Parker’s phone. Vanessa followed.

“Time to go,” she said.

I really wanted to argue or at least stall but the other vampire came to stand behind me and started caressing the back of my hair. Oh hell no. I got to my feet quickly and moved toward the door. Vanessa went out and down the hall. She looked over her shoulder, crooking a finger in a signal for us to follow.

I had a really bad feeling about this, but I was pretty sure I didn't have a choice, especially when Weasel the Vampire came up behind me, brushing his entire body against my back. Oh, and he was *very* happy to see me. I flinched and trotted after Vanessa. I decided then and there that if she planned to let Weasel Face rape me that I would fight to the death. Fuck, she'd basically said she was going to kill me anyway. If it got to that point and Conner still hadn't arrived on his white charger, then I wouldn't go down quietly. They might be bigger and stronger but that didn't mean I had to roll over and give up.

Vanessa stopped in front of a door. Nearby I heard someone crying. Though I didn't want to think about why she might be crying, I sincerely hoped it was Ivie. Because if she was crying, then she was still alive.

Opening the door, Vanessa gestured for me to enter. "After you," she said.

I went through the door and stopped short. This was not going to happen. In front of me was a metal table with leather straps attached to each corner. There was also a drain in the floor in the center of the room. My heart immediately started to try and pound its way through my sternum. Jesus Christ, I did not want to think about what happened in this room.

The weasel-faced vampire was on me in a blink, moving me toward the table though I was digging my heels into the concrete floor. My struggle was a waste of energy. He had me flat on my back on the table before I could draw in the breath to scream in frustration. With one hand on my left wrist and one on my right, he held me down so Parker could buckle the straps. I tried to kick but he repeated the process with my ankles.

In a pathetically quick amount of time, I was tightly bound to the table. I had no range of motion in my hands and arms. I bowed my back, flopping against the hard surface to see if I could pull the straps loose. Parker stood

at the head of the bed and turned a handle. My arms and legs were stretched until they were fully extended. I couldn't move even an inch.

The metallic taste of panic settled at the back of my tongue. Vanessa came to the head of the table and looked down at me, her face strangely expressionless.

"I'm sorry it had to end this way, Donna. Please don't take it personally. There are things in motion that are larger than even me. I will do what I must to be sure that the coming events have no obstacles. Since Conner will not ally himself with me, then he must be removed from the equation," she said, her tone conversational.

I realized that Vanessa wasn't exactly the scheming, power-hungry bitch I thought she was. She wasn't getting rid of me because she wanted Conner and the power she would have if they were together. She was the sleeper cell for the upcoming invasion.

I wanted to ask her questions to see what I could learn, but she looked over at Parker and her eyes began to glow. "Parker, do you remember all those things you wanted to do to Donna? The ones you wrote in your journal?" she asked.

His face was blank and empty but he nodded.

"You will do them all," she commanded before she raised a hand to Weasel Face and beckoned him to leave the room with her. Speaking to Weasel Face, she said, "Be sure that you record it all and get the video to Conner. This is the only way we can take him down. Once he sees what is done to her, he will not rest until he gets retribution from Mr. Hanes. We have to be sure to catch him in the act and publically expose him. Once we do, then the Council will have no choice but to terminate him. Then we can implement our plan for control of vampire kind."

I don't think that they intended me to hear that part of the conversation but it did make several things clear to me. This wasn't about Vanessa and Conner or even Conner and me. This was about control over vampire society itself.

I was distracted from my eavesdropping by a snipping sound. My eyes flew to my feet and I saw Parker using a huge pair of scissors to cut a straight line up the center of the leg of my jeans. I tried to jerk my leg away, but I was strapped to tightly to the bed.

I strained and fought with every ounce of my strength as Parker cut from the bottom hem to my waist on each leg. Despite my struggle, he completed his cuts and pulled the jeans away from my body. My shirt was much quicker and easier to remove. Soon I was lying on that fucking cold bed in nothing but a sexy sheer bra and panties that I had worn with Conner in mind. I tried not to beg when I saw the light flare in Parker's eyes. Jesus, Weasel the Vampire wasn't going to rape me, Parker was.

It almost hurt when he dragged his finger tips down my leg from hip to ankle. The contact was light, but I was so freaked out that even that small touch felt as though it had been magnified by a million. I managed to keep my mouth shut until I saw the razor blade in his hand.

"Please, please don't do this, Parker. You know you don't really want to hurt me." My voice was high and thin.

He looked at the blade and then placed his hand on my stomach, tracing a line across my abdomen with his fingers. "You're so pale. The blood will look so beautiful against your white skin." He placed the blade against the spot where his fingers had rested moments ago. "I love the color of blood."

Oh fucking hell, Parker wasn't just a douchebag, he was a psycho. If these sorts of things had been simmering in his brain all this time, it made me thankful I had gotten fired when I did. If those journals were real, then

something told me it would have only been a matter of time before he couldn't fight his desire to make his fantasies come true, either with me or someone else.

At the first slice of the razor, I couldn't hold back my scream. I kept screaming as he used his finger to smear the blood against my skin, drawing patterns with it, and he did it again. And again. And again. No matter how long or loud I begged, he just continued to cut me.

After the fifth cut, or maybe it the sixth, I lost count. The pain grew. Some slices were small and shallow, others deep. Parker cut me with a smile on his face and an unholy light in his eyes the entire time. Once, after a particularly brutal slice, he actually laughed as I screamed so loud and long that I ran out of air and choked.

When my body was a huge mass of pain and blood, he stopped. I don't know how long he had spent torturing me, but it felt like days. I couldn't even scream any more. My throat was so raw that no sound came out. It wasn't enough, though. I watched in horror as Parker began removing his clothes.

My movements were weak, but I still tried to break free of my bonds. When I realized I couldn't, I began to cry soundlessly. "No, no, no," I moaned, shaking my head wildly.

I jerked as he picked up the huge scissors he used to cut my clothes free of my body. With a few snips he removed my underwear from my body. I lay on the table naked, save my blood.

Parker was also nude when he picked up the razor again. I watched as he climbed on top of the table and loomed over me.

"I want to wear your blood while I fuck you," he whispered.

I kept saying no. If I said it enough, maybe it would penetrate the haze of blood lust in his mind. I was so intent on begging him not to do this to

me, I didn't hear the noise at first.

Parker did. He stopped, looking over at the door.

Suddenly a sound did break through my fear. It was Conner's voice, calling my name.

I drew in a breath. "Conner!" I yelled it but my voice was hoarse.

Parker started shaking his head. "No, I have to finish. I have to wear your blood, then I can drain you. This isn't how it's supposed to happen."

I knew then what he was about to do. I tried to scream again. "Conner, in here! Hurry! Conner!"

There was nothing I could do as I watched Parker's hand arc through the air, the light glinting off the bloody razor. While I lay helpless and bleeding beneath him, Parker Hanes slit my throat.

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Twenty

I knew I was dead. My body felt as though it were floating on a cloud. Nothing hurt. After the pain I experienced before my death, I was grateful for that. I was warm and safe in the silence.

Without opening my eyes, I breathed in deeply. The air around me smelled wonderful. The scent was extremely familiar. I couldn't figure out where I knew it from, but it made me think of home. I took stock of my body and realized that I felt wonderful. When I finally opened my eyes I was surrounded by white. White light, white walls. Maybe this was Heaven. Though I hadn't believed before maybe God did exist.

I sighed in contentment as I turned my head and took stock of my surroundings. I was lying on a huge bed set in the center of the room. The linens were soft and cool. If I hadn't been so curious about what Heaven looked like, I could have stayed in that bed forever. The walls were smooth and blank, no artwork or windows to be seen. An overstuffed armchair and sofa were in the corner. And it was all white and cream. I felt like I was in a cocoon.

A door opened and my eyes wandered to the opposite side of the room, admitting even more bright beautiful light. A figure stood in silhouette. I smiled. I wondered if it was my guardian angel coming to welcome me. There were also some adventures I probably should apologize for because I was sure they caused my guardian angel plenty of stress.

As the figure moved into the room, I realized it was a man. His features became clear and I think my heart stopped again, which was an amazing feat as I was dead. It was Conner Savage. My heart both soared and broke simultaneously. I was so glad he was with me in heaven but it hurt to know that Vanessa and her cohorts had succeeded in killing him when he came for me.

“Conner,” I breathed, holding a hand out to him.

He came to the side of the bed and sat down before taking my hand. “I’m glad you’re awake. How are you feeling?” He was watching me closely as though he expected something bad to happen.

I felt tears fill my eyes. “I’m fine. I feel amazing, and I’m so glad you’re here. I mean I hate how you came to be here, but I’m glad you’re with me all the same.”

He cocked his head to the side. “You hate how I came to be here? What do you mean?”

“Well, I hate that neither of us escaped, but I am glad we’re together.”

Conner shifted on the mattress, looking confused. “Just where do you think we are, Donna?” he asked.

My tears stopped and I smiled at him. “Heaven. I wasn’t sure about the whole ‘God exists’ thing, but I’m glad he decided to let me in after all.”

Conner’s eyebrows lowered. “Why would we be in Heaven?”

“Because Vanessa killed us,” I replied.

He grabbed my other hand and held them both in front of me in a tight grip. “Donna, we’re not in Heaven.”

“Then where are we because this doesn’t exactly feel like Hell to me, Conner.”

He sighed. “You’re not in Hell either, lass. You’re at an underground facility in the building that houses the vampire council.”

“I can’t be. I’m dead,” I said. Why was he arguing with me?

He shook his head and his accent was thick when he spoke. “No. You came damn close and I’ll never forget that for the rest of my long, wicked life, but you’re not dead.”

I stared at him. “I have to be dead. Parker slit my throat. I don’t know any human being anywhere who could survive that.”

Conner cupped my shoulders in his hands. “Part of that statement is true. No human being could survive the wound that you had to your throat.”

I nodded before his words began to sink in. “What exactly are you trying to tell me, Conner? I am a human and I survived.”

He cupped my head, his fingers spearing through my hair to massage my scalp. “You’re not human any longer, Donna.”

For a second I was confused then I realized what he was saying. “I’m a vampire?” I asked, my voice actually squeaked. It fucking squeaked. I cleared my throat. “You turned me into a vampire?” I asked again.

Conner looked slightly sad as he nodded. “Yes, lass. I had to turn you. The wound to your throat was fatal. I had no time to waste, no time to think. I just knew that I didn’t want to exist in this world without you. I know it was selfish, but I turned you right then and there. I hope that you will forgive me.”

“So I’m not dead?” I asked again.

“No, you’re not. You are now vampire.” Conner was being especially patient.

I sat for a moment and let the words sink in. “Okay,” I said slowly.

He waited and watched me but didn’t say anything else.

I took another deep breath. “How?”

Conner looked confused. “How what?”

“How did you change me? You never told me anything about the process.”

He frowned slightly. “I drained what little blood you had left in your body and forced you to drink my blood. Fortunately, your jugular was not severed when he cut your throat, only your carotid artery. I was able to get you to swallow a few mouthfuls. As you healed, you took more and more. You don’t remember changing?” he asked

I shook my head. “I guess that’s the one thing I’ve read about vampires that’s true,” I mused.

Conner nodded his head and leaned closer. It was then that I realized that the amazing scent I smelled when I woke up was Conner. The only reason I didn’t recognize it before is because it was stronger, deeper, and sexier than it had been before.

“God you smell amazing,” I commented.

Conner looked at me as though I had lost my sanity as well as my humanity. “Are you okay?” he asked softly.

I took one more breath and refrained from mentioning how great he smelled again. “Yes, I’m okay. I mean I’m a little upset that this happened now. I was hoping to wait a couple of years, if not the full five, before you turned me, but I knew before the Claiming that I would let you do it when the time came. This is not how I wanted it to happen but I knew it would happen eventually.”

He slid his arms around me and pulled me close. “You are a strange and wonderful woman, Donna Perry. I will be forever grateful for the day I saw you and decided that I had to have you.”

I put my arms around him as well. We sat in the silent, still white room, holding each other like that for a long time.

Finally, I pulled away. “Thank you for coming to rescue me. I knew you would be coming. I did everything I could to hold out until you got there.”

Conner cupped my face. “I will always come for you, Donna. You are everything to me. I would give up everything I have, everything I own, to ensure your safety.”

I swallowed back more tears. Then I grabbed my stomach as a hunger pang about a million times stronger than any I felt before hit me. Black spots danced in front of my eyes, and I felt a tingling sensation in my mouth.

“Oh God,” I moaned, clutching my middle. “What’s happening?”

Conner stroked my hair. “Just breathe, baby. Just breathe. It’s the hunger for blood. I gave you a few bags while you were unconscious, but you need to feed again. You’ll need to feed on vampire or human blood every few hours for the first few weeks.”

“Where’s the blood? Please I need this to stop.”

He positioned us so that we were facing. “You are going to feed from me.” Conner tilted his head slightly to the side so I could see his throat. He ran a finger over the area where his neck and shoulder met. “This is where you will bite.”

I stared at his throat, and I swear I could hear the blood rushing through his veins with each heartbeat. I ran my tongue over my teeth and poked a hole in my tongue with my fang.

“Ouch!”

Conner laughed softly. “Your fangs will come out a lot at first. Especially when you’re hungry, horny, or angry. I’ll teach you how to control them.” He cupped the back of my head. “Now, you need to feed.”

I tilted my head and gently scraped my teeth over his neck. He shuddered against me, and I knew it was from pleasure. That’s when I sank my fangs into his skin and began to suck. Part of me dreaded the first taste of blood because I still sort of thought sucking blood was gross. I mean it didn’t bother me when Conner did it, but *me* doing it was weird.

When the first rush of liquid hit my mouth, it tasted like all of my favorite foods all at once and not in a nasty way. The sweetness I noticed during the Claiming ceremony was stronger. It was incredible. After the first pull, I had to have another and then another. I moaned deep in my throat and pulled Conner closer. Once I was full, I was tempted to keep drinking because it tasted so good, unlike anything else I had ever consumed. Then I remembered that I was drinking from Conner, my fiancé.

I pulled away. “Wow.”

Conner smiled and used a handkerchief to dab the corner of my mouth. I resolutely ignored the little splotch of red. Then I remembered something.

“Hey why didn’t we, um, you know, when I drank from you?” I asked. I mean it would be embarrassing if I orgasmed every time I fed or if my donor did, but I always had when Conner drank from me.

I gaped as Conner threw his head back and literally roared with laughter. “The only reason we ‘you know’ when I bite you is because we’re already doing ‘you know’. The bite enhances the pleasure you are already experiencing. It takes a great deal of talent and power to enter a human’s mind enough to force an orgasm from just a bite. And very few vampires can do it to other vampires.”

“Good to know,” I said. Reality intruded when I remembered how it was I came to be a vampire. “Please tell me you caught the fucking bitch who tried to have me killed.”

“We did,” he answered.

“What about Ivie?” I asked, afraid of his answer.

Conner shifted on the bed, and an unhappy look crossed his face. “She will be okay physically. We’re not sure what Otto did to her, but she’s traumatized. We kept her here so that you could speak with her when you woke up.”

I nodded. “Okay. Let me get cleaned up. I need to do one thing before I go to my friend.”

“What’s that?” Conner asked.

“I need to bitch slap Vanessa and tell you what I heard.” I rolled out of bed and onto my feet. My body felt light and limber. And strong. “I’ll tell you about it while I take a shower.”

Thirty minutes later I had shared everything I overheard Vanessa tell Weasel Face and washed my body. I noticed how clean I was considering I had been unconscious two days. At least Conner said it was two days. When I mentioned it, he said he had given me a sponge bath. The look on his face when he said it frightened me.

“There was a great deal of blood, Donna. When I turned you the cuts healed, but it was difficult to see what he had done to you.”

“What happened to Parker?”

Conner just looked at me and I knew what had happened to Parker. I was torn. Part of me hoped that his death was at least quick. The rest of me remembered the horrible things he had done to me at Vanessa’s direction, voluntary or not. I wondered if what Vanessa had told me about his journals was true. If it was, then maybe it wasn’t so bad that he was dead.

I decided to think about it later, like in fifty years or so. Maybe a hundred.

“I want to see Vanessa,” I said.

After I dressed, Conner took me to the room where they were keeping her. When he opened the door, Vanessa gaped at me in shock. “You’re dead,” she whispered.

“Yeah, I’m just the ghost of Christmas Past,” I quipped.

“I watched him cut your throat. You’re dead,” she repeated.

I didn’t bother with a verbal response. I went to the bench that she was chained to and hauled off and punched her in the face. I put everything I had into it, and her body flew sideways to hit the wall. Her chains pulled taut and jerked her to the ground. She sprawled on the floor, looking incredibly undignified. I’m sure that it was horrible of me, but I felt a great deal of satisfaction in seeing her like that.

“No, bitch, I’m a vampire. Now that I’m your equal, do you want to continue the little chat we had two days ago?”

Her eyes burned as she stared at me but she didn’t answer. I leaned down and got right in her face. “I remember everything you said to me and to Weasel Face and you can bet your ass the Council knows now too. Whatever you and your friends are planning, they will be expecting it and they will be ready for it.”

Vanessa’s eyes focused over my shoulder at Conner and she smiled humorlessly. “You have no idea what you’re facing.”

I stood and walked back to my man. He stared at Vanessa with cold eyes. “No, but you’re going to tell me.”

She laughed.

Conner crossed his arms and leaned against the doorjamb, looking as though he hadn’t a care in the world. “Well you may not tell me but you

will tell Alexander.”

If it was possible, her face paled. “No.”

Whoever Alexander was he must be a scary motherfucker because I saw real fear in her face and eyes. Not fear. Terror. She was more than afraid of Alexander. I decided then and there that I would be on my best behavior when I met him.

Conner leaned forward slightly and hissed, “Yes.”

With that, we left Vanessa to consider, or fear, her future. Conner took me down several hallways, holding my hand in silence. I was grateful that he didn’t speak because I wouldn’t know what to say. When we reached the room where Ivie had been staying the last few days, Conner stopped me.

“I’m not sure if I should let you anywhere near her right now, Donna,” he said for the five hundredth time since I had insisted I see her.

I looked at him impatiently. “I know, I know. I’m too young to be around a human alone.” I sighed. “I know I’m new to this whole vampire business, but you have to understand that Ivie is like a sister to me. She’s my family and she needs me.”

“I know. That’s why I’m allowing you to talk to her before one of my men wipes her memory.”

This was news to me. “What? Why are you wiping her memory? Ivie won’t tell anyone. She can keep a secret.”

Conner eyed me because he had heard some of the stories Ivie told at the pool party that seemed like it was two years ago rather than the same night I was kidnapped. They were things that she probably should have kept to herself, but they were too juicy not to share.

I rolled my eyes. “Okay, so she will share with us girls sometimes but, if I asked her to, she would keep it quiet because she’s my friend, she loves me, and she wants me to be happy and safe.”

He sighed. "Alright but I will be listening outside the door in case you start to have issues. We will discuss wiping her memories after you come out." He put a hand on my arm. "It might be the best for her, Donna. She had a very traumatic experience. Some scars are not physical."

I started to argue but he held up a hand. "What would be worse? Me listening at the door, or you not being able to control your blood lust and ripping out your friend's throat?"

I shut my mouth with a snap. "Fine. You have a point."

He didn't gloat, only nodded. I forgot about being annoyed with him when I approached Ivie's door. I knocked softly. Silence from within.

I knocked again. "Ivie, it's Donna. Can I come in?"

I heard some rustling before the door cracked open. "Donna?" Suddenly her arm shot out, and she dragged me into the room. She slammed the door shut behind us.

"Are you okay?" she asked, tears streaming down her face.

I don't think I had ever seen Ivie cry, so I just looked at her a second before I responded. "Yes, I'm fine."

She threw her arms around me. "Thank God. When Conner carried you out of the building you were covered in blood. For days they kept me in here, no one would tell me anything, they wouldn't let me go. I've been going out of my mind." Ivie leaned closer, her eyes widening. "I know this is going to be difficult for you to believe, but, Donna, these people are *vampires*. Even Conner. It isn't safe here. We have to get out. I don't know how, but we need to get out of here before they decide to get kill us."

I was distracted from her babbling when I breathed in. God, she smelled even better than Conner. I could hear her heart beating loud and fast. Shit. This wasn't going to be easy. For a moment I thought Conner might be right in thinking I couldn't be around a human yet. Then I looked at the healing

bruises and scrapes on her face and arms and knowing there were more I couldn't see and I immediately calmed down. I would not hurt my friend.

I put a hand on her arm. "They won't kill us. I promise. You're safe here. I'm safe here."

Her eyes wheeled around in her head. "You don't understand. You can't understand what happened."

I realized that she was headed toward a panic attack and knew I needed to derail her fast. "Ivie, look at me." She was muttering under her breath so I decided to use my 'serious' voice. "*Look at me.*"

She immediately fell quiet and looked at me with a serene expression on her face. I realized then that I had controlled her mind without meaning to. That wasn't good. Afraid that Conner would come in and intervene I touched Ivie's hand and somehow that broke the connection. I was going to have to get a handle on these new powers of mine pretty damn quick.

"I have something to tell you and I'm asking, no I'm begging you, to keep an open mind." I sucked in a deep breath. Bad idea because all I could smell was Ivie's blood. I forged ahead. "I died two nights ago, Ivie."

"Of course you didn't," she argued. Then she stopped and stared at me in bewilderment. "What's wrong with your eyes, Donna?" Then I knew she noticed my fangs. A look of horror spread across her face, and she tore herself away from me and ran across the room to huddle in the corner. "Oh God, you're one of them. Please don't hurt me. Donna, if you're in there somewhere, don't hurt me. I love you, you love me. Don't hurt me."

It broke my heart to see my friend so terrified, begging me not to hurt her. I closed my eyes and took slow deep breaths, focusing on how much I loved my friend and wanted to help her rather than the smell of her blood. It worked. I felt my fangs recede, and I was sure that my eyes returned to normal.

When I opened my eyes again, she was still huddled in the corner staring at me.

“Ivie,” I said, “I will never, ever hurt you. I do love you and I know you love me. It is true. I am a vampire now. Conner turned me Friday night.” I went slowly to the chair by the desk in her room and sat. It kept me a good six feet from her. “You know all that blood you saw on me?”

She nodded.

“All that blood was on me because Parker Hanes cut me to pieces with a razor blade.” I paused when she gasped but still went on. “When he realized that the cavalry had arrived, he slit my throat.”

Her own hands went to her throat, and tears continued to trickle down her face. “No,” she whispered.

“Yes,” I said. “I wouldn’t be here unless Conner had turned me. But I’m still me. I think the same and feel the same. I even eat regular food. It’s just now I need blood to continue to survive.”

“But....but,” she began.

“I know. Otto, Vanessa, and that weasel faced motherfucker whose name I don’t know. They were all vampires. But vampires are like humans, Ivie. Some are good, some are bad. Please don’t judge all of them based on the actions of three.” I took a breath and realized I was getting somewhere but I needed to keep going. So I did. “Remember the first night you met Conner. What did you think of him?”

She looked at me with huge, dark eyes. “I thought he was perfect for you. He was sweet without being a sap, strong enough to stand up to you when you get carried away, and he seemed to get off on the way you like to bicker.”

I could have argued the point about the bickering but it wasn’t important right now. What was important, was that my best friend understood that she

had nothing to fear from me or Conner.

“Exactly,” I said softly. “He is perfect for me and now I’m perfect for him. We can be together for as long as we live, which will be a pretty damn long time.”

“So you don’t want to suck all my blood out of my body?” she asked.

I wanted to laugh because that question was pure Ivie. I shook my head. “No. You’re my friend. You’re like a sister to me.” I tried for some levity. “Though I wouldn’t say no to a little snack.”

Thankfully Ivie’s sense of humor was as twisted as mine, and she laughed.

“Are we going to be okay?” I asked her.

She shrugged a little, her smile disappearing. “I don’t know.” She looked hard at me. “I think you and I will but I don’t know about the rest. I won’t be able to trust them. The only reason I can trust you is because I’ve known you forever. I’m lost here, Donna.”

I took a step but stopped when Ivie stiffened. It made my heart sink to think that she wouldn’t want to be too close to me anymore. But my friend surprised the hell out of me. Instead of apologizing and letting me come to her, she came to me and put her arms around me again. I hugged her tightly in return.

“Uh, Donna,” she said, her voice rough with emotion.

“Yeah.”

“I think you’re about to break all my ribs.”

I quickly released her. Apparently I didn’t understand how strong I was. “I’m sorry.”

She smiled at me. “It’s okay. Vampire or not, I’m so glad you’re alive.”

“Me too,” I whispered. “Me too.”

As I held her close, Ivie finally broke down and sobbed like a child.

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Epilogue

The engagement party was incredibly crowded. How Conner managed to get all the guests to come on such short notice was beyond his comprehension. Alexander Dimitriades leaned against the wall in the shadows and sipped his scotch as he watched the insane crush of people. This was not the way he wanted to spend his evening. He just wanted a warm, willing woman to drink from and possibly spend a few hours at bed play. Unfortunately, since he saw her, no other woman held any interest for him.

He cursed under his breath and tossed back the last of the liquor in his glass. In his mind he saw the long, curling dark hair, gorgeous dark eyes, and that smile that could light up the darkest night. As though she were conjured from his thoughts, the woman he pictured appeared across the room. She was all he remembered and more. Wearing a black dress that showed her lush figure without being lewd, Ivie Lang was everything he ever wanted. That in itself was amazing because he had lived for nearly a millennia and he had never been so taken with a woman.

He thought back to when Conner Savage had extended the invitation to his engagement party, Alexander had immediately turned him down.

“Ivie will be there,” he stated calmly.

Alexander tried to pretend he had no idea what Conner was talking about but they had been friends, almost brothers, for too long.

“Lex, you’ve paid penance long enough. It’s time to let go of the past and look to your future. I think we both know she is your future.”

That may be the case but he and Conner knew that there was something else in their future. Something not so wonderful. It had been difficult to break Vanessa Santino but she had broken. Very little surprised Alexander after so long on this world but what she told him had not only surprised him. It rendered him speechless. Steps were being taken by the enemy that would change life for vampires all over the world. Unfortunately, it would not be a change for the better.

He and Conner had met with the Council and were tasked with assembling men to work against the threat. That was on hold for tonight though. Conner and Donna were celebrating their engagement. Now that Donna was turned, his friend was wasting no time in making her his for eternity. There would be time enough for war amongst his kind. There had been battles before and would be again. Tonight was to remember why they fought, and the rewards.

As he absently swirled his empty glass, Lex kept both eyes on the woman that he knew in his soul would be his future. He also knew she would lead him on a merry chase. But like any prey, Lex could run her to ground if he had enough patience and endurance. Since he had been a hunter for nearly a thousand years, he was confident that’s exactly what he would do.

“Enjoy yourself tonight, Ivie,” he murmured though she couldn’t hear him, “because tomorrow the hunt begins.”

As though she heard him, Ivie’s head came up and she looked across the room to the place where Alexander had been standing.

All that remained there were shadows.

The End

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Acknowledgements

When I started writing books last year, I had no idea what I was doing. I just wanted to write about all the funny, crazy people in my head and their stories. I hoped I would sell a few books, make a few friends, and have some fun while I was at it. Since then, I have done all of those things and more.

So many people have helped me on my journey, and I am so grateful for their help, encouragement, and, sometimes, inspiration.

Many, many thanks to Ana's Attic and Scandalicious Book Reviews for taking a chance and reading my first novellas with an open mind. You ladies have taken me under your collective wings and helped me in so many ways. I love you both for it.

Also, I am grateful to Smut Book Club, Book Crack, Mommy's Reads and Treats, Becca the Bibliophile, A Love Affair with Books, Bookslapped, Bookaholics Blog, and Books, Babes, and Cheap Cabernet for reading the books and sharing with their followers. If I have forgotten anyone, I'm sorry. So many blogs have been kind enough to review my works.

I have learned so, so much from Raine Miller, Jasinda Wilder, Katie Ashley, and R.K. Lilley. Thank you for sharing your experiences and your knowledge with me. I am so blessed to be able to call you friends. Oh, and also thanks for letting me have all those ARC's. I loved every single one!

And a big thanks to Tara Sivec for being awesome. I would say you're my role model but I don't know if you should be anyone's role model. Ha! Love ya!

Last, but not least, a big thank you to the Whorehouse. I love you Donna, Ivie, Ricki, Shannon, and Kerry. You ladies inspired this series of books, and you each get your own. I can't wait to write your stories.

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About C.C.

A native Texan, C.C. grew up either reading or playing the piano. Years later, she's still not grown up and doing the same things. Since the voices in her head never shut up, C.C. decided to try and profit from their crazy stories and started writing books.

Now that she has a baby girl at home, C.C.'s non-writing time is usually spent cleaning up poopy diapers or feeding the poop machine. Sometimes she teaches piano, cooks, or spends time bugging her hubby and two beagles.

Other Titles by C.C. Wood

Novellas:

Girl Next Door Series:

Friends with Benefits

Frenemies

Kiss Series:
A Kiss for Christmas
Kiss Me

Novels:
Bitten Series
Bite Me

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