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| BLOOD WITCH |
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Chapter 1

 The sound of glass shattering exploded the silence like a million chimes set simultaneously in motion by the wind. A piercing scream competed with the cacophony of sounds created by the glass scattering on the ground below. The broken pieces glimmered like diamonds. We were falling. Time slowed down. Each second felt like a minute, giving me time to fully appreciate the fear growing inside me. Time often feels as though it slows down when something truly terrible is happening – and something terrible was happening. I was going to die *with* the son-of-a-bitch.

 I hadn’t really planned on killing him when I had confronted him. I had just wanted to scare him into leaving me alone. But when he threatened to punish Sylvie for helping me escape the basement…well, I just lost it. It was bad enough that I had suffered at his hand for the last four years. There was no way I was going to allow him to lay a finger on my little sister. Little sister may be overstating it a bit. At fifteen years old Sylvie was only three years younger than me, but I still wasn’t going to let anyone hurt her.

 When he lunged for Sylvie, I dove for him. I put everything I had into that dive and it paid off – sort of. I used every speck of power I had within me as I dove at him. I hit him mid-chest, my arms snaking around his waist, my head buried in his shoulder. If you could have frozen time at that exact moment it might have looked as though we were embracing. But we weren’t.

 Daddy had been careless to stand in front of the window. He had been so smug standing there too. I could bet that he wished he had never insisted on having those expensive floor to ceiling windows put in now. He didn’t look so smug now. In fact, he looked scared and more than a little pissed off. Oh well. It certainly wasn’t the first time I had seen that pissed off look on his face.

 The window we were falling out of was actually part of a group of windows that overlooked the back yard. From the windows you had a beautiful view of the yard with its manicured lawns and carefully landscaped hedges. The gazebo, whose twinkling white lights were so beautiful to see at night, was also visible. Of course you couldn’t miss the large Roman styled fountain mom had insisted on buying. Mom had said the fountain reminded her of those from her youth in Italy. While it might have looked wonderful in some random house in Italy, it looked monstrous, at over ten feet tall and seven feet wide, in Michigan. The fountain was hard to miss from our vantage point. We were falling towards it very rapidly.

Of course I hadn’t planned on going out the window with him. Things seldom go as you plan them to. As we had crashed through the glass, I’d let go of him. The trouble was that he had grabbed onto my arm, pulling me out with him. I tried to pull back but the momentum from the dive had been too powerful and everything happened so quickly. As we fell I did the only thing I could think to do. I grabbed onto him again and tried to keep him under me.

“Ironic, don’t you think? A little too ironic?” The song started playing in my head as we fell. I tried to stop it, really I did. I tried to concentrate on not dying. Yeah I know. How do you think of all this while you’re falling out of a third story window? I don’t know. You just do. Like I said, time seems to slow down when something really terrible is happening.

 I heard the sound of him hitting the fountain a moment before I saw the blood. The impact was so great that the fountain cherub’s wing broke off. Hot damn! He had hit the fountain with his head. A killing blow, no doubt. It was then that I loosened my arms from him and pushed away from him. I was still falling and I tried to make sure I landed in the water and not on the fountain itself like dear old dad had. I did my best to slow my fall using my powers and I succeeded for the most part. My arms and back scraped the sides of the cherubs as I fell, tearing through my sweat jacket like it was made of cotton candy. I would have a hell of a lot of scrapes and bruises, but I’d live. I couldn’t say the same for daddy.

 Hitting the water, I scrambled to find purchase on the bottom of the fountain and push to a sitting position. It wouldn’t do to drown now. I reached out my hand, grabbing the ledge, and pulled myself over to the side. Dazed, I pushed my now wet, dark blonde hair out of my eyes and looked around. My gaze fixed upon dad’s broken body. He had ended up face down in the water with his lower body draped over the lap of one cherub like a naughty child in the throes of discipline. Crimson blood gushed from his crushed skull. The blood poured into the fountain turning the water a pinkish hue that was actually very pretty.

 “Looks like I won dad” I muttered, turning away from him. My scrapes were really burning now, creating an agony of stinging pain on my arms, legs and back. My body ached like I’d been in a fight and I had, hadn’t I? I’d been in a fight for my life, a fight for my freedom. My injuries should have been worse and would have been if I hadn’t managed to get that stupid song out of my head. What saved me from suffering a fate similar to dad’s was the fact that I’d managed to slow down my fall using my magic. I gathered enough energy to make the air around me heavier. If I’d had more time, I could have thickened the air enough so that I would have landed softly. I could have practically floated down. But I hadn’t had that time. I had been falling out of a very high window.

 For the first time in a long time, I was thankful I wasn’t your average eighteen year old girl, but a witch. Not a Wiccan type witch but a real witch. Witchiness ran in my family. It was in my blood. I’d been born and raised a witch. Both my mother and father had practiced witchcraft, but it was from mom’s side that I had inherited the gene. Mom had been a blood witch as her mother had before her and her mother before that and so on. Dad was a witch too, but he hadn’t been born one. He had gained his magic through more nefarious means. His was a result of making deals with the devil.

 I looked towards the window I had just fallen out of. Sylvie was staring down through the shattered glass. My blue eyes met Sylvie’s green ones. For a moment I worried Sylvie might be upset with me for pushing dad out of the window. I quickly realized I had nothing to fear. Sylvie’s mouth held a soft ‘o’ of surprise. When our eyes met, Sylvie smiled. Just a small smile, but it was there. She wasn’t mad. How could she be? We were both free now.

 A wailing siren in the distance pulled my attention from Sylvie. Sylvie must have called 911 while dad and I were still falling. A hospital might not be a bad idea since I wasn’t feeling that great. Maybe some medical attention was a good idea.

 The sirens grew louder as they came closer. I heard the familiar scrape of tires on the driveway. I should have been afraid. I should have feared that I would spend the rest of my life in prison for murdering a man. But I wasn’t. Prison couldn’t be any worse than what I’d already lived through. Besides, it was self defense, wasn’t it? Surely he would have killed me if I hadn’t gotten to him first. If he hadn’t done it today it would have been some other day, that I was sure of. Yeah, it was self-defense. I should have done it a long time ago.

 I began drifting in and out of consciousness. I was aware of others around me but I couldn’t see them clearly. I strained to see Sylvie in the window but Sylvie was gone. Had she come down to greet the emergency workers? Of course she must have. She called them after all. Nothing was making too much sense anymore. I felt like I was floating. No, that wasn’t right. There were hands lifting me. Pain shot through my body as I was laid on top of something hard. That was my last coherent thought before everything went black.

Chapter 2

 The first thing I became aware of when I awoke was the soft hum of machines intermittingly interrupted by a low beeping sound. My eyes opened slowly and focused on a white ceiling above me. The scent of antiseptic and the too-clean smell of medical supplies accosted my senses. A quick look around confirmed that I was in the hospital. Medical equipment I didn’t even try to identify surrounded me and an IV ran from my arm dripping God knows what into my veins. My body still ached and I shifted in the bed trying to get more comfortable.

 A restraining pressure just below my chest prompted me to peek under the thin hospital gown someone had put me in. White bandages adorned the flesh just below my breasts. I must have broken ribs in the fall. Sighing heavily I shifted again. At least the pain was manageable but it still sucked. Pain sucked.

 Looking around I noticed I wasn’t alone. Uncle Ned occupied one of the chairs set up across the room. His still form indicated that he was dozing and from the rumbled look of his expensive suit, he had been here a while. It had been a while since I’d seen him last and I couldn’t help but notice that his almost black hair held more flecks of gray than it had the last time I had seen him. I must have been unconscious for some time since he’d had time to fly in from L.A.

 Uncle Ned was my mother’s brother, the only family from mom’s side that I had ever met. Mom and Uncle Ned had left their family behind, seemingly without regret, when they came to America from Italy. They weren’t Italian, although they had spent most of their youth living in Italy. They were a mixture of French and English and who knew what else. Mira and Nedley Folliet hailed from a family of blood witches on the outskirts of Rome. Their father was supposed to have been fearsome in his magic, prone to angry outbursts, and more than a little controlling. At least that’s the little I’d been told about him. Some unnamed falling out occurred with their father and mom and Uncle Ned had left Italy, jumping a plane to the United States. As far as I knew the two had never spoken to their family again.

 Uncle Ned had done well for himself in America, excelling in business and amassing a fortune before age forty. I still didn’t understand exactly what it was he did, investing of some sort, but I knew he was good at it. Mom wasn’t so lucky. All she found in America was dad. She married him shortly after arriving. Obviously she had some daddy issues since she married someone that was remarkably similar to her own father from what I’d heard. She became pregnant quickly after marrying and ended up with me. Sylvie came along a couple of years later.

 To the outside world our family had appeared to be like any other upper middle class family, except of course that we were witches. Most people didn’t know that little tidbit though. It’s not like we announced it upon introducing ourselves. “Hello, my name is Giselle and I’m a witch”. No, I don’t think so. Not only would it completely freak people out but it would sound like a freaking AA meeting confessional for the love of God. No, the only people who knew we were witches were the other members of the coven and of course this wasn’t shocking to them since they were witches too.

 My family might as well have been royalty as far as the coven was concerned. Dad is – err-was -the coven master. I had always thought it should have been mom since she was by far the strongest witch in the coven, but it just didn’t work like that. I wonder who will take over now that dad’s dead. It will probably be daddy’s little bitch girlfriend, Margaret. Oh well, so not my problem anymore.

 The coven would want retribution for dad’s death but they were going to be disappointed. None of them were strong enough to best me in a magical showdown. Besides, they wouldn’t risk exposure to try to publicly bring me to justice. I couldn’t help but feel gleeful.

 Thank goodness mom had insisted on training Sylvie and I to use our powers from an early age. That knowledge is probably what had saved my life. Mom had mostly taught us slight manipulations of energy, parlor tricks at best. We had learned to light candles with only our breath, how to move objects by manipulating the air around us and how to make the rain come. I had liked our lessons. I was good at them. It was nice to feel powerful, even in something so small since the rest of my life was so wildly out of control.

 Sylvie struggled more than I in our lessons. Mom had never seemed surprised. She simply assured Sylvie that her powers would come to her in time. I was just a natural. I had thought that dad would be proud of my emerging powers, but if anything it only made him hate me more. It took me years to realize it, but he was actually afraid of me. As it turned out, he had a right to be afraid. If mom had survived that car accident things might have turned out differently. Never would she have allowed dad to do the things he’d done since she died.

 Uncle Ned stirred in his chair chasing my thoughts away. His eyes opened and met mine. I gave him my best smile. He smiled back and rose from his chair coming to rest on the edge of my bed. Taking my hand in his, he spoke, “Hey, you’re awake” he said. “How are you feeling?”
 “Pretty good” I confessed. “I’m guessing they gave me something for pain seeing as I don’t hurt-much. How long have I been out”?

 “Two days” he answered heavily.

 “Two days?” I echoed. “Wow. I guess I was hurt worse than I thought,” I said.

 “Yeah, you were,” Uncle Ned answered as he absently squeezed my hand and glanced nervously at the door. “Look, Elle, we don’t have much time. The police are going to want to talk to you as soon as they know you’re awake. They’ve already spoken with Sylvie,” he informed me, looking at me sternly. “Her story is that your father was angry and pushed you into the glass. She said that the window shattered and you grabbed onto your father to stop yourself from falling. I need you to tell me what happened Elle. The coven wants you to be tried for murder. You’re eighteen,” he reminded me. “You’ll be tried as an adult. We’re talking prison, not juvenile detention. You need to be straight with me.” Uncle Ned hesitated, looking away. “Sylvie told the police and me about the days leading up to the accident and now I want you to tell me. What’s been going on in that house Elle?”

 I looked away trying to absorb what Uncle Ned had said. Sylvie had lied for me. I shouldn’t be surprised really. We had always looked out for each other, but to lie to the police… I hadn’t expected that. Tears dampened my eyes as I thought about my sister and the man sitting beside me. They were the only people left on the face of the earth who cared anything about me. They loved me and I loved them. How was I going to tell Uncle Ned about what it had been like in that house since mom died? I knew it would hurt him. I knew he couldn’t handle the truth. Not poor, sweet Uncle Ned who had done his best to distance himself from the magic he’d been raised on.

 “Elle,” Uncle Ned said insistently, “we don’t have much time. Tell me.”

 “Dad has been…” I hesitated, “unstable since mom’s death. We were never close, but since she died he’s been so angry with me. It’s almost like he blames me for her death. I don’t know…,” I trailed off.

 “Did he lock you in the basement for three days without food or water Elle? Did he?” Uncle Ned demanded.

 “Yes” I answered quietly. “He was angry that I was seeing this guy behind his back”.

 “He didn’t like the guy you were dating and so he locked you in the basement?” Uncle Ned asked in disbelief.

 “You don’t get it,” I said roughly. “It wasn’t this one guy, it was any guy. Dad controlled everything we did. I wasn’t allowed to date.” Uncle Ned looked at me with obvious confusion. “Uncle Ned,” I began quietly. “It wasn’t unusual for him to punish me as he did. He usually left Sylvie alone but for some reason he hated me. Often he used physical punishments when I went against him and sometimes he even used magic against me. Uncle Ned’s jaw almost hit the ground.

 “What…,” he sputtered?

 “He even forced me to do magic for him,” I admitted. “He came to me on my fourteenth birthday and told me that since mom was dead, I was going to have to stand in as her replacement in some of the rituals. He explained that none of the other witches were powerful enough. He had been referring to rituals involving human and animal sacrifice that he used in conjunction with his dark magic. He forced me to participate. I didn’t have a choice,” I told him, my voice pleading with him to understand. It was considered shameful for a blood witch to practice dark magic. I knew Uncle Ned would be disappointed in me. That knowledge burned inside me. I wanted to scream. Uncle Ned was the only person I didn’t want to disappoint but it was hopeless. Everything I am would disappoint him.

 “The sick thing is,” I continued, my voice cracking, “that I actually started to look forward to the rituals. It was the only time I ever felt loved by him. The only time he was proud of me”.

 “Giselle,” Uncle Ned admonished, “Stop this! I don’t want to hear this!”

 “You said you wanted to know so I told you!” I answered angrily.

 “Why didn’t you tell me when it first started?” Uncle Ned shouted. “I would have taken you away. I would have put that sick bastard in jail!” I laughed bitterly.

 “You couldn’t have stopped him Uncle Ned. Pretty thought that you could have though,” I said shaking my head. “Dad made it clear that if I ever told anyone he would kill you and Sylvie. He knew you were the only two I cared for in the world. He would have done it to,” I said with certainty. There was nothing dad had held sacred in the world save himself. “I’ve seen firsthand what he’s capable of,” I continued. “He was a monster.”

 “He wouldn’t have been able to hurt anyone from behind bars Elle,” Uncle Ned insisted.

 “Oh Uncle Ned,” I sighed. “Jail would not have stopped him. Have you been away from magic for so long that you don’t remember that a dark sorcerer’s reach is beyond just his physical body?” Uncle Ned had to be smarter than this.

 “He made deals with the devil,” I told him, trying to make him understand. “Nowhere would have been safe. Do you know how he used to punish me?” I asked bitterly. “Did Sylvie tell you?” Uncle Ned just stared at me, anguish consuming his eyes.

 “Sometimes,” I went on manically, “he simply used chains to beat me. That wasn’t so bad. I think he just like to see how fast I could heal. I can heal real fast. Did you know that Uncle Ned?” Uncle Ned’s eyes widened. He hadn’t known.

 “I think it’s something to do with my witch powers,” I continued, “I’m not sure. Other times he would throw gasoline on me and toss a match, but his favorite was classic for a witch – you can probably guess.” I gave him a moment to guess but when he didn’t, I continued.

 “He would tie me to a cross and burn me just like they did in the old days. The whole time he’d be screaming that I was a monster. He should have been able to be more creative than that, right?” I continued feverishly.

 “Please stop Elle” Uncle Ned choked out. “It’s over. He’s dead. Thank God he’s dead!” Uncle Ned began to cry holding his face in his hands. I was shaking and I realized I had begun to cry too. I couldn’t remember the last time I had cried. I gingerly reached a hand to my face amazed to feel the wetness. This small touch unleashed an avalanche of pain I had buried inside me and I began to cry loudly. I felt ashamed for having hurt him. I felt ashamed for not protecting him from the awful truth, for not keeping it to myself. What good did it do to tell him now? It was over.

 “I’m sorry Uncle Ned” I sobbed. “I’m sorry.”

 “Oh baby,” Uncle Ned cried as he wrapped his arms protectively around me, “it’s not your fault. You have nothing to be sorry about. You’re safe now. It’s over. Just tell the police what you told me. We’ll tell them together. I’m going to take care of you from now on,” he promised rocking me gently.

 I let myself relax in his arms knowing he meant what he said. I knew he would do everything he could to protect me and take care of me, of that I didn’t doubt. But I knew in my heart that something had changed inside of me long ago and I would never be that darling little girl he envisioned me to be. I would no longer be a victim to anyone. I would never again allow anyone to rule my life as my father had done.

Chapter 3

The moving van doors slid shut with a loud bang. The last of the boxes had been loaded. I watched the van pull away with the few things Sylvie and I had decided to take with us to California. Neither of us had wanted anything of dad’s to remember him by, but we had both chosen a few special things that had belonged to mom to take with us. Nothing else in the house was of any value to us, outside of our own personal belongings. The house had been more like a prison than a home for longer than either of us cared to think about. Those were memories we didn’t want to bring with us. Most of the things in the house had been sold at auction and an absurdly low asking price for the house itself had assured a quick sale.

It hadn’t been difficult for Uncle Ned to get custody of us seeing as he was our only family, or at least the only family who had come forward to claim us. Dad’s family had been notified of his death, but not one person from his family had shown up for his funeral let alone offered to take us in. His family had disowned him years ago. I had always thought his family must be pretty decent seeing as how they were smart enough not to have anything to do with him.

Dad’s death had been ruled an accident resulting from self-defense. Not many people would have believed a 5’2 woman of my build could throw a grown man out of a window. Once the police heard my stories of abuse corroborated by Sylvie, they decided to close the case quickly to avoid court.

 I had included the parts regarding dad’s use of witchcraft but decided to leave out my own use of powers. While it was true that Supernaturals were coming out of the closet around the nation, I didn’t think outing myself as a witch would fare well for me in a murder case.

None of the members of the coven came forward to correct my story either. It wasn’t really surprising. Many people were still very much afraid of any kind of magic. Fine upstanding citizens like that of the coven couldn’t afford to be linked with the supernatural.

I made my way slowly towards the back yard, taking in the scenery around me. As I reached the fountain I noticed the cherub’s wing was still broken but everything else had been cleaned up. I looked to the window I had fallen from. It too had been repaired. I wasn’t sorry for what had happened. I wasn’t sorry I had to miss the funeral either. I wouldn’t have gone even if I had been out of the hospital. At least being in the hospital had saved me the trouble of having to make an excuse for not being at my own father’s funeral. I couldn’t help but feel a little sad at hating my own father as much as I did. As a child I had always foolishly hoped that one day I would do something so wonderful that he would just have to love me. It had taken years to realize that day was never coming.

I walked to where mom’s heirloom roses were planted. The roses were one of the few things mom had brought with her when she left Italy. Mom had grown them from just a small cutting she had carried with her across the Atlantic.

Mom had told Sylvie and me that they were magic roses. That they had been enchanted by our great-grandmother long ago and that they had the power to fulfill your greatest desire and to grant happiness. The roses had been so special to mom that I simply could not bear the thought of leaving without a piece as she had done when she had left home long ago.

I removed some cutters from my pocket and clipped a branch. I used a small water tube I had gotten from the florist, the kind used for corsages, to put the clipping in. Bringing the bloom from the cutting up to my nose, I inhaled the sweet fragrance.

Of all the roses I had ever seen, these were the most fragrant and the most vividly red. Their magic had never worked here, but maybe if away from the taint of dark magic dad had used, they would find their magic once again.

I was excited to be moving to L.A. I was excited to be starting new. I could be anyone I wanted to be in L.A. Nobody knew me there. I was ready to write new chapters in my life. Chapters filled with happiness and adventure.

Chapter 4

 A man by the name of Gerald was waiting for Sylvie and I at the airport when we arrived in L.A. Uncle Ned had sent him to meet us. Uncle Ned was unable to get away from work to meet us himself, but he had promised to meet us at the house as soon as he could get away from work. Gerald led us to a black sedan and loaded our bags in the trunk. He politely stepped in front of us and opened the door of the sedan before we could do so ourselves.

 Sylvie and I exchanged a glance. We knew Uncle Ned was loaded but we never really stopped to think about what his day to day life was like or what this would mean for us now that we would be living with him. I couldn’t remember anyone ever having opened a door for me before. I had to admit it was nice to feel pampered. The first class seats on the plane had been nice too.

 We drove for about an hour before the sedan turned down a tree-lined drive. The drive hadn’t bothered me. I enjoyed getting a chance to see a little of California. About fifteen feet down the drive stood a huge wrought iron gate. Gerald rolled down the window and punched a code into a little box along the side of the drive. The gates slid open silently and the sedan pulled in. The trees continued to hug the drive for another twenty feet before the drive curved to the right and opened up to a huge expanse of manicured lawns. Breaking up the lawn were well placed flower beds and tasteful statues in old-world Greek styling.

 The house was now visible and it was a little overkill. Uncle Ned lived alone after all, what did he need a house this big for? The driveway horseshoed in front of the house and the sedan parked in front of the huge marble stairs leading up to a set of large mahogany doors. Gerald opened the door of the sedan for us and we climbed out to take in what would be our new home. We were both grinning ear to ear. It was hard not to. It was a lot like winning the lottery. We’d just gone from living with a sick bastard named dad to living with a wonderful man hell bent on giving us everything we ever dreamed of. Once again I couldn’t manage to feel bad about killing dear old dad.

 A slim man in his early forties appeared in the doorway. He wore his hair short and neat and sported a very expensive looking suit to boot. He went to the trunk of the sedan and began helping Gerald with the bags. I was about to ask his name when he brushed past me like I wasn’t there. Well, his arms had been loaded with bags. The man swept inside the house leaving Sylvie and I to stare after him. At least he was efficient, whoever he was. Sylvie and I exchanged glances, not really sure what to do with ourselves. Gerald saved the day by letting us know we should go on in.

 We climbed the marble stairs and entered the house into a large foyer. Four doors graced the foyer like the points on a compass and in the middle of the foyer stood the most magnificent staircase I had ever seen. The staircase was done in rich mahogany and decorated with intricate carvings I couldn’t place. A door shutting drew my attention away from the staircase. Uncle Ned strode quickly up to us and embraced us in a bear hug. A huge smile was plastered across his face and it was impossible not to smile back at him.

 “So,” he asked waving a hand around, “What do you think?” Sylvie and I both told him how beautiful the house was and this seemed to please him.

 “Well, I’m glad you both like it” he said. “This is going to be your new home. I want you to feel comfortable here. All of this is yours now too,” he offered motioning his arms once more around the foyer. “You will find a few doors locked like my office and the servant’s quarters, but the rest of the house is yours to enjoy and explore. Let me show you to your rooms and then you two can check out the rest of the house on your own. Unfortunately I need to get back to the office in a little bit, but I’ll be home early. Julia, she’s our cook, is making a wonderful dinner in celebration of your first day here.” Uncle Ned continued as he motioned for us to follow him up the great staircase.

 I trailed my hand along the banister’s designs as we followed Uncle Ned up the stairs. The intricate carvings were in a pattern. They were almost like runes but I had never seen any like this before. Whatever they were, they were spelled. I couldn’t determine the spell but the vibrations were positive. Probably a protective spell of some sort.

 A painting adorned the wall halfway up the staircase. The woman in the painting projected an aura of power around her even through the canvas. She was wearing a black dress with a cape draped over one shoulder. The cape was drenched in deep purple and blue hues and looked to be embroidered. I paused to look at it more closely. Woven flowers of exotic origin detailed the cape along with symbols I recognized from mom’s grimoire. I didn’t know their meaning. The woman herself was a little severe looking at first glance, but beautiful in her fierceness.

 “That’s your grandmother,” Uncle Ned informed us, noticing my interest. Sylvie came to stand beside me and look too.

 “She was a witch?” Sylvie asked.

 “Yes, as all the women in our family have been for centuries” he answered. Uncle Ned’s eyes grew distant, lost in some memory neither Sylvie nor I knew anything about. “She died a long time ago,” he said quietly, his cheerfulness momentarily gone. Seeming to snap out of his daze, he started up the stairs once more. I shook off the sadness that tried to wrap around me. Sadness for never getting to know the rest of our family and our rich history. I wouldn’t let myself be sad anymore. I had spent enough years being sad.

 “Come on, I want to show you your rooms before I have to leave” Uncle Ned with false cheerfulness. Sylvie and I started up the stairs after him.

 At the top of the stairs, a corridor presented allowing you to turn right or left. At both ends of the corridor was another hallway leading you deeper into the house. We turned right. Along the way we passed several doors before arriving at the end of the hall to what we were informed were our bedrooms.

 “These are two of the largest bedrooms,” Uncle Ned informed us, “and they offer the best views.” Both rooms were almost identical. Each held a king-sized canopied bed, a dresser, a loveseat with a matching chair and an antique writing desk. The bed’s canopy and spread were done in a rich chocolate brown that set off the beige furniture and eggshell walls. Wine-colored pillows adorned the loveseat and bed giving the room a splash of color. The overall effect was elegant but not pretentious. I liked it – a lot. I had never had such a beautiful room before.

 A small door led to a spacious bathroom with both a shower and a jet tub. An antique framed mirror hung over a large marble vanity. Both rooms were absolutely gorgeous but what really caught my attention were the sliding glass doors to the back of the room. The doors were partially covered by a curtain that swept across half of the glass and tied back on the other side by velvet ropes. I walked to the doors and opened them.

 The doors led to a large veranda containing a table and chairs. The view was breathtaking. A small wood edged the backyard and shrubbed flower beds peeked from the tree line. An expanse of green lawn spread towards the house where it met a wrought iron fence that surrounded the most precious thing I had yet seen – a swimming pool. This wasn’t just any pool. It was a huge, in-ground swimming pool with a diving board. Several cabanas were scattered around the pool as well as several chaises and tables. I felt like I’d just checked in at some exclusive beach club.

 Reality began to sink in. This was my home now. I got to live here in all of this luxury. I no longer needed to fear dad or tolerate his abuse. I felt a little bad about not regretting killing dad, but only a little. I squashed back those feelings. Dad had made his bed and now he had to lie in it. Six feet under.

Chapter 5

 We spent the next few days getting used to our new surroundings. It was weird having servants to cook and clean for us but it was something I was quickly getting used to. The pool had proved to be as glorious as I had imagined it would be. Sylvie and I had already spent quite a bit of time working on our tans and enjoying the warm weather. Uncle Ned had drove us around the neighborhood and showed us the local sights. There were so many streets and the roads were so packed with traffic that I didn’t think I would ever be able to find my around. Uncle Ned assured me that in time it would be no problem.

 He pointed out good places to shop and which restaurants had the best food and even the best night spots, although with these he reminded us that we were too young to be going to clubs. I didn’t let this spoil my good mood. He showed us where Sylvie would be attending school in the fall and a local college he thought I might be interested in attending. He was really pushing me to go to college although I didn’t really see the need. I had always hated school. I promised to check it out and to try a couple of classes in the fall for him though. It was the least I could do after all he had done for Sylvie and me. I found myself actually wanting to please him which was a new feeling for me.

 Uncle Ned had acquired another car and driver to take Sylvie and I wherever we wanted to go. He had taken us shopping for personal touches to decorate our rooms. Everything we bought was automatically charged to Uncle Ned and sent to the house. It was a staggering example of how much money Uncle Ned actually had that we could do that. He was using his wealth to spoil Sylvie and me. He even gave us our own credit cards to buy whatever we wanted. I felt a little guilty at first about using the credit card, but reasoned that Uncle Ned didn’t have any children of his own and had never been allowed to buy us extravagant gifts when my father was alive. Dad never allowed it for some reason even though I know Uncle Ned had tried. Maybe Uncle Ned was just making up for lost time.

 Guilty feelings or not, Sylvie and I planned on shopping for clothes today. July in California can be hotter than hell, but going from an air-conditioned house to an air-conditioned car to an air-conditioned mall made it more bearable.

 I sat on the large marble steps and waited for Sylvie to come out. She was taking forever. I fidgeted with the hem of my short, jean shorts and adjusted my bright blue scoop neck tee, which showed just the right amount of cleavage. I wondered what people my age dressed like around here as I waited for Sylvie in the sweltering heat.

 The door opened and Sylvie came bounding down the stairs, her dark brown hair bobbing in her ponytail. Sylvie was dressed very similar to me in her yellow tee and jean shorts, but her tee had a higher neck and her shorts were longer. Sylvie could get away with wearing longer shorts since she was already 5’6 at age fifteen and had longer legs. I liked to wear short skirts and shorts to make my legs look longer. I regretted my height more than any of my other features. I was happy with my long, dark blonde hair and its natural waves. I looked thin despite my curvy hips and I could even tolerate my more than amble breasts, but my height bothered me. It’s hard to be taken seriously when you always have to look up to talk to someone. I had often wondered how Sylvie and I could even be sisters. We looked so different.

 “Ready?” she asked as I rose and we walked to the waiting car.

 “I’ve been ready” I teased. We laughed.

 “It’s summer so we’ll probably meet some people at the mall,” Sylvie speculated.

 “I hope so,” I said jokingly. “I hope we meet guys- tall, dark Californian guys”.

 “Me too,” Sylvie Laughed as we climbed into the car. The air-conditioning was heavenly to my overheated skin. The driver, whose name was Paul, drove us to the mall and dropped us off at the front entrance. We arranged to have him pick us up at 3 o’clock, giving us plenty of time to shop and have lunch.

As the driver drove away, I gleefully chimed out, “free at last”. Sylvie laughed. This would be the first time since arriving in California that we had been out without supervision. Really, it was one of our first chances to ever go about unsupervised. Dad had kept a close eye on us. We hadn’t been allowed to go out by ourselves very often.

Happily, we bounded up the steps to the mall and into its glistening corridor lined with expensive stores. The ceiling was unusually high and made the space look larger than it was. Store windows lured us in with their colorful signs and elegant displays. We quickly went into a couple of stores and made our way out just as quickly. These stores catered to much older women. I could picture haughty women who were used to looking down their noses at people shopping at these stores. They definitely were not my taste or my style. At the third store a helpful saleswoman suggested we try the north end of the mall where some of the trendier shops were located as she looked us over disapprovingly. I supposed we did stick out in our tees and shorts amongst the more elegantly dressed patrons. Hopefully in the north end of the mall everyone wouldn’t be dressed as if they were going to a funeral.

We made our way across the mall, not bothering to stop at any of the other stores we passed on our way. As we neared the north end, the shops began to look different. Gone were the elegant displays and in their place were more casual and trendy displays. Groups of teens huddled around leather couches and tables that sat in between the rows of shops. At the far end of the corridor you could see a food court displaying the names of fast food restaurants where more teens gathered to grab a bite to eat before getting back to the difficult job of shopping.

The first shop we came to displayed casual shorts and tanks in their window. We went in. I browsed through a nearby rack and glanced at the price tag of a tank top. It was outrageous what they were asking for a simple tank top. Appalled, I put the tank back on the rack. I had never paid half of that for a top in Michigan. I looked around some more but everything was outrageously priced. Finally I decided that Uncle Ned must have known the stores were outrageously overpriced when he’d suggested we come to this mall. He did tell us not to worry about what we spent.

Sylvie and I loaded up our arms with potential buys and trotted off to the dressing rooms. After deciding against most of the clothes I tried on, I ended up with a pair of jeans, a nice summer dress, and an off-the-shoulder shirt. Sylvie fared much better, finding several shorts, tops and dresses that she liked.

The next two stores proved to be the same. Sylvie found a lot she wanted to buy while I came away with a few odds and ends. I did manage to find some pieces that would mix and match well with stuff I already had, but nothing that stood out or excited me. I wanted a new look to go with my new life and that didn’t include casual tees with store logos on them or over-priced khakis. I wanted clothes that were sexier, more grown-up, the kind of clothes my father never would have let me wear when he was alive. There was no way I was going to continue to dress like a nun now that I was living in California. I was ready for some excitement and I wasn’t going to find it dressing like a high school kid.

We decided to take a break from shopping and grab a bite to eat at the food court. As we were heading to the food court a store caught my attention. The window displayed a mannequin dressed in a black, supple leather tank dress. The scoop of the neck was cut just a little too low and dark metal rings held together the sides. It was wonderful. It screamed sexy and dangerous. It was everything a good dress should be.

“One more shop before we eat,” I told Sylvie as I started to enter the store.

“What in the world are you going to get in there?” Sylvie asked nervously as she eyed a dress made entirely out of fishnet.

I ignored her and continued into the store where more naughty delights met my eyes. Leather pants, slinky tank tops and faux fur jackets hung on racks while tight fitting dresses adorned the walls. In no time I had my arms full of treasures and was heading to the dressing room. I tried on dozens of outfits and came away with more than half of what I’d tried on, including the dress that had been displayed in the store window. I left my choices with the saleswoman and went to look at accessories.

Their accessories were as hot as their clothes and I quickly added several pairs of dangly earrings, scarves, and handbags to my growing pile on the counter. The shoes were next and I was not disappointed. I found three pairs of sexy high-heeled boots and two pairs of sexy pumps to go with the dresses I had picked out. Sylvie had only picked out a waist-length denim jacket and a snake skin print tee.

“Giselle, where do you think you’re going to wear these outfits to anyways?” Sylvie asked as the saleswoman rang up my purchases.

“To the clubs of course” I answered matter-of-factly, trying not to blanch when the saleswoman gave me the total. I handed her my credit card like I spent that much money every day and tried not to think about it.

“Uh…earth to Giselle, you can’t go to the clubs. You’re only nineteen, remember” Sylvie sing-songed?

“I’m only nineteen now but in two weeks I’ll be twenty,” I reminded her, “and that is old enough to get into some clubs” I finished triumphantly. Sylvie looked unconvinced.

“Uncle Ned is not going to let you go to clubs and he certainly isn’t going to let you go anywhere dressed in those,” Sylvie informed me, gesturing at the garments the girl was bagging. I was getting frustrated with her. Sometimes she was just so…young.

“He’ll never even know Sylvie, don’t worry about it. He’s always working or at some charity event. You won’t tell him, so what’s the worry?” Sylvie looked indignant.

 “Uncle Ned has to work. His “work” is what’s buying us all this today” Sylvie informed me as if I were stupid.

“I know that” I bit out. “I wasn’t criticizing. I’m just saying he’ll never know so it’s not a problem. I’m glad he’s not around hovering all of the time. Dad kept us on such a short leash. We never got to do anything. I’m enjoying my freedom,” I said exasperated. “Besides,” I continued, “I’m an adult now, not a little kid, I want to start living like the adult I am”. Sylvie’s hurt expression made me sorry I had added the “little kid” part. I tried to smooth it over as I grabbed my bags and we headed out of the store.

 “Hey, after we eat do you want to go in that shoe store we passed earlier? I saw you eying those boots in the window. They would look cute on you. You should get them” I encouraged. Sylvie smiled and nodded her head. Shoes always make a girl feel better.

Sylvie and I stuffed ourselves on French Fries and hamburgers at the food court. Not the healthiest meal, but it was definitely delicious. We were dropping off our trays when we noticed a group of guys at the entrance of the food court. They looked like high school guys and they were staring at us. I wasn’t interested, although one was kind of cute. He was only maybe 5’7 with short, wavy blonde hair. I couldn’t tell for sure what color his eyes were from where we stood. He was cute, not handsome, but you could tell that he’d grow into it. His face was still too round, too boyish to be handsome.

His friends were identical and only a couple of inches taller than him with their light brown hair falling messily over their eyes. Twins, now that had potential. We started to move past them when one of the twins, who was propped on top of a table, kicked his foot out to block our way.

“Sorry girls,” twin one began, “you can’t pass unless you give us a kiss”. His brother laughed, but it wasn’t a nice laugh. It was a laugh that told me he was a bully by nature and had spotted us and mistaken us for easy pickings. Boy did he have the wrong girls. Anger filled me instantly. I’ve kissed a lot of boys, hell I’ve done more than just kiss, but no one gets to tell me what to do, at least not anymore.

“Sorry,” I began sweetly, “I’m not big on fairytales so I’m not into kissing frogs”.

“What?” twin two asked obviously confused. It wasn’t difficult to figure out that he wasn’t the brains of the group.

“Frogs, you know? The fairytale where the princess kisses the frog? Never mind…” Blondie said giving up. “I’m Terrance,” Blondie informed us, “and this is Rob and Mike” he said gesturing to the two I was quickly coming to think of as dumb and dumber.

“Giselle and Sylvie Davis” I said politely as I gestured to my sister who was practically hiding behind me. Sylvie didn’t have much of a backbone, but I had enough for both of us.

“You’re new here” said Terrance as more of a statement than a question. “You’re Mr. Folliet’s nieces, right?” he finished.

“How did you know that?” Sylvie asked, speaking for the first time.

“News travels fast around here, especially when it has to do with the obscenely wealthy” Mike informed us, or was it Rob? It really didn’t matter.

“You already graduated, right Giselle?” Terrance asked ignoring his friend. I nodded letting my boredom show.

“This is our last year. We’re about the same age.”

“How nice,” I said in my most condescending voice. “Well it really has been lovely meeting you but we really do have to run” I said. I started to move forward again when Mike or Rob or whoever the hell he was moved his leg to block our path again. I could have walked around him, but I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. I was really starting to get pissed.

“Move your leg” I said gritting my teeth.

“Or what?” the moron asked laughing. I smiled, a very nasty smile, and leaned towards him, talking slowly so his feeble mind could comprehend what I was saying.

 “Look asshole, you really don’t want to piss me off. I’m going to ask you one more time to move your legs and then things are going to get ugly”. The fool laughed. Why was I always being underestimated? He stopped laughing as my hand began to slide up his leg and towards his groin. His breath hitched as I moved closer to his family jewels. The others sat frozen, watching.

“Oh yeah baby,” he said as I cupped him with my right hand. It was then that I released a flash of energy that jolted him so hard, it sent him crashing to the ground. He stayed there clutching his privates and cursing me in between cries of pain.

“What did you do to him” Terrance yelled as he rushed over to check on his friend.

“I taught him a lesson. Hopefully you will all learn from it. Don’t fuck with me or my sister,” I advised tossing my hair over my shoulder and storming off with Sylvie chasing after me. “You shouldn’t have done that,” she admonished breathlessly, trying to catch up.

“He was a little shit and needed to be taught a lesson, I could have done much worse. Now we won’t have to worry about anyone bothering us. They’ll get the word out not to mess with us” I said absently.

 “Uncle Ned’s going to be mad” she went on. “He doesn’t even practice magic anymore. He’s not going to want everyone knowing what we are”.

“Did he tell you that?” I asked icily.

“No, but…” Sylvie stammered. I turned to face her.

“You and Uncle Ned can hide what you are from the world if you want to but I’m done hiding. I am what I am. I’m done pretending” I informed her. “Besides,” I added as I began walking again, shifting the weight of the bags to my other arm, “L.A. is a hot bed of supernatural activity these days. Maybe I’ll fit in for a change. I’m certainly not going to hide in the broom closet” I added, laughing at my own joke. “There are worse things than witches to be concerned with these days” I said absently.

“This is supposed to be a fresh start for us” Sylvie said timidly turning away from me.

“It is,” I responded hotly, “a fresh start where I can be myself. I’m not going to cower to anyone anymore. Those days are over” I told her. Why she was making such a big deal over this?

 “I’m not ashamed of what I am Sylvie,” I said more softly, “and you shouldn’t be either” I added. “We’re blood witches, not girl scouts. We’ve been raised on magic our whole lives, it’s who we are. Are you planning on just giving it all up?” I asked incredulously.

“I don’t know” she replied slowly. “I’m not sure I want everyone to know I’m different. I want to fit in, not stick out. Are you going to join a coven?” she asked nervously.

“Hell no!” I replied. “I don’t need a coven. I’ve got enough power all on my own. Covens are for people who need to join power with others. I don’t need that, and I certainly don’t need to be under the thumb of a coven master who tells me what to do” I finished.

We had stopped walking and had dropped our bags onto one of the couches. I looked into Sylvie’s sad eyes. “Look Sylvie,” I began more softly, “I’m not dad. I’m not looking to hurt anyone and I don’t want to rule anyone either. I just won’t let others push me around, not here, not anywhere”.

“That was quite a show you put on back there” said a female voice from behind us. I turned to see a tall, auburn-haired woman standing behind us. She must have been at least 5’10 and she towered over me, but I was used to people towering over me. Her hair fell in soft waves around her shoulders. Her skin was pale and flawless. She looked like a model. She was beautiful in a way that I would never be. It’s not that I was hard on the eyes but I was too cute to be beautiful. She had full pouty lips and the greenest eyes I had ever seen. Her summer dress showed off her perfect breasts and perfect figure. She was amazing and it took me a full minute of gazing at her before I came to my senses and could speak again.

“I’m Nallia” she said, introducing herself. She extended her hand towards me delicately. I took her hand and shook it gently. Her hand was like silk and for a moment I wondered what it would be like to have those hands touch my body. I was shocked at my own thoughts. I had never had these thoughts about another woman before. I loved men. I was practically addicted to them. Before I could figure out what had just happened she began to speak again.

“How did you do it?” she asked huskily.

“Do what?” I asked stupidly.

“How did you zap Mike like that?” she asked again. So it was Mike. I hadn’t been sure which one it was. I didn’t answer her. I just continued to stare.

“You’re a witch aren’t you?” she asked knowingly.

“Why do you ask that?” Sylvie piped in nervously.

“Oh” Nallia said carelessly, “I know a little about that stuff. I dabble but…” she trailed off, “let’s just say I’m not naturally gifted, at least not in that way” she added smiling wickedly.

“I’m Giselle and this is Sylvie” I said coming to my senses and introducing us. “We’re blood witches” I explained. Sylvie looked outraged at my confession. I tried to ignore her.

“Nice” said Nallia approvingly. “I overheard you conversing with the boys so I know your Mr. Folliet’s nieces. I never knew he was a witch.”

“He’s not,” I corrected, “not really. Men often don’t often inherit witch genes. Don’t ask me why,” I added.

“Oh” she said considering. “Well” she continued, “you’ve already met some of the local boys,” she said rolling her eyes, “how do you feel about meeting some of the local men?” She laughed. I’m meeting a couple of friends tonight at Seville’s, it’s a club on Hanover” she explained. “Want to join us?” she asked. “It will be a great way for you to meet people since you are new here” she added. Disappointment set in my gut.

“I ‘m not twenty-one, so I probably can’t get in” I explained weakly.

“Oh I’ll get you in” she assured me. “I know the bouncer. He’ll let you in. He’s a real good friend.” I looked at her uncertainly. “Meet us there around 9 pm” she said reassuringly. “I’ll get you in. I’ll wait by the door for you” she promised as she turned to go, already assuming I would accept her invitation. She was right. I would accept.

“Great” I called after her, “I’ll see you at 9 pm”. She waved once more as she sauntered away.

Chapter 6

Seville’s was easy to find, at least for our driver Paul it was. Uncle Ned had left at 6 pm and I had told him I was meeting up tonight with a friend I’d met at the mall. He just didn’t know where I was meeting her. Sylvie had tried talking me out of going. I had to listen to her lecture about the dangers of a big city and the repercussions of underage drinking for a half an hour before she had finally given up. Wisely I had chosen to ignore her rather than to argue or she would have gone on even longer. I didn’t understand what she was so worried about. I would probably be the most dangerous thing at the club tonight.

Paul drove around the side of the club and pulled up to the curb. Seville’s looked like I thought it would – cool. The building sat at the end of a row of shops. The brick building that housed Seville’s was painted black. Graffiti stylized lettering spelled out the club name across the building wall. On top of the second story of the building was a blue neon sign flashing out “Seville’s Dance Club”. A banner hung from one side of the building, advertising live music on Friday and Saturday nights. I would love to check out one of the bands some day. I loved live music but had rarely been able to enjoy bands under dad’s watchful eye. I wondered what type of music they would have on a Wednesday night like tonight. It really didn’t matter. I would be happy just to get into the club. I hoped Nallia had been telling the truth about being able to get me in.

I sat in the car taking in the scene. The driver waited patiently for me to get out. I adjusted the top of the white strapless dress I had chosen wondering if strapless was the best choice for my large breasts. I felt like I was falling out of it but the dress looked great. Tiny silver studs embellished the soft white leather across the bodice. Matching white leather straps with silver studs criss-crossed the mid-section of the dress making the dress more interesting. I had chosen a pair of silver, heeled sandals, silver jewelry and a silver evening bag to go with the dress.

The only thing that looked out of place was large, blue corundum cut into an oval and hanging from a heavy chain around my neck. Blue corundum is more commonly known as a sapphire to those outside the magical community. This particular stone was an intense inky blue color that looked almost black until it was held up to the light. Some called it a lynx sapphire because of its unusually deep color. Witches often used crystals in their spells. Sapphires hold a special significance as they are known to provide protection and wisdom to those who wear them.

I didn’t wear it because of its metaphysical properties though. I wore it because I had to. I had been given the necklace when I was just eight years old. It was then that my father had called upon the dark powers to summon a demon. By capturing the demon in his spell he could force the demon to make a trade with him for power. The tricky part was that the demon summoned got to negotiate that trade. As it turns out, that demon wanted me.

It turned out better for me than I had first expected. The demon that was summoned wasn’t actually a demon at all but a fallen angel. The angel, Semiazaz, had been stripped of his beautiful white wings when he had followed Lucifer out of heaven during his fall from grace. Semiazaz had no intention of joining Lucifer, rather he’d followed him to destroy him, but he had done it against God’s orders. God punished his disobedience regardless of his reasons for disobeying. God had stripped Semiazaz of his angelic qualities and cursed him to be an incubus, a disgrace for an angel. All in all I thought Semiazaz handled his fall from grace well. I suppose throughout the thousands of years he had lived he had come to terms with his punishment.

When my father had first called the circle I had known he intended to summon a demon. I didn’t know he intended to hand me over in exchange for power from the demon. When Semiazaz had risen in my father’s circle I had been scared shitless. When my father offered me up to the demon, I had become hysterical. At first Semiazaz had looked furious with my father for suggesting the trade be for a little girl, but my father assured him that I was powerful. Semiazaz had taken my hands in his and had a change of heart about accepting a little girl as payment. The deal was struck. Dad received power from the demon, the demon received me and, unexpectedly, I received Semiazaz’s protection.

 I was to remain free to live my life as I chose as long as I agreed to call Semiazaz up every couple of weeks using the necklace and release him to feed. If I was in trouble I need only a drop of my blood on the dark stone to call my angel to me. This is why dad had the necklace hidden by a spell I couldn’t break. I was only allowed to have the necklace under dad’s supervision and only for as long as was necessary to release Semiazaz. With dad dead, the spell was broken and I was free to wear the necklace whenever I wanted.

Uncle Ned hadn’t liked the news of me being bound to a demon, even if he had once been an angel, but there was nothing I could do about it. I was bound to Semiazaz as he was bound to me. I did my best to assure Uncle Ned that Semiazaz wasn’t dangerous, at least not to me. I wasn’t so sure if he was dangerous to others or not. I didn’t know where he went or what he did after I released him from the necklace or how he got back to wherever he came from. I didn’t ask.

I checked the time on my cell phone as I stepped out of the car. It was a quarter to nine. I still had plenty of time to release Semiazaz before I had to meet Nallia. I slipped around the corner of the building for a little privacy. Seeing a man appear out of thin air might freak a few people out if they witnessed it. I might be comfortable letting people know I was a witch but it didn’t seem smart to let them know I was bound to a incubus. Somehow I didn’t think L.A. was that open-minded.

I removed a small pin from my purse and pricked my finger. I pressed the bleeding finger to the stone of the necklace and murmured his name once. The blood seeped into the stone as if it was being drank up. The air around me shimmered slightly and then he was there. Semiazaz stood before me looking delightfully yummy. His tight jeans and t-shirt showed off his muscular body while his black hair set off his sky-blue eyes wonderfully.

He smiled at me and I smiled back. He looked good enough to eat but our relationship wasn’t like that. He had watched me grow up. He was my protector and in a way, I was his. He reached his hands towards mine and I met his with my own. We made contact and I fed him some of my energy to sustain him until he could feed. We let our hands fall away. He looked around.

“A club?” he questioned. “Nice” he said with a predatory grin, “easy pickings.” I laughed.

“Behave tonight” I warned half-heartedly. He was an incubus after all, how much could I expect him to behave himself? He just continued to grin.

“You’re all dolled up tonight” he observed. “Hot date?” I rolled my eyes at him.

 “Unfortunately, no” I answered. “I’m meeting a friend here tonight.” I told him.

“Is she hot?” he asked interested.

“Yes” I answered honestly, “and before you even ask, the answer is no. You can’t feed off of her.”

“Geez” he said exasperated, “you’re no fun.”

 “Just because I won’t let you feed off of my friends doesn’t mean I’m not fun” I protested poutily.

“Well” he began as he wrapped his arm around my shoulders, “let’s go meet your friend, shall we?”

 He ushered me around the corner to the front of the building where a crowd of people were waiting to get in. I spotted Nallia right away. She was standing at the front of the line, her hands playing up the front of the bouncer’s chest. We slipped to the front of the line amidst a sea of complaining voices. I didn’t feel bad we were cutting. There was no way I was standing in that line all night. Nallia sauntered over to us in a skirt so short she couldn’t lean in it let alone bend over. Her eyes were glued to Semiazaz.

“Hey” she said absently as she reached us. “Aren’t you going to introduce us?” she asked coyly, her eyes never leaving Semiazaz.

“Sem this is Nallia, Nallia, this is Sem. He’s a friend of the family” I added lamely.

“Sem?” she asked, finally looking at me.

“It’s short for Semiazaz” I explained as she quirked her eyebrows.

“What an unusual name” she commented locking her eyes to his once more.

“My father gave it to me” he said laughing sexily. The double entendre was lost on Nallia who obviously had no idea he was other-worldly.

“My friends are already inside” Nallia explained as she motioned us around the bouncer, who never even bothered to ask for my I.D. Flashing lights blinked in time with the music around a crowded dance floor. The floor vibrated from the intensity of the music. Sem gave a finger wave as he disappeared into the crowd.

“He’s not sitting with us? Nallia shouted over the music.

“No” I answered, “We didn’t come together. I think he’s meeting someone here” I added hastily. Nallia might be okay with me being a witch, but I didn’t know her well enough to confide about Semiazaz.

“Oh” she said her disappointment evident. “Well,” she said rallying “our table is over here” she said pointing to a high top table across the room where several people sat. We made our way through the crowd to the table.

“Everyone” she said getting the group’s attention, “this is Giselle, Giselle, this is everyone” she added laughing. “Actually, this is Marissa and James” she said pointing to a cute brunette and a jock-type guy that must have been the brunette’s boyfriend.

“That’s Trevor” she said pointing to the other guy sitting at the table. Everyone gave a little wave to me. I waved back. I noticed Trevor didn’t have a girl with him. I could tell Nallia and him were not a couple. I hoped that didn’t mean that Nallia was trying to set me up. He was okay, but not really my type.

I choose the empty stool next to Marissa. After about fifteen minutes of chitchat Nallia excused herself claiming there was someone she “just had to” talk to. A half an hour later I realized that she might not be coming back. I couldn’t believe she had left me alone with her friends. They were boring me to death. All they talked about was college and career paths. Blah! I couldn’t take anymore.

I made my escape to the bar with the excuse I needed a drink. I tried to order alcohol, but the bartender asked for I.D. I settled for a coke. While I was waiting for my drink a guy sitting at the other end of the bar caught my eye. He stood out from the other guys at the club.

His dark blonde hair was almost the same color as mine and was cut short in back and on the sides but was a little longer on top. It gave him a messy look that softened his angular face. I couldn’t be sure of his height since he was seated, but I was guessing him to be 5’10 or so. Even in the dim light I could tell his eyes were dark and his skin was very pale.

I normally didn’t go for guys with skin that pale, but his skin was beautiful. It practically glowed. He noticed me too and we were still staring at each other when Semiazaz came up behind me.

“What is he?” I asked Semiazaz immediately.

“Don’t you know?” Sem asked curiously.

“If I knew, I wouldn’t ask” I replied shortly. Sem laughed. He wasn’t easily offended by my brashness.

“Open yourself up and use your power” he suggested. “You’ll know.” I did as he suggested but I still didn’t know what he was. In fact, I was more confused than ever. I had never felt an essence like his before. It was cold, so cold. I couldn’t feel his life force at all.

“He feels like…death” I said to Sem. “That’s all I feel…wait, I can feel his power too. He’s powerful” I added. I must have been on the right track because Sem was smiling.

“What’s dead but still walks and talks?” he asked. “Oh wait,” he added, “that sounds like a riddle” he said laughing.

“You’re telling me he’s dead?” I asked confused. Semiazaz just stared at me with his eyebrows slightly raised, waiting for me to get it. I finally did.

“Are you telling me he’s a vampire?” I asked in disbelief.

“Ding, ding, ding...” he said mockingly, “give the lady a prize”. I tried to ignore his sarcasm.

“Does everyone know what he is?” I whispered.

“I don’t know” Sem said thoughtfully. “They might” he continued, “It’s not like it used to be. Vampires, Weres and witches,” he added motioning at me, “are gaining public recognition and rights in some parts of the country. L.A. is especially progressive in that area among others”. How he was more up to date on politics than me baffled me, but I knew better than to ask Sem how he knew. I’d never get a straight answer. I let it go and continued questioning him.

“What kind of rights?”

“The same as everyone else” he answered shrugging. “They want the right to life…or their version of it, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The whole kit and caboodle” he finished.

“Are they going to get them?” I asked.

 “There’s a good chance” he answered. “California just passed a law recognizing vampires as living beings and therefore subject to the same laws, rights and taxes as every other American citizen” he said, no doubt enjoying giving me a lesson in politics. I listened quietly as he continued. “California has always been progressive though,” he added quirking his eyebrows at me and grinning, “medical marijuana and all. It will probably be a while before the federal government will recognize them though. The Bible belt states won’t recognize them. The federal government will have to go slow. If they push too hard too soon it we could end up in another civil war” he finished. I thought about what he’d said.

“Why wouldn’t the other states recognize them?” I ask innocently.

“Most people consider them monsters. Most people are still getting used to the idea that magic and magical creatures exist. Many Christians believe that they are unholy and are not of God and therefore they are of the devil” he explained.

“Are they?” I asked nervously.

“God made all things, Elle” he said offhandedly.

“Will witches have rights too?” I asked. He looked at me as though I was an adorable five year old.

 “Witches already have rights, the same as everyone else” he explained slowly. I let the idea of vampires and Weres becoming law abiding citizens and taxpayers sink in for a moment.

“What is to stop them from killing everyone?” I asked wondering why humans would ever give rights to creatures that could annihilate them.

“They would never want to kill off everyone” he said exasperated. “What would they eat if they killed all of the humans?” he asked jokingly. I knew he was making fun of me, but I was used to it.

“Vampires don’t have to drain a person to feed” he continued, “and Weres eat animals, not humans – usually. Some vampires do drain humans just for the sheer enjoyment of it. What are they teaching you in witch school these days anyways?” he teased. I gave him a look to let him know I didn’t think he was funny. He knew damn well that I didn’t have any experience with other supernaturals. Hell, I hadn’t even believed that they existed until I’d seen the headlines plastered across every newspaper and magazine I came across.

“Well love,” Semiazaz began, “the women await me so I must go” he informed me. As quickly as he had come, he was gone. A second later Nallia came sweeping up next to me and I wondered if she was the real reason for Sem’s sudden departure. If so, I was proud of him. He really was being good tonight. Her incessant giggling signaled that she had managed to score a real drink.

“How did you get served?” I asked annoyed.

 “You’ve got to know the right people” she said tip-toeing her fingers up my arm. I laughed in spite of myself and shrugged off her hand. “Speaking of knowing people,” I segued, “do you know the guy at the end of the bar? Don’t look!” I warned. I didn’t want the guy to know we were talking about him. She looked.

“Damn Nallia! Can you at least pretend to look casual?” I criticized. She fell into another fit of giggles and it took a moment to get her back on track.

“That, my friend, is Ashford Pentington” she answered in a regal tone. “He goes by Ash” she continued, “and his family has major money, but then again, most of the people here come from major money” she added absently.

“What do you know about him?” I asked carefully not wanting to give away what he was if she didn’t already know.

“He’s a vampire” she informed me casually as if she was telling me what she had for dinner. Then she raised her arms out to me and did a bad *Night of the Living Dead* impression.

“So you know already” I said, pushing her arms away from me and she immediately fell into another fit of giggles.

“Yeah, I know” she answered. “He’s only been a vampire for a little over a year. His girlfriend turned him. They’re not together anymore” she added. “She was older than him, and by older, I mean much older, as in a hundred years or so” she said laughing.

I was about to ask for more information on him when I noticed movement beside me. No, that’s not right. I felt his energy before I saw him. I knew it was Ash without even turning my head.

“Hey Nallia” he said casually. “Who’s your friend?” he asked meeting my eyes as I turned to look at him. I was right. He was about 5’10 and his eyes were a deep brown color that almost looked black.

“This is Giselle Davis” Nallia sang, “she just moved here. “Her uncle is Ned Folliet” she added in a way that suggested that information should mean something to him. I felt like she was giving my pedigree and it annoyed the hell out of me.

“Hi” he said extending his hand. I reached out and grasped his hand in mine for a firm shake but a jolt of power jumped between us when our hands met. He jerked his hand away in surprise and I wiggled my fingers trying to alleviate them from the prickles of pain that lashed through them.

“What the hell was that?” he demanded, a little angry. “Is that how you greet people where you’re from?” Embarrassed, but not about to apologize, I retorted, “You tell me”. After all, it wasn’t definitely my fault. It could have been his power that caused it. It had never happened when I had touched anyone else before. I reigned in my anger before I said anything else. I didn’t really want to test my witch powers out on a vampire.

“What are you?” he asked curiously, his anger gone. “Don’t you know?” I asked playfully trying to eliminate the tension. He just stared at me. “I’m a witch,” I confessed openly. “I already figured out what you were ten minutes ago so you don’t need to confess to me” I added waving my hand. He laughed. That was a good sign.

“That saves me the trouble of having to tell you myself then” he said jokingly. “It’s always a really awkward way to start a conversation, “hello, I’m Ash and I’m a vampire”” he admitted teasing. “Although it definitely is a good way to weed out those who are frightened of me or just plain hate me for what I am” he added seriously. I frowned, shaking my head. I couldn’t imagine someone not giving someone else a chance because of what they were. I mean, what if someone was forcibly turned into a vampire? What if they hadn’t had a choice? It didn’t seem very fair. I certainly hadn’t had a choice in being a witch. I’d been born that way.

“A real witch” Ash said looking me over as if he would be able to tell just by looking at me. “I’ve never met a witch before” he paused and glanced at Nallia, “at least not a real one”. Nallia huffed and looked insulted.

“You’re a witch?” I asked Nallia. I was confused. I had never felt a single spark of power from her before. Either she was really good at shielding or she didn’t have anything to hide.

“I told you I dabbled” she said defensively. “I’m going to mingle” she said haughtily as she sauntered away. I couldn’t help giggling just a little. Nallia was something else.

“She told me she dabbled, but I didn’t think she actually considered herself to be a witch” I admitted felling bad for Nallia.

“She’s not part of a coven” he told me, “She’s a solitary witch”.

“Well I can tell you from experience that covens are way overrated” I said.

“Is that so?” he asked playfully. I nodded my head emphatically and his grin widened.

“Would you like to have a drink with me?” he asked.

“Sure,” I answered without hesitation, “why not?” Like a gentleman, he took my arm and led me to where I had seen him sitting earlier. The night was looking up.

Chapter 7

From the way Ash presented himself it was easy to see that he was from old money. His manners were impeccable. He pulled my chair out for me at the bar and ordered me a drink, a real one. Ash couldn’t be much older than me and I wondered why the bartender hadn’t asked for I.D. I decided to ask Ash.

He grinned mischievously when he answered. “I encouraged him not to” he said simply.

“Encouraged how?” I asked.

“You really don’t know?” he asked surprised. “I figured that since you are a witch you would know all about vampires.” I shook my head.

“Enlighten me” I suggested. He smiled broadly at me making him appear even more handsome and deceivingly innocent, winsome almost. I wondered how often he had used that smile to get his way.

“Vampires” he began, “can enter a human’s mind and make suggestions. The stronger the vamp, the stronger those suggestions are” he answered.

“Suggestions?” I accused. “Isn’t that more like mind control?”

“Not in my case” he said laughing, “I’m still too young, but for a stronger vamp I guess it is like mind control.

“You can do this?” I asked uncertainly. I didn’t like the idea of someone being able to go into my mind and make me do things. He must have noticed my unease. “Relax. I can’t enter your mind. I already tried,” he added devilishly. “Your shields are too strong,” he confessed. This made me feel a little better.

“Does that mean that no vampire can enter my mind?” I asked hopefully.

“I’m not sure” he said thoughtfully. “It may be because I’m so new that I can’t do it or it may mean that because you are a witch, no vamp can.” He took a sip of his drink as he considered it. I wondered how vampires could eat and drink if they were dead. Maybe not a topic I really wanted to explore, but it was interesting.

“I’ll try again in a hundred years and let you know” he said laughing, but you could detect a note of bitterness in his comment.

“How old are you?” I asked taking a sip of my own drink. “I was twenty when I was turned and that was almost a year ago” he answered, downing the rest of his drink and signaling for another. He continued, “Vamps count age based on when they were turned, not how many years they have actually walked the earth. I’ll always look twenty” he added, “even when I’m a hundred”.

“Don’t you mean how many years they’ve been dead?” I asked. Ash‘s face lost all expression for a moment. I immediately regretted it. I could really be a bitch sometimes.

“I’m sorry” I apologized. “I shouldn’t have said that. I’m new at all this vampire stuff and I’m just trying to get a handle on it.” He smiled at me and I was glad I had apologized. It wasn’t something I did often.

“It’s okay” he said. “Do I look dead?” he asked preening for me.

“You most definitely do not look dead” I said appreciatively. We smiled at each other.

“If you want to ask me questions, you can” he offered. “It would be far better to offend me than an older vamp that may be more temperamental” he suggested playfully. “Ask away” he encouraged. And I did.

 I discovered that vampires really did only come out at sundown and that their reaction to holy items depended upon how old they were. They can eat and drink a little, but most of the older vamps lost the desire to do so. Interestingly, he told me that vamps don’t get intoxicated from the alcohol they drink. Their bodies heal too quickly for alcohol to take effect. He also debunked the myth that vampires sleep in coffins saying that a long time ago that may have been true, but not today. He assured me that he spent the days in a comfy bed within a darkened room. We spent the next hour asking each other questions about our supernatural abilities.

I was surprised to find that Ash was really a nice guy…err…vampire. Despite being brought up wealthy, he had remained grounded and not snobbish at all. During our conversation, Ash let his leg brush mine several times. He found little ways to make contact with my body enough times that I was quite certain of one thing - this vampire was flirting with me. I was surprised to realize that I liked it – a lot. I wondered how it would feel to have him really touch me. As the night wore on I became determined to find out.

Nallia stopped by on her way out. She had some muscled-up guy with her that seemed as though his IQ probably only went as high as his body fat ratio. We exchanged numbers and she promised to call me the next day. I looked at the clock behind the bar. It was almost midnight, the witching hour. I hadn’t seen Semiazaz for hours and was betting I wouldn’t see him until I called him up again. Where did he disappear to all of the time?

 I was feeling a little tipsy from the four cocktails I had consumed. Ash leaned over and whispered into my ear how beautiful he thought I was. I didn’t mean to giggle. It just came out. His breath tickled my ear and sent shivers up my spine. He rested his hand on my bare thigh leaving the skin he touched feeling hot. I wondered briefly at his warmth, thinking that vampires were supposed to be cold, before his lips were on mine.

His kiss started as a soft glide across my mouth but quickly deepened into more. I was on fire from that kiss. I had been celibate for almost two months. A record for me. I needed this. I tried to relax and enjoy the kiss as he wrapped his arms around me, but in the back of my mind I was worried. I was worried that he would want more from me than I was willing to give. It wasn’t that he was a vampire or that he might want my blood. That didn’t bother me. In fact, it excited me. What had me troubled was the thought that he might want us to be more than just a casual hook-up, and I wasn’t ready for that. I reluctantly pushed away from him.

“What’s wrong?” he asked his face still inches from mine. I didn’t know what to say. How do you tell someone that you’d be willing to sleep with them, but not date them, at least not exclusively?

 I stammered, “I…don’t want you to get the wrong idea about us. I just moved here and I don’t want anything serious with anyone” I confessed. I felt good that I’d been able to put it so nicely. I was hoping he would understand. He laughed abruptly.

“I’m not proposing marriage Giselle,” he said trailing his hands up my sides, “just the honeymoon. “We can be friends,” he added seductively, “friends with benefits”. He kissed his way to my neck and I tilted my head to give him better access. His lips were like velvet on my skin.

“I just don’t want you to get pissed off if I meet someone else or for you to expect me to be at your beck-and-call. I’m not that kind of girl” I said clarifying.

“You are direct, aren’t you?” he said pulling away. My neck felt lonely where he had been kissing it.

“I try to be,” I said slowly, “I just don’t like misunderstandings”.

“Come on,” he said pulling me gently from the chair. “I’ll show you my place, no strings attached” he added waggling his eyebrows at me.

I let Ash lead me out to the parking lot. He stopped at a sleek, black BMW Z8 and opened the door for me. I wasn’t surprised that a guy like Ash would be driving an expensive sports car. By the time I had settled into my seat, Ash was already in the driver’s seat. It was uncanny how fast he could move. As he pulled the car onto the road, I stole a glance at him. He was so handsome and I could hardly wait to have my hands all over his bare flesh and him underneath me. Being on top was my favorite position. It was very powerful to have that much control over someone. I enjoyed power. Few people ever realize how powerful sex really is.

Chapter 8

The hot July sun beat against my bare skin leaving tiny beads of sweet on my forehead, but I wasn’t complaining. I loved the warmth of the sun. The rays felt as if they sent the breath of life itself into me. I had learned to enjoy the sun’s warmth living in Michigan where summer was all too brief and the sun could disappear for months at a time. In less than two months it would be turning cold again in Michigan.

This year the thought didn’t depress me because I would still be here in sunny California. Even though I knew that warm sunny weather would be the norm for me from now on, I couldn’t take it for granted. I hadn’t lived here long enough to have grown used to the wonder of year round warm weather. Californians didn’t know what cold weather was, not the way that Michiganders did. Nallia had been complaining all afternoon about the hot July heat, but the heat didn’t bother me or Sylvie. Sylvie seemed to be as content as I was.

Nallia wore a broad-brimmed straw hat to protect her face from the sun. She didn’t need it though. She had pulled her chaise back into the shade as far as it would go. Not a speck of sun landed anywhere on her body. I did my best to drown out her incessant complaints and babbling and just enjoy the sun. I watched the pool water shimmer in the sun. I was thinking about how the sun made the water look like tiny crystals all squashed together when I heard Nallia call my name.

“What?” I asked coming out of my daze.

“I was asking,” Nallia said impatiently, “if you were listening to me, but it is evident you are not” she pouted. “Nallia,” I pleaded, “say something interesting and I’ll listen” I promised. “You’ve been complaining about the heat for the last hour. I can’t take anymore” I grumbled. “Go swimming” I suggested.

“I’ll get my hair wet if I go swimming” she said appalled.

“That’s kind of the point” I retorted.

“No way!” she said aghast. “I have a date tonight and I just had my hair done at the salon. I’m not going to mess it up by going swimming”. All I could mange was, “Ugh”.

“All right” she said devilishly, “I’ve got an interesting topic for you. What happened between you and Ash last night?” Before I could answer she continued. “I thought maybe I wouldn’t have to ask and you would just tell me, but obviously that didn’t happen” she complained.

“I can’t get a word in to tell you” I muttered under my breath.

“What?” she asked. “Oh, never mind, just spill” she insisted.

“What exactly do you want to know?” I asked neutrally, noticing Sylvie had taken a sudden interest in our conversation. I didn’t like it. It wasn’t that I was afraid that she would tell on me. She would never do that. It was that she didn’t approve of what she had often referred to as my “wonton ways”.

“Did you do him?” Nallia asked bluntly and I couldn’t help but laugh at her directness even if it was tacky.

“Yes” I answered just as directly.

“Oh my God” Nallia screamed. “You slept with a vamp! How was he? Did you let him bite you?”

“What?” Sylvie screamed, sitting up abruptly and now fully engaged in the conversation.

“Relax” I said laughing. “He didn’t bite me, although I’m kind of regretting that now” I admitted. “Nallia” I teased, “I thought you would already know how he was. I got the impression you’d done just about everyone”. She threw a towel at me as I laughed.

“Not Ash” she replied. “Ash doesn’t do humans anymore”. She gave me a wicked smile. “Maybe he doesn’t consider you to be human.” I frowned. I was a witch, but I was still human.

“So how was it?” she asked again.

“It was…nice” I answered.

“You have sex with a vampire and all you can say is “it was nice”?”

“What do you want me to say” I asked. “It was good but I’ve had good before. I didn’t see shooting stars or anything corny like that”.

“So,” Nallia asked seriously, “are you dating him now?”

“No” I answered emphatically. “We’re just friends”. Sylvie chose now to pipe in.

 “Friends don’t sleep together Elle”.

“Thank you” said Nallia nodding in agreement.

 “Our kind of “friends” does” I insisted. “We agreed a head of time on the whole friends with benefits thing” I informed them. Sylvie shook her head in disbelief.

“You agreed to that?” she asked. “What is wrong with you Elle?” she exclaimed. “Don’t you want a nice guy to do things with? Why would you allow yourself to be used like that? Is everything always about sex with you?”

 Nallia and I exchanged glances over Sylvie’s tirade. She was only fifteen and still a virgin. She couldn’t possibly understand how possessive a guy could get once you had sex with him. She couldn’t understand that such boundaries were necessary to avoid confusion. She also hadn’t learned yet that if you got too close to a guy, you’d end up with a broken heart.

I sat up and faced her. “I’m too young for a serious relationship Sylvie” I pleaded for her to understand. “I don’t want to be controlled by anyone and that is what guys do when you date them”. Nallia nodded in agreement.

“Ash will be that nice guy to hang with,” I explained, “just without the strings attached, no complications and that is how I want it”.

“Uncomplicated?” she asked incredulously. “How can you say that sleeping with a vampire, who is “just your friend”, is uncomplicated? He’s a vampire Elle! What if he gets pissed off at you one day and, I don’t know, rips your throat out? You’ve got to admit that’s a possibility…you do have a tendency to piss people off”.

I couldn’t help but laugh at her near hysterical take on the situation. I had to realize that she hadn’t met Ash and was judging him to be blood thirsty just because he was a vampire.

“Relax Sylvie,” I urged, “he really is a nice guy. He’s only been a vampire for a year. He’s not even that powerful. He tried to enter my mind, but he couldn’t. I’ve got a few tricks up my sleeves if he ever goes rabid on me” I joked. Sylvie lay back down on her chaise knowing there was no way she would win this argument.

“Well I think it’s exciting” Nallia said. “I knew when I met you that you would be fun to hang with. Just call it intuition” she added. I rolled my eyes behind my sunglasses. Nallia had about as much intuition as a rock. She looked at her cell to check the time.

“I need to get going if I’m going to have enough time to get ready for my date” she said giddily as she gathered her belongings.

“Don’t forget my birthday” I called after her as she headed for the pool gate. “It’s next Saturday,” I reminded her, “here at the house”. “It starts at four, but it will be boring until Uncle Ned and his friends leave. He’s promised to be cleared out by eight so the real party can start” I told her. “He’s going all out” I continued, “Catering, a band, the whole bit” I said happily. “Invite whoever you want. I don’t know anyone except you and Ash so I’m counting on you” I added.

“No problem” she assured me. “I’ll be here and I’ve already started to get the word out. It will be a great way to introduce you to everyone. Don’t worry, it will be great” she added.

“I hope so” I said quietly. “I’ve never had a real birthday party before. Our dad wasn’t much into celebrating our birthdays, not since our mom died. Sylvie and I would celebrate with cookies and small gifts we’d buy with our allowance,” I admitted looking towards Sylvie, “but it wasn’t much”.

“Well those days are over” Nallia said dramatically. “From what I can see, your uncle adores you and is trying desperately to spoil you both rotten”. She skipped over to me and gave me a quick peck on the cheek before skipping out the gate.

“Have fun tonight” I called after her.

Chapter 9

I had been waiting for this day for weeks and it was finally here, July 25, my birthday. Another year older. I was twenty now. Uncle Ned and Sylvie had been fussing over me all morning. It had been wonderful. They made my favorite breakfast, ham and cheese omelets. It may be simple, but it was my favorite. They hadn’t had the cook do it either. They had made it themselves, which was sweet.

The omelets had been delicious and yellow calla lilies, my favorite flower, had been placed on the table. There is something to be said about the love that goes into a gift, even one as simple as breakfast or flowers. Many take such little things for granted, but not me. I’d had too many years with too little love not to be appreciative.

After breakfast Uncle Ned asked us to get dressed and meet him in the foyer. Sylvie and I scrambled to do as he asked, knowing he must have a surprise. Uncle Ned had us follow him outside to the driveway. Parked in front was a brand new Jaguar convertible. The paint was a dazzling electric blue. It was so metallic that it looked as if thousands of tiny diamonds had been crushed into the paint. I stood there in complete shock as he told me it was mine. He had bought me a freakin’ car for my birthday.

I’ve had my driver license since I was sixteen but I had never had my own car. It wasn’t because we couldn’t have afforded one. It was because dad hadn’t wanted me out of his sights. Dad had seldom allowed me to take his car anywhere. The only freedom I had ever gotten was when he’d pass out after drinking and I’d sneak out my window to meet up with a guy.

I threw my arms around Uncle Ned and covered him in kisses. He was the sweetest man who had ever lived. Tears pricked my eyes at this overwhelming display of his affection. I finally managed to calm my excitement and offered to take Sylvie for a drive. Of course she said yes. Uncle Ned quickly went over the car’s basics with me before we tooled out of the driveway.

The jag was as beautiful inside as it was out. Dark grey leather seats blanketed the interior along with a high tech radio, navigation system and a hundred other gadgets that I had no idea how to operate. It was by far the best present I had ever been given.

Sylvie and I drove around town. It felt awesome to be on the road, especially in such a hot car. I enjoyed all of the envious looks we inspired from other motorists. There was no way you could not feel good in a car this awesome.

I called Nallia to get her address. I punched it in my navigation system and told her I was stopping by. Sylvie and I drove to Nallia’s house, giddy with happiness. No doubt Sylvie was thinking of her sixteenth birthday coming up in a few months when Uncle Ned would no doubt provide her with her own set of wheels.

Nallia was impressed with my new ride. She decided to come back to the house with us to get ready for the party. Nallia grabbed a few things and jumped into the car. We headed back to Uncle Ned’s laughing and joking. I parked in the driveway and the three of us went to my room.

Sylvie excused herself for a moment. When she returned she had a small wrapped box in her hands.

“I feel a little silly giving you something used” she began, “especially after the car Uncle Ned got you, but I thought this might mean a lot to you” she said handing me the box. I carefully unwrapped the box and lifted the lid. Tears sprang to my eyes as I recognized the treasure inside. It was mom’s cameo necklace. Sylvie had replaced the broken chain with a new one. The cameo was also a locket and I knew what I would see inside even before I opened it. Side by side were pictures of Sylvie and myself as small children.

She should have never felt silly for giving me this. It meant more to me than all the cars in the world ever could have and I told her so. I put the necklace on and by the time I was done thanking her, we were both in tears. Tears for a mother that had died too young. Tears for a mother that we had for too little time. Tears for two sisters who’d been to hell and back only to find themselves now in heaven.

Sylvie hesitated before excusing herself again, this time to retrieve something. When she returned this time her expression was far more serious. She told me she had something she needed to show me. I looked to her expectantly.

“When I went to get the cameo from mom’s jewelry box to have it repaired I found this” she said handing me a piece of yellowing paper. “The drawer stuck like it always does” she explained, “I had to pull hard to open it and when it opened the bottom of the drawer came off and this fell out”. I slowly opened the paper careful not to tear it as Sylvie continued.

“It was hidden Giselle. The drawer has a false bottom. I guess that’s why it never opened and shut right” she added. Eager to see what mom had felt so important that she would hide it, I began to read the letter out loud.

Dearest Mira, I know that you do not understand what I do, but I do it because I must, not because I want to. My people are in grave danger and it is my duty, my family’s duty, to put an end to this treachery. I fear the world that you and our little one would live in if these monsters are not stopped. I cannot promise my return, but I pray, if there is a God who will hear me, that I will return to you and the treasure you carry within your womb. I pray that I am not so far lost that my prayers cannot be answered. I ask that if anything should happen to me that you go to my father and confess all. He is a good man and will not show you the scorn that others would. Trust him Mira. Trust me.

With love and undying devotion,

Yours forever,

Fredrick Molyneux

The room was silent as I finished reading. I tried to make sense of what I had just read. Obviously it was a love letter of sorts, but there had been mention of an unborn child. Mom never had any children besides Sylvie and me. My insides were knotted from confusion and the possible implications of such a letter. Could we have an older brother or sister somewhere out there? I couldn’t imagine mom ever giving one of her children up. Nallia was the first to break the silence.

“So she had an old boyfriend” she said. “What’s the big deal?”

“It’s not that she had an old boyfriend that is the big deal” Sylvie explained, “It’s that this Fredrick guy mentions that mom is pregnant with his child”. Nallia’s face finally began to register the full brunt of what this might mean.

“There’s no date on the letter” I observed. “How can we know when this was written?” “How do we even know she had the child? Something could have happened.” I said “Maybe she lost the child and it was too painful for her to talk about” I suggested.

“That’s possible, “Sylvie said carefully, “but I found this with the letter” she added handing me a worn photograph. The picture was of mom, much younger than I remembered her, and she was with a handsome young man. The man had dark blonde hair the same color as mine and brown eyes. The similarities between his features and mine were staggering. The pieces began to slide together in my mind.

“Oh my God” I said quietly. “It all makes sense now.” The sudden revelation rocked me. I was that child mentioned in the letter. I was why mom had left Italy so suddenly and why she had married dad so quickly. Had dad known when he married her?

“That’s why dad always hated me. Why he always resented me and took his anger out on me. He never laid a hand on you Sylvie” I said looking at her through tears. “He knew I wasn’t his. He knew and never told me, not even after mom died. Why? Why didn’t he send me away to live with my father? Why did he keep me there?”

“Maybe he didn’t know them” Nallia suggested quietly. Apprehension lined her face. “What did you mean by “he hated me”?” she asked.

“My father” I spat out angrily, “or the man who called himself my father, abused me for years”. I covered my eyes with my hands, the letter and photo still clutched in them. Nallia looked away, obviously not knowing what to do. I let my hands fall away from my face.

“He wasn’t my father. I’m not even upset over that. It’s a relief to know that son-of-a-bitch wasn’t really my father” I said laughing through my tears. Sylvie looked away, shame marring her young face.

“Did you show this to Uncle Ned?” I asked suddenly. “No” Sylvie answered quietly, “I thought I should show it to you first. Maybe today wasn’t the best day to do that” she added, her voice choked.

 “Today was a great day to find out that man wasn’t my father” I assured her. I stood and went to get a tissue from my desk. I dried my eyes and tried to compose myself.

“I’m going to talk to Uncle Ned” I told them.

“Right now?” Nallia asked. “The party is starting in just a couple of hours. Don’t you have to get ready?” she asked.

“I have time” I assured her as I walked to the door. “You two go ahead and start getting ready. Sylvie, show her where everything is, okay?” I said as I left the room.

 I made my way to Uncle Ned’s office where I knew I’d find him. The door was already opened and I knocked lightly on it to get his attention.

“Elle” he said sounding surprised, “I thought you’d be getting ready. Is everything okay?” he asked nervously. I knew I must look a mess from crying. My face swells when I cry and I can’t help but to look terrible. I nodded at him and entered the office closing the door behind me.

“I need to talk to you” I answered. He motioned for me to sit. I let my hand glide over the ornate wood of a small table as I passed and sat opposite of Uncle Ned who was at his desk. The letter and photo were still clutched in my hand. Uncle Ned sat patiently, saying nothing and waiting for me to tell him what was on my mind. I slid the letter and photo across the desk to lie in front of him.

“Sylvie found these in mom’s jewelry box” I told him. “I was hoping you could tell me more about them”. Uncle Ned took the items gingerly, looking first at the photo and then gently unfolding the letter. When he had finished reading the letter he laid them on the desk. He ran his fingers through his graying hair and rested his face in his palms.

“Well…?” I asked impatiently. “Did you know about this?” I asked trying to keep the accusation out of my voice.

“I knew the man in the photo” he stated calmly. “Your mother dated him briefly before we left Italy. Our father didn’t like them dating and it was my understanding that she had broken things off with him” he explained.

“What about the child?” I asked. “Surely you must have known she was pregnant.”

“No,” he said, “I didn’t know. She never told me.”

“What year did you move here?” I asked stiffly. His eyes met mine as he answered.

“We moved here in the fall of 1989”.

“I was born in 1990, almost nine months after you moved here” I said my voice rising. “I look like this guy – Fredrick – in the photo”.

“Yes,” he agreed, “yes you do Elle, but I swear to you I didn’t know. I never put it together. I should have,” he added, “she was so adamant about leaving Italy right away…I wanted to wait, but she was resolute. I guess now we know why.” Uncle Ned’s face twisted in pain and disbelief. I could tell he was telling the truth. He hadn’t known.

“Why would she just leave my father?” I asked. “Why didn’t she just wait for him to come back from wherever he had to go?” I asked trying not to cry again.

 “I told you,” he said desperately, “I don’t know. She had told me they broke up. Maybe they had a fight.”

“What was this family business he was referring to in the letter?” I asked.

“I’m not sure “Uncle Ned said carefully. “Theirs was a private family. A very old and prestigious family with a long history” he added looking at me. “That history includes being at odds with our family Elle. There are a thousand reasons why she wouldn’t have wanted anyone to know she was pregnant. It would have been disastrous for both of them if our families knew of their involvement.”

“Were they witches?” I asked.

“No,” he replied looking away, “they were not witches” he added evasively. There was something off about the way he had answered, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. He looked sick, as if this news was even more upsetting to him than it was to me. He was starting to cry, though working hard to hold back.

“I want to find him” I informed him. “I want to know my father, my real father Uncle Ned” I added desperately. I held my breath waiting for him to refuse, but he didn’t. He nodded his head slowly up and down a few times and said, “Of course Elle. I’ll help you find him. There’s no harm in looking for him now I suppose.” He seemed to be thinking. “I can’t see what it would hurt” he added thoughtfully. “I’ll hire a private investigator to start searching. I’ll do it on Monday. It will go quicker to have someone experienced helping us.”

 I was so surprised at his willingness to help that I didn’t know what else to say. I had never seen Uncle Ned so sullen, so broken. He looked utterly defeated and I couldn’t understand why. Was he so upset that his sister had lied to him that it made his eyes well with tears. For surely those were tears I saw in his eyes. I felt horrible for him. My insides twisted painfully from seeing him so upset. I thought I should give him some privacy so I collected the letter and photograph and stood to go.

“Okay,” I said, “thank you for helping Uncle Ned. It means everything to me” I said heading for the door. I had just reached the door when his voice stopped me.

“Elle,” he began, “don’t get your hopes up” he cautioned. “It’s been twenty years. Even if we find him…it will be a shock for him to discover you exist. He may not feel the way he did back then about having a child” he added. I looked at Uncle Ned for a long moment before responding.

“He knew I existed” I insisted. “He said so in the letter.”

“He knew you existed back then,” Uncle Ned explained, “but he doesn’t now, I can assure you of that. Fredrick Molyneux was not the type of man to let a woman pregnant with his child just disappear. He would have gone to the ends of the earth to find you. Either he doesn’t know you exist or…” he paused looking away, “he didn’t make it back from wherever he spoke of in the letter”.

My breath caught in my throat and I couldn’t speak. I hadn’t thought of the possibility he could be dead. I hadn’t wanted to even think the letter indicated it was a possibility. I nodded towards Uncle Ned and turned away.

 I made my way back upstairs to my bedroom. Whatever fears I had, I needed answers. I needed to know what had become of my father and why my mother had left all those years ago.

Chapter 10

I should have known that Sylvie and Nallia would be able to brighten my mood. My sides hurt from laughing at their incessant joking about all the fine, up-standing citizens that would be attending my party today. We had to be on our best behavior until Uncle Ned’s friends left. His friends just happened to be judges, lawyers and politicians and other influential business men. Go figure that a billionaire would have friends like that.

 Since our company was to be conservative early on in the night, and I didn’t want to give Uncle Ned a heart attack, I decided to wear something a little less revealing than my usual attire. I chose a satin tank dress with an asymmetrical hem in a beautiful sapphire blue color. It had been a gift from Uncle Ned and was very sophisticated. The bodice was scooped with delicate beading across it. It matched my sapphire pendant perfectly.

I had already managed to steal some privacy to release Semiazaz and he was already downstairs mingling with the guests. We were sticking with the story that he was a family friend from out of town. Uncle Ned wasn’t thrilled with the idea of an incubus rubbing shoulders with his friends but it was my birthday. I wanted Sem there.

I put on a pair of dangly sapphire earrings to match and a delicate silver bracelet. Slipping on my silver heels, I glanced in the mirror once more. Nallia had done a wonderful job on my hair, piling it loosely on top of my head, allowing a few tendrils to escape around my face.

Sylvie and Nallia came to wish me luck before going downstairs to mingle with the guests. My uncle had insisted on escorting me to the party. It seemed ridiculous to me to make such a big deal of my introduction, but it was important to him so I’d agreed.

Someone knocked softly on my door before it opened. It was Uncle Ned. I stood to greet him.

“Elle,” he said looking at me, “you look beautiful”. I smiled brightly at him.

“Thank you” I said softly. He smiled back at me but I could swear he was about to cry again. I hoped he wouldn’t because then I would cry too and I look terrible when I cry. Make-up wouldn’t be able to fix that.

“Are you ready?” he asked, regaining his composure and extending his arm to me.

“As ready as I’ll ever be” I admitted letting out a nervous breath. I took his arm and tried to calm the butterflies in my stomach. As we walked towards the staircase I mentally reminded myself that I had nothing to be nervous about. I didn’t even know most of these people and it didn’t matter what they thought of me. It didn’t do any good. I was still nervous.

We paused at the top of the staircase as our names were announced and every head turned to look at us. I prayed that I didn’t trip down the stairs. We slowly made our way down. My face felt as if it might break I was smiling so big. I wondered if this is how Miss America felt when she was out in public, having to smile so brightly at everyone.

 I silently applauded myself for choosing the blue dress as I noticed several nods of approval from our guests. Relief swept over me as we descended the last step and the music started again. We joined the crowd amidst choruses of “happy birthday” and “you look so lovely”.

Uncle Ned made his rounds with me on his arm, introducing me to so many people that I knew I’d never remember all of their names or what they did for a living. Many of his friends asked me about my life back in Michigan and I tried to be vague, knowing I couldn’t tell them the truth about the hell I’d been through there. I also had to politely accept the condolences about my father…err, stepfather- from at least a dozen people. I was relieved when his friends began to say their goodbyes. I needed a party now more than ever.

I was jealous that Sylvie and Nallia had been enjoying my party while I’d been forced to make small talk with people who would never accept me if they really knew me. If it hadn’t been for the several flutes of champagne I had drank, I probably wouldn’t have survived the ordeal.

Uncle Ned assured me that he would take care of the remaining guests and that I could join my friends in the backyard now. I was relieved. I excused myself to my bedroom to freshen up. I sat at my vanity staring into the mirror.

 I realized that talking to those people had made me feel bad about myself. I couldn’t help but notice that I didn’t fit in with them, and not just because they were adults. It was the way the talked, the things they cared about, the way they lived. I just didn’t understand them and I knew if the really knew me, they wouldn’t understand me either. I wasn’t thinking about a career or even college. I had no desire to go to a nine to five job every day. It sounded like death to me. I didn’t even really care about having expensive things. They were nice and fun to have but I could do without them and not be miserable. In truth, I didn’t know what I wanted. Adventure, maybe?

 I had come to California hoping for a fresh start, but now I was starting to worry. I felt as much like an outcast here as I always had. I wondered if I would ever find a place where I fit in, if even a place like that existed. I could only hope that the people Nallia had invited weren’t so stuffy.

I rose with a sigh from my vanity and made my way back downstairs. I paused at the sliding doors leading to the pool area where a crowd of people were already enjoying themselves. Uncle Ned had out done himself and the yard looked amazing. I looked at the people and wondered what they were like. Would I find someone out there that I fit in with? I liked Nallia and she could be fun, but I could see that for the most part she molded to what others expected of her. I was tired of others expectations.

“You look a million miles away beautiful” a familiar voice said. I turned to see Ash grinning at me. I smiled back. “It’s your birthday,” he continued, “you should be out there having fun. What’s wrong?” he asked.

 “Nothing now that you’re here” I purred sliding up next to him. He looked unconvinced so I added, “I’m just tired of playing twenty questions” I answered honestly.

“Ah” he said in understanding, “they’re playing grill the new girl with you, are they?”

“Something like that” I answered.

“Well, your real party is out there so what do you say we get to it” he suggested.

“I think that’s the best idea I’ve heard all night” I answered taking his arm.

We made our way to the pool area. It looked beautiful with its twinkling white lights and colorful paper lanterns hanging everywhere. Tables were scattered across the lawn, each with soft votive candles glowing on them. Towards the back of the lawn a stage had been set up and the band was warming up. A crowd had gathered on the dance floor that had been assembled in front of the stage in anticipation of the band starting. More guests were huddled around the two bars set up on opposite sides of the lawn and the smaller bar by the pool area.

 I marveled at the scene. It must have cost a small fortune and yet Uncle Ned never even blinked an eye at spending money. Tears stung the back of my eyes. No one had ever done anything so nice for me before. I pushed the tears back, unwillingly to become emotional again tonight.

 I tugged Ash’s arm gently towards the pool bar. Uncle Ned had agreed to have alcohol at the party as long as those drinking left their keys with the bartender at the start of the night. I was surprised that Nallia had managed to invite so many people and that they had actually come. They didn’t even know me. Maybe they just wanted to go to a party or maybe they were curious about Ned Folliet’s nieces. Either way, I was thankful so many had come.

We reached the bar and the bartender signaled us for our order.

“Captain and Coke” I said, “make it a double” I added, “and no lime”. I hated fruit in my drinks. Ash ordered a beer and the bartender gave us our drinks. We wandered over to the side of the bar.

“What do you think?” Ash asked as I took a drink.

“I think,” I answered slowly, looking around, “that this is way over the top, but I love it despite the fact that I don’t know any of these people.” Ash laughed.

“I must admit that Nallia did a good job on the invite list. She invited far more interesting people than I would have imagined. I didn’t realize she knew so many Supes” he told me.

“There are supernaturals here?” I questioned, raising my eyebrows.

“About half are” he admitted. “She must have figured that you would have more in common with them than her usual group of snobby friends” he added.

“Why?” I asked. “I’m not supernatural. Not really anyways. I’m just a witch.”

“You don’t consider yourself a supernatural?” he asked surprised. I shook my head and he let out a soft chuckle. “You can do things that humans can’t darling,” he said, “that makes you a Supernatural.” I considered what he said before answering.

“I guess. I just never thought of myself that way I suppose. How do you tell who is just human and who is supernatural?” I asked.

“How did you know I was different?” he asked. I thought about it.

“You just looked different” I replied. “When I felt for your energy I could feel your power and that you were different. Semiazaz actually helped me figure it out exactly what you were” I admitted. He looked puzzled.

“Surely you’ve been around Supernaturals before, you are a powerful witch.” I shook my head.

“I’ve only been around other witches and most of them weren’t that powerful” I confessed. He threw his arm around me and began guiding me through the crowd.

“I think it’s time you go to know some of your own kind” he stated. “See over there,” he said pointing out a table of guys adjacent from us, “they’re werewolves. They belong to the Sons of the Earth clan. The other group of guys you see by the bar,” he pointed out, “they belong to the Erebus clan. I’m surprised Nallia invited people from both groups. Hopefully there won’t be any trouble tonight with all of the humans around.”

“Why would there be” I asked curiously. He looked at me for a moment before answering.

“The two groups don’t get along, but the Greater L.A. Wolf Federation has ordered a peace treaty between the clans” he explained. “They can’t afford bad media right now. Supernaturals are still not accepted in most parts. A public fight would be a huge blow to the council’s efforts to get Supes recognized.”

“So the two clans are ruled by a larger body?” I asked clarifying.

“Yes” he answered. “Actually there are three clans ruled by the federation, but I don’t see anyone from the third clan here tonight”. I looked at him in question. “I’m not surprised no one from the Lua de Sangue clan is here” he told me. “They’re aligned with the Area Master and associate almost exclusively with other Supes.”

 “What’s an Area Master?” I asked. He looked at me with surprise.

“Girl, you really don’t know anything about Supes, do you?” he teased.

I was getting annoyed with him for making fun of my ignorance but had to admit that when it came to this stuff, I really was ignorant. I was getting great information from him and didn’t want to risk pissing him off so I decided to tone down my comeback.

“Michigan wasn’t exactly a hotbed of supernatural activity, so yeah, I’m ignorant” I replied. “Enlighten me oh wise one” I teased. Ash laughed loudly at that and went on to explain it to me.

“The Area Master is a master vampire for a specified area. Other master-level vampires may be in the area, but he, or she, is the one in charge of all of the vampires for a given area. In this case the Area Master is Pierce and he’s in charge of all the vampires in L.A. and its neighboring suburbs.”

“How exactly does one become a master vampire” I asked intrigued.

“Don’t get them confused” he cautioned. “Any vampire that is old enough can become a master vampire. Being a master has to do with how much power you have, there are many of those. An Area Master has to be approved by the vampire council. This usually happens if they can prove that they are the most powerful vampire in the area and have the ability to rule the others”. It was surprising how well organized the Supes were and I wondered if this was a recent development or if it had always been this way.

“Do you work for this Area Master?” I asked. Ash laughed loudly.

“Hell no” he exclaimed. “I’m just a baby to him, practically useless. He only employs the strongest vampires in the area to run his organization” he explained. “Area Masters have to make sure they are strong enough to fend off ambitious vamps from within their own territory or from outsiders. Older vamps need to be crafty to survive. There is always another, possibly stronger, vamp out there who wants what you have” he told me.

“What a terrible way to live” I murmured. “I would hate always having to look over my shoulder.”

“Pierce can handle it” he assured me. “He’s as crafty as they come and ruthless to boot.” My eyes widened at his description of this master vampire who had been placed in charge of all of L.A.

“All of the old vamps are ruthless, that’s how they survive. It seems like the more time you spend as a vampire, the more you lose your humanity.” I felt sad that this is what Ash had to look forward to.

“Doesn’t it make you feel sad?” I asked. “Do you worry about what you’ll be like in a hundred years?”

“No” he answered immediately. “I figure that it happens gradually. I’m suspecting that like the older vamps I’ve met, I simply won’t care. Besides,” he added, “there is nothing I can do about it unless I plan on walking out into the sun or letting someone stake me – and I don’t plan on doing either of those. I like life, or would that be the afterlife?” he asked jokingly. I respected his courage in facing the unknown.

“So our Area Master was chosen by a council of other vampires” I summarized. “How long does he get to be in charge for?” I asked.

“Until someone manages to kill him I suppose” Ash said. I looked at him with surprise. He continued, “If another vampire can come into your territory and kill you then the council considers that vampire to be the new ruler for the area. They figure if you couldn’t defeat the intruder than you don’t deserve to reign.” I was alarmed at how brutal the system seemed to be but at the same time had to appreciate the simplicity of it.

“Have you met the Area Master?” I asked him. “No,” he said seriously, “but I saw him once.”

 “What was he like?” I asked curiously.

“Scary,” Ash said simply, “very scary. He’s definitely not one to mess with. I could feel the power emanating from him and it was overwhelming. I’m pretty sure he was shielding too. I’d hate to feel his power if he wasn’t” Ash said, downing the rest of his beer.

“So if you don’t work for him, how does he rule you?” I asked innocently. Ash gave me a sideways glance.

“If you fuck-up, he gets to punish you” he answered.

“What constitutes “fucking-up”? I pushed. Ash called off a range of offenses that would require punishment such as killing humans, plotting against the Area Master, starting wars with other Supes, and drawing negative public attention.

“I make sure I don’t fuck-up” Ash teased.

“Good objective” I replied. “I don’t even want to know what one would do to “punish” a vampire.”

“Good call” he said heading over to the bar for another beer. I followed him. “You’d have nightmares for months if I gave you the details of punishments.”

“So what other kinds of supernaturals exist?” I asked as I ordered another drink.

“Well,” he began, “there are a variety of Weres. Almost any large predator can be a Were. There are Were-lions, Were-wolves, and Were-bears” he told me. I giggled.

“Were-bears?” I asked. “Are they anything like Care-Bears?”

“You wouldn’t be laughing if you ever had to tangle with one” he said elbowing me. “They’re anything but cute and cuddly and caring isn’t a word I’d use to describe them if you’ve done something to piss them off” he added. I tried to stifle another round of giggles. The double Captain and Cokes were making me giddy.

It was exciting to think of all the supernaturals out there. It was hard to believe they had always existed but I never knew about them. A whole new world was opening up for me. A world where I didn’t feel as strange as I once had. There were many others like me who could do unusual things, who didn’t fit into the human world.

“Are there any other supernaturals here tonight?” I asked as we made our way onto the lawn.

“The band is a group of Were-leopards,” he informed me, “and there’s a couple of Were-boars over there – don’t laugh – boars can be extremely dangerous.”

As I looked to the group Ash had just pointed out to me, my eyes landed on the most gorgeous male specimen I had ever seen. A striking 6’5, his muscles were so well-defined that I could almost see the ripples through his t-shirt. His hair was a long, rich brown tied back in a pony tail, reaching the middle of his back. I was in love.

“Do you know them?” I asked pointing towards my new love and his friend. Ash nodded.

“The one with all of the hair is Sean and his friend is Mark” he told me.

“Will you introduce us?” I asked hopefully, my eyes never leaving the man who would forever more haunt my every fantasy.

 “Oh Elle,” Ash laughed, “I don’t think he’s the one for you.”

“And why not?” I snapped at him.

“Easy tiger,” he said in between laughing, “I’m just letting you know that Sean isn’t really into the whole rich-society thing. He seems to have a grudge against the ridiculously wealthy. He’s probably only here tonight because he’s friends with the band” he continued. I didn’t let his deter me. I wasn’t really into the socialite scene either. Sean would see that once he got a chance to know me.

“So are you going to introduce us or not?” I asked annoyed.

“Beautiful,” Ash said, “if you want to be introduced, I’ll introduce you”.

We began making our away across the yard and where about halfway to my destiny when Nallia sidelined me, dragging me off to meet someone else. I looked back over my shoulder to see Ash laughing. Nallia was going on and on about how I had to meet some of the witches from the local coven. Bor-ing, but since this was obviously important to Nallia, I allowed her to drag me over to them. No doubt Nallia wanted to join their coven despite her lame protests that she was happy being a solitary witch.

Three girls sat at a table. I identified the leader right away. Gretchen, as she turned out to be, was tall with spiky blonde hair. Her eyes exuded strength despite their un-extraordinary, dull brown color. This one was crafty. I’d have to watch her.

The girl beside her, Phyllis, wore the trampiest get-up I had ever seen. A blood-red leather dress, made up mostly of criss-crossed straps, left hardly anything to the imagination. Phyllis was way too thin and her black bob did nothing to help her pasty complexion. I pegged her immediately as a Gretchen worshipper.

The third girl, Sami, didn’t seem to fit in with the other two at all. I liked her instantly. She was dressed in jeans and a tee and looked out of place at the party. Her brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail and her eyes were the saddest gray eyes I had ever seen. I could tell that she would be beautiful with the right clothes and make-up, despite her mousy appearance.

Nallia introduced the girls and I was just beginning to introduce myself when Gretchen interrupted.

 “We know who you are” she said coldly. I was taken aback by her brusque manner. “Just so you know,” Gretchen continued, “we didn’t come to celebrate with you. We came for the party and to see what all of the fuss was about. Honestly, I can’t understand it, you don’t seem so special to me” she added snottily. I could feel my cheeks start to burn with anger. Who the hell did this girl think she was?

“Yeah” added Phyllis the slut girl, “I thought you would be all big and bad seeing as you murdered your dad and all”. My head snapped to her. Obviously these girls had done their research since it wasn’t commonly known here what had happened to my step-father. Sami had the decency to look embarrassed and she hung her head, distancing herself from the others. Smart girl.

“I don’t know what you are talking about” I replied as calmly as possible.

“Bullshit” spat Gretchen. “We know you used your magic to kill your father. We don’t go for shit like that around here” she continued boldly. “If you have a problem with a coven member, you take it to the coven. You don’t kill them.”

Was she out of her freaking mind? My dad had been the head of my old coven. Who would have helped me? The coven had known for years what he was all about. Now I was really pissed.

 “You don’t know what you are talking about” I said through clenched teeth. Gretchen smiled condescendingly at me.

 “I think we do” she said. “We’ve spoken to your old coven and they’ve explained everything.” Nallia looked uncomfortable.

I just bet they had. I should have known they weren’t the kind to just drop what had happened. They must be trying to block me from joining the coven out here. Well, they could have their way. I didn’t want to join a coven anyways let alone one where these bitches were members. No doubt dad’s bitch girlfriend, Margaret, was behind this. She always had hated me. It must have been a blow to her ego that an eight year old ad more power than her.

 “You’re not welcome here” spat Phyllis.

 “It’s not like I asked to join your joke of a coven anyways” I spat back, my anger really taking hold.

 “Our joke of a coven?” Gretchen cackled. “Girlie you have no idea what we can do” she threatened. I had finally lost it. I couldn’t take anymore. I gathered energy around me.

“And you” I said spitting out each word, “have no idea what I can do”. The votives on the tables were extinguished, the lights went out and the band went silent. The energy swirled around me and I knew at that moment I must truly look supernatural. Nallia gasped and stepped away from me. The energy dancing around me caused my hair to blow around my face. My skin almost glowed with the power. I was just about to spill all of that energy into those dumb witches when I felt a calming hand on my shoulder.

“Love,” Semiazaz cooed, “is there a problem?” All of my anger vanished with the touch of his hand. How did he do that? As quickly as everything had went out, everything came back on, even the candles lit up again. The band began to play again, but the damage had been done. Everyone was staring at me. There was no way to pass off what had just happened as being natural.

Gretchen’s grin told me that she had gotten what she wanted. I’d been bated and hooked. Damn it! Uncle Ned was going to be pissed. Any chance I had of fitting in with humans had just went out the window.

“Ladies,” Semiazaz said smoothly, “I think it’s time for you to get going” he suggested to Gretchen’s group.

“No problem” Gretchen said, rising from her seat. “Oh Elle,” she said as she walked away, “just so you know, your coven will punish you.”

“Are you threatening me?” I asked as I lunged for her. Semiazaz grabbed me around my waist, effectively stopping me.

“No need to,” she replied as she and her groupies walked off, “our coven won’t touch you but we won’t interfere in the justice your coven seeks either. Chow.”

“Nice invite” I spat, turning on Nallia. “Do you think maybe you should have mentioned that you were inviting the bitches of Eastwick to my birthday party?” I raged.

“How the hell could I have known she’d do that?” whined Nallia. “I mean sure, she’s always been a little bitchy, but nothing like that before” she protested. I shook my head in disgust. It really wasn’t her fault. I was just so angry. I wanted to tear someone apart. Sylvie walked up as Nallia asked what Gretchen had been talking about.

“I think it’s time we all had a little talk” Sylvie interjected.

“Not now” I told Sylvie.

“We need to figure out what to do and Nallia deserves to know” Sylvie argued. “She could be in danger too.”

“What?” Nallia squealed. Nallia really got on my nerves sometimes.

“We’ll talk, but not tonight” I insisted. Sylvie started to argue but I raised my hand to silence her. “It’s my birthday and I’m going to have some fun if it kills me” I spat. “We’ll talk tomorrow. We’re not in any danger tonight. Gretchen’s job was to deliver a message from our old coven and she did that. Nothing else will happen tonight. Let’s have fun” I insisted.

Nallia looked worried and Sylvie looked upset but they both agreed and wandered off to mingle. Semiazaz excused himself for the night telling me I could use the necklace to call him if he was needed. I looked for Ash but he was nowhere to be found. Too bad. I could really use some advice. I decided to shake it off and get back to what I had intended to do before Nallia’s interruption.

 I tried to ignore the odd looks people were giving me as I made my way over to the table where Mr. Gorgeous had been sitting earlier. He and his friend were still there. With Ash gone it looked as though I would have to make the introductions for myself.

“Hi,” I said as I approached the table where the man I had suddenly become obsessed with was sitting, “I’m Giselle” I said extending my hand to him. Sean looked at my hand before reluctantly grasping it in a quick shake and releasing it as quickly as he could. It was as if someone had told him I was carrying a deadly contagion and he dreaded touching me. His reaction threw me and in my typical fashion when I got nervous, I started babbling.

 “Your Sean and Mark – right?” I asked dumbly. “Ash told me who you were. He was going to introduce us, but he never got the chance.” Mark looked away as if he were bored. Sean stared at me as if I had three heads.

“I’m new here,” I added lamely, “and I thought I would try to get to know some people.” Sean’s beautiful gold-brown eyes bore into mine and I squirmed. This was not going how I had planned.

“You’re a Were, right?” I asked. “I can tell. I’m trying to get used to figuring out who’s a Supe and who’s not” I explained.

Sean’s eyes flicked with what could have been interest, but it was gone almost immediately. He looked away, but before he did I noticed the way his eyes roamed up my body. He took a drink of his beer and turned back towards me.

“Do you always make a scene like that at parties?” he asked coldly.

“Not usually” I started, embarrassed.

“Look,” he interrupted, “I’ll be blunt. I don’t really go for spoiled rich girls who throw tantrums at parties for attention.” I started to explain that he had gotten the wrong impression when he interrupted me again.

 “Also, I’m not rich and I’m not anyone your uncle would approve of you dating. That right there should save you some trouble” he added. “You’re kind,” he said waving his finger around, “don’t typically hang with my kind. You’re not my type and I’m not yours” he finished.

Indignation swept over me. He thought he knew me. He knew nothing. How could Mr. Gorgeous turn out to be such an arrogant jerk? Tears stung my eyes and I turned to leave, knocking over a chair in the process. I didn’t care. I had had enough for one night. I had half of the party ignoring me and the other half ripping me to shreds and they didn’t even know me! It was my birthday for God’s sakes. Had anyone come up to introduce themselves? Had anyone bothered to wish me a happy birthday? They hadn’t. I turned back to him as I walked away.

“You don’t know me” I spat as tears coursed down my cheeks. Damn those tears. “You sit there and judge me, but you don’t know me. You don’t know anything about me” I finished, walking hurriedly away.

I walked past the bar, past the pool and into the house. I didn’t stop to talk to anyone. I went straight up to my room and flung myself on my bed. My birthday had been one disaster after another. I hated myself for being weak and crying. I hated myself for feeling sorry for myself.

Nallia and Sylvie, who had witnessed the scene, came to console me, but there would be no consoling tonight. I couldn’t stop crying. There seemed to be so many things to cry over. How can I make a fresh start if no one will give me a chance? With this thought in my head, I cried myself to sleep.

Chapter 11

I woke the next morning in a foul mood and with a pounding headache. I knew it couldn’t have been from the booze since I’d hardly had anything to drink the night before. It was from the crying and I had done plenty of that. I absently wondered how long the party had lasted after I had fled. I also wondered how likely it was that I would run into overnight guests if I wandered down stairs for some aspirin. I decided to take a quick shower before venturing down, just in case.

I took a wash cloth and some soap and washed last night’s make-up off my face. Nallia would have been appalled if she had seen me. She thought it barbaric that I didn’t have a regular skin care routine and had been on me to get one since finding out. Nallia and I were very different in a lot of ways, but I liked her. She exuded a confidence I wished I had. She always seemed to know what she wanted and where she was going. I always felt lost.

By the time I had finished showering it was almost ten o’clock in the morning. Anyone who had stayed the night was probably gone by now. I decided to play it safe anyways and throw on some clothes. It would be embarrassing for strangers to see me in my bathrobe and I didn’t need any more embarrassment. I pulled on a pair of comfy plaid shorts and a tee. I left my hair to air dry, knowing it would be wild when it did, but not caring. Anyone who had seen what had happened at the party last night probably already thought I was a freak, so what did it matter?

I trudged down the stairs just in time to see some guy pulling on his pants. I remembered seeing him at the party last night. Ash had pointed him out. He was a wolf, but I couldn’t remember what clan he was with. I averted my eyes and started to head for the kitchen but he’d seen me and called out to me.

“Hey, Elle right?” he asked grabbing his t-shirt from the floor.

“That’s me” I said matter-of-factly, “And you are…” “Brian” he said grinning. “Great party last night” he said chuckling. “I didn’t get a chance to introduce myself or wish you a happy birthday” he added sheepishly. “Things got a little crazy and when I looked for you later, you were gone.” I liked Brian almost instantly. Something about him just radiated ‘good guy’.

He had an easy-going manner that let you know that what you saw was what you got. I liked that. He was maybe 5’9 and solidly built. He was muscular, but not with the overkill you saw in some guys. It looked natural on him and his fluid motions made it evident he wasn’t human. His light blonde hair was cut short and his warm tan made both his hair and his pale blue eyes stand out. He stood smiling, allowing me to appraise him.

“Like what you see?” he asked, teasing. I rolled my eyes and smiled.

“Ash told me you were a wolf” I offered. “I’ve never met one before so I was just trying to see if it was obvious just by looking at you what you were” I lied.

“And is it?” he asked, the stupid smile still plastered to his face. He rubbed his hands down his bare chest provocatively. In a lot of men this might have seemed arrogant, but in Brian it was just funny. He was being playful and I couldn’t help but laugh. He was very handsome and had a nice personality to match his looks.

“Actually,” I told him, “it is obvious, but maybe that’s only to me” I added. “It’s the way you move,” I offered, “and there’s a…wildness about your aura that’s difficult to explain. It looks brighter than most, more alive” I told him. Brian smiled wider.

“Ash said you were a witch” he told me. “I wouldn’t have known that just by looking at you. I can’t see your aura so I can’t say anything about it. I can tell you you’re beautiful. Anyone can see that” he said. I shook my head, embarrassed by his compliment for some reason. Maybe it was because it had seemed so sincere.

 I was glad he couldn’t see my aura. Sylvie had once told me that mine was fringed with darkness. A witch wasn’t able to see their own aura so I just had to take her word for it. For those who could see it, usually other witches, it was a beacon declaring that I couldn’t be trusted. I didn’t feel this was a fair estimation of me. I couldn’t help what my aura looked like and it wasn’t fair to be judged by others of my kind on it.

“I got to hand it to you Giselle,” Brian said laughing again, “you scared the hell out of those wanna-be-witches last night. I wouldn’t have believed a witch could have that much power if I hadn’t seen it for myself. Gretchen almost wet her pants not to mention what it did to the norms who witnessed it.”

Once again someone had set me apart from being human. I wondered about what Ash had said about me being more Supe than human. Maybe he was right. It seemed to be a growing consensus. Maybe I had been trying to fit in with the wrong group of people all of these years. Supernaturals didn’t seem to be bothered at all by my powers. They didn’t think I was weird or strange because of them. They seemed to accept it.

“Gretchen didn’t seem all that scared to me” I pointed out. “In fact, I think she wanted me to react, to do something to expose what I am”.

“Oh she was scared” Brian assured me. “I’ve known Gretchen for a long time. She likes to put up a good front, but she was scared. I’m surprised she wasn’t hiding under the table, afraid you were going to go all *Carrie* on her ass.” I grunted in amusement.

“I’ve never seen anyone do what you did last night,” he admitted, “and I’ve seen a lot of things.” I thought carefully before responding.

“I probably would have hurt them if Semiazaz hadn’t stopped me” I told him honestly. “Don’t get me wrong,” I added hastily, “I would have regretted it afterwards, but at the time I was just so angry…”

“Semiazaz? That’s the guy who broke up the fight?” he asked. I nodded. “Is he your boyfriend?” he asked.

“No,” I said smiling, “Sem’s an old family friend.”

“An old family friend?” he asked rolling his eyes. “Come on. That guy has Supe written all over him. I don’t know what he is, but he’s something. I know he’s not a Were or a vampire, but he’s something.” He looked at me expectantly but there are some things you just can’t tell, especially to someone you just met.

“Hmm,” I began, “it’s not really my place to tell you what he is. Sem is a private man and he wouldn’t appreciate me telling his business. I value his friendship too much to cross that line” I explained. He nodded his head in understanding.

“So Sem isn’t your boyfriend. Is Ash?” he asked.

“Well,” I hedged, “he’s a boy and he’s my friend, but he’s not my boyfriend. We agreed to a more casual relationship” I explained. “Neither of us wants to be tied down”. I was proud of myself for finding a delicate way of explaining my relationship with Ash. Brian smiled broadly at me.

“You are honest and blunt” he said respectfully. “I like that. Most Supes are underhanded, tricky even. Most have a hidden agenda. I like that you’re so open” he said.

“Thanks” I said, meaning it.

“Since you don’t have a boyfriend,” he grinned mischievously, “would you like to hang out some time?” he asked. “No pressure of course” he added. “Maybe you could even meet some of the other members of my pack” he offered. I knew that Brian would be a fun guy to hang out with.

“I’d like that” I said grabbing a notebook off of the entryway table and writing my number on it.

 “Call me and we can set something up” I suggested, handing him my number.

“Great” he said taking the paper. “I have to run now but I’ll call you”. Before my eyes could register the movement I felt his hot breath on my cheek. He stole a quick kiss on the cheek and then was gone. Show off. Was I the only Supe who couldn’t move fast? I had just referred to myself as a Supe and found I wasn’t upset by it. In fact, I liked it. Being human was overrated.

I was in a much better mood as I entered the kitchen. Amazingly, my headache was gone. Sylvie and Nallia were sitting at the breakfast bar eating. The smell of bacon and eggs made my stomach growl, but I decided on toast instead. I dropped a couple of slices of bread in the toaster as they stared at me.

“It’s alive” Nallia said teasingly to Sylvie who giggled.

“Yes, I’m alive” I said taking my toast out and joining them at the bar. I knew I owed them an apology for being such a drama queen the night before and I wanted to get it over with.

“I’m sorry I was such a brat last night” I told them. “I was really caught off guard by the witches and then the way Sean treated me…” I looked down at my toast. “I’m just sorry is all” I repeated.

“Don’t think twice about it” Nallia offered while Sylvie nodded her head in agreement. “Those girls don’t even matter, Elle. There are a lot more interesting people in L.A than them and Sean’s an idiot. What do you want to do with a jerk like that anyways?” I knew she was right about the witches, but for some reason the thought of Sean not liking me turned my stomach.

She was wrong about me not wanting anything to do with Sean. There were a lot of things I wanted to do with him. The worst part is that I got the impression that Sean was usually a really nice guy. He had a great aura. It was me he didn’t like and I didn’t understand why. He just needed to get to know me and he’d discover that I’m not at all like the rich, snobby people he had been referring to. Besides, he might have bluntly told me he wanted nothing to do with me, but I saw the desire in his eyes when he’d looked at me. He was attracted to me, at least physically. I could work with that. I hadn’t written Sean off. There was more than one way to catch a fish, or a leopard as the case may be. The one thing I knew was men. That kind of desire in a man’s eyes almost always meant they’d come around, no matter how indifferent they pretended to be. Yes, I still had plans for Sean and me, but after the way he had treated me, he was going to have to work for me now.

“Earth to Elle” Sylvie called.

“Hmm?” I asked looking up from my toast.

“I said,” laughed Sylvie, “that I have been filling Nallia in on all of the history. Don’t be mad but I thought she had a right to know since the local coven was obviously sending you a message last night.” I waved my hand to let her know it was all right that she had told Nallia. Sylvie was right after all, she did have a right to know.

“We need to be on our toes, proactive” she finished. That was my baby sister, always the pragmatic. She had a point though. We needed to find out what the local coven wanted.

“What have you told her so far?” I asked while chewing.

“Pretty much everything,” Sylvie admitted, “including how dad really died.” I swallowed my toast and turned towards Nallia who was nibbling on a piece of bacon.

“So, do you think I’m a monster?” I asked her. She looked surprised.

“Hell no, if someone locked me in a basement for days I’d kill them too.” Now it was my turn to look surprised. I would have thought she’d be running for the hills by now screaming murderer as she went.

“It was ruled self-defense Elle. The way I see it, you did what you had to. You didn’t kill him in cold-blood.” I was in awe of how understanding she was being about all of this.

“Well,” I said, “there’s no hiding what I am after last night.”

“That might be a good thing” Nallia said. “Your display of power will let the other supernaturals know you’re no one to mess with. Supes love power and they respect it. Who cares what the norms think” she added. “You don’t belong with them anyways.”

“Nallia,” I interjected, “I’m a norm, I’m just a witch too.”

“No, no, no” she said shaking her head. “What you did last night was not normal. Normal people can’t gather energy like that thus you are not a norm. I don’t want you to get upset, but I’m starting to wonder about your real father. Something tells me he might have been a Supe too, fey maybe? I’m not sure, but something” she insisted. This caught me off guard and I stopped eating while she spoke.

 “I doubt he was human” she continued. “We know your mom was a blood witch and you inherited those powers from her, but come on Giselle, your power goes way beyond that. I’ve never heard of a witch doing what you did last night. Plus, Sylvie inherited your mom’s genes too and she doesn’t have a quarter of the power you display, she admitted it herself” Nallia said, looking back between Sylvie and me as she spoke.

 I hated to admit it, but Nallia might be right. I nodded my head slowly in agreement and tried to choke down another bite of toast. I needed to find out more about my father.

Chapter 12

It had been almost a week and Uncle Ned still hadn’t been able to find out anything about my father. I forced myself not to pester him. I knew he had people working on trying to locate him using the information we had. All we had to go on was his last known area of residence and his name. It was better than nothing but it wasn’t much. I was driving myself crazy wondering if he was human or something else and what that meant for me. Instead of focusing on something I couldn’t control, I tried to focus on something I could.

Tonight was the night of the full moon and Sylvie, Nallia, and I were going to celebrate the Esbat together. We had decided it was best to be discreet about the ritual and perform it on house grounds. Sylvie and I had scouted out the woods behind the house a couple of days ago and had found the perfect spot. We got permission from Uncle Ned to have a small clearing amongst the trees mowed for our ritual. The trees were old and had great energy. It would be the perfect place for our ritual. The absence of trees above our circle would allow the moon to shine down on us directly lending even more power to the ritual.

Sylvie and I had worked earlier in the day on arranging stones in a circle. We had put bundles of sage and rue in between the stones to rid the area of negative energy. We now dressed in our traditional ritual gowns, wearing nothing else. I had to lend Nallia one since she didn’t have one of her own yet. This was her first real Esbat and she was excited. I was excited for her. I loved esbats and was happy to share it with her.

Sylvie and I gathered our ritual tools in our satchels along with all of the supplies we would need. We set out for the clearing on foot, our long gowns swooshing against the ground as we walked. The thin, loose fabric of my dress brushed silkily against my skin. The full moon bathed the night in its light and I thought of Brian. I wondered if he was already in wolf form and where he was. I had heard that only the strongest of werewolves could hold off the change. Could he do that? I doubted it. He hadn’t seemed that powerful to me. I wondered at how awesome it would be to witness someone change into a Were. It was all so fascinating to me.

I hadn’t been able to meet with Brian that week as we had hoped, although he had called. We had both been too busy. The last time I spoke with him he had invited Nallia and I to a party he was throwing at his house this Friday night. The party would be almost exclusively other supernaturals and Nallia and I were excited to go. Sylvie, of course, didn’t think it was a good idea to get too involved with the local Supes, but when I pointed out that I hardly fit in with the norms, she contended that I might have a point. She had let the matter drop.

Ash had been pleased that Brian had invited us. He was going to be there as well. When I’d asked him where he’d disappeared to the night of my party, he informed me that he had met a nice were-girl the night of the party that had a curiosity about what it would be like to be bitten. Turns out he took her home and let her find out. It was a relief to hear that he had hooked up with someone else, as strange as that sounds. It shows that he was taking our agreement seriously. His making the first move in being with other people let me off the hook. I didn’t have to worry now about hurting his feelings or him getting pissed off.

The trees began to thin out and the clearing became visible in the moonlight. Immediately upon entering the clearing we began setting up our small altar. Sylvie and I had chosen to use lavender and basil around the altar. The lavender was to invite positive energy into our circle while the basil was to keep unwanted influences and negativity out. We scattered crystals of beryl, amethyst, and turquoise around the altar to encourage our psychic awareness. The only magic we were planning on enacting tonight, besides the ritual itself, was a spell to see who may want to harm us. We were hoping to find out what the local coven was up to.

 I set up a long, pink taper to serve as the main alter candle. On each side of it I placed a candle to represent the god and goddess. I lit the main candle and then stood to sprinkle sea salt around the perimeter of our circle. It was very important to have this boundary set before I invoked the circle. It was crucial to protect yourself within a circle when practicing magic. The energy emitted had a tendency to draw otherworldly beings like a magnet. Bored or mischievous spirits could play havoc on an unprotected circle.

Sylvie went to work preparing the elemental candles while I did the circle. Nallia watched us closely. She had never actually seen a circle before though she had read much on the subject. Sylvie set up a yellow candle for the East/Air, red for the South/Fire, blue for the West/Water, and green for the North/Earth. She used a separate candle that she had lit to drip wax onto the rocks and place the elemental candles into the melted wax. This provided a make shift holder for the candles. I was proud that she had remembered not to use one of the ritual candles. It was very important never to use your ritual candles for anything other than their originally intended purpose. With everything set, it was time to begin our ritual.

Nallia was given a feather and asked to stand in the East corner to represent air. Sylvie would stand halfway between the North and West corners to represent earth and water since we didn’t have a fourth person. She held a crystal goblet in the hand closest to the West and a wand in the hand closest to the North. I would represent fire. I held my anthame ready. I said a prayer of protection over us and then invoked the circle using my powers. I used the main alter candle to call up each element as I lit the candles.

I lit the East candle first and invited the air elemental to join us. I was answered with the slight rustling of leaves at our feet. Next I lit the candle for North, inviting the elemental to join us as well. A sudden dampness on our skins told me of its presence. When I lit the candle for the west the smell of fresh meadows invaded our senses and when I lit the south, the scent of smoldering wood came upon us. I went then to the altar and lit the gold and silver candles I had placed earlier to invoke the god and goddess. I replaced the main alter candle and returned to my corner.

 I glanced at Nallia and could see her nervous excitement. I probably should have warned her that the elementals usually responded. We bowed to the circle and placed our instruments on the ground by their corners.

Now it was time to enact our magic. We went to sit in the middle of the circle by the altar. I placed the ingredients I had gathered earlier into a small wood bowl. I lit the ingredients and let them smolder, allowing the smoke to waft over us as we joined hands to combine our energy. Despite Nallia’s inexperience, our energy felt strong and I was pleased. Next to the bowl of smoldering herbs and oil, Sylvie placed a small crystal bowl of spring water. This we would use for scrying. I recited a Latin incantation I had learned long ago and gazed into the water.

At first I thought the spell hadn’t worked because the water turned black but nothing else happened. Then a series of images flashed across the surface of the water. The images seemed jumbled and didn’t make much sense.

The first one was of Margaret. This didn’t surprise me since we had already guessed that she was the root of my troubles with the local coven. The next image was of latex covered hands hovering over the ripped out abdomen of some pour soul. The intestines were spilled from the opening and the hands held what I could only assume to be some kind of organ. The final image was of a man I had never seen before wielding a sword and slaughtering those around him. I could tell that this man was a vampire. I could feel his power emanating from him even through the vision. As suddenly as they had appeared, the images vanished and the water turned dark once more. I knew we wouldn’t be getting any more information tonight.

I rocked back on my heels and stood, frustrated. What did the images mean?

“Okay,” Nallia said standing as well, “that was creepy.”

“Yeah,” agreed Sylvie, standing as well, “what the hell was that about?” I knew Sylvie must be really shaken to have used a curse word, even one as mundane as hell. She never swore. I looked to her and saw her shiver.

“I don’t know” I replied honestly. “The images don’t seem to fit together. I mean, we knew Margaret was probably involved so seeing her image isn’t surprising” I told them. “But who was that man and why did we see a surgery?” I asked. I didn’t bother to tell them the man was a vampire. I assumed Sylvie could feel his power too.

“Could it mean she is working with the vampires?” asked Sylvie.

 “I don’t think so” Nallia said and we looked at her. “Vampires don’t typically like witches” she explained. “They don’t trust them. At the very least they are leery of them.” She shook her head. “Plus, vampires wouldn’t help her unless they were getting something out of the deal. What could this Margaret possibly have to offer a vampire?”

 “Blood?” suggested Sylvie.

“No,” replied Nallia surely, “they can get that anywhere. Since they went public, everyone is offering themselves up as snacks.”

“Let’s just think about it tomorrow” I suggested. I didn’t feel like letting Margaret and her plots for revenge ruin our esbat. “Maybe something will come to us. Let’s make our offering” I said.

“Nallia, did you bring the gifts?” I asked.

“Right here” she said running over to her bag and pulling out a bottle of wine she’d swiped from her parent’s wine cellar. She also pulled out an assortment of cheese and crackers in Ziploc bags. She brought the items over and Sylvie poured a goblet of wine for the god and goddess and set them on the altar along with a few pieces of cheese and crackers. Nallia poured us each a glass of wine into plastic cups and set out the remaining cheese and crackers.

We spent the next half an hour gossiping and laughing over things only a group of friends would find funny. Nallia was in the middle of telling us a hysterical story about a party she had went to when I felt the air shift around us. We weren’t alone. We were being watched. Sylvie sensed it too. Her spine went ramrod straight. She looked to me and then the woods. Sensing something was up, Nallia went silent. I motioned for her to be still.

I opened my senses and tried to feel for what was out there. I could feel whatever it was at the edge of the clearing behind us. I turned to face it. Whatever it was, it wasn’t human or animal. Nallia was becoming frantic and I had to assure her that whatever it was couldn’t harm us because it couldn’t get past our circle. As long as no one panicked and broke the circle, we would be fine.

Realizing it had been detected, the creature made its way into the clearing. The moonlight illuminated the beast. The largest black panther I had ever seen stood staring at us with its intense yellow-green cat eyes. I stared back in amazement. It had to be a Were-panther. Real panthers were never that large in nature. It stood at least three feet tall from its shoulder. Its paws were as big as my head. It didn’t move any closer or threaten us in any way. It simply stared at us.

 I was mesmerized by the creature. I had never seen anything so magnificent in all of my life. I edged closer to where he stood.

Sylvie spoke softly, “It’s a Were-leopard.”

“Leopard?” I asked confused. “It’s black. It’s a panther.”

“Look closer,” Sylvie instructed, “it has rosettes on its coat. That makes it a leopard.” I looked closer and darn if she wasn’t right.

“Leopard, panther, tiger, who cares?” Nallia squealed. I ignored her and continued to stare at the large cat.

I remembered Ash mentioning that the local Were-leopards were a small group compared to the wolves. There were only maybe fifty in the area. I wondered why he was here and if he could understand what we were saying in animal form. I wondered about a dozen more things I would have to ask Ash or Brian about tomorrow.

The beast lowered his head and gave out a strange cry before disappearing into the woods. We all let out a breath, one I hadn’t even realized I’d been holding. We kept staring into the darkness until Nallia broke the silence.

“Great,” she complained, “now we have to stay out here all night.”

“What? Why?” I asked in surprise.

“Because,” she whined, “there is no way I’m leaving this circle with that thing out there. I’m not getting torn to shreds. Did you see the claws on that thing?” I couldn’t help but laugh at her near hysterics.

“Nallia sweetheart,” I said soothingly, “Sylvie and I knew it was here before we even saw it. We’ll know if it’s still out there before we go” I promised. “Plus, the house isn’t that far” I added. “We can run if you want to” I offered. I didn’t mention to her that from the way that thing had run off there was no way we would be able to out run it if it wanted to catch us. She was already upset enough. Somewhat comforted, we all sat back down, but no one seemed as festive as they had. We couldn’t stop thinking about our strange visitor.

“I don’t think it wanted to hurt us” offered Sylvie. “I think it was just curious.” I began packing away the food and drink.

“He?” asked Nallia. “How do you know it was a “he”?” Sylvie covered her mouth and laughed.

“I thought you were the last person I’d have to explain that to” she teased. “Didn’t you see his package? He was huge!” Nallia’s mouth hung open.

 “Really?” she asked. “I was too busy worrying about his teeth and his claws, I didn’t see.” She sounded disappointed.

“I did” I piped in, laughing into my wine as I finished the glass. “I was wondering if he was that huge only in cat form or in human form too.” Sylvie slapped my arm.

 “Elle,” she admonished, “you are truly incorrigible.”

We all laughed at that. We put out the candles and thanked the elements and god and goddess for their help. I opened my senses to scan the area and found nothing other than your everyday night creatures. I slid my foot across the salt line, officially breaking the circle.

Nallia took off like a bullet for the house with Sylvie and I close on her heels, laughing the whole way. I was laughing so hard, it made it difficult to run at all.

Once inside I locked the doors and the windows. While I didn’t think he had meant us harm, there was no reason to be careless. Caution was best when dealing with something that could kill you before you even knew it happened. We did have witches after us and who knew who else was involved. I decided to be extra safe.

I gave Nallia a crash course in warding and we set to work warding all of the doors and windows. The spells we set made it impossible for anything to pass through the entrances if they were in any way supernatural. Exhausted we said our goodnights and made our way to our rooms.

That night I dreamt of the leopard. In my dream the great cat allowed me to wrap my arms around it like a friend. It was as if we knew each other, he and I. He was so familiar. The dream flashed and suddenly I was a leopard too. I was black like him but with golden rosettes. It was such a strange color combination but so beautiful that I was mesmerized by this new me. Together we ran through the woods, the moonlight dabbling through the trees. I had never felt so alive. I had never felt so free.

Chapter 13

Nallia, Sylvie and I had spent the better part of the morning discussing what the coven might be up to. We still had no answers. Nothing fit right. The visions simply didn’t make sense. I was frustrated, but not surprised. Visions were often obscure pieces of a larger puzzle you needed to fit together. Magic seldom gave you an x=y answer. Unfortunately, it seemed we were missing some crucial pieces in the puzzle.

After Nallia left to go home I decided to call Brian about our second mystery. I wanted to see what I could find out about our late night visitor. I told him about last night’s encounter with the leopard. He had been very surprised to the point of wondering out loud about why the creature would have been checking up on us. He finally had suggested that maybe whoever it was had felt our magic and been drawn to it out of curiosity. He promised he’d ask around and see what he could find out. He had a few friends who were leopards and they just might know something. It was a relatively small group after all. One of them might at least know who was colored like our visitor had been. Before saying goodbye I thanked him and promised that Nallia and I would see him on Friday. I appreciated his willingness to help. I was way over my head when it came to dealing with Supes.

I hesitated outside Uncle Ned’s office wondering if it was wise to tell him what was going on. Deciding I needed all the help I could get, I knocked lightly on his door. Uncle Ned might not be a witch, but he still had witch blood. Magic wasn’t foreign to him even if he had decided long ago to leave it in his past. He had also mentioned several times that he had known and even befriended many Supernaturals in his day.

 “Come in” Uncle Ned bellowed from inside his office. I opened the door and entered. He was sitting on a couch in his office reading a newspaper.

“Hey Elle” he said, seeing it was me. “What’s up?” he asked, folding his paper and setting it aside.

“Not much “I answered shrugging. If you could call witch threats and leopard stalkers not much that is. I went to sit next to him on the couch.

“I just wanted your advice on something” I hedged.

“Shoot” he said and seeing I had his full attention, I told him the whole story. I didn’t leave anything out which was unusual for me since I often cut out parts of a story that incriminated me. But for a change, I had done nothing wrong, not really. So I told him everything.

“You had Supernaturals at your party?” he asked. “What were you thinking?”

“Nallia invited them” I said defensively. “I just moved here, remember?” I continued. “Who would I have invited?” He waved my explanation away.

“I had heard something about a confrontation at the party, but not this” he told me. “I can understand you losing your temper if you were being threatened. No one likes to be threatened.” He sighed heavily. “I never thought I’d say this, but thank God for Semiazaz.” He shook his head and turned to me and I knew I was in for a lecture.

“Elle,” he began, “I know you wouldn’t mean to hurt anyone, but you could. You are very powerful. You’ve got to learn to control your anger. You can’t let people get to you. Who cares what they say about you? They are just words, nothing more. They only have power if you give them power. You know that” he added looking away.

“Well, everyone who saw that knows you are different now. God only knows how many people they’ve told. I’m surprised no one has had the guts to ask me about it yet” he continued. “Are you all right with that Elle?” he asked looking at me. “Are you all right having people know that you are a witch, that you’re different?” he questioned.

 I took a deep calming breath and let it out. I was frustrated that he had thought I should hide what I am in the first place. He seemed almost ashamed of his witch blood and I didn’t understand it.

“I am different Uncle Ned” I began slowly. “I don’t want to hide it. I’m sick of pretending I’m something I’m not” I complained. “Is it so horrible to want to be around people who accept me as I am, people like me?” I asked. Uncle Ned seemed to consider what I’d just said. Then he looked at me, a mixture of pride and sadness in his eyes.

“No Elle, it isn’t terrible, it’s understandable” he answered. “I’m guessing this means you plan on hanging out more with the other local Supernaturals” he said.

“Yeah,” I said, nodding my head, “I think I am. They’re not scared of me.”

 Uncle Ned interrupted, “they’re not scared of you because they are even scarier” he countered. “I know, I know” he said raising a hand as I started to answer, “I get it, really I do.” He surprised me by chuckling.

“You’re a lot like your mother when she was younger. She loved being a witch and she didn’t care who approved and who didn’t. She did what she wanted, but that often got her into trouble Elle. All the Supernaturals I ever met, I met through her. It was her world, never mine.” His eyes looked sad again as he took my hand. “I can’t protect you from Supernaturals Elle. I’ll help you in whatever way I can, but I’m not a witch, not really” he added.

“I know that Uncle Ned” I said grasping his hand. “Don’t worry about me. I can take care of myself.” I kissed his cheek quickly and stood up.

“I’m going to call Nallia and see if she wants to hang out later” I told him. “I’m sorry if I upset you but I thought you would want to know what was going on.”

“You didn’t” he insisted. “I’m glad you came to me. I want you to come to me when you’re in trouble” he assured me. “Have fun with Nallia tonight” he added.

I felt better for having talked with Uncle Ned. He couldn’t help me but it was good to know he was on my side and that he understood. I headed upstairs to give Nallia a call.

Chapter 14

The rest of the week flew by and before I knew it was Friday. I hadn’t learned anything new about my father, the coven’s plans, or the mysterious leopard. It was disappointing. I was looking forward to Brian’s party tonight to take my mind off of my troubles.

Nallia and I had decided to get ready for the party at my house. I wasn’t really sure what to wear to a Supe party, but I remembered the Supes I had met at my party had all been dressed casually. I didn’t want to go too casual though. I still wanted to look good. I settled on a pair of tight, dark blue jeans and a thin, silvery top. The top was loose around the neck and shoulders causing it to drape seductively over one shoulder. It was fitted near the bottom so it still showed off my small waist. I added some simple jewelry and flats and I was done.

Nallia took a bit longer to get ready but the results were worth it. She looked gorgeous as usual in her blood-red mini and tight black top. The top had strategically placed slashes all over it. It was definitely not casual, but I doubted that Nallia ever dressed casual. I looked in the mirror at our reflections as she stood beside me finishing her make-up. Her long, sleek tresses fell in a dark curtain down her back while my much lighter tresses wound wildly from the clip I’d used to pull back my long bangs. I would never look sophisticated the way that Nallia did. I decided I looked good all the same. We grabbed our purses and headed out.

I was driving tonight. I hadn’t had nearly enough opportunities to drive my car since I’d gotten it. I was enjoying the admiring looks we received as I drove to Brian’s house. His house was set outside of the city. Nallia navigated as I drove. I wasn’t familiar with the roads inside the city much less outside of the city.

It didn’t take that long to arrive at Brian’s house. A dozen or so cars and trucks lined the circle driveway. Other cars were parked right on the lawn. I parked my car at the end of the driveway and we got out. His house wasn’t large but it looked nice from the outside. The area to the right side of the house was wooded and I wondered if that was why Brian had chosen it. It seemed a good choice for a Were that had to contend with full moons.

We walked down the sidewalk towards the house and up onto a small, narrow porch. We were all ready to knock when the door swung open and Brian greeted us.

 “Hey ladies” he said smiling. “You made it” he quipped. “I thought maybe you had gotten lost.”

“Ha, ha” Nallia retorted. “I was navigating. There was no chance of us getting lost. Now if Elle had navigated we wouldn’t have been here for at least,” Nallia checked her imaginary watch, “another 4-5 hours.”

“Oh you’re both so funny” I pouted. “I’m new here, I’m allowed to get lost” I said defending my honor. “Now where’s the liquor?” I asked ducking under his arm and entering the house.

“Right this way ladies” Brian said, closing the door behind Nallia and then taking the lead. It took me a minute to register how he had gotten in front of us. He moved so fast. Nallia gasped. Brian was a blur of movement and suddenly a beer was placed in each of our hands. Nallia’s mouth hung open in surprise. Obviously she’d never seen a Were move before.

“Show off” I accused as he led us into the living room where some other guests were hanging out. The living room opened directly into the dining room where I could see several people sitting at a table laughing and talking. Brian made a quick round of introductions to those who were in the living room and then ushered us into the kitchen.

Brian introduced us to a pretty blonde werewolf named Jillian. I was taken aback when he introduced her as his girlfriend. I had a quick twinge of jealousy. I hadn’t realized he was taken. I chided myself on how silly that was. I hadn’t set my sights on being Brian’s girlfriend. I would much rather be his friend. Friends hung around a lot longer than boyfriends. She was very friendly and I knew immediately she would be fun to hang out with.

I didn’t have much time to deal with my surprise over his girlfriend since Brian was already introducing the rest of the group. When my eyes fell on who he was introducing next, I thought I’d pass out. There in all his guy glory sat Sean. The man who hated my guts without even knowing me and had made me cry at my own birthday party. I took a swig of my beer and tried to hide my surprise and sudden case of nerves. I tried to concentrate on the other introductions Brian was making and play it off as if it were no big deal that Sean was here. Brian introduced the others as being Alex, Adam and Karla - all wolves.

All of the guys had what I was quickly coming to think of as Were-muscle. They each had well-defined muscle that was impressive without being overdone. Brian pulled up a couple of chairs for us. Nallia and I sat sipping our beers while Alex regaled us with a story about a friend of his. The others joined in telling the story, obviously familiar with it. Soon we were all laughing. I even saw Sean crack a smile. His smile made him look even hotter, if that was even possible.

 I silently cursed myself for wondering what it would be like to kiss those lips that smiled like that. Despite having sworn to myself that I hadn’t given up on Sean and would make him beg for me, I didn’t really believe it. I wasn’t the type to throw myself at a man and I wasn’t in the mood for more rejection. There was no sense fantasizing about someone I couldn’t have.

Soon shots started flowing along with more beer. Someone turned on the radio. One of my favorite songs came on. Without thinking, I started to sing softly along with the music. Before I knew it, Jillian and Karla had joined me. We jumped up to serenade each other, holding imaginary microphones out to each other to sing into. We were having a blast. No one cared if we looked foolish or what anyone thought. We were just enjoying the moment. It was the kind of moment you could only get from women bonding. That and with the help of alcohol.

We sang and danced for several more songs until we were either too tired or laughing too hard that we couldn’t stand. I was one of the later. I knew I was intoxicated, but I just didn’t care. This was the most fun I’d had since I’d moved to California. The guys applauded us and refilled our drinks as we sat back down.

I glanced into the living room and noticed that most of the people had left over the last couple of hours. I began to wonder why Ash had never shown up. I turned back to the table to find Sean staring at me intently.

“What?” I asked staring back. He shrugged.

“I’m just surprised is all” he answered smugly.

“About what?” I asked indignantly. When he didn’t answer I continued. “Did you think I was some up-tight rich girl who didn’t know how to have fun?” I asked. The others watched us with interest.

“I’m sorry” he said shocking me into silence. “I shouldn’t have assumed that just because you were rich you’d be a bitch. That was shitty of me, and I’m sorry” he continued. I shrugged trying to play off how much his apology meant to me.

“That’s okay” I told him. “I am a bitch, but it isn’t because I’m rich, it’s because that’s the way I was born.” The group broke into laughter. Even Sean smiled.

A loud crash drew our attention to the living room. A huge guy, over six feet tall was knocking over lamps and overturning furniture on his way to the kitchen. A group of three guys, just as huge as he was, flanked him. Brian jumped up, knocking over his beer in the process. Jillian rushed forward.

“Tom!” she screamed. “What are you doing here?” She tried unsuccessfully to block his path. Tom’s face began to elongate and fangs popped from his gums. He gave a menacing growl. Holy crap! Was this guy going to shift?

He grabbed Jillian by the throat like she was a rag doll. He tossed her out of his way. Thankfully, she landed on the couch. Obviously we had one pissed off werewolf on our hands.

 Instinct had me backing up against the bar behind the table. Nallia was already hiding behind the bar, crouched down. I wondered if she didn’t have the better idea. Brian moved towards Tom.

“You little shit” Tom seethed. “You think you’re a big man running around with my girlfriend? Do you think you’re strong enough to take my girl? If you want her than you’re going to have to win her” Tom snarled.

“That’s arcane bullshit” Brian hissed through fangs. I did a double take. I had been so focused on Tom that I hadn’t noticed that Brian’s face was changing too. I shivered as I watched his face shift.

“No lover boy,” Tom countered, “that’s the way of the pack.” Tom lunged for Brian and Brian met the attack head on. Their fangs and claws tore at each other. Why was everyone just standing around? Why wasn’t anyone breaking this up? Brian was getting his ass kicked. Tom’s right hand swiped at Brian’s midsection and what looked like his intestines spilled out. I cried out in shock.

This was more than I could take. I began crying hysterically, the alcohol no doubt playing a role. I had to do something. I rushed forward to put a stop to the fighting. There was no way I was going to just stand here while my friend was murdered before my very eyes. I’d give that bully a jolt that would knock his big ass into tomorrow. Before I could reach Tom, two big hands grabbed me around my waist and pulled me to the ground. Sean kept a tight grip on me. I couldn’t get up unless I wanted to use my power to hurt him.

“Why aren’t you helping him?” I cried. “I thought he was your friend. That guy is killing him” I said hysterically.

“He is my friend” Sean replied calmly. “You don’t understand how the pack works. No one can get involved. They’re fighting for dominance. It has to be between them and them alone” he explained.

“So we’re just supposed to sit here and watch him kill Brian?” I screamed.

“He’s not killing him” Sean protested. “He’s a werewolf Giselle, he’ll heal.”

I couldn’t believe that Sean could be so calm while all of this was happening. Could a werewolf heal the kind of injuries Brian had? It seemed impossible, but Sean seemed sure that he could. Not able to watch any longer, I buried my face into Sean’s shoulder and cried. I covered my ears to block out the awful sounds coming from the fight.

Sometime later Sean gently pulled me away from his shoulder. My hands still covered my ears and he took my hands in his and removed them. I was shaking and realized that the mewling sounds I had been hearing had been coming from me.

“It’s over Giselle” Sean said softly. “Brian’s alive, he’s okay” he said trying to comfort me. “In fact, he won” Sean told me.

“What?” I asked stupidly. “He won? How? That guy was killing him.” Sean started to laugh but seeing my expression he stopped.

“Come on” he said pulling me to my feet. “I’ll take you to him. You can see for yourself.”

Nallia rounded the corner of the bar looking as bad as I felt.

“I want to go home” she screamed.

“I want to check on Brian first” I told her.

“No Elle, now!” she insisted.

“I’m not leaving until I see if he’s okay” I said loudly. Alex saved the day by offering to take Nallia home and she stormed out the front door. I followed Sean into the living room to where Brian lay on the couch. I looked at Brian and began sobbing again. Jillian sat with his head in her lap. Open slashes and blood covered his body. He was not okay. He needed a doctor.

“Brian,” I blubbered, “we have to get you to a doctor.” Sean and Brian exchanged a look and laughed. I didn’t see what was so funny. This was nothing to be laughing about. Jillian looked sadly at me.

“Giselle, I don’t need a doctor” Brian insisted. “Trust me when I tell you I’ll heal. I’m a werewolf. We heal incredibly fast. I just need to rest.” I started to protest when Brian interrupted me.

“Sean, take her upstairs and find her something of mine to wear” he said. “She can stay in the guest room. You should have taken the girls there earlier” he admonished. “You shouldn’t have let them watch that” he said solemnly.

“I would have,” protested Sean, “but your snarling ass was blocking the stairs.” Brian laughed.

“Good job by the way” Sean added. “Impressive.”

“Thanks” Brian said grinning grotesquely though his split open lip.

Numbly I let Sean lead me upstairs to the guest bedroom. He found one of Brian’s t-shirts for me to put on. I went into the bathroom and tried to clean myself up. Somewhere along the way I must have spilled a drink on myself because I was a sticky mess. Make-up had smeared down my face and I washed it off. I tried to calm my shaking hands. Everyone was so blasé about what had happened. Was I the only one who thought this was royally fucked up?

 I was exhausted from the long night, the alcohol, and a shitload of emotional and psychological stress. I walked out of the bathroom intending on falling into bed and asleep as fast as possible.

I was shocked to see Sean sitting on the edge of the bed. I had assumed he had left. He stood as I entered the room and walked towards me.

“Are you okay?” he asked. I nodded.

 I decided I’d better thank him and was just about to when his arm wrapped around my waist, pulling me close. Every nerve ending in my body lit up like the Fourth of July. My heart was beating so fast I thought it might jump out of my chest. I looked up into his face. My God he was beautiful.

His face was masculine with hard angles but his lips had a sensuous fullness that softened his features. His eyes looked inhuman with their unusual golden brown hue, and his hair, don’t get me started on his hair. He had worn it loose tonight and it cascaded over his shoulders in a chocolate waterfall. I love chocolate.

I sucked in my breath, overcome with longing. I stared up at him, my eyes fixed on those luscious lips. He tilted his head down letting those beautiful lips brush against mine. Passion sparked between us and the kiss grew deeper, more urgent. He ran his hands along the sides of my breasts, my waist and finally ended his exploration on my butt. He tightened his grip and lifted me up to him.

His erection probed me through his jeans. I felt his hardness against my core and I was ready for him. My breath came rough and rapid in between kisses. I smoothed my hands over his chest and chiseled abs, enjoying the smooth hardness of his flesh. I left one hand drop lower to cup him. He pushed me roughly onto the bed. Reaching down he tugged on the t-shirt I was wearing. I tried to raise myself up to take it off but he ripped it off of me before I could. The force of him pulling at the t-shirt lifted me off of the bed, pressing him into my core once more and setting me on fire.

His mouth descended on my breasts and I was completely lost. He took turns teasing them with his mouth and telling me how beautiful I was.

His hands found my core and began teasing me relentlessly. He tore my panties from me and plunged his fingers inside of me. His mouth swallowed my moans of pleasure as I rocked against his fingers. I fumbled with the zipper of his jeans, needing him to be inside of me. He reached down and shed the nuisance himself. I reached down and stroked him. He moaned, pushing me down by the shoulders. I bent my knees, ready for him.

Never hesitating, he plunged deep inside me, filling me to the point where pleasure meets pain. He thrust in and out of me in an almost frantic rhythm. I clung to his back, my fingernails scoring his flesh. The pleasure was so intense. It was like nothing I had ever experienced before. There was wildness in his movements, like he had lost all control. His hands were everywhere and his mouth assaulted mine.

My first climax hit suddenly and I screamed out, arching my back. Within seconds I was already climaxing again, calling out his name. This time he joined me, his shouts matching mine. He collapsed on top of me. Seeming to remember his size, he pushed his weight off of me, his body hovering just inches from mine. I tried to catch my breath and focus. I had never experienced sex with this intensity before. It had been incredible.

 I was beginning to feel my limbs again after that amazing climax when he suddenly rose off of me and off the bed. He stared at me as if he couldn’t believe I was lying there naked. He looked devastated, which was not the look I had expected after the mind-blowing sex we had just had.

“I’m sorry” he said running his fingers through his hair. “I’m so sorry Giselle”.

“For what?” I asked, laughing weakly. He grabbed his jeans and quickly put them on. I sat up in bed.

“You’re leaving?” I asked in disbelief. This could not be happening. He wasn’t really just going to leave, was he? He looked away from me and grabbed his shirt.

“This should have never happened Giselle. It was a mistake” he told me.

“A mistake?” I asked trying to keep my voice from cracking. “Why?” I demanded, pulling the sheets around my naked body. He threw his hands in the air.

“For a lot of reasons” he insisted. “For one Giselle, you’re still a child.”

I couldn’t believe he had the audacity to say I was a child. I was twenty years old and no one who looked at me would have considered me a child. This was ridiculous. Anger and hurt burned inside of me.

“You sure didn’t think I was a child a moment ago when you were fucking me” I spat. He looked at me in disapproval for my crassness.

“I wasn’t thinking clearly” he said lamely. “I lost control. I said I was sorry. I wish I could take it back but I can’t.”

Now I was really angry. He regretted having sex with me? It was great sex! How could he regret it? Never had I felt so used, so devastated after having sex with a man.

“Well I’m sure glad you’re thinking clearly now” I grit out. “Good thing you got it together before we had sex or something. You think you are so grown up” I accused. “You could only be a few years older than me. You think because you’re a Were-whatever that makes you wiser than me, better?”

“You know nothing about me,” he spat, reaching for the door. “You know nothing about my kind or the fire you’re playing with. I can’t belong to you! You are so naïve Giselle. That makes you a child.” He opened the door and stormed out, slamming it behind him. The roar of a motorcycle taking off a few moments later let me know that he had really left.

His words stung and I tried to fight the tears, but I failed. How could the night have ended up like this? How could I have been in the arms of the man of my dreams one second and alone and crying the next? Couldn’t he feel how right we were together? I clutched the covers to me and lay back down. I stopped fighting the tears and let them stream down my face. Somehow I managed to cry myself to sleep.

Chapter 15

I blinked at the sunlight streaming in from the window. It took me a moment to realize where I was. I sat up in bed, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes. Despite the large amount of alcohol I had consumed the night before, I wasn’t hung over. For some reason, I never felt hung over the day after drinking. My body felt fine. It was my heart that hurt.

My stomach was in knots over what had happened with Sean the night before. I still couldn’t understand why he had acted the way he did. What did he mean when he had said he couldn’t belong to me? Did he have a girlfriend that he had conveniently forgotten while we were having sex? I could smell Sean’s scent on me, on the bed, everywhere. I had to get out of here.

I flung myself off the bed and wobbled into the bathroom. I needed a shower. I needed to wash his scent off me. I needed to wash the memory of his body against mine out of my head. I turned the water on as hot as it would go and stepped into the shower. I let the water sluice over me. I found some soap and began scrubbing. I wanted his scent off of me. I needed to get him out of my head and out of my heart. I couldn’t stand how miserable I felt.

Few things ever got me this upset. I looked for reasons to convince myself that I was better off without him, that he was a jerk. Mentally reasoning with myself usually made me feel better, but not today. Sean’s actions were so bi-polar that I couldn’t make sense of them. He had brutally blown me off at my party, comforted me last night, had incredible sex with me, and then called me a child and stormed off. I couldn’t keep up with his mood swings. My heart clenched painfully when I thought of him. The only thing I knew to do was to not let myself think about him. I’d make sure Brian was okay and then I’d go home and put last night behind me. Somehow I knew it wouldn’t be that easy, but I was optimistic.

I finished my shower and dressed, frowning at the uncomfortable feeling of jeans without underwear. I pulled my still wet hair into a clip I’d had in my purse and went in search of Brian. I wasn’t familiar with the house but the sound of Brian’s voice led me to his room. The door was open and I peered inside. Brian was propped up in bed wearing only a pair of gray sweatpants. Jillian was next to him.

“Hey” Jillian said seeing me at the door. “I was just going to make some coffee, want some?” she offered. Coffee sounded really good but I wanted to get out of here. I shook my head.

“No thanks” I added. “I need to get home. I just wanted to check on Brian before I left.” Jillian walked past me, a frown creasing her face as she did.

“Okay” she said awkwardly. I wondered why she was looking at me so strangely. She suggested we hang out again sometime and then left me alone with Brian.

Brian patted the bed next to him. “Sit down” he said. I crossed the room and sat.

“You look better” I commented. Amazingly he looked almost completely healed. “No one would ever know you had your guts ripped out last night” I added dryly. He laughed.

“Not ripped out” he corrected, “just lacerated.” I shook my head not thinking his joke was funny.

“What ?” he exclaimed. “Look, I’m sorry you had to see that last night Elle, but it’s who we are. We’re not human. We’re werewolves and at times we’re more animal than anything else” he explained.

“Well,” I said sighing, “I’m glad you’re alright. You had me scared to death last night” I confessed, leaning over to give him a quick hug. I went to pull away but his grip tightened on me, pinning me to his chest. He sniffed loudly at my neck before releasing me. He did the same to my hands and arms. I had never had anyone sniff me before and it freaked me out a little. I jerked my hands away and gave him a questioning look.

“Are you crazy Elle?” he shouted.

“What are you talking about?” I asked wondering if all Weres suffered from bi-polar.

“You were with him last night” he accused and my face went blank. “You were with Sean. I can smell him all over you and if I can smell him everyone else will be able to.” I tried to process that he could smell Sean on me. I had taken a really hot shower and scrubbed myself until I was almost raw.

 “I’m not going to talk about this” I said pulling away from him and standing. He let me go and gave me an assessing look. For some reason I couldn’t make eye contact with him anymore and it pissed me off.

“Since when is it a federal offense to have sex with someone?” I asked defensively. “Can you really smell him on me?” I asked, glancing towards him in amazement. Was a Were’s sense of smell that good I wondered?

“It may not be a federal offense,” he said seriously, “but it is definitely a vampire offense.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked turning towards him. Good, I could make eye contact again.

“You really don’t know, do you Elle?” he sighed, running his fingers through his hair. “You’re messing with things and you don’t have any idea of the consequences. Sean belongs to a vampire, a very powerful, master vampire. One that doesn’t like to share and will be really, really pissed to find you’ve been messing around with her pet.”

I wondered what “belongs to” meant exactly. Did that mean that she was Sean’s girlfriend? I knew there had to be some reason he had run off like that. He regretted it because he knew she would be able to smell me on him and he’d be busted. The cheating bastard! Great, not only did I have witches after me and a strange Were-cat spying on me, I had now managed to piss off a master vampire who I had never even met. Things were going great for me in California. I wasn’t trying to get myself in trouble. It just kept happening.

I asked Brian what he meant by saying Sean belonged to this master vampire and if she was his girlfriend. He just rubbed a hand over his face and laughed. I was really getting sick of everyone finding me so amusing when I wasn’t trying to be funny. How was I supposed to know these things?

“No wonder he was in such a hurry to get out of here” I vented. “She’ll be able to smell me on him like you could smell him on me, right? That will serve him right for being a cheating jerk” I finished.

“That’s exactly my point Elle. She’s going to know your scent and she’s going to be pissed” he told me. “She’ll come looking for you” he added.

“Well,” I said calmly, “I’ll just explain to her that he never mentioned he had a girlfriend and she’ll understand. Surely she knows what pigs guys can be sometimes.”

“Understand?” he screamed, almost jumping off the bed. “No, no, no Elle. It’s you who doesn’t understand. She’s not his girlfriend. She owns him. He’s her property. Vampires take their property rights very seriously. She won’t care that you didn’t know. Ignorance is not a defense in the vampire world. How could Sean put you in this position?” he asked to no one in particular. At least I think it was to no one in particular since he really couldn’t expect me to answer that question.

Okay, now I was worried, really worried. This wasn’t fair! How could I be held responsible for what I didn’t know?

“How can she own him” I asked desperately. “He’s a person not a car or a house or a purse for goodness sakes!” I cried.

“Easily,” he replied stiffly, “vampire law states that if a vampire attacks another vampire, unprovoked, and the attacker is killed, the vampire who was attacked gets to keep the attacker’s property. That includes all of the people aligned with the attacker. Cecilia was attacked by Sean’s old master and won, therefore she came to own Sean.”

My head was starting to hurt. Vampire law seemed very confusing to me. I couldn’t understand how you could own another person. I wasn’t sure I wanted the answer to my next question, but I had to ask anyways.

“What exactly does she do with her “property”? I asked. He chuckled wryly.

“Whatever she wants” he answered with vehemence. “Sean’s pretty and she likes to play with pretty things. She especially enjoys his stamina and his ability to heal.” I puzzled together what he had said.

“You mean she makes him have sex with her and then hurts him, physically, to watch him heal? During?” Brian nodded.

 “Eww…” I didn’t know what to do with that information. Maybe Brian and Sean were right and I really didn’t know anything about them. This world was confusing…and a little demented as well.

“Can’t he just tell her he doesn’t want to have sex with her?” I asked. Brian sighed, obviously frustrated with my ignorance.

“What aren’t you getting about he’s her property?” he asked roughly. “No, he can’t just tell her no.”

“He’s a Were,” I countered, “can’t he just fight her?” Brian grunted.

“If he was a stronger Were, maybe” he consented, “but he’s not. Sean is like me, he’s not very high up in the pecking order. She would eat him alive – literally” he told me.

“But he’d heal” I protested. “What could she do to him that he wouldn’t heal?” Would she kill him?” I asked alarmed.

“There are worse things than death Elle” Brian said sounding tired. “Our ability to heal is what allows those who wish to torture us to drag it out for as long as they wish.”

Now I really felt sick. I couldn’t believe I was feeling worried for Sean. It sounded like he had gotten me into quite a mess. The least he could have done was to tell me his situation and let me decide if I wanted to get involved. At least I knew his running out on me hadn’t been about me.

“Does he like it?” I asked fearing the answer. Brian smiled a not nice smile.

“Why don’t you ask him?” he suggested. I rolled my eyes.

“He’s your friend, surely you know something.” Brian looked steadily at me.

“I’m not sure. In some ways I think he does.” I felt nauseous and I wasn’t sure I wanted the answer to my next question but I asked anyways.

“Does he love her?”

“I’m not sure if he loves her or is just used to her” he replied thoughtfully. “They’ve been together a long time. He’s her favorite.”

“They couldn’t have been together that long” I protested. “He’s, what, twenty-three tops. You make it sound like they’ve spent centuries together.” Brian laughed.

“How old do you think I am Elle?” he asked. I thought about it.

“You look maybe twenty-one” I replied.

“I’m thirty-five” he told me. My mouth fell open. He didn’t look like he could be that old. “We age slower than humans” he told me, answering my question before I could ask it. “Our bodies constantly repair any damage done to them, so we don’t look as old as we are.” Should I ask the next question I wondered?

“How old is Sean?” He smiled at me.

“Sean is forty-one” he replied calmly. Forty-one?! No wonder he had thought I was a child! To him I was. There was so much I didn’t freaking know about supernaturals!

“How long have Sean and Cecilia been together?” I asked, trying to cover up my shock.

“They’ve been together for eighteen years” he answered. “He became a Were-leopard when he was twenty-one. He was with his first master for two years before Cecilia took over.” My heart sank.

“Don’t set your sights on him Elle” Brian cautioned. “You’re out of your league on this one. There’s still a lot you don’t know about Supernaturals. You could get hurt. I’m not just talking about your heart.” He paused, looking sad for a moment.

“I shouldn’t have gotten you involved with this group” he said. “It’s just that you seemed so lonely and you were different. I thought you would fit in with us.” I was surprised he felt responsible for what had happened between Sean and me and even more surprised he felt I didn’t belong with them.

“You don’t think I fit in with you? Where do I fit in then?” I asked, sounding hurt. “I don’t fit in with humans. I don’t fit in with other witches…”

“Let me rephrase,” he started, “it’s not so much that I don’t think you fit as it is I don’t think this is the best thing for you. I think you should just try to blend with the humans. You may be a powerful witch, but I doubt that you could take on a vampire if you had to or even a dominant Were.

I was indignant that he was implying I couldn’t take care of myself. More than that, I was upset that he didn’t want me around.

 “Well thanks for the concern, but I can take care of myself” I said icily. “I may have made a few mistakes so far, but I’m new at this and the one thing I’m as good at as getting into trouble, is getting out of it” I added arrogantly. He laughed.

“What trouble are you referring to, the trouble at your party or with Sean?” He asked. I couldn’t help but crack a smile, but just a small one.

“Both” I replied. Hating that I had to ask him but knowing that I should, I asked, “What should I do about Cecilia?” He shook his head.

“Nothing” he replied. “If Sean left last night it means he knew he screwed up. Hopefully he’s lying low until your scent wears off of him. Maybe she won’t even find out” he added. “I’m definitely not going to tell anyone, and you shouldn’t either.” I nodded in understanding.

“Thanks Brian” I said heading for the door. “I’m glad you’re feeling better. “ As I reached the door Brian called my name.

“Elle…stay- away- from- Sean. Okay?” His voice was pleading and I could tell he was genuinely worried.

“Of course” I replied.

Chapter 16

I decided to stop at my favorite coffee shop after leaving Brian’s house. I was starving. I was trying to decide between a bagel and a scrumptious looking pastry when I heard familiar voices behind me. I knew that cackling laugh anywhere and knew it could only mean trouble.

“Well, well, well,” the wicked witch said, “look who’s here.” My back went stiff from tension as she continued. “It looks like someone had a rough night last night. Still in your party clothes I see.”

When I refused to turn around and acknowledge her, Gretchen continued. “I heard you like to whore around so I’m not really surprised.”

 I took a calming breath and put on my brightest smile before turning around. Obviously she wasn’t going to quit until I acknowledged her.

“Gretchen,” I purred, “loyal followers,” I added acknowledging Phyllis and Sami, “so nice to see you again. You are quite right, Gretchen, I did have a late night last night. Come now,” I crooned, “don’t be jealous. Just because you three couldn’t get laid in a hen house doesn’t mean you have to hate on me. Oh…”I said acting as if I’d just thought of something, “Maybe you three just do each other. That would explain why you’re always so stuck up each other’s asses.”

“Make jokes now slut, but your day is coming” Gretchen spat. “You can count on it” she added. How lame, I thought. It certainly wasn’t the first time I’d been called a slut. After being called it so many times in the past, it kind of had lost its effectiveness.

“I’m shivering in my sandals” I told her, sounding as bored as I was.

Sami interrupted, “She reeks of Were” she told them.

“Really?” asked Phyllis. “What kind?” How the hell would Sami know that? Witches couldn’t smell that well. I decided now was a good time to look at her a little closer. I opened my senses to her. She was definitely a witch, but what else? I couldn’t figure it out. Her aura had that extra brightness I had noticed in Weres. Could she be a Were too? A Were-witch? Was that even possible? Whatever she was she was definitely not just your garden variety witch. It was looking like I’d have to keep a closer eye on her from now on.

“I can smell several scents on her,” continued Sami, “but the strongest is leopard.”

“Thanks for my scent analysis, but I really need to get going now” I said. I turned and placed my order. I could hear them still talking as I paid the cashier.

“Is it anyone we know?” asked Phyllis.

“Maybe,” said Sami, “it smells familiar.”

This was so not good. If they recognized it as Sean’s scent, I would be toast. I was walking towards the door when a chair tipped over in front of me. To anyone else it may have looked like invisible hands had pushed it over in my path, but I knew it had been Gretchen. I could scent her power. My temper flared as I turned slightly towards the girls, my hair beginning to blow around my face.

“You don’t want to start this with me” I growled. She tsked.

“You’re making the wrong friends Elle” Gretchen warned me. “As if you weren’t in enough trouble already, you go and make more for yourself. You’re making this too easy – really.” My eyes met hers.

“If you think you’re big enough to take me,” I said coolly, “bring it.”

“Oh no,” Phyllis interjected, “when we come for you we won’t be alone. We’re going to have lots of help.” Gretchen elbowed her in the side and I silently thanked Phyllis for being so stupid.

“Enjoy your day Elle, but I suggest you stock up on holy water and crosses, just in case you have visitors tonight” Gretchen purred.

I pushed open the door and walked out of the café. So they did know who I was with last night. They must to be making vampire allusions. I knew it was childish, but I couldn’t help but stomp all the way to my car. Why did everything seem to be going so terribly wrong for me? I couldn’t catch a break lately.

I drove home feeling very depressed. When I arrived home I went upstairs to change and then decided I had better call Nallia. She had been pretty upset the night before and I wanted to make sure she was all right.

“What do you want?” she answered coolly.

“Jeez Nallia,” I complained, “can’t you say hello? What the hell is wrong with you anyway?”

“Let me see,” Nallia said, obviously going for sarcasm, “What’s wrong with me? Hmm…well it could be that my friend drug me to a Were party last night for a night of murder and mayhem. Or maybe what’s wrong is that after I was nearly murdered, you made me get a ride home with one of the animals” she seethed. Obviously she was pissed, but in my opinion she was being just a hair dramatic.

“I didn’t drag you anywhere” I defended myself. “You knew it was a Were party and you wanted to go. How was I to know it would turn out like it did?”

“I wanted to go for drinking and fun not to witness tryouts for werewolf *Survivor”* she screamed.

 “Neither did I!” I screamed back. “You act like I started the fight Nallia. It had nothing to do with me!”

“You may not have started it but you could have taken me home. I was scared shitless and you chose those animals over me.” This was really unbelievable. Brian and his friends, minus Sean, are the nicest bunch. I couldn’t believe she had resorted to name calling. I wondered what she said about me when I wasn’t around.

“Was I supposed to leave without even checking on Brian?” I asked hotly. “If you could have waited five minutes, I would have taken you home.”

“I was freaked out” she argued. “I didn’t want to wait. Besides, what do I care about Brian? He was one of the monsters!”

“Monsters?” I screamed into the phone. Nallia truly was a self-centered, ignorant bitch. “Brian may be a werewolf, but he’s also a person” I informed her. “Besides, I thought you were so hot to get a little supernatural action. Was it more than you bargained for?” I asked angrily. “Now you want to call them monsters? Is that what I am too Nallia, a monster?”

“I never said you were a monster” she said. “I was interested in learning more about witchcraft, not getting involved with werewolves and vampires. Ever since I met you I seem to be surrounded by both” she accused. “I’m not going to become someone’s chew toy or blood whore” she continued. “What you do is your business, but I’m out” she informed me coldly.

“So what,” I asked calmly, “are you saying you don’t want to be friends with me anymore?”

“I’m saying,” she said softening her tone, “that you need to decide which friends are more important to you. If you’re going to continue to hang around Supernaturals, than no, I can’t be your friend. I refuse to get any deeper. I may already be in trouble with the witches” she finished.

 I couldn’t believe it. Nallia was making me choose between her and my other friends. Ultimatums never ended well when given to me. I never let anyone tell me what to do. It sounded to me like she was more worried about the witches than anything else. I decided to accuse her.

“Is that what this is all about Nallia? You’re still hoping for a spot in the coven? That’s never going to happen. You have no natural power. No coven is going to accept you as a member.” I knew it was cruel, but it was also true. She hadn’t spared my feelings. Why should I spare hers?

“At least I don’t fuck monsters Elle” she accused. “Maybe you’re closer to being one of them than I first thought.”

“Who told you?” I asked, my jaw clenched tight in anger. “Who told you about Sean?” She tried to deny it at first but finally came clean.

“Gretchen called me a little while ago and told me” she admitted. “I can’t get involved in this Elle. You’re in deep shit.”

My head was spinning. I had thought of Nallia as a friend, a close friend. Now she was abandoning me.

“Thanks so much for being such a great friend Nallia. There’s nothing like bailing on someone when they need you” I accused. I hung up the phone. I couldn’t talk to her anymore. I was so angry that I thought I might explode.

For the hundredth time that week, I wondered how things had gotten so messed up. I shouldn’t have been surprised that she had turned her back on me, that’s what people always did. The minute you started to think you could count on them – bam- they screwed you over.

Chapter 17

I sat by the pool trying to process all that had happened over the last week. I had summoned Semiazaz after Nallia and I had fought. I told him everything that had been going on. I knew he wouldn’t be able to help me, angel rules and all that, but it was nice to unburden myself. He did tell me to keep my necklace on at all times now so I could summon him if I was in trouble. He wasn’t allowed to tell me what to do, something about interfering with free will, but he could protect me if my life was in danger. Just to be safe, he stayed with me until dawn to make sure the vampires didn’t show. Gretchen’s threat had freaked me out, even if I’d tried not to show her. No vampires showed, much to my relief.

I hadn’t spoken to Nallia since that day and I was surprised to find I missed her. I could understand her not wanting to get involved. I didn’t want to be involved either, it just kind of happened.

Sylvie had met some girls that attended the same school she was going to in the fall. She had been spending a lot of time with them lately. I was happy for her. I understood her desire to fit in and to be normal. Normalcy was a possibility for Sylvie, but it wasn’t for me.

I’d been keeping busy helping Uncle Ned plan an event for a charity he was involved with. I needed something to keep my mind off of things and keep me out of trouble. Besides, I liked planning parties. It was fun, especially when money wasn’t an issue.

Feeling more than a little sorry for myself and a lot off balance, I decided to cast a circle tonight. It would be the first one I had cast since Nallia, Sylvie and I had celebrated the esbat together and met our leopard friend. I was thinking that I could try the spell again and see if anything new emerged.

The sun was beginning to set and I decided to head upstairs and start preparations to cast the circle. I changed, gathered my supplies and headed off to the clearing. I took my time walking there. It was a nice night. I was enjoying the peacefulness of it. Some people didn’t like the night – the dark. I loved it. It felt like an old friend.

I arrived at the clearing and began setting up. The moon was dim tonight but it still cast enough light so that I didn’t need a flashlight. I wasn’t afraid of the dark. In fact, I liked it.

 I didn’t need the others to call the elements; their participation had been largely symbolic. I was able to call them by myself. I lit the candles and called the elements the way I always did. After replacing the alter candle I set up the spell the same way we had done it the first time. I peered into the bowl of water and waited for an image to appear.

The image was different this time, but still confusing. Piercing yellow eyes glared from the water followed by a slobbering man with fangs. More vampires, great. The water went black. I was frustrated and could feel my own negativity in the circle. I decided to meditate and calm myself. Maybe something would come to me if I could relax.

I lay back onto the cool grass within the circle. I closed my eyes and began to clear my mind. A noise from the edge of the clearing drew my attention and I bolted upright. The leopard was back. He was standing at the edge of the clearing watching me. I moved as close to the edge of the circle as I could without breaking it and kneeled down.

He was magnificent. I wanted so badly to reach out and touch him, but I resisted the urge. I didn’t know who he was or what he was doing here. I mustn’t be careless.

“Who are you?” I asked out loud. The great cat made a shrieking kind of bark in reply. “That really doesn’t answer my question” I said sarcastically. “Maybe we can try yes or no questions” I suggested. “Move your head up and down for yes and sideways for no” I instructed. The cat moved closer.

“Do you come here a lot?” I asked. He moved his head from left to right. He could understand me in animal form – interesting.

“Are you out here because of me?” I asked. The movement of his head up and down gave me the answer. “Are you working for the witches?” I asked nervously. He answered no. “For someone else – to spy on me?” Again the answer was no. That was good if he was telling the truth. Unfortunately, I had no way to know if he was telling the truth.

“Do you plan on hurting me?” I asked. It was really a stupid question since if he was planning on hurting me, he probably wouldn’t tell me. An emphatic shake of his head gave his answer. He moved just outside the circle, as close as he could go. The circle created a barrier he couldn’t cross.

“Do I know you?” I asked as I thought of a possibility. He didn’t answer. He just stared at me with his large yellow eyes. Golden-yellow eyes that were familiar to me. Oh my God! I’m such an idiot. I can’t believe I hadn’t thought of it before.

“Sean?” I asked excited. “Is that you?” The big cat wailed at looked at me mournfully. He stood and started off towards the woods, looking back only once before he disappeared into the shadows.

I was breathless. I knew it had to be Sean. It explained why his energy felt so familiar. It was similar to his energy in human form, but more intense. Why was he coming here? Why in the world would he come in leopard form? If he had wanted to see me, he could have just called. I had to be sure it was him. I gathered my supplies as quickly as I could and took off towards the house. I dropped everything on my bed and grabbed my cell. Brian would know if I was him or not. I dialed his number.

“Hello beautiful” Brian sang when he answered the phone. Without even going into hellos I asked him about Sean.

“What color is Sean when he changes?” I grew impatient with the silence on the other end of the phone. “Brian? What color is he when he’s in leopard form?”

“Why are you asking” he said with a great deal of hesitation.

“Just tell me” I demanded. Brian blew out a breath. “He’s black” he stated. “Did you see him?” he asked. I ignored his question and plowed ahead with my own.

“Are all the local leopards black, or just him?” I asked.

“Just him “Brian admitted. “His coloring is unique. It’s one of the reasons Cecilia is so fond of him. Did you see him?” he asked again. My pulse was pounding wildly. Sean had been coming to see me, but why?

“I’m pretty sure I did” I told him. “It must have been him. I saw a leopard outside my circle tonight. It was the same one I saw before” I explained. “I spoke to him using head nods, but when I asked him if he was Sean, he just ran off. Why wouldn’t he just tell me he was Sean?” I asked confused. Then I thought of something.

“You knew who it was the first time I told you about the visitor, didn’t you?” I accused. “Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“Obviously he didn’t want you to know who he was” Brian answered, dodging my accusations.

“Then why come at all?” I countered.

“Maybe he just wanted to see you” Brian offered sadly. “Elle, stay away from him, please” he pleaded. “I don’t know why he’s doing this, coming to your circle and all, but just stay away from him.”

“I have been staying away from him” I said defensively. “He came to my circle, remember?”

“I know, I know” he offered. I felt bad for having worried Brian but I had to know for sure if the leopard I had seen in the clearing had been Sean. I thanked Brian for the information and promised to see him soon.

The next night I went to the clearing and cast a circle, hoping Sean would appear, but he didn’t. I did the same thing the following two night but he still never showed. I came again tonight and was just about to pack up and head back in when he emerged from the woods. I didn’t say a word. I was speechless.

He came to the very edge of the circle and lay down. I crept to the edge of the circle and lay down as well, mirroring him. The longing to touch him as we lay there staring at one another was so great that the tips of my fingers hurt. I thought to myself, why not? I didn’t have to break the circle to reach outside of it. As long as I wasn’t pulled out of the circle it would remain. Sean wouldn’t hurt me, I reasoned.

I tentatively reached my fingers towards him. His huge head turned to watch my fingers. The air at the circle’s edge felt like a sticky web as my fingers began to stretch through it. He stretched his head towards my hand and my fingers met his fur. It was incredibly thick and silky. I stuck my other hand through the circle’s boundary and cupped his head in my palms. I was amazed that this great beast allowed me to do it. He rested his giant head in my hands and purred. I couldn’t help but laugh. Here was Sean lying next to my circle like a giant house cat asking to be petted. I obliged, running my fingers through his soft fur.

I stretched forward my body and circled my arms around his neck, burying my face into his fur as he rested his head on my shoulder. It was amazing. I could feel his essence, the thing that made him what he was, his beast and the wildness of that creature.

I hesitated and then opened my senses to get a better feel for the beast that lie inside the man. There was two halves of him that merged in the middle I realized. You could not truly separate the man from the beast. Both halves accepted and welcomed me and I felt myself falling into them. I had never felt anything like it before. My essence mingled with his, searching each other out. I could feel what they felt, man and beast.

 The beast was wild and free but the man was afraid and lost. Utterly lost in a world he had little control over. I wanted to cry for him but my limbs had become tingly and felt heavy, foreign to me. The odd sensations distracted me. I felt our essences start to separate. I wanted to hold on to this feeling. I tried not to let go, but he was pulling away from me.

He was mewling pitifully. I tried to focus on him to see what was wrong but my limbs wouldn’t work right. I stared down at my hands but they were no longer hands, they were paws. Giant, black paws covered in golden rosettes. I looked at my legs and they too had changed. It was like in my dream. Fear raced through me. I flung myself back into the circle. Icy pain seared my flesh and when I looked down I was human again. Sean was pacing restlessly around the circle, agitated. He let out a piercing cry and then disappeared into the woods. I was alone again.

My breath caught in painful rasps and I was shaking. What the hell had just happened? Had he somehow turned me into a Were-leopard? It seemed impossible. Ash had told me that Weres were made when they were bitten or scratched by another Were. Sean hadn’t done either of those things to me.

Unnerved, I gathered my things quickly and opened the circle. I hurried the short distance back to the house. Branches and twigs tore at my hair as I hurried.

I went straight up to my room. Sitting on the edge of the bed, I tried to calm my nerves. I couldn’t have imagined it. I know what I saw and Sean was so upset… He must have seen the transformation too. It must have been what had upset him. It’s the only thing that made sense. I had changed into a leopard, or at least I had started to change.

I could still feel a portion of Sean’s essence in me. It was a small fragment of what I felt when we had merged our essences together at the circle. I wonder if it would be enough. Could I change again if I tried?

 Sliding onto the floor beside my bed I began to concentrate. I wanted to see if I could do it again. Closing my eyes, I felt for the remaining essence Sean had left behind. The tingling came back almost immediately. I could feel my body begin to change. I fought back the fear inside of me and allowed the change to take place.

My arms and legs began to feel different, foreign to me. Everything about my physiology seemed to change down to the way my heart beat and my breath came. I clumsily drug myself over to my full-length mirror. It was difficult to get my new body to work for me. What I saw in the mirror astounded me. My own reflection did not stare back at me, but that of a small black leopard with golden rosettes decorating its body. It was a beautiful color combination, but definitely something you would never see in nature.

And that’s just it. This was against nature. For man, or woman, to become animal was wholly against nature. It was magic, a strong and powerful magic that I could feel. Fear tinged my thoughts and my awe over my transformation. I was afraid I may not be able to return to my own shape. I tried not to panic at the thought of being stuck as the leopard.

I calmed myself and then gently released the essence I had been holding to my own. The shift back to my body happened almost simultaneously with me releasing the last drop of essence from my grasp. I was in utter shock. I could turn into a leopard and back again at will. Whether this was a temporarily thing or a permanent one, I didn’t know. I was definitely freaked out. I needed to talk to Brian now and I needed a drink, a strong one. I grabbed my keys and purse and headed out. I sure hoped Brian didn’t mind me dropping by.

When I arrived at his door he was understandably surprised to see me. I had brought a fifth of Jack Daniels I’d swiped from my uncle with me. I figured we’d both need a drink after this. Jillian was there, which wasn’t surprising. They had been inseparable lately. She set up the glasses and poured us all a drink. They could tell I was really shaken and I appreciated their patience while I downed my first drink. When I had put my glass down on the coffee table and turned my gaze towards Brian, he spoke.

“What’s going on?” he asked nervously. “Please tell me this has nothing to do with Sean” he begged. I glanced at Jillian who threw up her hands.

“I already know” she said sounding irritated. “I’m a werewolf too. I smelled him on you that day the same as Brian did” she explained. I nodded and turned back to Brian. Deciding there was no use in beating around the bush, I quickly filled them in on everything that had happened. There were some parts Jillian didn’t know and I quickly filled her in on the parts she had missed.

“That’s impossible” Jillian said after I had finished my story. “Even if you had somehow gotten accidentally scratched, you wouldn’t change until the next full moon.” I didn’t understand her logic.

“It wasn’t a full moon tonight and Sean was in animal form” I pointed out.

“Yes” she acknowledged, “but he’s been a Were for almost twenty years. He has control over his shifting, new Weres don’t” she explained.

“Well,” I said nonchalantly, “no since arguing on what’s possible or impossible. I can show you” I offered.

I slammed another glass of Jack and moved myself to the floor. Jillian ad Brian moved out of the way, giving me room to shift.

I went down on all fours on the floor. I really didn’t know if it was necessary, but I wanted to do it exactly as I had in my bedroom. Jillian and Brian watched me in expectation. I repeated the process as I had done it in my bedroom, searching for Sean’s essence and binding it to mine. The change felt even faster than it had before. Maybe it was because I wasn’t fighting it this time.

I peered at Jillian and Brian through my new eyes. It was interesting to find that I could scent their fear. They backed away from me. Instinctively I lowered my head to show them I didn’t mean them any harm. I walked slowly over to Jillian and rubbed my body against her leg. She knelt down and slowly ran her fingers through my fur. I resisted the urge to roll over and offer her my belly. Brian reached down and touched me as well.

I walked back over to where I had shifted and released the essence I had been holding onto. I changed back. When I looked at them again with my human eyes, their months were hanging open.

“Holy shit” said Brian. “I’ve never seen anything like that” he sputtered. He seemed to have trouble forming his next sentence.

“You’re not a Were Elle, at least not a true Were. I don’t know what you are, but he didn’t infect you. Something else happened.” Jillian nodded in agreement.

 “Well I sure as hell couldn’t do this before tonight” I protested. “Why do you say I’m not a real Were? You saw me shift?”

“We don’t shift like that” he explained. “We don’t just pop in and out of form like you did. When we shift our bones stretch, there’s popping and cracking and sometimes even blood. Plus, our clothes get shredded during the change. Nothing happened at all to your clothes. It’s like you shifted, but you didn’t” he said in awe. Jillian was still nodding in agreement, although more emphatically now.

 “It was like glamour or a psychic shift or something. It wasn’t physical like ours” he added.

“But you touched me” I protested. “I was solid. It wasn’t glamour. I can do glamour and I know what it feels like and this wasn’t it.”

“It’s magic” said Jillian.

“But it’s magic when you shift too” I protested again. “I could feel the magic in Sean when I merged with him. I could feel very powerful magic. That’s what is at your ability to become animal” I told them. They shook their heads in disbelief. If I wasn’t infected, then why could I now shift?

We spent the next hour trying to figure it out but never arrived at a true answer. The best we could come up with was that when our essences merged I brought back a piece of his with me. We decided that because I was a blood witch my magic had been attracted to his magic and that’s why I was able to snatch a piece of his essence. Maybe that's what allowed me to use that essence to shift. I wasn’t sure.

I’d never heard of a witch being able to shift before. Then again, I could do a lot of things other witches couldn’t do. It made me wonder again what my real father had been. More and more I was coming to accept that he couldn’t have been human. My greatest fear now wasn’t that I could shift at will but that I would turn all furry on the next full moon and not be able to control it. I also hoped this didn’t mean I was going to suddenly start having to shave more.

Chapter 18

The sun felt wonderful on my bikini clad body. I closed my eyes and enjoyed its warmth. Its rays seemed to energize me. They seemed to revitalize and cleanse my energy. My energy had felt somewhat tainted lately so I was thankful for the cleansing. I kind of felt like a crystal someone had left in the sun to recharge.

Sylvie and I were enjoying some relaxation time by the pool. It was good to reconnect with her. I hadn’t seen a whole lot of her lately. She had been hanging out with a group of girls she had met. Earlier she had filled me in on the local gossip. Her gossip largely consisted of her telling me who was dating who and who had gotten their driver’s license. She was only fifteen after all. I let her talk, not wanting to ruin her good mood with all the garbage going on with me.

I let my foot skim across the surface of the water as I sat on the ledge of the pool. Sylvie finished another lap and then pulled herself out of the water to sit beside me. Noticing that I was unusually quiet, she asked me what was going on.

“Does something have to be going on for me to be quiet?” I asked pretending to be hurt. “Maybe there’s just nothing going on to talk about.”

“Uh-huh” she grunted. “Actually, there does have to be something going on for you to be quiet. It’s very unusual behavior for you. You only get quiet if something is on your mind. Otherwise you always find something to chat about, so spill.” she demanded.

The bad, and sometimes good, thing about sisters is that they know you too well. It’s difficult to bullshit them. I was dreading the lecture I was going to get if I told her what had really been going on. I dreaded even more how much trouble I’d be in when she found out the truth later if I didn’t tell her. I knew better than to think I could lie and get away with it. The truth always seemed to come back to bite me in the ass. Lying had never worked well for me in the past. I’ve practically given it up altogether.

I sighed heavily. “Well,” I hedged, “things have been…interesting lately.” She gave me a look and waited for me to continue.

“Remember I told you Nallia and I were going to Brian’s for a party? Well, we went and it’s a safe bet to say that you were right. We should have stayed home.” Sylvie’s eyes got all slanty as she waited for me to fill her in. Knowing it was best just to get to the point, I filled her in on all of the details of the party.

“Shit Elle” she said making me raise my eyebrows. Did I mention my sister never swears? Maybe she was picking up her colorful language from her new friends.

“I think you may have understated it when you said that things had been a little interesting lately. So nothing has happened with this vampire girlfriend, master, whatever of Sean’s?” I shook my head.

“It gets better though” I warned her. She twisted her long brown hair and let the water drip onto her skin as she met my eyes. I looked away. I went ahead and filled her in on my confrontation at the coffee shop with the witches. She was quite upset with that news, especially since they had threatened me again. That didn’t surprise me. Any good witch knew to be leery of other witches, especially when they hated your guts. It could only spell trouble, no pun intended.

By the time I’d finished telling her that our mysterious leopard visitor was really Sean and that I had a new ability, her mouth was hanging open. I didn’t blame her really. I was still shocked by all that had taken place over the last couple of weeks. To my amazement she hung her head in her hands and began to laugh.

“Only you Giselle” she said through fits of laughter. I really didn’t get what was so funny. I hadn’t told her anything we should be laughing about.

“You wanted some excitement,” she said, “it looks like you’re getting it.” I hung my mouth in disbelief. Was she saying all of this was my fault? I asked her.

She shook her head sadly. “No Giselle, I don’t think it’s your fault. I understand you wanting to be around others who are different because you are different. You’ve always struggled to find a place for yourself. I can see why you would think your place would be with other Supernaturals. Obviously the fight at Brian’s wasn’t your fault and there was no way you could have known Sean was off limits. I blame him for that” she added with a note of anger.

“The witches and Sean coming to see you, those are things that were out of your control also” she continued. “I’m actually proud that you walked away from the fight with the witches” she added, smiling at me. “The problem is that there is so much we don’t know about these people Elle. That is why I am so worried. You’re blundering through this as best you can, but it’s a landmine full of what we don’t know. You’re in over your head and I don’t think I’m strong enough to help you” she confessed.

 “What does Ash say about all of this?” she asked.

“He doesn’t know” I informed her. “He’s been out of town on “secret” vampire business. I guess that is why he never showed at Brian’s party that night” I continued. “I tried talking to Sem, but you know how he is. Everything always has to be so secretive and mysterious with him, I never get a straight answer” I complained. She nodded in understanding. Semiazaz was a fallen angel trying to get back into God’s good graces. He followed the rules unwaveringly. He wouldn’t get involved. Angel rules forbid him leading a human’s -or nonhuman’s- actions.

“What does Nallia think?” she asked.

I was afraid to tell her about our fight since she really liked Nallia and I could see her blaming me. Knowing I had to tell her, I did. When I had related my last conversation with Nallia to her, she sighed heavily.

“I think you are both right” she said wisely. “I don’t blame Nallia for not wanting to get in any deeper than she already is and I don’t blame you for staying to check on Brian.” Sylvie’s insights were wise because I could understand both sides as well. I didn’t blame Nallia. I just couldn’t be who she wanted me to be, a re-occurring problem in my life.

“What a mess” Sylvie exclaimed and I couldn’t agree more. Sylvie seemed to be thinking through the situation before she spoke again.

“I think you need to lie low for a while” she suggested. “Keep a low profile and stay away from other Supernaturals. Maybe this will all blow over. Even if it doesn’t, you won’t be able to get yourself into any more trouble if you’re not around them.” She ran her foot across the water and seemed to be thinking. She looked up at me.

“Will you show me how you change into a leopard?” she asked suddenly. I laughed.

“Sure, but let’s do it upstairs. Uncle Ned doesn’t know and I don’t want any of the staff seeing me shift and freak out.” We both laughed and headed for the house.

Sylvie was impressed with my new ability, but I couldn’t see how it could be very useful. I was very small compared to real Weres and probably wouldn’t stand a chance against a real one in a fight, at least not in leopard form. It probably wouldn’t help me in a fight with a vampire either. As disappointing as this realization was, I figured it still provided an element of surprise that might benefit me someday.

After seeing me shift and discussing the metaphysics of it, she had excused herself to her room. She was meeting some friends later and needed to get ready. I curled up on my bed with a book I had been trying to read for what seemed like forever. I had just started to get into it when my cell phone rang. The caller I.D. told me it was Brian.

“Hello handsome” I answered and he laughed. We had gotten into the habit of answering each other’s calls that way. It was a little joke between us.

“Hello beautiful” he countered sexily. “Are you busy tonight?” Sylvie’s advice came back to me and I knew that I should say yes but I had been cooped up in the house for days and I was bored.

“Not really. Why?” I asked.

“Jillian, Karla, Alex, and I are going up to the Dirty Monkey tonight. Want to come?” he asked.

“The dirty what?” I asked. He laughed and repeated himself.

“It’s a little pool hall in the downtown area” he explained. “It’s named after a drink” he added.

“That sounds like fun” I answered, trying to push away the guilty feelings I was having for not taking Sylvie’s good advice.

Brian gave me directions and told me to meet them there at eight o’clock. I hung up and started getting ready. As much as I complained about my looks, I really was lucky. A quick shampoo, a little blow drying and some make-up and I was ready. I would never be a super model, I was only 5’2, but I cleaned up well. I threw on a pair of jeans and paired it with a nice burgundy knit shirt. I pulled on my knee-high boots and some jewelry, remembering to put on the sapphire pendant, and I was ready. I grabbed my purse and keys and headed out.

The Dirty Monkey wasn’t difficult to find and I was fortunate to find a parking spot nearby. It was a Thursday and the place didn’t look too busy. I walked inside. It looked like you would expect a pool hall to look. A long bar lined with stools ran along the back wall. It was the first thing you saw as you walked into the bar. To the left a half a dozen pool tables were set up with small tables nearby. To the right was a small stage and dance floor.

I spotted Brian’s group right away over by the pool tables and headed over. I sat on a stool next to Jillian. A rough looking man, whom I had noticed behind the bar when I came in, approached us. It was easy to tell that he was a Were.

“You twenty-one?” he asked me gruffly. I looked to Brian. I don’t know why I had thought my age wouldn’t be an issue. It was a bar.

“Of course she’s twenty-one Mack,” Brian replied for me, “do you think I’d invite an underage kid here?” he asked laughing and giving me a wink I hoped that Mack hadn’t seen.

“I need to see I.D.” Mack said looking towards me. Before I could respond Brian was talking again.

“Her I.D. is going to say she’s twenty Mack, but go ahead and check it. She’s a Were, she was made when she was twenty.” Brian added. I tried to hide my surprise at Brian’s lie.

“She’s a Were?” Mack asked sniffing me. I was really getting tired of people sniffing me. It was just too weird. “She doesn’t smell like a Were” Mack concluded as I raised my eyebrows at Brian.

“Well,” said Brian, “she is one. She doesn’t smell like us because she’s also a blood witch, half and half” he explained. “Do you want to see her shift?” Brian asked. “It’s pretty cool to see” he added.

I had to admit that Brian’s lie was ingenuous and not completely a lie. From the look on Mack’s face I was thinking this just might work. Mack’s eyes were round and I wasn’t sure if it was because of the blood witch thing or because he was afraid I was going to shift. I raised my brows at him in question of what he wanted me to do. I could shift for him after all.

“We don’t allow shifting in here” he said gruffly. “I’ll just take your word for it. She does smell odd and I can sense a beast, but it feels all wrong.” Although I didn’t appreciate being told how odd I smelled or that I felt all wrong, I smiled and gave him my drink order when asked.

As Mack walked behind the bar to get my drink, he cast another look at Brian and informed him, “You’re vouching for her son. If she causes any trouble, it’s on you.”

“Agreed,” Brian said, unconcerned as he picked up a pool stick. Mack had the waitress bring me my beer.

“I can’t believe we just got away with that” I murmured to Jillian.

“Why?” asked Brian walking closer to us. “I didn’t lie. You can shift. He’d have pissed his pants if he had seen you shift though. I almost wish he had insisted on it. That would have been a hoot” he added.

 Picking up on his teasing, I countered, “Who would have thought there would be so many benefits from turning furry?” The group busted up into laughter.

“On a serious note,” I added, “what did he mean by he could feel a beast, but it feels wrong? Can you sense a beast in me?”

Jillian answered. “I can feel something, but it’s not obvious. Mack’s right. The beast I sense doesn’t feel right. It’s not…complete” she finished.

The others nodded in agreement. I thought about what they’d said. I had a beast of sorts but it was different from other Weres. I suppose that makes sense since I wasn’t a Were in the true sense of the word. I wondered if there were other witches out there who could do what I did.

We played pool for the next half an hour, taking turns. They wouldn’t let me use my magic to get the balls into the pockets so I wasn’t doing very well. It quickly became a joke how bad I was at pool and soon no one wanted to partner with me. I wasn’t upset though. It was all in fun and it was nice to feel like I belonged. Alex and I were both sitting the game out when he let me in on a juicy tidbit.

“Someone’s been asking about you” he teased. Brian shot him a “shut up” look but the damage had been done. I was hooked.

 “What?” he asked Brian innocently. “She has a right to know.” Now my curiosity was really peaked. “I’d want to know if someone was obsessed with me” he continued, doubling my curiosity. I gave him a look that let him know to get on with it.

“A certain were-leopard I know has a crush on you” he said. I took a swallow of beer and tried to feign indifference.

“Who would that be?” I asked, hoping he was referring to the only were-leopard I knew. Alex was more than happy to let me in on what he knew.

“Your hero, from Brian’s party, of course, Sean. He came in the other day asking Brian if he’d seen you lately and how you were doing. He wanted to know if you had been hanging around with us and if you had said anything about him.” I swallowed hard.

I had a pretty good idea of what Sean had been trying to find out. He probably wanted to know if the change I’d experienced that night was permanent. I wondered if he was worried for me or that he might be in trouble for what happened that night. After more consideration I realized that he must be worried about me. After the way he had acted in animal form that night I knew he must care something about me. My heart squeezed in my chest. Sean cared about me. “Speak of the devil” Alex said, bringing me out of my thoughts. I looked in the direction where Alex was staring to see Sean walking towards us. Sean looked yummy as always and my heart clenched even tighter than before. Sean hopped onto the empty stool next to me and Alex laughed.

“What’s up buddy?” Alex asked Sean as Brian made his next shot.

“Not much,” Sean said, “just looking for something to do.” This made Alex laugh harder and heat blossomed across my cheeks. I was pretty sure that Alex was reading far more into Sean’s comment than Sean had intended and was laughing at us.

“Okay, you’re cut off” Brian told Alex. Karla lost that game” he informed us. “Who’s next?”

“We should play doubles now that we have a sixth” Jillian suggested. Everyone thought it was a good idea. I ended up paired with Sean, by plan, coincidence, or the fact that nobody wanted to be my partner, I didn’t know. Sean and I were going to play the winners of the first game.

The others racked the balls and began playing. Sean moved his stool a little closer.

“I’m glad you’re here” he said quietly. “I’ve wanted to talk to you. I don’t know where to even begin.” he said looking down at his hands. “This is all kind of embarrassing” he admitted. I decided to spare him from having to tell me what I already knew.

“Don’t be embarrassed” I said. “I already know it was you in the woods and I know about Cecilia and your tie to her.” He looked relieved.

“I’m glad you know. Now you can understand why I left the way I did that night and what I said. Now you can understand why it’s dangerous for us to be together” he said sadly. I took a deep breath and looked away. More talk of how we couldn’t be together. I couldn’t stand it. It was so unfair.

“Does she get to tell you who you can be friends with?” I asked looking back at him.

“No” he answered smiling. I loved his smile so much.

 “Well then,” I said nudging his arm with my elbow, “there’s no harm in us hanging out as friends then, is there?”

“I guess not” he said breaking into a bigger and more beautiful smile. It disappeared too soon and concern took its place.

“What happened the other night in the clearing?” he asked. I told him the best answer I had come up with to that question.

“I’ve never heard of anything like that before and I’ve definitely never felt anything like it. It was…strange. You must be very powerful to be able to pull in someone’s essence like that. Are you sure you’re just a blood witch?” he asked teasing.

“No, I’m not” I answered seriously. I told him about how I had found out about my real father and what I suspected – that he wasn’t human. The others had finished their game and had come to stand by us.

“Holy shit Elle” Brian exclaimed. “You never told me that.”

“There’s not much to tell” I said. “I don’t know where or what he is. My uncle is trying to find him but so far, no luck” I said shrugging.

“So you’re not only a bad ass blood witch that can suck energy from around you, you’re also a shifter of sorts, and possibly something else?” Alex asked. “That’s so cool. We should test your abilities and try to figure it out” Alex suggested. Karla slapped him in his head.

“Just how would we do that brainiac” she asked.

“I don’t know” he said rubbing his head. “Maybe she could try to make the earth rumble like fairies do or drink blood like vampires.” Karla and Jillian both smacked him in the head this time. I smiled.

“I pretty sure I would have figured out if I could move the earth by now,” I told him, “and I’m pretty sure I’d know if I was a vampire. I can go in the sun and I don’t drink blood. Aren’t those two key elements in being a vampire?” I asked. Everyone nodded and Alex looked defeated.

“Jillian and I won” Brian said changing the subject. “Rack’em”

 It didn’t take Sean long to discover that I sucked at pool. Thank goodness he was good enough for both of us.

“Let me show you” he offered, stepping behind me and molding his body against mine. “Hold the stick like this,” he told me, “then sight down towards the pocket. It’s a little like hunting” he said huskily. “You sight your prey, never take your eyes off it, and then pounce.”

The stick hit the ball and it went perfectly into the pocket it was intended to. How I managed to hear a single word he said with his body pressed up to mine, I’ll never know. I tried to control my breathing so I wouldn’t embarrass myself by panting like a dog in heat. Maybe this being a friend thing was going to be harder than I thought. I knew the whole friend angle was a lie even though I had been trying to convince myself of it. I was never going to be satisfied just being Sean’s friend. I wanted him too much.

“No helping!” Brian piped in. “We already know you can play Sean and we know she can’t. That’s why you make a great team and this is a team game” he pointed out.

“Sorry” he said to Sean. “We figured it was fairer if we paired her with you.” I should have known that was why he wanted me paired with Sean. He was the one telling me to stay away from Sean so of course he wouldn’t be trying to bring us together.

“He’s really good” Jillian piped in. Oh how I knew how good he was. I shook my head slightly, trying to get my mind out of the gutter. It was difficult considering I kept imaging all of the things we could do on that pool table, not to mention he was still pressed up against me. Sean pressed himself more firmly against me before stepping back. I couldn’t concentrate on the next shot and I missed.

Somehow I had the misfortune of having the game come down to me needing to make the winning shot. Sean came over by me as I was setting up for the shot and whispered so quietly in my ear that I almost didn’t hear him.

“Use you magic” he told me. “We can’t let them win. We’ll never hear the end of it.”

“We can’t” I whispered back. “They’ll know.”

“They won’t know” he assured me. “They’re too drunk.” I looked over at Brian and Jillian who were giggling and playing around. Maybe he was right. I gave him a secret smile and lined up the shot. I focused my energy on guiding the ball into the pocket. It went in perfectly.

“No way” Brian shouted running over. “You cheated” he accused. Obviously he had no confidence in my pool shooting abilities, drunk or not. “You used your magic” he said, pointing his finger at me. “That’s an unfair advantage.”

“Like we don’t have an unfair advantage being Weres?” Sean accused right back. “Our senses are much more tuned than hers are. You’ve been making her play as a human all night when you always get to use your heightened senses.” I frowned at this. Could their senses make them better pool players? They did move more fluidly than humans.

“Yeah!” I called back. “Your were-senses are what made you win all of those other times.” I knew I was stretching it but I thought I’d see how far it would take me. Brian gave me an incredulous look, but conceded.

“Okay, okay” Brian relented. “You won – happy?” I nodded emphatically. It was the first game I’d won all night. “Eat that wolf-boy” Sean taunted jokingly.

Everyone decided it was getting late and time to head home. We said our goodnights and walked to our cars. Sean walked with me to mine.

“That’s your car?” he asked grinning.

“Yeah,” I squirmed, “it was a birthday gift from my uncle.” Sean laughed softly and shook his head and then turned towards me.

“So,” he started, “just friends huh? That sucks” he added pulling me against him. I was sure there was a good reason I should not be doing this, but at the moment I couldn’t remember what it was. I was on fire. I had never wanted someone the way I wanted him. He captured my mouth with his. He tasted like beer and butterscotch. At that moment those were my two favorite flavors.

 I rose on my tiptoes and wrapped my arms around him, kissing him back. I let my fingers glide through his silky fall of hair and thought of how it had felt on my naked flesh. I wanted that again. I moaned into his mouth and rocked my hips against him. I could feel his hardness through his jeans, pushing into my belly.

One of his hands found my breast while the other slid between my legs. He began rubbing me slowly, creating a fiery need inside me. I leaned my head back, gasping with pleasure and wantonly writhing against his hand. Unexpectedly, climax tore through me. I was more than ready for round two when Sean separated us.

“What?” I asked breathless. Sean sniffed at the air. “Someone’s watching us” he said. My body went stiff, all thoughts of sex momentarily forgotten. I opened my senses to search out the peeping Tom. I felt a dull energy, but I couldn’t peg what it was.

“Get in your car Giselle” he ordered stiffly. He opened my door and shoved me inside. Quickly, he jotted his phone number on my hand. My heart was pounding but this time it had nothing to do with sex.

“Go straight home and lock all of your doors – and windows” he instructed. Call me when you’re done with that.”

I didn’t want to leave him alone but he wasn’t giving me much of a choice. I hesitated, wanting to stay but he pounded lightly on the hood of my car telling me to go. I couldn’t just leave him here. What was out there anyway? Did he know what it was? He pounded gently on my hood again and motioned for me to get going. I started the car and pulled away. I hoped he knew what he was doing.

I drove through the night shaking and hating myself for leaving him. I thought over and over again about going back, but then dismissed the idea. If he had a plan for whatever was out there, my coming back might screw that up and I’d never forgive myself. I didn’t want to distract him if he was fighting. What if I could have helped though? I felt sick at my indecision and helplessness. He had been so firm in commanding me to leave. I usually never took orders well. Why had I chosen tonight to listen to someone?

I drove home quickly and got into the house. I locked all the doors and windows and then grabbed my cell. My fingers were shaking so badly that I could hardly dial. His phone went straight to voicemail. Why would he have his phone turned off if he wanted me to call when I got home? I left a message telling him to call me as soon as he got it.

 I waited and waited for his call. It never came. I wondered if I should go back and cursed myself for listening to him and leaving. I called several more times with the same result. I was going out of my mind with worry. I lay on my bed, exhausted from the long night. I tried to stay awake for his call but sleep finally overtook me.

Chapter 19

I woke with a start. I quickly checked the time on my phone which was still clutched in my hands. It was morning, but it was still dark outside. The sun had not even risen yet. There were no messages. He hadn’t returned my call. I tried Sean’s phone again but it was still turned off. I didn’t want to wake Brian at this ungodly hour so I decided to hold off calling him for now.

I busied myself with showering and chewing my nails until seven o’clock. Unable to wait any longer, I dialed his number. I knew right away that something was wrong. He didn’t call me beautiful or darling or anything else sweet. He called me by my full name, not even Elle. He never called me by my full name.

“Tell me” I demanded. “What happened to Sean?” He sighed heavily.

“I think you had better come over” he said. “We need to talk.” Brian had never sounded so serious before and I knew whatever had happened was bad. Panic blossomed inside me.

“Is he all right” I asked.

“He will be,” Brian told me, “but you need to come over. Meet me at my house in an hour.” He hung up the phone before I could ask anything else.

I dressed quickly, grabbed my purse and keys and ran down the stairs. Something had to be really wrong for Brian to be so curt with me. I managed to make it to Brian’s in forty-five minutes. I broke a few laws on the way to accomplish that but I felt it was justified since obviously something terrible had happened.

Brian had the door open and was motioning me inside before my feet even hit the porch. He looked tired and grimmer than I had ever seen him.

He lead me to the living room where Jillian and a man I had never met before were seated. I thought immediately that the man was a vampire then dismissed it since it was broad daylight and vampires couldn’t walk in the sun. Whatever he was, he was definitely a supernatural. I took a seat across from him so I could keep an eye on him. I didn’t know much about other Supernaturals but I was smart enough to know you shouldn’t turn your back to one you didn’t know.

“This is Claude” Brian told me motioning towards the man. “He works for the Area Master, Pierce.”

I did a double-take. I looked at the man more closely. His frame was lean and long. Jet black hair fell to his shoulders in a thick curtain. His eyes were as black as his hair. He flashed me a smile and I almost jumped out of my skin when I saw his fangs. Holy shit! This man *was* a vampire. I looked to Brian for answers to unspoken questions. What was this vampire doing out in the daytime and what was he doing in Brian’s house?

“I thought vampires couldn’t go out in the sun” I said nervously.

“Most can’t,” agreed Brian, “but Claude is really old and knows a few tricks. If you look you’ll see the shades are all drawn.” I swallowed hard. This might be worse than I had thought. Was I in some kind of trouble with the Area Master now?

“Did Claude bring us news of Sean?” I asked hopefully. Claude answered for himself.

“Your leopard friend seems to have gotten himself into quite a bit of trouble” he said blandly.

“Is he all right?” I blurted out. Claude gave me a distasteful look.

“He’ll be out of commission for a few days but he’ll live” he answered. “Cecilia won’t permanently damage him” he went on. “He’s one of her favorites.”

I swallowed back my revulsion and tears pricked my eyes. Claude acted as if it was no big deal and maybe to him it wasn’t. I was dying inside knowing that Sean was hurt. It was my fault. I couldn’t blame anyone else this time. I’d been told he belonged to a powerful vampire but I hadn’t listened. I’d been told that she would hurt him…

“I told you to stay away from him, didn’t I Elle?” Brian asked angrily. I opened my mouth to speak but never got the chance.

“Playing pool with him was fine,” Brian continued, “but making out with him in public wasn’t. You’re lucky Cecelia likes him so much or he’d be dead right now” Brian spat. No longer able to hold back the tears, I began to sob. Jillian came to sit on the arm of my chair and wrapped her arms around me, trying to comfort me.

“I didn’t mean for any of this to happen” I explained weakly between sobs.

“Your intentions do not mean anything” Claude informed me. “It is the outcome that matters,” he stated, “and that outcome is that you are in grave danger from Cecelia” he stated matter-of-factly. “Frankly,” he said giving me a cold look, “I could care less, but” he added shrugging his shoulders, “Pierce has asked me to offer you his protection and so here I am” he finished coldly.

“Protection?” I stammered. “Why would he do that?” Claude looked to Brian.

“At least she is not so naïve that she thinks he would do this for nothing” Claude told him. Claude refocused his cold eyes towards me and continued.

“Cecelia has been…problematic of late” he informed me. “Her actions have been aggressive and we feel she may be up to something. We’ve been watching her and have reason to believe that she might make a play at becoming the Area Master” he finished. What in the world did this have to do with me or Sean?

I quickly tried to figure out how Pierce protecting me would help him with Cecelia. I went over in my head all of the vampire laws I had learned from Ash and Brian. Most of them had to do with property rights. I knew that if Cecelia came after Pierce and he killed her that he would get all that was hers. I also knew that Pierce’s offer of protection wasn’t as simple as Claude had laid it out for me. Ash had told me that older vamps did nothing for free. Noticing my indecision, Claude clarified things for me.

“Yes, you would, in a sense, become Pierce’s property” he said answering the question I hadn’t been able to nail down.

“So then what,” I asked, “he basically uses me to bait Cecelia into doing something?” Claude smiled wickedly at me.

“Yes,” he answered simply, “but without our protection you are most certainly dead.” I swallowed hard. He seemed pretty sure that Cecelia would kill me. I didn’t like that. I didn’t like Claude at the moment much either and liked even less the fact that he knew I needed them.

“What exactly would I have to do?” I questioned.

“Simple,” he stated, “you will come to live at our compound where we can keep you safe. You will become an employee of the Master’s and you will do as you are told to do.” I was never very good at doing what I was told to do and I wasn’t sure if I wanted to become one of Pierce’s employees. I certainly wasn’t about to become anyone’s property. It didn’t seem like a very good bargain for me.

“Sounds like prison to me” I said coolly. I might not know much about supernatural politics but I sure as hell knew enough to know that Pierce must have a bigger agenda than Claude had let me in on. The pieces of this offer just didn’t add up.

“I don’t know what other choice you have,” Claude said haughtily. “If you refuse our protection you’ll be at Cecilia’s mercy. She will come for you my dear” he added, looking coldly at me. “You’ve tasted something forbidden and she will not let this grievance pass.”

 If he was trying to scare me, it was working. I was equally afraid to go live with a bunch of bloodsuckers. I racked my brain to come up with a third choice, something that didn’t include me becoming someone’s property or ending up dead.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t come up with anything. The vision of the vampire’s fangs and of him slaying people came back to me along with the image of Margaret. Were the vampires working with her? If so, I couldn’t trust them. This could all be a trap. I felt sick. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know who to trust. Maybe I could defeat Cecelia on my own.

Noticing my indecision Brian said, “Pierce is a good man. I’ve been telling him about you and he’s fascinated. He wants to meet you” he added like it was some sort of honor.

“I even told him how well you sing. He’s got a club downtown, maybe you could sing there sometime” Brian offered. I felt my face scrunch in confusion.

Since when was Brian so cozy with the Area Master anyways? I was alarmed that he had been telling Pierce about me. My hackles were instantly raised. Could Brian be in on this too? Could his friendship have been just an elaborate scheme to serve me up to the witches? Had I been set up? It hit me then. I had never asked Brian what clan he belonged to. I had always assumed it was with the Sons of the Earth or Erebus clans since Ash had said no one from the other clan was at my party. I had never imaged he could belong to the clan aligned with the Area Master.

“What clan do you belong to?” I asked Brian, my jaw clenched.

He gave me a strange look and then replied, “Lua de Sangue.”

“I should have known you were aligned with the Area Master” I accused. I stood, shaking Jillian off of me. “No wonder you were nice to me” I hissed growing more paranoid by the minute. “You’re working with the witches, aren’t you?” I shouted, openly accusing him. Claude looked slightly amused and definitely more interested than he had moments before. Jillian and Brian were staring at me open-mouthed, surprised by my sudden outburst.

“Calm down Elle” Brian pleaded. “I’m your friend. What are you talking about?”

“Friend?” I asked, noting the edge of hysteria in my voice. “You call handing me over to the vampires being my friend?”

By now my posture was clearly defensive. I could feel the wind blowing through my hair even though all of the windows were closed. Claude studied me with new interest.

“She’s more interesting than I thought she’d be” he said off-handedly. Brian gave him a warning look.

“Elle, why would you think the vampires would want to hurt you?” Brian asked.

“Well, for one…they’re vampires” I stated knowing how stupid that sounded. I had slept with a vampire and he had never offered to hurt me, but logic wasn’t my strong suit at the moment. I felt like the walls were closing in around me. I had to get out of here. I had to get somewhere I could think things through.

“We just want to help you” Brian begged stepping towards me blocking the way to the door. I had a moment of regret for having accused him but then pushed it away. I couldn’t trust anyone right now. I could only trust myself and those that had always been there for me. I knew what I needed to do. I dug through my purse and pulled out a small pin as the group watched me curiously.

“Sorry,” I said harshly, “but right now I think it’s best if I helped myself.” I stuck myself with the pin, squeezing the tip to get the blood to well up and smeared it onto my pendant. Thank goodness I had at least listened to Semiazaz and kept the pendant on.

The air shimmered around me and then there was Semiazaz, standing next to me. Brian and Jillian jumped back, moving quickly away from us. Claude sat stiffly seemingly unwilling to flee although I noted the flash of fear in his eyes. Semiazaz gave me a questioning look.

“Is there a reason you are alone with two wolves and a vampire right now?” he asked calmly. “I thought you had decided to stay away from other Supernaturals for the time being.” He gave Claude, who hadn’t moved since Sem had appeared, a bored look.

“I was just leaving” I told Sem, heading for the door. Claude stood and faced Semiazaz.

“Now you’re interesting” Claude said bowing slightly. “I’m Claudius Wendell Hawthorne, and you are?” he inquired.

“Semiazaz” he replied. “That’s it I’m afraid. My father didn’t bother giving me anything else” Sem said smoothly. “Angels only go by one name” he added.

Shock spread across Jillian and Brian’s faces. Even Claude looked a little less smug than he had a moment before.

Semiazaz took advantage of the stunned silence to declare, “I don’t know what your intentions towards Giselle are and I don’t care. If anyone tries to stop us from leaving,” he looked towards Claude, “you’re going to lose your fangs… or paws as it might me” he finished, casting a glance in Brian and Jillian’s direction.

“Giselle honey, are you ready?” he asked sweetly. “Absolutely” I said without hesitation. This was the one moment in my life when I actually felt thankfulness well up inside me towards my step-father. If he had never bartered me for power I would not have had Sem here with me today to protect me. At the moment I definitely felt like I needed protecting.

“Elle, don’t do this” Brian pleaded as we reached the door. “I’m your friend. I wouldn’t let anyone hurt you.” I paused on the threshold and looked at him. He seemed so sincere. Maybe he really didn’t mean me any harm. I just couldn’t be sure.

“Maybe you wouldn’t,” I conceded, “but you said yourself you aren’t a dominant. You wouldn’t be able to stop them if they tried anymore than Sean could stop whatever happened to him.” A sob stuck in my throat and my voice cracked.

“If you really are my friend then leave me alone for now. I can take care of myself.” I turned away from him and headed to my car, Semiazaz following me.

I explained everything to Semiazaz on the ride home. To put it lightly, he wasn’t pleased. He reiterated the importance of keeping the necklace on from now on. I pointed out to him that I had been wearing it today. It was how I summoned him after all. He stayed with me until evening before leaving to feed.

He taught me some new wards for the doors. The wards were especially spelled to work against vampires and Weres. For an angel, he really knew a lot about magic. I went to work warding every possible entrance to the house. I felt terrible for putting Sylvie and Uncle Ned in danger. I thought about telling them what was going on, but in the end decided against it. There was no sense in all of us worrying about something we couldn’t control.

Chapter 20

After Semiazaz left to fed, I put on my pajamas and tried to relax. It was impossible. I flipped absent mindedly through the TV channels. Nothing of interest was on. I turned off the TV and tossed the remote on the bed. I was silently fuming about crappy programming when I heard the front door bell ring. My heart began racing.

I forced myself to calm down, assuring myself that nothing could get past the wards. As I made my way downstairs to the door I was torn between wishing Sylvie and Uncle Ned were home and being thankful they weren’t. I paused with my hand on the doorknob wanting to check the peephole before opening the door. Unfortunately, I was too short to see out of it without a step stool and I just didn’t happen to have one handy. I silently fumed. Didn’t anyone ever take short people into consideration? I took a deep breath and opened the door.

Ash stood there, grinning at me. “Hey Elle” he said as he stepped forward to embrace me. Unable to pass through the ward, he hit his nose on the invisible barrier. His face registered a look of surprise and he lost his smile. Hot damn! The wards worked. Yippee! Point for Elle.

“Why are your doors protected like Fort Knox?” Ash asked rubbing his nose.

“Long story” I replied.

“Well can I come in and you can tell it to me?” he asked smiling again. “I missed you. I want to say hello” he added laughing. I hesitated. This was Ash. I knew him. Or did I? Did I really know him? What kind of “secret” vampire business had he been off taking care of? For all I knew, he could be working for the Area Master too. I shook my head.

“I’m sorry Ash,” I replied, “but these wards aren’t coming down for anyone.” He lost his smile and he looked hurt.

“What kind of trouble are you in?” he asked solemnly. We agreed to sit and talk through the open door.

After telling him all that had happened, I could see that he was hurt that I didn’t trust him, but he also understood why I was being so cautious.

“Elle,” he began softly, “you should really consider Pierce’s offer” he advised.

“You told me he was frightening,” I retorted, “now you think I should put myself under his control?” I asked incredulously.

“Pierce is a good man as far as old vampires go” he explained. “He has to be brutal and frightening to do what he does. How else would he be able to control an entire region like L.A.?” he asked, pleads for understanding in his voice. I knew he was trying to be his usual practical self but I wasn’t much in the mood for practical. Sure I could be practical in the short run and accept Pierce’s offer of protection and it may indeed mean saving my life. But in the long run I would be indebted to a very powerful and potentially dangerous vampire, a vampire that would consider me his property. I was so not becoming somebody’s property. I voiced my concerns to Ash.

“I get it Elle,” he told me, “I really do. But you are in a lot of trouble right now” he went on despite my protests. “I know it isn’t your fault, or at least most of it isn’t” he added earning a glare from me. I didn’t need to be reminded how royally I’d screwed up. I knew it.

“Taking Pierce’s offer might be the only choice you have to stay alive” he finished. Ash got quiet for a moment. “I think there is a lot more going on than meets the eye” he told me. “Pierce wouldn’t normally offer protection like this. He must be really worried about Cecelia” Ash mused. “Regardless of why he’s offering it,” Ash told me, “he’s offering it and if Pierce says he’ll protect you, he’ll protect you” Ash finished.

I was so confused. I didn’t know who I could trust anymore. I didn’t know if Ash meant the words coming out of his mouth right now or if he was trying to convince me to take Pierce’s protection because Pierce had ordered him to. I was quickly becoming paranoid that those I had once thought cared about me were out to hurt me. Paranoia was a lonesome companion. I promised to consider the proposal and we said goodnight.

Exhausted from having to re-hash the day’s drama, I headed back upstairs for bed. I threw myself onto my bed and was asleep within minutes.

Sometime later, as I lay sleeping, Lady Gaga’s *Monster* drove me from my slumber. It took me a minute to realize it was my phone ringing. I fumbled for it and finally managed to answer before it went to voicemail.

“Hello” I mumbled sleepily.

“I need to talk to you Giselle” I heard Sean’s voice say. I shot out of bed, now fully awake.

“Sean! Oh my God! How are you? Are you all right? What did she do to you?” I rambled.

“I’m fine” he said roughly. He sounded upset and I frantically tried to think what he would be upset with me about. Did he blame me for what happened?

“Look” he said gruffly, “I’m going to get straight to the point. I know I might have led you on and you may believe that there can be something between us, but there can’t be” he said. I shook my head before realizing he couldn’t see me.

 “I know about Cecelia. I know she hurt you. You don’t have to stay with her Sean. You can leave town. I’ll go with you” I added desperately.

“Giselle,” he said sternly, “I’m not leaving.” I started to protest but he interrupted me, laughing roughly.

“You don’t get it” he said. I don’t want to leave. I want to stay with Cecelia. It’s where I belong. I was confused about that for a while, but I’m not now. I know where I belong and it’s not with you” he finished. My heart felt like it would collapse. He couldn’t possibly mean what he’d said. I knew there was something special between us.

“Sean” I began, but never got the chance to finish.

“Don’t call me again Giselle” he said crossly. “I don’t want to see you again. If we meet in passing, act as if you don’t know me. Don’t talk to me, don’t look at me.” I held the phone, not believing what I was hearing. He never wanted to see me again? His last words pierced my heart more than all of the others.

“I wish I had never met you” he said angrily. “All I’ve had since I met you is trouble. Don’t contact me again” he bellowed, hanging up.

I stood in shock, holding the phone long after he had hung up. Everyone had told me that Sean and I could never be, that we couldn’t be together, but somehow I always thought… He loved her. He must love her. I felt sick.

 I lowered myself onto the bed, the phone still cradled in my hand. I felt like all of the air had left my body. It was difficult to breathe. I lay back, turning on my side as I did. I curled into a ball and sobbed. How could this be happening? How could he say he regretted ever meeting me?

My insides felt like they had been gutted. I had been falling in love with him. Maybe even already a little in love with him and he wanted nothing to do with me.

Chapter 21

The following week completely sucked. Not only was I devastated over the phone call from Sean but to top things off, I had been trapped in my own home like a prisoner. I had one friend who wasn’t talking to me and the others I was hiding from in case they were out to get me. My life had become utterly ridiculous.

I was starting to think that Brian and Jillian may really have been trying to help me when I went ballistic on them. If they had been part of some scheme to get me, it was an elaborate one. I was usually pretty good at reading people and I had felt they were both sincere in their friendship towards me. I just couldn’t understand why Brian had never mentioned he worked for the Area Master before. Why did it seem like he had been keeping it a secret. It was difficult to trust people who kept secrets from you.

Cecelia hadn’t made a move and I was starting to think she never would. If she was going to I wish she would just get on with it already. I was beginning to think that having to hide inside everyday was another kind of death. A slower and more painful one perhaps. Maybe the others had been wrong. Maybe she wouldn’t retaliate. Maybe since Sean had re-pledged his loyalty to her and kicked me to the curb she didn’t care about me anymore. I could be hopeful, couldn’t I?

One thing was for sure, I was going crazy being locked up in this house. Sylvie and Uncle Ned were never home. I hadn’t wanted to worry them so I hadn’t told them about the escalating trouble around me. I needed to talk to someone. I’d been calling up Sem more and more lately but his mysterious warnings and constant advice to lay low and wear the necklace were getting on my nerves. How much lower could I lay and for how long?

I sat on the couch and flipped open my phone. Who should I call? Definitely not Nallia. She and I hadn’t spoken for weeks. If she hadn’t wanted to be involved before she certainly wouldn’t want to now. Brian and Jillian were probably mad at me for acting the way I had when I’d been offered Pierce’s protection. I couldn’t really blame them. I had acted like a total lunatic. Not to mention I had summoned Semiazaz in the middle of Brian’s living room. No doubt he thought me a complete freak now.

I settled on Ash. Ash was the most unlikely candidate to be in on a plot to get me. He had no ties to the Area Master that I knew of (I actually believed him on this) and he was out of town while all of this had been going on. He had seemed genuinely surprised when I had told him about all the excitement around me lately. Plus, if he had been instructed to get close to me because of some master plan the vampires and witches had in store for me, he had really screwed it up. We had slept together and agreed to see other people. He had dated other girls since then. If he was supposed to have seduced me, he wouldn’t have agreed to that or been so open about his love life. I dialed his number.

“Hey Ash” I said softly when he answered.

“Everything all right?” he asked nervously.

“Everything’s fine” I assured him. “I just wanted to talk.” He blew out a breath.

“I’m sorry Ash” I continued. “I’m sorry I didn’t let you in that night. I’ve just been so freaked out. I wasn’t thinking clearly. Do you forgive me?” Ash’s silky laugh set goose bumps running down my skin.

“Of course I forgive you. If I were you, I wouldn’t have let me in either” he added laughing again. “I can tell you Giselle, I’m not working for anyone in anyway other than that which involves real estate. I don’t do master plots to seduce and destroy beautiful women” he teased.

I remembered now that he had told me he worked for other vampires, scouting for properties to buy. Vampires liked financial security since they had a lot of potential years they needed to provide for. Real estate was a good investment.

“So,” I said hopefully, “you want to do something tonight? I’m going crazy cooped up in this house” I confessed.

“I’d love to darling but I’m meeting some clients tonight” he answered. My heart sank. He seemed to think for a moment before adding, “I guess you could come with me. It is a casual meeting. We’re meeting at the club. I could take care of business and then we could hang out” he suggested. I was giddy with excitement. I so needed a break from staring at these walls.

“Wonderful” I gushed. “Where should I meet you?”

“Dette de Sang, of course” he replied. “It’s in the downtown area by that little bakery we stopped at that time, remember?” I did. They had the best muffins there.

“Meet me there at nine o’clock and look cute” he demanded. “I haven’t seen my little wild cat in a while. I miss my spunky little kitty” he teased. I couldn’t believe he was making fun of my newly acquired shifting skills. It was so typical Ash that I had to laugh.

“Ha, ha” I said, “I’ll see you there at nine.” We hung up and I raced upstairs to find something to wear. I was so excited to be going out. I needed a night out and I would be with Ash so I would be safe, at least safer than I would be without him. Plus, we would be in public and I still had the necklace if things went wrong.

Chapter 22

I was surprised at how easy the club had been to find. I had been in this area several times before, but I had never seen it. The club was tucked behind a couple of shops and if you weren’t looking for it, it was easy to miss. I pulled into the parking lot and checked my reflection in the mirror before getting out.

Tonight was definitely the night to be wearing my new black dress. It had been hanging in my closet since I’d bought it that first day shopping with Sylvie. When I spotted it in my closet tonight, in all its leather and silver ringed glory, it begged for my attention. I could almost hear it say “wear me Elle” and I was happy to oblige.

I had chosen silver five inch heels to go with it. The heels were a little bit much, but I was short. I needed the inches. Plus, they made my legs look great. I had taken the time to curl my hair in ringlets. I had clipped them up on top of my head, allowing a few to escape around my face. The pendant didn’t really go with the rest of my look but I wore it anyways. I may love fashion, but I’m not stupid.

I got out of my car and started towards the club. The club’s name was unusual. Instead of a flashy sign that you see at most clubs, this one was situated over the door and unlit. It was almost as if they didn’t want any business. They certainly didn’t do anything to advertise themselves. “Dette de Sang” must be French, but I didn’t know for what. I had never paid much attention in French class.

As I reached the club I noticed a bouncer standing outside the door, clipboard in hand. I had a moment of nerves thinking he might not let me in since I was underage. I’d be pissed if I had gotten all dolled up for nothing. Straightening my shoulders, I approached him.

“Name?” he asked not looking at me.

“Giselle Davis” I answered sweetly.

“Who are you meeting?” he asked sounding bored.

“Ashford Pentington” I answered just as sweetly as before.

“Go on in” he said opening the door for me. I moved past him and entered the club.

The club was dark inside, the lighting very subdued. Music played softly from an unseen source. My eyes struggled to adjust in the dim light. They could at least put candles on the tables. Someone could get hurt in here. Small tables littered the main floor of the place. Private booths lined the perimeter of the room. The booths had unusually high backs, making it impossible to see if anyone was sitting in them until you were almost directly upon them.

I peeked into one as I made my way to the bar. A man and a woman sat in the booth, embracing. I watched as the man buried his face into the woman’s neck. I could swear I saw his fangs pierce the woman’s throat. Fangs? Was he a vampire? Was he feeding on her in public? Okay, so the mystery of the need for such unusual booths was solved.

Instead of being repulsed by what I had just seen, I was strangely fascinated. What would it be like to be bitten or to be the one doing the biting? I shook myself to clear my thoughts and joined Ash at the bar. Ash and the vampires he was meeting were sitting at the bar drinking from wine glasses. The wine looked thicker than any I had ever seen before and I wondered if it was really wine or something else. A chill passed down my spine. What kind of club was this? Ash turned towards me as I approached. It frustrated me that I never seemed to be able to sneak up on anyone these days. They always sensed me coming. I’d have to work on some shielding spells.

“You look stunning” Ash said, rising from his stool and smiling broadly at me. I couldn’t help but smile back whenever Ash smiled at me. His smile was infectious.

“Let me introduce you to my associates” he suggested. His associates were Barry and Gregory. I wondered what kind of vamp names those were. I thought vamps had cool, sophisticated names. Gregory was okay, but Barry? Couldn’t he have changed it when he turned? If I’d been named Barry, I would have changed my name.

Barry looked as odd as his name and was definitely not my type. He was short and kind of dumpy looking. He dressed sloppily and appallingly enough, he looked unwashed. What kind of vampire was he anyways? Vampires were supposed to be sexy and suave. He was just a mess.

Gregory was a lot better looking and more my type, but it probably wasn’t a good idea to flirt with Ash’s business associates. He wasn’t that tall but he was fit and well groomed. After looking at Barry, that went a long way with me.

“We’re done with business,” Ash informed me, “so please sit” he said pulling out a stool for me. Ash ordered me a drink and the three men continued the conversation they had been having when I walked up. I tried following along but soon found my mind and eyes wandering.

A slow song was playing and a few couples graced the dance floor. One couple was dancing especially close. The woman was seductively grinding against the guy’s leg while the man kissed at her neck. They did a small turn in the dance and I got a closer look. Okay, so he wasn’t kissing her neck. He was feeding. What the hell was going on in this place? I didn’t know much about vampires, but I did know that one did not go about feeding in public.

I swiveled around in my stool to get a better look at the other club goers. I could easily see at least another half dozen vampires openly feeding. The more I looked, the more I noticed that the majority of clientele present were vampires. There were a few humans and Weres as well, but they appeared to be dates of the vampires. The truth finally hit me and my French finally came back to me. “Dette de Sang” translated roughly to “blood debt”. This was a vampire club.

I laughed at myself for my stupidity. Of course Ash would be doing vampire business at a vampire club. He was a vampire after all. After a week of trying to hide from the vampires, I had managed to put myself right in the middle of a large group of them. Wise Giselle, very wise, I thought to myself. I turned to Ash and tapped him on the arm.

“Why didn’t you tell me this was a vampire club?” I asked calmly. He peered at me curiously.

“Does it matter?” he asked innocently.

“Yes, yes it does” I informed him just as calmly. “You see,” I said explaining, “there is a certain vampire who may or may not want to kill me. So you see, it matters.” Barry came to Ash’s rescue.

“Pierce owns this club” he stated matter-of-factly. I was sure I blanched at that news. “No harm will come to you here. He deals swiftly with those who dare to start a fight or settle business in his club.”

“This club is owned by the Area Master?” I squealed, looking back and forth between Barry and Ash. Ash rubbed his hands across his face. I couldn’t tell if it was an act of exasperation or agitation. Either way, I didn’t like it.

“Is that a bad thing?” Barry asked, referring to Pierce being the club owner.

“Are you in trouble with the Area Master?” Gregory asked, speaking to me for the first time.

“No” I retorted. “At least I don’t think I am” I added unsure. I was suddenly very flustered.

 Okay I needed to stay calm. Sure, it was a club owned by a vampire, a vampire I had been avoiding, but that was no reason to panic. I just needed a mental pep talk. Barry had said fighting wasn’t allowed in the club. That had to go for the owner too, right? He needed to set a good example. I hadn’t done anything to Pierce other than refuse his protection. That wasn’t a crime, was it?

Besides, Pierce probably wasn’t even here tonight. I’m sure the Area Master has better things to do than hang out at a club, even if it is his own. None of the other vampires would even know who I was. I had never met them before. I took a deep calming breath.

“Pierce isn’t here tonight, is he?” I asked nonchalantly, taking a sip of my drink.

“Actually,” said Gregory, “he’s sitting right over there.” I let my eyes follow Gregory’s finger to a small alcove where a very intense looking vampire sat. He wore a blank expression and just so happened to be staring directly at me. I quickly averted my eyes.

“Shit!” I exclaimed. “I’ve got to get out of here” I said, starting to rise. Ash grabbed my arm, stopping me.

“Relax” he commanded. “He’s not going to hurt you just because you refused his protection” Ash chided. Barry and Gregory’s mouths hung open. Weren’t vampires supposed to be good at acting nonchalant?

“You refused his protection?” Barry exclaimed. “Are you crazy?” I focused on Barry a little more. Just as I had thought. He was relatively new at being a vamp. His melodrama was giving vamps a bad name and getting on my nerves. I couldn’t be the first person to ever refuse a master vampire’s protection.

”Yes, I did” I said curtly. “Don’t ask. It’s a long story.” I was hoping to avoid more questions and get to the business of getting out of here when Ash decided to answer for me.

“Let’s just say Elle is new to the Supernatural world and has managed to very quickly get herself into a lot of trouble” he explained.

“Thanks” I said bitterly, giving him a sour look.

A tap on my shoulder took my attention away from my newbie vampire companions. I cast a look over my shoulder to see a very scary, black-eyed vamp standing behind me.

“The Master would like to speak with you” he intoned ominously. He would have fit in nicely with *The Adam’s Family*. I looked to Ash for help.

“Do I have to?” I asked Ash. Mr. Scary vampire answered instead.

“Yes, and you are to come alone.” The vampire grasped me by the elbow and practically lifted me off of my stool. “Come now” he said, dragging me towards the even scarier looking vamp I had been avoiding. We drew quite a bit of attention from the other patrons as we made our way across the room.

I was determined to die with dignity, if die I must. I shook him off me, or at least tried to. He had quite a grip.

“Get off me Igor” I cried. “I can walk by myself, thank you very much.” He released me and I walked the five or so remaining steps by myself. I faced Pierce raising my eyebrows at him as in a “what the fuck do you want” expression. Ballsy and probably not smart, but that was me.

“Brian told me you were spirited” Pierce said calmly, motioning for me to sit down. Not really wanting to sit but knowing I had to, I sat. I wondered if I hadn’t if Igor would have sat on top of me to get me to do it.

“Your help needs better manners” I said hotly. “Where did he learn to treat women like that anyways – prison?” Pierce gave me a considering look. I looked away and hated myself for being too cowardly to meet his eye.

“My apologies Miss Davis” Pierce said smoothly. “Bartholomew takes his orders very literally. I told him to bring you to me and so he did. I should have worded my directive more precisely I’m afraid. He did not hurt you, did he?” Pierce asked with what appeared to be genuine concern. I shook my head reluctantly.

“You will find Miss Davis,” he continued, “that many in our community treat both men and women equally in regards to the threat they pose to one. A female Supernatural can easily rip your throat out as quickly as a male can. Caution is wise and so Bartholomew does not think any differently of you as a woman than he would a man” Pierce explained.

He paused, casting me an admiring look, or as admiring as his looks probably ever got. He was very expressionless and I wondered if all older vamps were that way. It was kind of creepy, but he was so handsome, it was difficult to hold it against him. Somehow I thought it might be wiser to hold it against him.

“I myself,” he continued in the same inflectionless voice, “have always thought that women should be treated with delicacy and utter adoration as beautiful creatures deserve to be treated regardless of their ability to rip your throat, or heart as it might be, out.” He handed me a glass of wine. His response mollified me somewhat.

I was beginning to think of him as charming, but I wasn’t letting down my defenses yet. I could feel his power crawling on the surface of my skin. He reminded me of the beguiling serpent in the Garden of Eden, beautiful yet deadly and leading to sin. I put the wine glass down without taking a sip. Yep, definitely not putting my guard down yet.

I looked at him. I couldn’t help but notice how beautiful he was, almost unnaturally so. His dark brown hair fell just past his shoulders, waving ever so slightly. His eyes were the brightest, bluest eyes I had ever seen. I couldn’t even think of anything to compare them to. The closet thing I could come up with was the ocean on a sunny day but even that wasn’t right. They were deep, yet bright. It seemed impossible to categorize them. They were dazzling.

His face was classic, beautiful in its lines and contours. His skin was light pale ivory and I longed to run my fingers along it and see if it was as smooth as it looked. I must have drifted off because he reached out and gently shook my arm.

“Miss Davis?” he asked. “Are you all right?”

“Giselle” I said numbly trying to focus. “My name is Giselle.” What the hell was wrong with me? Realization struck and I snapped out of my stupor. “Did you just pull some of that vampire mind control shit with me?” I asked angrily.

“No Giselle” he said holding up a hand apologetically. “I did not try to take you over but I am afraid that I am old and sometimes my powers extend further than I wish. I was simply trying to get a feel for your power as is acceptable within the vampire community when meeting one for the first time. I apologize and will not do it again” he promised.

His sincerity relaxed me somewhat. I suppose it could be true that he hadn’t meant to do what he had. I hadn’t meant to jolt Ash like I did the first time we first met, but I still had.

“Giselle” he asked softly, “if it would not be rude, I would like to ask what are you – supernaturally speaking?” He moved his hands in little circles like he was searching for the right words.

“Your powers, they taste…different” he told me.

I frowned slightly at this information, but decided to use his curiosity to my advantage.

“You answer my questions and I’ll answer yours” I proposed arrogantly. I thought I saw a small smile play at the corner of his mouth, but it was gone before I could be sure.

“Fair enough” he said. “What questions have you for me?”

“Are you working with the local coven” I asked bluntly.

“Certainly not” he answered with disgust. It made me remember what Nallia had said about vampires not trusting witches. That brought up another question. Certainly Brian must have told him I was a witch. If witches disgusted him so much what did he want with me?

“How do I know you’re not lying?” I ventured.

“You should be able to tell if I am lying or not. Your powers are strong enough. What does instinct tell you?” My instinct told me that he could be trusted, but lately instinct hadn’t served me too well. I had thought that Brian and Jillian were my friends and now I wasn’t so sure. I had thought that Sean really cared for me, but he had shown me that he didn’t. Usually instinct served me well, but not lately.

Pierce could be playing more mind tricks on me, making me feel like he could be trusted. How could I know? I searched inside myself again. I couldn’t feel his power like I had before. I couldn’t feel it creeping across my skin like I had moments earlier. He had reigned in his powers as promised. Surely I would be able to tell if he was trying to control me. Now that I knew what it felt like, I was sure I would be able to detect a vampire doing that to me again. No matter how much I searched for deception within him I still felt he was being up-front.

“How old are you?” I blurted out. He gave a soft chuckle.

“It has been nearly four hundred and thirty-eight years since I was made a vampire” he answered. I tried to hide my shock while I sipped my wine. Shit! I had forgotten not to drink the wine in case it was poisoned or drugged or something. Oh well, I thought taking a bigger gulp. I doubted a vampire that old would need to resort to poisoning or drugging to get me to do what he wanted. He waited patiently seeming to realize I had more to say. I turned to him.

“You sound American and yet I can detect just the slightest accent. Where are you from?” I asked. He shrugged slightly.

“I have lived all over the world, but I first lived in France. Some have told me I retain a bit of that accent” he explained.

“So, you speak French?” I asked. He nodded. “Oui, ma beau sorcière. Je parle Francais” he said smiling.

“Cool” I said, meaning it.

“I have answered several of your questions, now answer mine. What are you?” he asked.

“I thought Brian would have already told you” I said. “I’m a blood witch, born of the blood on my mother’s side” I explained.

“He told me you were witch, but there is more to it than that” Pierce insisted. My mind flashed to my father’s letter and my growing suspicions that he might not be human.

“I don’t know” I said honestly. “I recently found out that the man I thought was my father wasn’t. So…your guess is as good as mine” I said wryly.

Pierce seemed to ponder this information while I sipped my wine.

Suddenly he said, “Why didn’t you accept my protection?” I took a moment before answering, not wanting to offend him yet not wanting to lie either. I took a deep breath before answering.

“I don’t like owing anyone anything and I don’t like being under anyone’s thumb.” I shrugged. It was honest at least. Pierce pondered for a moment before responding.

“Do you realize that it is rare and an honor to be offered protection from the Area Master?” he asked.

“I didn’t mean to offend you” I said honestly. “The terms of the protection were explained to me and I didn’t like them. I’m not moving anywhere and I don’t need a job” I explained. He nodded slowly.

“If you could take protection and still live where you are, would you take it?” he asked. Was he bargaining?

“It depends” I said evenly. “What would I have to do in return?”

“Nothing” he stated just as evenly. I looked at him in disbelief. “You’re wondering,” he said, “and rightly so, what would be in it for me? I do stand to gain from you being under my protection. If Cecelia were to attack you while you were under my protection, and she will come after you, she will have committed an offense against me. By our laws that would give me the right to punish her however I see fit. As of now, I must wait for her to make the first move against me” he explained. I gulped.

“So,” I said clarifying, “I would be bait even if I wasn’t living in the compound?”

He nodded then added, “You’d be better bait since it is unlikely she would come against you at the compound where she would be outnumbered. I was only thinking of your protection when I offered to let you stay at the compound. Since you have a demon as a bodyguard,” he said motioning towards my pendant, “you might not need the physical protection.”

“Angel” I said absently. “Semiazaz is an angel.” He raised his eyebrows in question. I explained. “He’s a fallen angel, cursed to be an incubus, but he’s trying to get back into God’s good graces” I added. His face lost all expression and I wondered if he did that on purpose.

“Semantics I’m sure” he said blankly. “He’s not of our world and I’m sure he would make a formidable enemy.” He was right about that. The power that oozed off of Sem sometimes overwhelmed me. Also, I’d seen Sem in his “other” form before and it wasn’t pretty. It had taken me weeks to get up the nerve to release him again.

“You stand to gain a lot from protecting me,” I began, “but what do I gain?”

“Very blunt” he said admiringly. “I like that. You, ma beau sorcière, would gain a shadow that could watch your every move. You gain the ability to call for help without having to call.”

“What kind of shadow?” I asked.

“One that is created with a spell” he explained. “A witch performs a spell while two people exchange blood and voila, a shadow is formed. The shadow will alert the one it belongs to if the other person is in danger. They will be able to know precisely where that person is at any given time” he added.

I know he thought he was convincing me, but he wasn’t. I didn’t want someone knowing what I was doing or where I was all of the time.

Noticing my uncertainty he continued, “It is an emotional connection, not a physical one” he explained. I considered his proposal and had a thought.

“You said you didn’t work with the witches. If that’s true, who’s performing the spell? He gave me a quizzical look before responding.

“I thought that you could perform the spell since you are a witch” he said evenly.

I felt really stupid but tried to play it off. I thought about what he had said. Sure I had Semiazaz, but a little back up couldn’t hurt. The spell he was talking about didn’t seem like that big of a deal. I could always back out before the spell was complete if I wanted. I would be able to tell what the spell’s true intentions were before it was final. I was a blood witch. Reaching my decision, I turned to face him.

“All right” I agreed. “I’ll do the spell.” He retained his blank expression but I wasn’t stupid enough to think he wasn’t pleased.

“We can do the spell tonight if you wish” he offered. “I have everything we need in my office” he added. Either he made a habit of keeping spelling supplies on hand or he had expected this all along. Regardless, I had made my decision. There was no sense in postponing the spell.

“Tonight works for me” I said casually. “Which vampire do I have to let suck my blood” I asked.

“Me” he said in a way that implied a lot more than a business agreement. I shivered and chastised myself for being excited about the thought of someone drinking my blood. It was just so wrong, wasn’t it?

He rose from the table and offered me his hand. I rose as well, taking his offered hand, and followed him across the room. Patrons turned and stared curiously at us. He led me to a back room and unlocked the door. A desk sat close to the back wall with several chairs around it. The desk was ornate and definitely old and it was immaculate. If he did any work in here, you couldn’t tell. Not a thing was out of place.

 I appraised him from the corner of my eye. He was immaculate as well. Maybe he was a neat freak. His clothes were undeniably tailored and suited his athletic build. He was around six foot tall and lean. His black slacks and black silk shirt showed off his physique without being obvious. His shiny black shoes completed his ensemble and I couldn’t help but think how much vampires seemed to like black. Then again, I like black, so who was I to judge.

I ended my appraisal of him and began to check out the rest of the room while he busied himself removing items from a small closet. The room contained the largest couch I had ever seen. The fabric was a deep burgundy plush and the cushions were big enough to fit three people, not side to side, but back to back. If I sat all the way back on that couch, my legs would be sticking straight out.

He set the supplies down on the desk and I looked them over. They were all supplies used in white magic spells. So far, so good. Pierce took my hand and led me to the couch. I perched on the edge. He handed me a small piece of paper with the spell written on it, but said nothing.

I looked it over. It was a simple spell. All I had to do was will the shadow to form. It would be there until I broke it. Perfect, since it gave me an easy out if I wanted it. I nodded to let him know I understood it and rose to gather the supplies. He came to stand beside me.

When I lit the first candle, he backed away. I noted his action and logged it away in my mind. Vampires really didn’t like fire. Maybe they were really flammable or something. That was good to remember. If Cecelia ever came after me, I could always hurl a fireball at her. I chuckled softly. I bet I could make Pierce lose his calm demeanor if he saw me form a fireball in my hands.

“I’m ready” I told Pierce. He looked at the unused supplies. “Those are just to help you focus and gather energy” I explained. “I don’t need them.” We walked back to the couch and sat. I read the incantation as he waited silently.

When I had finished he moved closer to me on the couch. He moved a couple of stray ringlets off of my neck and wrapped one am around my waist. He moved his other hand around my neck and tilted my head to the side. I tried not to stiffen under his touch. He made me really nervous for some reason. Maybe because he was over four hundred years old and a vampire and I had just agreed to let him drink my blood. That’s just a few reasons for starters.

His fangs began to elongate and a flash of fear tinged with excitement drove through me. My body was humming in anticipation of his bite and my breath began to come faster.

“Concentrate” he breathed into my ear. He leaned in towards my neck. His teeth pierced my flesh softly, feeling at first like a bee sting but then becoming pure bliss. I fought the euphoria of his bite and concentrated on forming the shadow. I chanted as he took my blood. I could already see the edges of the shadow coming together. It was like a living being stretching between us. He released my neck and used one of his fangs to pierce his flesh. The blood welled up on the tip of his finger and he pressed it to my mouth. Only a drop was needed for me to complete the spell.

I was surprised at how yummy his blood tasted and how I craved more. I tried to push those thoughts out of my mind and continued to chant. I saw in my mind the shadow finish forming. It became thicker, more tangible. Finally the shadow was complete. The spell had worked. I could feel it with me, like a small part of him. It had taken less than five minutes to complete the process. It was so much simpler than I had imagined it’d be.

Pierce slowly moved away from me, the shadow pulling between us like taffy stretching until it finally separated leaving a piece within each of us. My body ached with the need his bite had created in me. I tried to ignore the uncomfortable dampness between my legs. Pierce looked at me as I tried to compose myself.

“You are truly a powerful witch Giselle” he told me. “I wasn’t sure that the spell could be done, but I felt it was worth trying” he admitted. “I haven’t met anyone who could perform that spell in over three hundred years” he confessed. I shrugged, not understanding what the big deal was.

“The spell was simple” I said shrugging.

“The spell’s ingredients and chant are simple, but the strength of will needed to forge the shadow and create such a bond is almost impossible” he said. I frowned. The spell had been surprisingly easy and the effort to will the shadow into being not as great as I had first anticipated. Pierce continued his praise of my powers.

“The only bond that comes close to the one you have just forged between us is the one created when two vampires exchange blood between them. Seldom do vampires do this because few like to be bound to anyone” he admitted. I was proud that I had been powerful enough to forge the bond and yet found myself wondering for the hundredth time what the hell my father was. Pierce leaned over and gently kissed my forehead.

“Now there is nothing left to do but wait” he said solemnly. “Go back to your friends,” he instructed, “and know that if you need me, I will come.” I stood to leave, turning back to ask him one last question when I noticed he had already drifted into his own thoughts. His gaze was far away and on things I couldn’t even begin to guess about. I left his office and made my way back to the bar.

Barry and Gregory where gone, but Ash sat alone, waiting for me.

“Well,” he asked grinning, “did you decide to accept his protection after all?”

“Kind of” I admitted, absently touching the place where Pierce had bitten me. Ash’s face registered surprise.

“He put his mark on you” Ash observed seriously. He appeared dumbfounded. I tried to figure out how much I should tell Ash about what Pierce and I had just done.

“Wow,” Ash continued, “you can’t get more serious than an Area Master putting his mark on you” he told me. I didn’t understand what all of the fuss was about. I couldn’t have been the first person Pierce had bitten before. He was a vampire after all and this I told to Ash.

“No Giselle” Ash protested. “He didn’t just bite you, he left a mark on your soul that lets other vampires know you are off limits, that you are his. Any vampire coming within ten feet of you will be able to detect the mark and will steer clear if they’re smart. They won’t touch you, even in a friendly way” Ash explained.

What the hell? Had Pierce tricked me after all? Maybe what Ash was sensing was just the spell. I explained it to him thinking that this must be what he sensed. I opened my mind to him and let him search me for whatever he was sensing. I didn’t like what he had to tell me.

“I can feel the spell, but I can also feel the mark. I’m sorry Giselle, but it’s true.” He told me.

“Great, just freaking great” I exclaimed!

“Why are you so upset?” he asked as we rose to leave. “This is phenomenal. I’ve never heard of Pierce marking anyone. It isn’t something that master vampires do lightly. It’s an honor” he went on. “It means he really likes you. You must have made quite an impression. His mark means that he would give his life to protect you” he added, dumbfounding me.

My heart did a little pitter-patter as I thought of what it meant to have Pierce’s mark on me. I forced myself to retain my anger and not be gaga over it. The fact remained that Pierce had done it without my permission, thereby tricking me into having his mark on me. I didn’t like being tricked or having people do things regarding me without my permission. Pierce had gotten the better end of our deal by a long shot. It was like getting two great pairs of shoes for the price of one. Did I just compare myself to shoes? I had to get out of here.

I started making my way to the exit. Ash followed behind me. Several vamps we passed on our way out displayed open shock on their faces as we passed. That was my first clue that Ash had been right about Pierce marking me. What really made me certain was when we reached the door. Scary vamp bouncer guy was still there. He stepped in front of us, blocking our path. Now what? He bowed at the waist as he spoke to me.

“The master has asked me to invite you to return whenever you wish” he informed me. Could this be the same guy that had ignored me when I came in? Why was he bowing? Ash elbowed me and nodded his head. It took me a moment to realize he wanted me to nod at the bouncer. I did and the vamp bouncer straightened up.

“He wishes to tell you to think of Dette de Sang as your own. You are always welcome” he finished. He stepped to the side to let us pass and I hurried away. I was anxious to get away from the creepy vamp even if he was being nice.

Ash hurried behind me, laughing all the way.

“See?” he quipped. “I told you, you were his bitch” he laughed. I was inflamed by the implication that I somehow belonged to Pierce. I hadn’t agreed to the stupid mark and he had no right to give it to me. Honor my ass.

“I am not his bitch” I replied hotly as I reached my car. “I need at least a few dates and some great sex before I’m anybody’s bitch and I’ve gotten neither.” Ash laughed all the harder as he waved goodbye and headed for his car. I’m glad one of us thought this was funny. I was fuming.

Chapter 23

Not ready to go home yet, I decided to stop at The Dirty Monkey and see if Brian or Jillian were there. I was already in the downtown area and I really owed them an apology. I owed them a double apology since I’d ended up accepting Pierce’s protection after all my fuss about it. I could be an idiot sometimes. My only excuse was that all this vampire business had really freaked me out. Vampires seemed to go by a code that I just didn’t understand. Somehow I had managed to tick off a master vampire I had never even met. Now I had put myself in the middle of a squabble between two very power vampires. I didn’t like it but if it stopped me from getting my throat ripped out, I could deal with it.

I pulled into the parking lot and hopped out of my car. The lot was almost empty. Walking towards the bar, I scanned the area. Even with Pierce’s protection I wasn’t letting my guard down. I kept expecting some crazy vampire broad to jump out of the bushes at me any moment. I really needed a drink.

I swung open the front door and stepped inside. The bar wasn’t crowded. There were only a few people playing pool and some others scattered around tables drinking and laughing. There was no sign of Jillian or Brian. I made my way over to the bar where Mack was working. I waited patiently for him to acknowledge me and placed my order. He seemed to remember me from the last time I was here and he didn’t hassle me for I.D. tonight.

“Have you seen Brian tonight?” I asked him as he handed me my rum and coke.

“Nope,” he replied gruffly, “he hasn’t been in tonight.”

“Thanks” I said absently, digging in my purse for my cell phone. I probably should have called first. As I was looking for my phone I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye. I looked up to see a man walking towards me. It was as if he had appeared out of nowhere. I hadn’t noticed him when I came in and I would have if I had seen him. He was extremely handsome and not the type of man one quickly forgot. I went back to looking for my phone.

The man came and sat down right next to where I was standing. There were plenty of open seats at the bar so I could only assume he had come over to talk to me. I looked at him out of the corner of my eye and he smiled at me. A hint of fang peeked out from his charming smile. Oh crap! Not another vampire. What was a vampire doing in here anyways? I thought this was a Were bar. I wasn’t aware that the two groups mingled socially. I gave him my attention, my phone forgotten.

“You’re a little dressed up for a place like this, aren’t you?” he asked. I glanced quickly at my dress and heels. I was definitely overdressed for The Dirty Monkey.

“I was somewhere else earlier” I explained off-handedly.

“I’m Martin,” he said extending his hand, “and please don’t call me Marty. I hate it” he said good-naturedly. I stared at his hand. I wasn’t sure I was up to making friends with a vampire. I had my hands full with vampire enemies and an Area Master shadowing me at the moment. Finally deciding I was being rude and it would be far worse to make another enemy than a friend, I grasped his hand lightly to shake it. Shaking hands was a gesture I had never seen a vampire make. He took my hand in his and brought it up to his lips, kissing it lightly. He was polite. I liked that.

I could feel his energy and could tell he was an older vampire. If power was anything to judge age with than I would guess he was around the same age as Pierce. Their energy felt similar. He didn’t try any mind tricks on me or even seem to test my powers in any way. This won him points from me.

“I’m Giselle” I said as he released my hand.

“Can I buy you a drink?” he asked me. I studied him more closely. He was very handsome. He actually looked a lot like Pierce with his dark hair and blue eyes. His eyes didn’t compare to Pierce’s though. I didn’t think anyone’s could though.

Thinking of Pierce made my blood boil again. I absently touched the mark on my neck where Pierce had bitten me earlier. I had taken my hair down in the car to cover the marks and now pulled my hair around it, concealing it more. The last thing I wanted was for this guy to think I was a walking buffet. I pushed the anger towards Pierce deep down inside of me determined not to let him ruin my night.

“Sure” I answered, sliding onto the bar stool next to him. “Why not?” We’d just see who I belonged to. I was nobody’s bitch, not even yummy Pierce’s.

“Do you come here a lot?” Martin asked. I smirked at him and he hung his head, laughing softly. “All right” he said, “I admit that sounded corny, but it was a legitimate question.” I smiled at him. He was charming and cute.

“No” I answered. “This is only the second time I’ve been here” I told him. “I came in tonight looking for a friend, but he’s not here” I added looking around once more. Martin looked disappointed.

“A boyfriend?” he asked. I laughed.

“No, just a friend” I assured him. His smile returned. The door to the bar swung open and a large group entered, laughing. The group seemed to be a mix of vampires and werewolves. Again I found myself surprised that the two groups were mixing. The first time I had been here I was certain that no vampires had been here. I thought it was strictly a Were bar. Earlier tonight at Dette de Sang I had only seen a few Weres present and they had obviously been vampire dates.

My heart almost fell out onto the floor when I noticed who was with the group. In the center of the group’s revelry was no other than Sean. My throat felt tight making it difficult to swallow. Sean wrapped his arms around a pretty woman and nuzzled her neck. He whispered something into her ear and her tinkling laugh carried across the bar.

I was going to be sick. I could only assume that was Cecelia. Of all the places they could go, they had to come here. My blood turned to ice water in my veins. The worst part was that she was pretty. I had been hoping she wouldn’t be in consolation for having lost Sean to her. She was virtually perfect with her 5’6 lean frame and just the right amount of curves. Her long blonde hair fell straight and flawless down her back. Even from a distance I could see that her eyes were a deep green color, beautiful. The dumb bitch. She was beautiful, powerful and had the man of my dreams. I hated her and at the moment I hated him too.

Obviously he had meant what he had said about not wanting to be with me. It was clear from the way that they were carrying on that he was in love with her. I felt sick to my core. How could he act like he had that night at Brian’s with me and again the other night and then wrap his arms around another woman? It was like I hadn’t mattered at all. Maybe I hadn’t. Maybe I had been a fool to think that he truly cared for me. Maybe he was just another pig who got a kick out of stringing women along and then breaking their hearts.

I turned away from them. I couldn’t look at them. It made me sick. I thought back to Sean’s last words to me. He had suggested that if I saw him on the street I should pretend we had never met. I was determined to do just that. I swallowed the last of my drink and pushed it aside. I took the drink Martin had gotten me and took a big swallow. I needed to relax before I exploded and alcohol seemed to be the best way to accomplish that at the moment.

“Giselle” Martin said interrupting my silent fuming. “Are you all right?” I looked at him. He had a slightly bemused smile on his lips. He had noticed my open gawking at Sean and Cecelia. I tried to play it off as if it were nothing to me.

“I’m fine” I said giving him my best smile. He gave me a questioning look. “There’s just someone here that I didn’t want to see” I explained lightly. “No big deal” I purred, moving my stool closer to him. If Sean could paw all over another woman in front of me, I could flirt with Martin. He leaned closer to me taking up my invitation readily.

“Have I told you how beautiful you are?” he asked seductively. I giggled. He really was charming. For the next hour we talked and drank and flirted with each other. I tried to keep my eyes off of Sean, but every now and again I couldn’t help but peek over to where they were sitting.

I glanced over once more and his eye met mine. He did not look happy. Whether that was because I was here or because of Martin, I didn’t know. I was glad he was upset. I didn’t deserve to be the only one upset. I hadn’t done anything wrong. I broke eye contact and returned to flirting with Martin. When I glanced at Sean again, he had his tongue down Cecelia’s throat and his hand on her breast. I was going to puke. They should be ashamed for carrying on like that in public.

Determined not to have Sean be the only one having fun tonight, I draped my leg seductively over Martin’s. Martin placed his hand on my knee, slowly moving it up to my thigh. I didn’t stop him even though deep inside I knew I should have. I wasn’t even sure why I was doing what I was doing anymore. Martin was nice but I wasn’t really into him like that. I was too heartbroken to be truly into anyone right now.

He leaned towards me and I didn’t stop him despite the silent voice screaming from inside me telling me not to do it. He kissed my neck and I tilted my head back allowing him better access. Over my shoulder I saw Sean looking angrier than I had ever seen him. Martin moved on to my mouth, kissing me roughly. I kissed him back, trying to get into it, but I was distracted. I pushed away from him gently not wanting to piss him off. I was leading him on after all.

I downed two more drinks in an effort to buy some liquid courage. Soon Martin’s petting became a little too heavy for public consumption. By this time I was drunk and had taken all I could of watching Sean with Cecelia. I agreed to move our party somewhere more private.

Martin excused himself for a moment. I gathered my things and started towards the door. Martin had said he would meet me outside in a moment. From the moment Martin excused himself I began second guessing my decision to leave with him. I was suddenly thinking much clearer than I was moments before. I couldn’t shake this nagging feeling gnawing at me telling me that I shouldn’t be doing this. But Pierce’s image kept pushing into my mind which only made me more determined to see this through. I was ticked about Sean and I was ticked about Pierce tricking me. I mentally chastised myself for having second thoughts. I deserved some loving. Pierce had gotten me all hot and bothered earlier in the night when he’d bitten me and then I’d come here and had to watch Sean make out with Cecelia. It just wasn’t fair. I deserved to feel loved too.

I was halfway to the door when Sean stepped in front of me, blocking my way. I hadn’t expected him to talk to me tonight let alone for him to confront me. What could I have possibly done to him now? I had acted as though we had never met just like he wanted. Shouldn’t he be happy? I’d actually listened for a change. But he did not look happy. He looked as if he was about to rip someone apart with his bare hands. I fought the urge to cower.

“What are you doing?” he asked roughly. I was thoroughly intoxicated and the alcohol buoyed on my courage. Something about the tone of his voice – his chiding- infuriated me. I was suddenly more than ready for a fight.

 “What does it look like?” I spat. “I’m having fun.”

“You don’t even know him” he accused.

“How do you know who I do and don’t know?” I countered. “Besides, it’s none of your business. Go back to your girlfriend and leave me alone” I hissed, waving him away with my hand.

“Elle” he began but I never let him finish.

“Don’t call me Elle. Only my friends call me Elle and you are not my friend” I said wagging my finger at him. “You’re the one who said we should pretend like we’d never met if we seen each other” I volleyed. “I think you had the right idea.” At that moment Martin returned to my side.

“Is there a problem?” Martin asked, looking at Sean dangerously. Sean stood, saying nothing.

“Not at all” I answered taking Martin’s arm. “I was just saying goodbye.”

We turned and headed out the door leaving Sean to watch us go. I felt better knowing he was jealous. He was a jerk and Cecelia was a bitch. They deserved each other.

Chapter 24

When I woke up at home the following day, it was already well into the afternoon. I wasn’t surprised that I had slept so late considering I hadn’t come home until this morning. It was a good thing Uncle Ned hadn’t known what time I’d come home. He would have had a fit. He would have had a double fit if he knew who or rather what I had been with last night.

Last night Martin and I had left The Dirty Monkey and I had followed Martin to his apartment in my car. Martin had opened a bottle of wine when we arrived. His apartment had been strangely vacant. I hadn’t seen a single personal item in the place. When I asked him about it he had told me that he’d just moved here and his things hadn’t arrived from the movers yet. His whole story seemed off to me. I couldn’t place my finger on it. I eventually just chalked it up to him being an old vampire. All of the older ones I’d met so far seemed a little creepy.

Martin kept the wine flowing and several glasses later I ended up in his bed with his fangs in my neck. I groaned and rolled over in bed. What had I been thinking? Revenge sex just hadn’t been what I thought it would be. Not that the sex hadn’t been amazing. The parts I could remember had been. I just couldn’t get into Martin the way I could with Sean. I just didn’t feel a connection with Martin. His essence was so cold, so empty. If I hadn’t been with Ash before I might have thought that it was simply owed to his being a vampire. But I had been with Ash and he hadn’t felt like that. Again I figured it must have to do with how old Martin was.

“No more thinking like that” I scolded myself, punching my pillow. Martin was charming and handsome and I was going to give him a chance.

I rolled out of bed and headed for the shower. A hot shower was exactly what I needed. I felt sluggish today. After I had washed, I got out of the shower and wiped the steam off of the mirror with a towel. I gasped in surprise at my reflection. Tiny pinpricks decorated each side of my neck. I looked over the rest of my body. More bite marks littered my breast and inner thighs. What did I do last night? Was I crazy? Had I agreed to this?

When I had left home last night I had never been bitten by a vampire before and now I looked like a pincushion. What was I, Taco Bell? Had he used me like a midnight buffet? Had I really agreed to see this guy again?

I forced myself to calm down. Okay, he had bitten me a few times. He was a vampire. I was so drunk last night I probably consented. I’m sure he wouldn’t have bitten me if I hadn’t agreed to it. Unfortunately I couldn’t remember much of the night so I needed to give him the benefit of the doubt. He was a nice guy and I had promised to meet him tonight. A few bite marks didn’t change that. It simply meant I would need to take them into consideration when choosing my wardrobe tonight. That is if I didn’t want to look like a blood whore to everybody we passed.

I pulled on some sweats and dried my hair. I was feeling a little woozy. Whether that was from blood loss or last night’s alcohol, it didn’t matter. I needed food. I made sure my bite marks were covered and headed downstairs.

Sylvie was sitting at the breakfast bar when I entered the kitchen. She gave me an appraising look and the said, “Rough night last night?” Before giving me a chance to answer, she went straight to scolding me. “I thought you said you were staying in.” I could hear the accusation in her voice but chose to ignore it. I was in no mood for her lecture.

“Plans changed” I said calmly. “Besides” I added testily, “I can’t stay locked up in this house forever.” I popped some bread in the toaster and got out the peanut butter. I loved the way it melted onto the toast. Yum. The small movement to reach for the peanut butter caused my hair to slip behind my shoulder, exposing my bite marks. Sylvie leapt off of her stool like she had been shot from a canon. She grabbed my hair and pulled it aside, exposing the marks more clearly.

“What the hell is that?” she asked, hysteria in her voice. When I didn’t answer but simply pulled away, she continued.

“Tell me it was Ash, Elle. Please, please tell me it was him. If you were going to let any vampire bite you, tell me it was him” she pleaded hysterically. I felt bad for a moment for upsetting her but instead of consoling her I did what I usually did when I felt bad. I got mad.

“Relax” I said pushing away from her. “You’re not my mother. It’s none of you business.” She gave me a hard look. “If you really must know,” I said relenting a little, “it wasn’t Ash.”

I explained about the spell with Pierce. She must have sensed that I was leaving something out because she grabbed me again and checked the other side of my neck. And that is why I have practically given up on lying. It never worked for me! Damn! Didn’t anyone believe in privacy anymore? Sometimes it was really a pain in the ass to live with another witch. She always knew when I was lying or omitting as the case might be.

“How many times did you need to let him bite you for the spell?” she asked accusingly. Deciding it would be simpler to come clean, I told her about Martin.

“You go from avoiding vampires to letting them bite you, to bedding them, to letting them bite you some more – all in one day?” she asked incredulously. I had to admit it sounded bad when she put it like that.

I spread the peanut butter on my toast before it cooled. It wouldn’t melt if the toast wasn’t hot when I put it on. I took a bite of my toast and tried not to lose my temper. I knew that Sylvie was just concerned but I was a big girl and could take care of myself. Besides, she was right. It had been stupid to be with Martin last night. I hated it when she was right.

What had I been thinking? The trouble was, I hadn’t been thinking. I had been so angry with Pierce for forcing his mark on me without permission. Seeing Sean with Cecelia had only made matters worse. I had wanted to get back at them. Of course it wasn’t logical. It hadn’t hurt Pierce or Sean that I had slept with Martin and become his breakfast, lunch and dinner. It had hurt me. Everything looked clearer today while last night everything had been so fuzzy. Now I was stuck going out with Martin again. I truly wasn’t crazy about seeing him again. I took a deep breath and met my sister’s outraged gaze.

“You’re right” I admitted reluctantly. “It was stupid but I don’t need a lecture. I didn’t plan on this. It just kind of happened.”

“Just like everything else just happens” she accused. “Things always seem “to happen” with you Elle. You need to start thinking before you act” she finished. Looks like I was going to get the lecture anyways. I looked away, tears threatening. She noticed my eyes were welling and her gaze softened. She put her hand on my shoulder.

“What had you so upset to do something this stupid?” she asked gently.

That was Sylvie for you. She always knew my moods. She knew I was upset about something more than just Martin. I told her everything I had left out before. I told her about Pierce’s mark and about seeing Sean. She listened supportively while I poured my heart out.

When I told her I was seeing Martin again tonight I had expected another lecture. Instead she offered me some advice.

“Don’t drink tonight Elle” she advised. “You need to be on your toes right now, not intoxicated. I know you say Pierce and Martin are nice guys, but they are vampires. I mean where is this Martin guy from anyways? Isn’t it just a little odd that he shows up right when you’re in the middle of all this vampire trouble? I don’t like it Elle. I’d rather you error on the side of caution than for something terrible to happen” she finished. She had a lot of good points. It was good advice and I planned on taking it this time.

I finished my toast and went upstairs to rest before I needed to get ready for tonight. I had been smart enough to tell Martin he didn’t need to pick me up tonight. I didn’t want him to know where I lived and I definitely didn’t plan on inviting him into my house. I’d spent too much time warding everything to blow that all on him. As far as I was concerned, no vampires were welcome in my home. I would meet him at the club.

Chapter 25

I left home around eight o’clock and drove to Dette de Sang. Martin had insisted we meet here tonight. He was adamant that it was the best club in town and we just had to go there. I just hoped Pierce wasn’t there tonight. His whole marking me thing had made me feel awkward. I sighed. Well, he had said I could come back anytime I wished, he never said I had to do it alone.

I parked in the small lot around the corner of the club. I needed to summon Semiazaz tonight before I met with Martin. I removed the pin I always used and pricked my finger. I pressed the blood to my pendant and the air began to shimmer.

“A vampire club?” remarked Sem. “Very interesting.” I ignored his sarcasm.

“Look” I said trying not to be rude, “I’m meeting someone here tonight and don’t want him to see you with me. He might get the wrong idea” I explained, getting out of the car. Semiazaz laughed his sexy laugh and nodded at me in understanding. He paused for a moment before giving me a quick nod and disappearing into the night. He had seemed on the verge of saying something to me but then had decided against. I couldn’t help but to wonder what it had been. I shook my head trying to clear it. It was pointless worrying about it. If it had been important he would have told me.

I started walking towards the club. A swoosh of air caught me by surprise. Suddenly Martin was standing beside me.

“Holy shit!” I exclaimed. “You scared me to death” I told him, holding my hand to my chest. Martin laughed devilishly.

“Sorry. I’ll try to slow my movements down so I won’t startle you again” he promised. I didn’t like his tone. It was off somehow. He didn’t seem in the least bit remorseful for scaring me half to death. In fact, he seemed to be enjoying himself. He seemed different than he had the night before. Had it just been the alcohol that had made him seem so charming? I tried to shake the nagging feeling that something was wrong. I just needed to relax. Paranoia was creeping up on me again.

He must have noticed my irritation because he lost his smirk and held his arm out to me in what appeared to be a peace offering. I took his arm and we walked towards the entrance. Perhaps he had thought he was being funny. After all, he had no idea I had good reason to be on edge.

The same bouncer from the last time I was here was at the door. As we approached he rose from his stool, looking from me to Martin and back to me again. He looked confused but then seemed to remember himself. He bowed to me and I nodded to him uncomfortably wondering what Martin thought about the bouncer’s strange behavior.

It brought up another question. Shouldn’t Martin know about Pierce’s mark? He was a vampire. I hadn’t even thought of it the night before. I had been too focused on payback. Ash had told me any vampire coming within ten feet of me would be able to detect the mark. If Martin knew Pierce had marked me, why wasn’t he afraid of Pierce? Did he not realize Pierce was the Area Master? Something was definitely off. I was definitely regretting agreeing to meet Martin tonight.

“Miss Davis you have a guest?” the bouncer asked in a strained voice looking at Martin once more. Martin grinned openly at him.

“Is that a problem?” I asked peevishly. I really shouldn’t have been so short with him. I was just suddenly very anxious.

“Not at all Miss Davis” the bouncer said holding the door open for us. Martin nodded to him as we entered and the bouncer looked as though he were ready to gut Martin. What the heck was that all about?

I tried to shake off the weirdness that had just taken place on our way in but something wasn’t right. I just couldn’t place my finger on it. Something was off. Fear had begun to root inside my gut. Somehow I knew I had somehow managed to make another huge mistake. I just didn’t know what that mistake was just yet.

Martin led me to a secluded booth. Not wanting to be his dinner again, I insisted on sitting opposite of him. He seemed to think this was funny for some reason. I didn’t like him half as well as I had the night before. A waitress came and took our order. We both ordered red wine. We were in the middle of enjoying that wine when I noticed a shadow looming over us. Pierce stood before us. He was trying to look blank but I could tell he was fuming. I did what I always did when I got nervous. I got mad. I certainly hoped he wasn’t mad because I was with another man. I didn’t belong to him. He hadn’t asked my permission to mark me.

Strangely Pierce seemed to sense my line of thinking. He looked at me sharply and lost his blank look. The look on his face now was murder some and I regretted instantly having ever agreed to come here tonight. It was a bad idea. A very, very bad idea. I squirmed as his gaze focused on me.

“Giselle,” he said evenly, “you look lovely tonight.”

 Shocked he had been so cordial I couldn’t form a coherent word. So I just nodded stupidly at him. He looked devastatingly handsome in his tight black jeans and boots. I loved a man in boots. It was just so sexy. He was wearing another silk shirt tonight. This one was an electric blue that almost matched his eyes. I forced myself to stop my mental appraisal of him. Now was not the time to be thinking about how sexy he looked. Not when he also looked quite capable of ripping someone’s throat out at any minute. I found myself praying it wasn’t mine.

Pierce’s gaze turned to Martin. “Martin,” he began calmly. “What brings you to town?” he asked coolly. What? They knew each other? I didn’t think it was possible but now I was even more nervous.

“I missed you of course” Martin quipped. Pierce gave a false smile followed by a sharp laugh. This was so not good. The tension between them was intense. It wasn’t difficult to interpret that they weren’t friends.

“Are you aware that Miss Davis in under my protection and bears my mark?” Pierce asked through gritted teeth. I looked to Martin, interested in his reply.

“She never mentioned it,” Martin replied flippantly, “and she had all night to mention it too” he added. My cheeks burned with embarrassment at the disrespectful implications Martin had just made. If a woman is open enough to give herself to you in that way, even for just a night, you should be respectful enough not to brag about it all over town. It was simply tacky of him to mention it.

“Maybe,” Martin said slowly, running his fingertips around the rim of his glass, “your mark doesn’t mean what it once did brother.”

Brother! Was he using that term as in “hey brother”, like a guy bonding thing, or did he mean literally? I looked back and forth between them, my eyes widening in surprise. They did look an awful lot alike. I had noticed that last night as well. They also seemed to have a lot of unfinished business between them. I was really in trouble. I just knew it!

“Are you two really brothers?” I asked unable to keep myself from interrupting their staring contest any longer.

Pierce raised his eyebrows at me while Martin laughed loudly. The pieces began to fall together and I realized it may not have been a coincidence that Martin had shown up at the bar last night. He had probably followed me from Pierce’s club. He had known Pierce had marked me. He had used me to get back at Pierce for…well something I knew nothing about. I was furious with Martin and with myself for being so stupid.

“You asshole” I spat at Martin, rising from the booth. “You have some twisted relationship with your brother so you seduce me?”

“You hardly needed to be seduced” Martin snarled. My mouth fell open at his accusation, even if it was true. I threw my wine on him.

“You whore” he screamed, rising from the booth and wiping at himself with a napkin. Pierce’s eyes widened in surprise. A slight grin spread across his face.

“You’ll be sorry for that” Martin promised. I edged closer to Pierce. Martin looked as if he wanted to make good on that promise right now.

“I think it’s time for you to get going, brother” Pierce said calmly.

“Don’t worry” he said, “I’m going.” He headed for the door, turning just once on his way out to call to us.

“You better keep an eye on your new toy big brother” he warned. “There’s no telling who she’ll hop into bed with next.” I was thoroughly embarrassed at this point.

Pierce turned to me and calmly requested that I accompany him to his office. I felt I didn’t really have a choice but to follow him even though everything inside of me was screaming to run. His cold, calm demeanor had me wondering what was in store for me. His energy told me he was pissed even if his outward appearance didn’t. It couldn’t be good. The minute he closed the office door, I began my defense.

“I didn’t know” I blurted out. “I didn’t know he was your brother. I mean, I should have known. You do look a lot alike, but, I mean, how was I to know?” I babbled. “He used me” I accused. “The dumb asshole used me.” Pierce leaned against the door and studied me, his fury concealed behind a calm façade.

“Regardless of who he is or why he was interested in you,” Pierce began, “the real question, dear Giselle, is why you were with him?” he seethed.

Yikes! I was really in trouble it seemed. He was pissed. I was scared and so I did what I always did when I got scared. I got pissed too. I wouldn’t allow him to intimidate me even if he was a very old, very powerful vampire. After all there was always a slim chance I could win a fight against him. It may be a slim chance but it was still a chance. I could always hurl a fireball at him if it came down to that. I really didn’t want it to come down to that. I liked Pierce despite his pushy ways but I wouldn’t allow myself to be pushed around.

“I can see anyone I want” I said defiantly. “I don’t have to explain to you why I was with him.” Pierce continued to stare holes into me.

“Our agreement,” I continued, “was for protection and a shadow, not my abstinence” I seethed. “You marked me without my permission!”

 Pierce took a deep breath and moved away from the door. Did vampires need to breathe? Now was definitely not the time to ask.

“You are either unbelievably brave or unbelievably stupid” he stated flatly. “I think,” He said hesitating, “that perhaps, you are a little of both. You knew that I had marked you and yet you were with him anyway. Do you know what it means to be marked by the Area Master Giselle, what an honor it is, do you?” he seethed.

“Yeah, yeah” I retorted. “Ash told me all about it and you know what I think? I think its bullshit! You didn’t ask me if it was okay to mark me. You just did it” I raged.

“Do you know the embarrassment this little fiasco with Martin tonight has caused me?” he bellowed. “Do you understand nothing about how dangerous a position it puts an Area Master in to appear weak in front of his flock? You made me look as if my mark and my protection meant nothing!” he continued violently.

Unbidden tears pulled at my eyes. I hadn’t meant to make him look stupid or to put him danger. As always, I hadn’t meant any of it.

“The others,” he continued, “will expect me to punish you for your disrespect.” I gulped and moved away from him.

“That’s not fair” I protested. “You can’t tell me I can’t date anyone.”

“The mark is to set you off limits to other vampires, not everyone” he explained roughly. He shook his head and went to sit at his desk. He steepled his fingers and thought for a moment.

“If you could date anyone you wanted, excluding vampires, and still retain my mark, would you?” he asked looking at me. He looked intently at me and I squirmed.

“Does that include Ash” I asked. Pierce gave me an incredulous look.

“Well, he’s my friend” I explained, “and…”

“Are you sleeping with him?” Pierce asked agitated

“No,” I said, “not anymore anyways.”

Pierce looked at me as if I had two heads. I was pretty sure I didn’t want to know what he was thinking of me at the moment. I’m sure I must look like a major whore. It looked bad for me that I had slept with Ash, Sean and Martin within just a few months. I needed to slow down on the men. I was running through them like water these days.

“Ash is acceptable as friends are,” Pierce told me. “so the mark will stand” Pierce stated, deciding for me. “I will inform the others that you did not know what the mark meant and therefore forgo punishment this time. Next time,” he said looking straight at me, “I cannot.”

His angry eyes boring into me undid me and I burst out crying. I just couldn’t help it. It seemed that lately I was doing a lot of crying.

“It’s not like I’m doing this stuff on purpose” I whined. “I don’t know anything about vampires or Weres or anything but witches” I blubbered. “I’m learning as I go” I said defensively. “It’s not like there’s a guide book or anything” I pointed out. “Every way I turn it’s the wrong way and I just keep getting myself into more and more trouble without meaning to” I rambled on, wiping a hand across my face and no doubt smearing my mascara in the process.

Pierce seemed to freeze. Maybe he’d never seen a hysterical woman before. Somehow I doubted that in his four hundred plus years that was even possible. His expression seemed to soften. The next thing I knew he was beside me, pulling me into his arms. I hadn’t even seen him move.

I sobbed shamelessly all over his beautiful silk shirt. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to me. I dabbed my eyes and nose with it, trying to regain my composure. It was an honest to goodness handkerchief. I mean, who carried these anymore? The answer was still holding me and looking at me with concern. I clutched the hankie between my fingers. My emotional outburst had left me shaky.

“You are so young” he said softly wiping a tear I had missed from my face. “You have been blundering along all alone, haven’t you?” he asked softly. “No more” he said surely. “I will help you navigate these new waters as much as I can” he promised. He cradled my face in his hands and kissed the top of my head like a child. “You should go home tonight” he told me. “Let me handle the mess my brother has created.”

I was thankful to leave. There was nowhere else I wanted to be at the moment but home. What an awful night. I had the feeling I had gotten lucky tonight. Things could have turned out a lot worse for me than they did. Pierce had been pretty understanding about the whole Martin situation.

Pierce walked me to the front doors and said goodnight. I walked to my car, fumbling in my purse for my keys as I went. Why was it that no matter how small my purse was I could never find my keys?

An electrical charge in the night air caught my attention. I let my power search for what it was. It wasn’t a Were or a vampire, but it was something. Something was out there, watching me. The energy was strange and foreign to me. For a moment I wondered if it could be the shadow. I dismissed this. I could sense the shadow with me and it wasn’t the same.

I tugged my keys out and got into my car, locking the doors after me. On the way home I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was being followed. I drove home as quickly as I could without killing myself. I was relieved when I was finally safely inside my house with the doors locked and the wards in place.

Sylvie was home. Thankfully she seemed preoccupied with her own thoughts and didn’t notice that anything was wrong with me. Or maybe she did and was just afraid to ask. She and I decided to pop popcorn and watch movies. I fell asleep on the couch before the end of the first movie. Mental fatigue won out over my desire for a little sisterly bonding.

Chapter 26

I woke up on the couch with a stiff neck. I snuggled my blanket up to my chin. Sylvie must have covered me up after I had fallen asleep. Sylvie was always trying to mother me. Sometimes it was hard to believe I was the older sister. Thinking about the past made me think of all the ways life had changed since we’d moved to California. Some changes were good, great even. Others, like all the trouble I’d managed to get myself into, sucked.

I used to leap of the bed in the morning, ready to face the day. Today I just felt grumpy. I had a strong desire to just bury under the blanket and not get up. I had been having a lot of these days lately.

The creepy feeling I’d had the night before about someone watching me, was still with me today. I tried to push it away, telling myself I was just paranoid. But I couldn’t shake the bad feeling that something else was going to happen. I had a feeling that I wasn’t going to like whatever it was.

Knowing I’d have to do it eventually, I got off the couch. I wandered lazily over to the window and peered into the sunlight. My eyes wandered over to where I had parked my car the night before. A scream escaped my throat before I could stop it. Sylvie came tearing down the stairs at break neck speed.

“What is it?” she screamed. I turned to look at her. “Someone threw paint all over my car!” I screamed. She jogged to the window, joining me.

“Son-of-a-bitch” I hollered.

“How could anyone manage to get through security?” she asked frantically. Uncle Ned emerged from his office.

“What’s all the yelling about?” he asked as I made my way to the front door. Sylvie and Uncle Ned followed me. I stomped down the walk to my car.

“That is what all the yelling is about” I exclaimed, gesturing wildly.

As I inspected my new paint job I realized that the paint looked odd. It was red but its consistency just wasn’t right. I ran a finger through it to feel its texture. This wasn’t paint at all. It was blood. Uncle Ned and Sylvie realized it about the same time I did and came rushing forward for a closer look. Someone threw blood all over my car. How very *Carrie*-esque. I walked around the car, inspecting it. Written in blood on the hood was a message for me, “You’re going to pay bitch”. Nice touch.

“Oh no” Sylvie squealed shaking her head. “It’s like my dream.”

 “What dream?” Uncle Ned and I asked at the same time. Sylvie’s dreams had a tendency to come true. I took them seriously.

She explained how last night she had dreamed about the message painted on the car. She went on to tell us that she had also seen me in danger in her dream. She said that I was in a basement somewhere, bound and bloody. Uncle Ned looked like he was going to have a coronary at any moment. His face was red with anger and little veins were popping out all over his forehead.

“That’s it” he bellowed. “No one is going anywhere today! No one is to leave this house. Do you understand? I’m going into the house to call the police. Don’t touch anything!” Uncle Ned stormed into the housing leaving Sylvie and I to stare after him. I had never seen him so out of control before.

“So much for the retail therapy we had planned for today” I said woodenly as I turned and walked back into the house leaving Sylvie to stare after me.

Three hours later the police had come and gone. They had grilled me for possible suspects. I gave them the top three on my list: Gretchen, Phyllis and Sami. I explained about the run-ins I’d had with them. I left the vampires and Weres out of it. I didn’t think the Weres were involved and somehow I didn’t think Cecelia would do something so childish.

They took evidence and identified the blood. It had come from a pig. It was just as I had thought, the blood was a *Carrie* reference. They could have at least done something original. They’d know for sure what a freak I was if I got my hands on them too. I vowed they’d be sorry they ever messed with me. I would catch up with them eventually.

A technical glitch was blamed for the vandal being able to enter the grounds. A technical glitch caused by magic I had no doubt, but I kept that to myself.

After the police left I went upstairs to rest. At least that was what I had told Uncle Ned and Sylvie. I needed to make some calls and for that I needed privacy.

My first call was to Ash. I wanted to tell him about what had happened at the club last night and ask him what he knew about Martin. I caught him at home but he wasn’t much help. He didn’t know much except that Pierce had been turned first. Crazed with bloodlust, Pierce had attacked Martin. Realizing what he had done, he had tried to save him, the only way he knew how. He turned him. It was hard to believe that Martin could still be mad about that after all of these years. I mean, come on already, it had been over four hundred years. Besides, it was an honest mistake, bloodlust and all. You couldn’t expect a new vampire to be able to control themselves. It would be like expecting someone to parallel park their first time behind the wheel. It was impossible! There had to be something more to it than that. I thanked Ash for the information and promised to see him soon.

Next I called Brian. I still needed to apologize to him. Plus, I needed Pierce’s phone number and I suspected Brian would know how to get hold of him. I had called the club earlier but had only gotten the answering machine. It seems that vampire clubs don’t open until after sunset. I supposed that was because of the unpleasant effects sunlight had on them.

I dialed Brian’s number and tapped my foot impatiently waiting for him to answer.

“Giselle,” he said coolly in lieu of hello, “I haven’t heard from you in a while.” Great. He sounded pissed and I needed a favor from him. I decided I had better get the apology out of the way first.

“I know you’re angry with me for how I treated you,” I began, “and you have every right to be. I’m sorry I suspected you guys and for thinking you were out to get me. What can I say? I was completely paranoid. I would have called before but a lot, a lot of stuff has been going on” I finished, almost out of breath.

“What kind of stuff?” he asked sounding slightly interested. I filled him in on everything, leaving nothing out. By the time I had finished my story I not only had his full attention, he had lost all signs of a bad attitude. We were obviously friends again and I was thankful. I adored Brian. I’d been missing him terribly.

“You have been very busy since I last seen you Elle” Brian said. “You weren’t kidding when you said a lot had happened. “I already knew most of it though” he admitted. “It’s nice though that you called and told me, nice that you trust me enough to tell me” he added. “You get a much better picture of what really happened when you hear both sides of a story I think. You really are a good story teller too, by the way” Brian teased. “The action parts really came to life for me as you were telling the story. I could almost picture it in my head.” I could not believe that he let me go on and on when he already knew most of it.

“How did you know?” I asked curiously and a little peevishly.

“Well,” he began, “I work for Pierce so that’s how I knew about the stuff with him. I ran into Sean the other night and he told me about seeing you with Martin.”

“That’s right!” I exclaimed. “You work for Pierce. You must know about Martin! What’s his beef with his brother?” I asked.

“I couldn’t tell you” he replied. “I don’t ask my boss personal questions. It’s not a healthy habit for one, especially one in my position, to do. I only know that their feud is a long standing one” he told me. I chewed my lip thinking about what he had said.

“Well, I’m on house arrest and I need to talk to Pierce. Do you have a number where I can reach him?” I asked hopefully.

“Normally I’m not allowed to give out his private number but seeing as how he marked you, it should be okay” he said playfully. I jotted down the number and thanked him.

“Are you sure you won’t get into trouble for giving this to me” I asked nervously, programming it into my phone. He laughed.

“I won’t get into trouble Elle. All employees have been told that they are to give you anything you ask of them. I’m guessing his phone number is included in that command but I suspect he may have even meant kidneys or even vital organs if necessary” Brian said matter-of-factly. He was his usual smart ass self. I also knew that for him to say it that meant there was at least partial truth in it. My mouth hung open in shock.

“Did he really say that?” I asked Brian.

“Yeah,” Brian told me, “he really did. Well, not the organ part but we were told we should help you in anyway necessary. He marked you Elle. In vampire terms that means he’d give his life for you. We’re expected to protect you the same way we would him” Brian finished.

“Why?” I asked incredulously. “Why did he mark me? Why would he want to protect me in that way?”

“I guess he really likes you Elle” Brian said simply. “I don’t try to make too much sense of what the big guy does” he added. “I just do what I’m told.”

Pierce’s interest in me was just so…odd. It went way above me being useful to him. He was treating me as if I were something special, like I meant more to him than I should. I’d never even kissed the guy and I’m guessing he didn’t get so emotional with all of the women he bit or he’d have a whole string of women marked around town.

Brian and I said goodbye and I lay on my bed to rest. I had a couple of hours before sundown when I could call Pierce. I was exhausted and I fell asleep before my head had even hit the pillow.

Sometime later I woke to the ringing of my phone. The caller ID showed Pierce’s name. I answered.

“Hello?”

“Giselle, are you all right?” Pierce asked in a strained voice.

“I’m fine” I said groggily. “Why? Is something wrong?” I asked, sitting up in bed.

“No” he said agitated. “Brian said you were going to call but you never did” he explained.

“Oh” I said, beginning to understand. I had worried him. It was sweet, if not a little odd, that he was so concerned.

 “I fell asleep. I’m sorry.” I apologized. “Isn’t it a little early for you to be up?” I asked looking at my clock. It was only five o’clock. The sun wasn’t even entirely down yet.

“One of the advantages of being an older vampire is that I rise earlier than most. I’ve been up since three-thirty” he informed me matter-of-factly.

“Doesn’t the sunlight burn you?” I asked stupidly.

“If I were to stand directly in it, than yes, it would burn me. I stay indoors until dusk to avoid little inconveniences such as burning to a crisp” he said sarcastically.

“Sorry” I said. “I was just curious.” Geez. He was touchy today.

 “You are a very curious creature Giselle, on more than one level” he stated. I wasn’t sure I liked his tone. What the hell did that mean? Was he ripping on me? Was he saying I was strange or abnormal? Before I could get pissed he began talking again.

“Brian told me about the unfortunate incident with your car.” He said matter-of-factly. “While you have probably guessed right in suspecting the witches, it would be wise to stay indoors tonight” he advised. “They must be working with someone” he reasoned. “My brother’s sudden appearance may be coincidence, or it may not be. I don’t trust coincidences, so stay home tonight” he ordered. And it didn’t escape me that it was an order either. I simply chose to let it go without remark.

“No problem” I replied honestly. “My uncle has completely flipped out since the car incident and I’m under house arrest anyways” I told him.

“Smart man” Pierce replied. “With your penchant for getting into trouble he should put you on house arrest more often” he said. I was stunned. Had that been laughter in his voice? Did he just make a funny? I hadn’t realized he had a sense of humor until that moment. He was always so serious.

“Giselle” Pierce said, bringing me back to attention. “If my brother comes to see you, don’t let him in” he cautioned. I agreed readily.

“No offense,” I told him, “but no vampire is coming into my home. Ash isn’t even allowed in and he’s one of my best friends” I told him.

“You’re smarter than you let on” he said. I was annoyed at the implication that he didn’t think I acted very smart. He was one arrogant vampire.

“Giselle,” he said again, “my brother can be very persuasive. If he comes to you make sure you do not look him in the eye. Don’t even talk to him. Just call me right away. Understand?” he asked, all joking gone from his voice. Did he think I was stupid? Of course I wasn’t going to be all friendly with his brother, especially after how he treated me. I told him that I understood. I asked if there was a reason he thought Martin would show up here.

“Let’s just say that something feels…off” he confessed. “I like to error on the side of caution. It has kept me alive for centuries.” He paused for so long in our conversation that I began to wonder if he was still on the phone. I hope he hadn’t hung up without saying goodbye. I hated it when people did that. It was so rude.

“I must get going” he informed me, startling me after all of the silence. At least he hadn’t hung up without saying goodbye.

“Have a good night ma beau sorcière and be safe.” I assured him I would be but he must not have trusted me because he felt the need to add more. “The last was an order from your Master. Don’t do anything stupid tonight. There is trouble in the air. I can taste it” he said.

 I wanted to argue about the master part but didn’t have the strength. Something told me I didn’t stand a chance in hell of winning an argument with him so I let it go and simply let him know I understood. I was getting smarter every day.

“Good night my sweet Giselle” he said seductively before hanging up the phone.

That man could switch gears so fast it made my head spin. One minute he was calling me stupid and lecturing me, the next he was acting all sexy. I was beginning to see through the calm façade though. I was starting to be able to read his mood without him ever changing his tone. I wondered if this had something to do with our shadow. If so, I hoped he was getting how much his little comments had been annoying me.

I seemed to be able to bring out a myriad of emotions in him ranging from anger and frustration to amusement and sympathy and even maybe a little bit of lust. He wasn’t the first to have difficulty figuring me out. I often couldn’t figure myself out. I shrugged it off and headed downstairs. Since everyone was locked down and Uncle Ned was staying in too, we decided to have game night. Actually, they had decided on it and I had been forced into it.

Chapter 27

Game night wasn’t half as bad as I had expected it to be. Sylvie beat us at Trivia Pursuit. I wasn’t surprised. She had always been a brainiac. Uncle Ned and I were neck and neck in Monopoly, but when we realized the game might never end, we decided to call it a draw. By that time it was pretty late and we decided to call it a night. We said our goodnights and headed off to our rooms.

I changed into a t-shirt and flopped into bed. Game night had done its job. I felt more relaxed than I had in weeks. I closed my eyes and immediately felt exhaustion take over. I hadn’t been sleeping well lately and it was taking its toll. I had just reached the point where you are half awake and half asleep when I thought I heard a soft tapping noise. I shook off the sleep trying to drag me under and listened. I heard it again. The tapping was coming from the glass doors leading to my balcony. I was immediately on high alert. What the hell could be tapping on my balcony door on the second floor of the house? It couldn’t possibly be good. I took a deep calming breath and then I peeked out of the adjacent window, trying to see without being seen. Holy Shit! My worst fears were realized. It was Martin! How the hell had he found out where I lived and how had he gotten on my balcony?

“I see you Giselle” he sang. “Open the door. We need to talk” he commanded roughly.

“I don’t think so buddy” I hissed, backing away from the window. One minute he was on my balcony and the next he was hovering in front of the window I had just been standing at. What the hell? Now that was something I didn’t know vampires could do. I guess I’d solved the mystery of how he had gotten onto my balcony. I tried not to let the creepiness overtake me.

“Don’t be difficult Giselle” Martin chided. “Pierce is hurt and he needs your help.” I didn’t say anything. Martin must have sensed my disbelief.

“He has a connection with you. You may be the only one who can save him” he pleaded with me. Pierce had warned me he might come. I tried to recall all of his warnings. He had told me not to talk to Martin, not to look at him and not to let him in. He definitely didn’t have to worry about the last part. There was no way I was letting this hovering freak into my house!

“You hate him” I accused, not moving any closer. I heard Pierce’s voice in my head telling me not to talk to him but what was I supposed to do? Was I supposed to just go to sleep with Martin hovering outside my window? “Why would you care if he died?” I asked.

“I do not hate my own flesh and blood” he denied hotly. “It is true we have an old quarrel but it is of no consequence when it comes to life and death. He is my brother. I love him” he insisted.

He sounded very convincing and sincere. I recalled Pierce telling me that Martin could be very persuasive. Then again, what if Pierce really was in trouble? What if Cecelia had made her move against him? Would our shadow know if Pierce was in trouble or did it only work if I were in trouble? I wasn’t sure. I hadn’t foreseen a situation where I would need to protect Pierce or even want to. I tried to feel for the shadow between Pierce and me. It was a soft hum in my mind like it always was. Did that mean Pierce was okay or did it only mean that he was still alive?

I edged closer to the window. If Martin was telling the truth and Pierce died because of my stubbornness, I would never forgive myself. Pierce was an arrogant, controlling, sometimes jerk, but he was also very nice and I liked him. Making up my mind, I walked to the window and opened it. Martin still couldn’t enter without an invitation so I was still safe.

“I’m listening” I said staring at him. His eyes were so much like Pierce’s, such a beautiful blue. How could I have ever thought that I couldn’t trust him? Of course I could trust Martin. He wouldn’t hurt me.

 “Come with me” he commanded. I dutifully began to climb out of the window and into his arms. What? I realized too late what had happened. Pierce had warned me, but I never thought… I tried to throw myself back but he grabbed hold of me pulling me out. I started to fight him when a sharp stabbing pain sliced through my arm. I had just enough time to wonder if he had bitten me before everything went dark.

Chapter 28

“It was too easy” I heard Martin say snidely. “I have no idea why my brother would have even wanted to mark her” he continued. “She seems to have no sense of self-preservation whatsoever. She quickly bought my story about Pierce.”

“Maybe it was so easy because it is a trap” a female voice suggested. “Surely she wouldn’t trust you after the scene you created at Dette de Sang. It was foolish of you to incite your brother so. We had the element of surprise before. Now Pierce will be expecting you to make a move” the woman admonished.

“I assure you, it is not a trap. This one is truly that foolish. She knows little about what a powerful vampire is capable of” Martin assured the woman. The woman tsked obviously not as sure as Martin was. Even in my half-drugged stupor I felt myself getting pissed. Martin was such an ass. He wouldn’t think me weak and foolish once I recovered from whatever the hell he had done to me. He obviously wasn’t much schooled in what a powerful blood witch could do. But he was about to find out.

“You should go Martin” the woman suggested. “You did well bringing her to me. Go and engage your brother. Keep him busy while we work” she ordered. “We’ll handle anyone else who shows up. They certainly won’t be expecting all of us or what we have planned” she laughed easily.

A hand smoothed over my hair. I fought to wake up. I couldn’t move my arms or legs no matter how much I willed them to move. My whole body felt like lead. What had Martin stuck me with?

“She is very pretty” the female voice mused. “I can see why Sean was so attracted to her. I will have lots of fun playing with her.” Ah shit! Everyone had been right. Cecelia hadn’t forgotten about me as I hoped.

“Just wait to start playing with her until we have her eggs” Martin warned. “I don’t want any damaged. With them we will be able to breed warriors that no one can stand against and we will control them” Martin said dreamily. Even through my fog I was beginning to get scared. What were they talking about?

“You need to go now” Cecelia reminded Martin. “You can dream of world domination another time.” I heard footsteps and assumed Martin was leaving.

 “Don’t let your hatred for your brother get the best of you tonight Martin” the woman warned as he left. “Lure him here with as few allies as possible. I can use her indiscretion with Sean as a justification for torture but you must make sure that that any attack on you is done without provocation” she told him. “You know the law. Keep our goal in mind and all will be well.”

“Once Pierce is dead you and I will rule together” Martin promised. “It’s the perfect plan. The only part that bothers me is the witches. Please explain to me again why we need them?” he asked.

“Because you fool,” Cecelia spat, “they have the null. The girl has great power and without the null I doubt we would be able to hold her. You did get rid of the necklace, didn’t you?” Cecelia asked.

“It’s tucked safely away” Martin assured her. “It’s fortunate that I saw her summon her demon that night at the club or else we might have gotten a nasty surprise.”

Cecelia’s mood seemed to shift and she told Martin, “Don’t worry about the witches. My men already know to dispose of them after the surgery. All will die except the null. Him I plan on keeping to help control Giselle. Go now and let me take care of business here.” Footsteps told me Martin had really left this time.

I should have known the voice belonged to Cecelia, the dumb bitch. I wondered sickly what kind of torture she had in mind. They were setting Pierce up to slaughter him and they were using me as bait. Why did I always end up the bait when it came to vampire schemes?

Was Pierce able to feel my distress? Through the fog of whatever Martin had knocked me out with I couldn’t feel anything. I tried to comfort myself. Pierce had said he would be able to find me anywhere with the shadow.

They had my necklace too. If I could call Semiazaz he could easily tear them to pieces. But I couldn’t call him without the necklace. If I could locate the necklace I could save myself. What fools they were to think he was just your average demon, not that those aren’t scary in their own right.

“Patrick,” I heard Cecelia call. “gather the witches and the null. She’s waking.” I heard more footsteps and the sound of a door closing. I finally managed to open my eyes and was greeted with the bright white glare of a light overhead. Cecelia was standing next to me.

“Hello dear Giselle” she purred. “It’s so good to see you. I so wanted you to be awake for this and now you are.” I knew if I was going to use my powers, I would have to do it now. Once the null entered the room I’d be helpless. I focused and tried to pull energy from my surroundings. I could feel it building, but it was slow, too damn slow. The drugs were affecting my abilities.

 If I could just make a fireball I could throw it at her, but I was just too weak. I looked frantically around the room trying to see where they might have put my necklace. I was definitely in a basement, just like in Sylvie’s dream. It wasn’t a nice basement either. Paint was peeling from the walls and by the musty smell it had suffered water damage at some point.

I had decided I would try shifting into leopard form, thinking it might catch her off guard, when the null walked in. I knew he had entered because all of the energy I had managed to gather left me. I was so screwed. I looked towards my new visitors.

I wasn’t surprised at who I saw. Margaret had Gretchen and Phyllis with her and by their rapturous faces I could tell that they looked up to her. She must be promising them something big to get them involved in kidnapping and…what? I wasn’t sure I wanted to find out.

I tried to sit up, thinking I’d engage them in some typical Giselle banter to give me time to think of an escape plan when I realized I couldn’t. Straps pinned my arms and legs to a medical table of sorts. I took a closer look around me. Someone had dressed me in an ugly hospital gown. The front was opened, exposing my belly. A small metal rolling tray was close by containing an assortment of medical supplies. I felt queasy looking at the supplies and forced myself not to wander down the mental path of wondering what they intended to do with those sharp instruments.

 At this point I was really hoping Martin would succeed in luring Pierce here. Pierce was my only hope in getting out of this mess, or at least getting out alive. It really didn’t look well for me. They had thought this out pretty well. The must have been planning this for a while. I was only thankful that Martin had met me at Dette de Sang that night. Cecelia was right, Pierce knowing Martin was in town and involved with me had put him on alert. I only hoped our shadow connection was working. I needed Pierce to find me and fast. In the meantime, I needed to buy some time. It seemed chitchat was in order.

“Gretchen, Phyllis, - Margaret” I said eying them in turn. “How nice to see you all again.” Gretchen and Phyllis snickered but Margaret walked over and slapped me. My head rocked to the side from the force. That was going to leave a mark. Cecelia’s eyebrows rose in surprise.

“Don’t you dare speak, you monstrous little bitch” she spat. “The biggest mistake Robert ever made was not killing you the minute you left your mother’s womb” she seethed. Hatred filled me. I truly loathed this woman.

“Robert knew you were a monster” she ranted. “He should have listened to me and destroyed you!” Somehow it didn’t surprise me that Margaret had been whispering in my step-father’s ear to kill me. She was the murderous bitch. This woman was rotten to the core. She’d been a perfect match for the dirt bag who’d let me believe he was my father all those years.

“If he had, he’d still be alive” she went on. You seduced him, you little slut, and then you murdered him” she accused.

I seduced him? I wanted to argue with her faulty trip down memory lane, but why bother. She wouldn’t believe me anymore now than she had before. She was a lunatic and always had been. She had wild crazy eyes that said she could snap at any minute. Now those crazy eyes were beaded on me and burning with hatred. Guess losing daddy put her right over the edge. I wasn’t going to get anywhere with Margaret, time to try the girls.

“What did she offer you to help her?” I asked them and then added, “Unless you always help murder people for kicks.”

“They’re not going to kill you, you idiot” spat Gretchen. She seemed to think and then said, “I bet you’ll wish they had when they’re through with you though.” That didn’t sound good. Phyllis had always been the big mouth and so I looked to her for clarification. She didn’t let me down today.

“Margaret is going to transfer power to us after this” she boasted foolishly. “We’ll be stronger than you when she’s through” she taunted. I burst into hysterical laughter. I just couldn’t help myself. They were so gullible it was scary. What made them think Margaret was going to be able to do that? And what witch would give up some of their own power to another witch on their own free will? It was crazy. Margaret didn’t even have that much power to go around. Revenge didn’t mean enough to her to give up all her power. No way.

“You two are the idiots” I told them still laughing. “Margaret isn’t powerful enough to do that. If she was, why would she need help from two wannabe witches in the first place, huh?” I asked. “Or why would she solicit help from the vampires? Think about it girls, you’ve been duped.” The expression on the girl’s faces was worth the chance I’d just taken in pissing Margaret off even more. After all, I was the one tied down.

“She’s lying” insisted Margaret.

“Enough of all this” insisted Cecelia. She had been sitting in the corner during all of this and looked bored. I continued.

“What about you?” I asked the null. “What are you getting out of all of this?” He looked nervous and I felt a little sorry for him, but not much.

“I’m a friend of the coven” he stated. “I help them with rogue witches sometimes. That’s what I thought you were” he said. Two vampires receiving Cecelia’s nod went to stand behind him. The poor fool. Realizing I was running out of potential allies, I decided to try the witches one last time.

“You guys do realize that the vampires plan on ripping out your throats when they’re done with you? Once you’ve served your purpose you’ll be disposed of. I heard Cecelia and Martin talking about it when they thought I was still out” I confessed. Cecelia looked angrily towards me and the witches looked to her. I had struck a nerve.

“She’s lying” bellowed Cecelia. “She’d say anything to save her own neck. Let’s get on with this already” she commanded. Margaret moved hesitantly towards me.

She may have despised me and thought that I was a lot of things, but a liar wasn’t one of them. She knew I told the truth. The null dampened her magic the same as he did mine. She didn’t stand a chance against the vampires. Even with her magic, she was way outnumbered.

Obviously she decided to worry about the vampires later. She picked up a scalpel and held it over me.

“What are you going to do with that?” I asked panicked.

“I’m going to make sure you can’t create more monsters” she answered stiffly.

“Shouldn’t you put me out to perform a hysterectomy?” I asked desperately. I was guessing that’s what she had planned for me. The crazy bitch planned on sterilizing me. I was quickly becoming hysterical. I was only a blood witch! What was wrong with making little witch babies one day to pass on our traditions?

“This isn’t the most sterile of environments for a surgery” I went on frantically. “We should really do this somewhere else” I babbled.

“Oophorectomy” she corrected.

“Ooph-er-what?” I cried.

“We’re only taking your ovaries, not everything” she said calmly. “We don’t need anesthesia” she informed me. I gave her a questioning look. “I want you to feel this” she said smiling evilly at me.

“Are you sure you’re trained for this” I asked trying to distract her. It didn’t work. She lowered the scalpel and sliced through my abdomen. Screams drowned out the last of my coherent thoughts.

Hot pain shot through my body as she cut. I screamed and screamed and screamed. I just couldn’t help it.

Chapter 29

The pain was excruciating. It was difficult to focus. I tried to, but I just couldn’t, at least not on anything but the pain. Unfortunately I managed to retain consciousness through my unwanted surgery. Lucky me. I tried to plead, to beg Margaret to stop but all that managed to escape my mouth were screams. Eventually the pain eased to a numbed burning sensation. My body was shaking as if I was freezing to death. I couldn’t stop it. I was going into shock.

I blinked rapidly up at Margaret. She had something in her hand. It was vaguely almond shaped and covered in gook. She placed it into a box that had been filled with dry ice. It was then that I realized it was one of my ovaries. She placed the other one beside it. I was going to be sick.

A strangled cry replaced my screams. I hadn’t had any immediate plans to have children, but I would have liked to have kept the option for a later date. There was just something so wrong about seeing a part of my body removed that I just couldn’t stand it. What little control I had managed to hold on to was quickly slipping away. I fought against the restraints holding me with all of my strength. It was useless. The restraints were too tight and I simply didn’t have that much strength left.

The ovaries removed and carefully stored, Cecelia began to sew me back up. The needle stung sharply through the numbness. Suddenly she stopped sewing. Something had drawn her attention away from me. Frustration ate at me. This was the part I really wanted her to do. I couldn’t stand the thought of my insides being spilled around me like a gutted fish. My whimpering grew louder.

A loud crash drew me out of the pain and panic that engulfed me. We had company. I prayed desperately to God for this to end. Some people don’t think that witches believe in God, but we do. We just think about Him a little differently than most. God wasn’t a being that could be evaluated or classified. He had many facets of His personality, just as we did. We are created in His image after all. The gods and goddesses of witchcraft are just representations of those different facets. I was tied to a fallen angel. How could I not believe in God?

I tried to orientate myself to see what all of the commotion was about. My vision was blurry and it was difficult to see. There appeared to be a fight going on. The room was suddenly more crowded and the blurs of movements from the vamps and Weres involved in the scuffle made it difficult to see what was going on. I did notice that the witches had scattered and the null was nowhere to be seen. Too bad he hadn’t disappeared earlier when I would have had a chance.

 Teeth and claws flashed around me. Margaret had left me but I couldn’t see where she had gone to. Cecelia stayed close to me and out of the fight. She didn’t seem fazed at all. Why would she be though? She had planned all of this. She was getting what she wanted.

I had just managed to identify Brian among the wolves that were fighting when he shifted. Where Brian had stood only moments earlier was a huge, gray wolf with piercing blue eyes. Suddenly the others began to change as well. The sound of bones breaking and shifting made me ache more than before. Fur flowed down their changing bodies. I had always wondered what they would look like when they shifted. Now I knew. They were terrifying with their abnormally large size, sharp claws and saliva drenched fangs. I was hoping none would come for me.

A wolf lunged for Brian and swiped at him with its sharp claws. The claws ripped through Brian’s shoulder, splattering blood everywhere. Brian must have been hurt, but he never stopped fighting. He leapt for the other wolf’s neck, throwing it to the ground and piercing it with his sharp teeth. The wolf’s form shimmered and then changed back to human form. It was dead. I gasped painfully as I looked at the broken still body of the man Brian had just taken down. It was a shocking and terrible sight to behold and yet a small part of me was glad the man was dead. If it hadn’t been him, it would have been Brian.

I was still trying to recover from the shock of what I had just seen when I caught the movement of a vampire out of the corner of my eye. I turned my head slightly for a better look. It was the same vampire I had seen during the spell I had done to learn more about the witches’ plans. His cold gray eyes were focused intently on the battle. He wielded his sword expertly, battling with one of Cecelia’s vampires. He must be one of Pierce’s vampires.

They parried back and forth until the vamp from my vision managed to skewer the other through the chest. I absently wondered if he had pierced the vampire’s heart when I seen the vamp’s head come rolling across the room, blood spraying everywhere. I hadn’t even seen my vision vamp remove the sword or cut off the other vamp’s head. He had moved so fast. I was so glad that guy was on our side. Or at least I was hoping I was right in assuming he was on our side.

Watching the battle before me was like watching the making of a movie. Everything was so unreal. I kept hoping everything that had happened tonight was just a bad dream and soon I would wake up. At least we appeared to be winning. That was good. I noticed Cecelia had left my side to join in the battle letting me know my instincts were right. More and more bodies littered the ground. I was trying to stay conscious but I kept slipping in and out.

Suddenly, Pierce was at my side. Where had he come from? Had I blacked out? He was speaking to me but I couldn’t hear his words. Martin appeared behind him, sword in hand. Somehow I managed to call out a weak warning. It was amazing that Pierce had even heard me.

Pierce crashed into Martin, the sword clanking uselessly to the ground. Pierce kicked the sword out of Martin’s reach. Why would he do that? He had Martin right where he wanted him. He should have picked up the sword, not kick it away. The brotherly bond could only go so far. I was certain Martin wouldn’t have shown Pierce any mercy. Everything within me screamed for Pierce to kill Martin.

I was soon distracted from Martin and Pierce. I had problems of my own. Cecelia hadn’t forgotten about me as I had hoped. She was charging towards me, a huge sword in her hand. Obviously she had changed her mind about keeping me alive. What was it with vamps and swords anyways?

Desperate not to get skewered, I felt for my power. With the null gone I felt it surge forth. Thank God it was alive and well within me. I began gathering energy from around me as quickly as I could. I used that energy to heat the metal bonds binding me to an unbearable degree. The metal was burning my skin, melting into it, but I didn’t stop. One of the bonds broke Just as Cecelia reached me. I raised my hand and brought fire to my palm. With all the strength I had left I hurled the fireball, willing it in Cecelia’s direction.

The sword came within inches of my throat. I screamed, turning my head as I did so. I tensed for the blow but it never came. I heard the sword clank to the floor and piercing screams fill the room. The screams were so shrill that the fighting had stopped to see what was happening. I turned to look as well. The fireball I hurled had hit Cecelia in the chest. She was screaming in agony as the flames licked at her body, rapidly spreading. She collapsed to the ground in a burning heap. She was writhing on the floor. I watched in horror as she burned. Within moments her screams stopped. She was no longer moving. Her body resembled a piece of paper that had been thrown into a fire. Her remains were no more than a pile of ash. All I could think was, “Wow, vampires really are flammable”. I had never seen anything burn so quickly.

The remaining vamps had fled while Cecelia was still burning. I guess seeing Cecelia go down in flames had freaked them out. Pierce was the only vampire that I saw still in the room. I could see that he wanted to come to me but there were flames all around. Not wanting him to go up in flames as Cecelia had, I gathered the remaining energy I had released back inside me and extinguished the flames. He was on me in an instant, breaking the remaining bonds.

“Beau Sorcerie” he repeated over and over again. “What have they done to you?” I motioned weakly to my stomach, not able to speak. Noticing my problem, he motioned Jillian over. I hadn’t even known she was there. She grabbed some instruments off the floor and pushed Pierce aside. She made fast work of stitching me up but I had taken all of the pain I could for one night. I welcomed the blackness that overtook me.

Chapter 30

Two days after the battle, I woke in a cold sweat. I pushed myself up in bed, trying to fight off invisible enemies. My arms flailed frantically around me. I opened my eyes and gasped in relief. I was in my own bed. I was not in the basement. My ovaries were not being ripped from me. Nobody was trying to kill me. It was just another nightmare, I thought thankfully. It was the fifth one I’d had since I’d been home. Each time Martin had been standing over me with his fangs bared. Each time I had tried to use my powers to protect myself and failed. Each time Cecelia was with him laughing wildly and each time I saw her burn.

I can’t describe what it is like to watch a vampire burn. They burn so quickly. Their skin literally melts off of their bones while you watch. It was utterly grotesque and I hoped I would never have to see it again or be the one to make it happen. I now was responsible for the deaths of two beings, both monsters in their own way. I had killed them out of necessity and yet it weighed heavily on me.

Sylvie’s pounding footsteps reminded me that each time I had the dream, I had woke up screaming. Had I screamed this time? From the way she flung open my door and rushed inside, I must have.

“Sorry” I said seeing her there. “Just another dream, I’m fine.” She let out a breath.

“How are you feeling?” she asked coming over and removing a stray piece of hair from my face.

“Better” I told her. I was healing remarkably fast, but then again, I always had. Another sign that my father couldn’t have been human since witches don’t have special healing abilities. Uncle Ned had wanted me to go to the hospital but somehow I had persuaded him to let me come home instead. I told him how I healed quickly and Sylvie backed me up on this.

What I didn’t tell either of them was that Pierce had made me drink his blood that night. I couldn’t deny that Pierce’s blood had helped me heal even quicker than I normally would have. At this rate, I would be back to myself in a couple of days. From the looks of things, I wasn’t even going to scar.

“You’re going to have visitors in about an hour” Sylvie informed me. “I held them off as long as I could but they won’t take no for an answer. Brian, Jillian and Ash are coming over. They want to see you for themselves” she explained.

This lifted my spirits. I wanted to see them and thank them for all of their help. I hadn’t known at the time, but Ash had fought as well. It had been very brave of him considering he was very young for a vampire. He could have died – again.

Sylvie had heard a scuffle coming from my room the night Martin had kidnapped me. She had come to check on me and discovered I was missing. She also noticed that I hadn’t left with my purse or car keys and that my window was open. Panicked she had called Ash to see if he knew where I might have gone. He in turn called Brian and Brian had immediately called Pierce.

Pierce had begun using our connection to locate me immediately but ran into some trouble. Martin had intercepted Pierce on his way to the house where I was being held. Martin hadn’t tried to fight Pierce or his people. He’s simply hurled insults trying to instigate Pierce into attacking first. It didn’t take them long to realize that Martin was a distraction. Pierce had to stay behind to deal with Martin but he sent a team to get me. They weren’t able to use Pierce’s connection to me to help locate me so instead they had to rely on Sylvie’s scrying. The Were’s were also able to use their senses to help track and locate me. However they had done it, I was thankful they had. God only knew what would be happening to me at Cecelia’s hands if they hadn’t been able to stop her. There were still a lot of holes in the story and I was anxious to have them filled in.

“Help me up” I beckoned Sylvie. “I want to shower and dress before they come” I told her.

“Are you sure you’re up to it?” she asked doubtfully, but came to assist me as I’d asked. Sylvie had been mothering me since I’d returned. I know after everything that had happened she had been a nervous wreck. She had known, like me, that Margaret hated me but she had never imagined Margaret would do something as gruesome as she had to me.

“I’ll be fine” I promised her. She wrapped her arms around my waist and helped me to the shower. I undressed and stepped into the hot shower. A hot shower never felt as good as that one did. I didn’t spend too much time enjoying it though. My guests would be arriving soon. I washed as well as I could. I was still really sore. Once out of the shower I didn’t bother trying to get all dolled up for my company. I figured they’d understand. I pulled on some sweats and pulled my hair into a ponytail. That’s as good as it was going to get for today.

When I finished dressing and came downstairs, Brian, Jillian and Ash were already waiting for me in the sitting room. Sylvie brought refreshments out and we all settled in.

“You look better” Brian began. He was holding a vase of strange looking flowers. When he saw me eying them he rose, handing them to me.

“These are from Pierce” he explained. “He told me to send his best wishes and to tell you he would like to see you when you’ve healed.” I frowned slightly at the flowers. They were a strange choice for get-well flowers. Then again, Pierce himself was a little strange. I hadn’t been eager to see Pierce after all that had happened. Even though he had saved my life, our connection was odd. I didn’t blame him for what happened despite his brother’s involvement. There was no denying that I had a huge chunk of responsibility to take for what had happened. I had a bad habit of getting on people’s bad side. Brian laughed at my expression.

“Just so there won’t be any confusion,” he added, “that translates roughly into get your ass into the club as soon as you’re feeling better.” Everyone laughed and even I couldn’t help but grin a little. No doubt Pierce expected me to do whatever he asked. It didn’t seem to matter how many times I tried to tell him he couldn’t control me, he just kept trying. Pierce didn’t even seem to understand why I believed I had a right to go against him. Obviously he was a vampire used to getting what he wanted. I had a feeling not many people told him no.

I didn’t seem to do too good of a job following orders. If I had listened to Pierce in the first place, Martin would have never gotten to me. Pierce had told me not to talk to him and not to look him in the eye. I had done both. Stupid. Sylvie took the flowers for me and placed them on the fireplace mantle. I smiled at her in appreciation.

“There’s a lot I don’t remember,” I began, “about that night. I passed out when Jillian finished stitching me. Anyone want to tell me what I missed?” I asked looking at them. They exchanged looks and then Ash shrugged. I guess he was going first.

“You were being kept in an abandoned house on the outskirts of town. After you passed out, Pierce took you outside. He was concerned with how weak your pulse was and so he decided to give you blood to heal you. After that, we brought you here” he finished.

“How many of ours died?” I asked, all the while thinking how strange it was that I thought of them as “ours”.

“Two,” Ash replied, “one vamp and a werewolf.” I hung my head and choked back a sob. Two more people were dead because of me, because I didn’t listen and do what I was supposed to.

“Elle,” Jillian cut in, “nobody blames you. Martin and Cecelia both wanted a fight. It would have happened eventually anyways. We were lucky we only lost two. That’s how it is in battle. You lose people. I don’t like it either, but that’s the world we live in” she explained. I couldn’t help thinking it was an awful world to live in when casualties were just so…well casual. I’m sure their deaths weren’t casual to the people who loved them.

Despite my remorse for the two we lost, I was thankful nobody else blamed me. I was doing enough blaming by myself. Straightening myself up I asked, “What happened to Martin?” Nobody answered for a moment but their expressions told it all.

“He got away” Brian spoke up. “Margaret and Phyllis escaped during the battle too” Brian continued. “Gretchen was killed along with most of Cecelia’s Weres and vamps.” I sucked in a breath. I knew it was wrong to have wished that Margaret and Martin had died too, but I did wish them dead. With both of them out there, I would never truly feel safe again. Now I would forever be looking over my shoulder.

“Elle,” Brian said getting my attention, “there’s something else I need to tell you. Pierce had us go back inside the house to look for your ovaries. He thought perhaps they could be reattached giving you a chance at having children someday.” I choked back a sob and Brian looked away. That Pierce had even been sensitive enough to think of that touched me.

“We never found them” Brian continued. “We believe that Margaret took them with her when she escaped” he explained.

I didn’t know what to say. What do you say when you find out you’ll never have children? Never get to be a mother? Why would Margaret take my ovaries with her? I mean, if I were running for my life in the middle of a vampire battle, I wouldn’t stop to get anything. Why had they been so important to her? I know she had said she wanted to make sure I didn’t create anymore monsters but her actions were extreme. I was just a blood witch after all. Or was I?

When Cecelia and Martin thought I was still asleep I had overheard them talking about using my eggs to create an army of Supernaturals they could control. Why would they think my eggs could accomplish that? Certainly Margaret wouldn’t have wanted that if she was so determined to make sure no others like me were created. Maybe she hadn’t known Martin and Cecelia’s true motives. I related what I had overheard to the others to see what they thought of it.

“I don’t know why they thought my offspring would make the perfect soldiers though. I’m strong and I’m a blood witch, but vampires are stronger. Why not just make an army of vampires?” I asked.

“Vampires aren’t easily controlled” Ash answered. “They must have wanted someone they could control” he continued. “Plus, new vampires aren’t that powerful” he said sheepishly.

“Maybe it has something to do with your father” Sylvie offered nervously. “Maybe they know what we don’t. Maybe they know what your father really is.” She had a good point. It was something that I hadn’t been able to put my finger on before. Margaret, Cecelia and Martin all seemed to know something about me that I didn’t. If they knew what my real father was then that meant that my step-father probably knew too. We sat and pondered how they could have known about my father when Ash’s eyes went round. I knew he had thought of something.

“Martin knows what you are because he had your blood” he offered. “A vampire can tell a lot about someone from their blood” he hurried on. I shook my head.

“Pierce had my blood too and he didn’t know what I was” I pointed out.

“No,” agreed Brian, “but he did say it tasted odd. He knew you were something more than just a witch, he just didn’t know what.” I felt my face turn red. What does one do when told their blood tastes “odd”?

Brian seemed to notice my line of thought and quickly added, “He said it was delicious, just different.” I wasn’t really sure which was better – to have delicious blood or odd blood. Somehow I just didn’t like discussing how I tasted. I wasn’t a pork dinner. Whatever I was, it wasn’t human.

It was disorienting to realize you weren’t human after years of living as one. I guess it made sense. I never did seem to fit in with others.

“We should get going” Ash said rising. “Work is crazy these days” he added coming over to hug me. I knew he was just making excuses. I was sure they could see fatigue pulling at me. I still had a long way to go before I was completely healed. I was just thankful to be alive.

Jillian and Brian followed his lead. They said their goodbyes and left me to my thoughts. After making sure that I didn’t need anything, Sylvie went up to her room. I sat thinking about everything that had happened for a long time before thirst drove me to the kitchen.

I didn’t know how I could be so thirsty. I had drunk almost a whole pitcher of lemonade by myself while the others had been here. Since coming home I had been in almost a constant state of thirst. It didn’t seem to matter how much I drank. I always craved more.

I grabbed a water bottle from the fridge and wandered back into the sitting room. I wanted to see if Pierce had sent a card with the flowers. I admired the unusual flowers again and wondered what they were. The blooms were tiny and waxy looking in a deep red hue. They were definitely an unusual choice for get-well flowers. I was betting that they weren’t all that common. I knew I had never seen any like them before and yet they seemed familiar.

I fished around the bouquet and found a card stuck between the thick glossy leaves. With nervous excitement I tore open the envelope. I knew I should stay away from Pierce. I knew I would be safer if I tried to live a quiet life like the one Sylvie had chose. I knew I should just try to fit in with the humans and forget this whole crazy mess with the local Supernaturals. Trouble was I wasn’t sure I could go back to trying to live a human life. I was already in too deep. Plus, I wasn’t sure I wanted to live a quiet, Supe- free life. Not that I wanted as much excitement as I’d been having lately, but a little excitement would be nice. Most of the trouble I had gotten myself into had been because I was ignorant about how Supernaturals operated. I already had a large dose of schooling the hard way. Maybe I should make it my mission to learn more. I really liked the friends I’d met. I didn’t want to walk away from them. They couldn’t help being Supes any more than I could.

I pulled the card out of its envelope. It was white and hand written in elegant script. It read:

Beau Sorcerie, I hope you are feeling better. I chose unusual flowers for an unusual woman. I hope you like them. These are to thank you for your part in defeating Cecelia and Martin. If not for me, Martin would have never bothered you. I am sorry for that. Please come to see me soon.

With love, Pierce.

 T**urn the page for a sneak peek into the continuation of Giselle’s story in**

 ***Blood Witch: Transitions***

I stood impatiently tapping my foot. I hate waiting in line. I didn’t understand what the holdup was. All you needed to do was ring up the merchandise, pay, and leave. It wasn’t rocket science. My biggest pet peeve was when someone had to dig around for cash or a credit card. Or worse, when they waited until they got up to the register to write a check. I mean, come on, couldn’t you have gotten that ready sometime during the twenty minutes you spent standing in line?

This would be my first semester in college. I should be excited, but I wasn’t. I suppose that if I had been your average twenty year old woman I would have been. But I wasn’t average. I was a blood witch and I had been through shit in the last couple of months that would have sent most people to the loony bin, not to mention their grave. Thank God for my speedy healing abilities and the vampire blood I received from the Area Master, Pierce.

The witch gene ran in my family. My mother had been a witch too but she had died in a car accident when I was fourteen. I had recently learned that the man I had always believed to be my father, wasn’t. He was a sick, twisted bastard so this hadn’t really upset me. He had died falling out of a third story window. Yeah, I had something to do with it but that’s all in the past.

I didn’t know my real father. I know his name and I have seen his picture, but I haven’t met him. My sister Sylvie and I are guessing he isn’t human. Where that leaves me I haven’t figured out yet. Uncle Ned was helping me locate my real father but we hadn’t had any luck finding him yet.

There was only one more student ahead of me in line and I would be able to pay for my stuff and get the hell out of here. Just my luck. He’s having trouble deciding between a three-subject and a five-subject notebook. Seriously? It’s a notebook! Just pick one already. I was dying of thirst here.

Ever since I’d had an unfortunate run-in with two crazy vampires and some witches, I’d been constantly thirsty. I didn’t think there was a direct connection but it was after they had forcefully removed my ovaries and I’d needed to drink vampire blood to heal that this unbearable thirst had started. I didn’t exactly understand the connection, but there had to be one.

The student finally chose the five-subject notebook and paid. It was my turn. I laid my books on the counter and handed the cashier my credit card. Since Uncle Ned had guilted me into taking classes at the local college, I had decided to at least take something I would be interested in. The college was offering some new courses on Supernaturals since their recent coming out to the public. I was taking, *Supernaturals: Fact or Fiction.* It seemed like a good class for me since I had been making a lot of mistakes in the supernatural world lately. Those mistakes had gotten me into a lot of trouble and almost cost me my life.

I was also taking French. Pierce, the Area Master was from France originally. He didn’t normally speak French but when he did it sounded beautiful. I had become overly connected to him lately. I tried to ignore my growing attraction to the man. He was over four hundred years older than me not to mention a vampire. He wasn’t exactly dating material.

I just couldn’t seem to stop thinking about him though. That’s why I’d been avoiding him. A man like that could easily come to control you. I wasn’t keen on giving up control to others.

The cashier, a young freckle-faced college boy, was staring at me instead of ringing me up. Normally I might have been flattered by his obvious interest but there was something creepy about the way he was looking at me. He was like a drone being controlled by some other world being. I wouldn’t have been surprised if this was the case. I’d seen a lot of weird shit lately. Under the impact of my best glare he began ringing me up.

“You’re eyes are beautiful” he said dreamily. I was starting to forgive him when he continued. “They’re so odd, inhuman almost. Are you a vampire?” he asked. I felt like I just walked into crazy town. What the hell was this guy talking about?

“You are, aren’t you?” he continued excitedly. “Will you bite me?” From the looks of his pants his excitement was growing out of control. Eww. Feeling really uncomfortable I snapped.

“No I’m not a vampire dipshit. I’m a witch and if you don’t finish ringing me up pronto I’m going to turn you into a toad – or something worse” I added, smiling evilly. He finished ringing me in record time. I stormed out of the bookstore. What an idiot. I should have leapt over the counter and bitten him, I thought angrily.

For some reason the thought of biting him made me shiver. Not with revulsion like one might expect, but with excitement. I found myself wondering what his blood would taste like. What the hell was wrong with me?

I hurried to my car and unlocked it. I had a small cooler of bottled water with me and I grabbed one out and slammed it. Lately I had been so thirsty that I didn’t dare leave home without a cooler full of water. Something strange was going on with me. Maybe it was time I stopped avoiding Mr. Tall, Dark, and Fangy. I needed some advice.