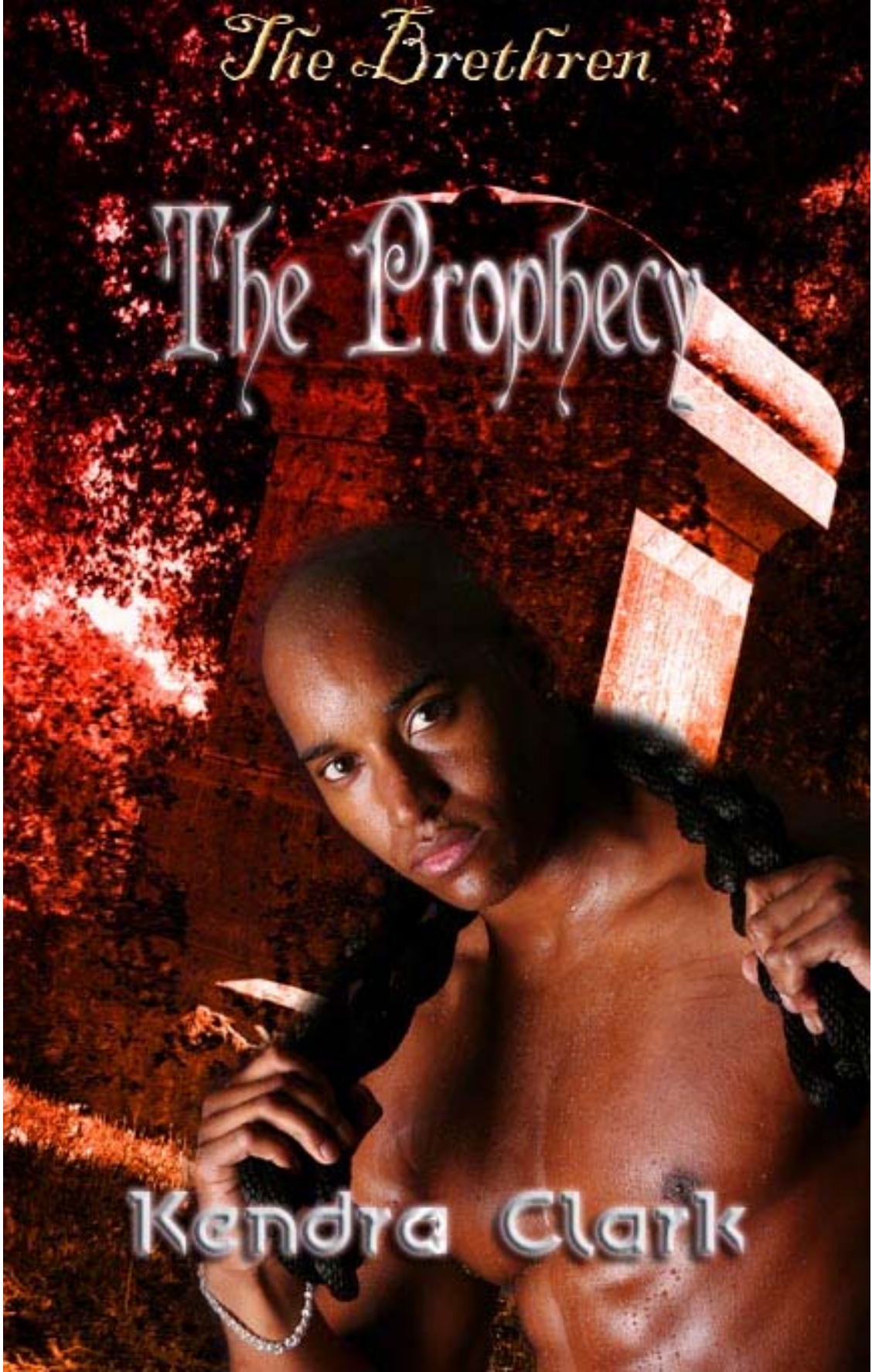


The Brethren

The Prophecy

Kendra Clark



The Brethren
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Dedication

To my parents who have always taught me to follow my dreams. To my husband and children for teaching me to love. And to Gail, who dreamt of Jax before he was a reality. Thanks for going that extra mile, even when you don't have to.

Prologue

The shadows live in the hearts of all who are evil. Heartless beings robbing life from the living in order to drown out cries of the half-dead.

Avery Johnson had always played it safe. Graduating college with honors, earning a double major in political science and marketing, she'd climbed the ladder of success all the way to the top at record speed. Well, almost the top.

The top is what screwed her.

The top is where morbid shadows of inhuman creatures lived. Soul-sucking bottom dwellers, feigning importance in their downtown offices as they mingled with *high* society. Her jaw tightened as anger coursed through her body.

Never was anyone so low than at the *top* of society. They were all the same, pretending to lead their people in a positive direction only to make sure that direction benefited them.

She sucked in a sharp breath, the cold bit into her lungs sharp and hard.

The fine people of Chicago didn't know what Avery knew. They were lucky. Avery knew *entirely* too much.

And now they chased her to claim revenge for a crime she didn't commit.

Damn it, she'd worked *entirely* too hard for this to happen. Being a woman provided her with an uphill climb. At the time, she hadn't minded. Pressure was her middle name. Avery *Pressure* Johnson. Yeah, that's right. A good obstacle provided her high IQ with a challenge. All her life she'd never been satisfied with mediocrity. She never let anything stop her from the quick journey to the top.

Family and friends warned her and she hadn't listened. For years, rumors had circulated about corrupt Chicago politics. She hadn't listened.

Being the mastermind behind political campaigns was just the challenge and the stuff her dreams were made of. The victories gave an unequivocal high.

Avery let out a long sigh. She'd forgotten her own advice to her clients, never allow yourself to be used as the scapegoat.

Never be in the wrong place at the wrong time. How could she have been so stupid? Sure, she'd gone to the exact location her source told her to meet. Time was money. She'd gone and searched vigorously for any leads on the opponent's weaknesses. It was a dirty business but that's what it was. Any information in a Congressional race that could be used would be. It's the way elections were won.

And because she'd gone, she was now a wanted woman. Running for her life and freedom; forced to become a shadow and morph into the world of the criminal.

A blur of snowflakes teased the street lights and fluttered across her face. The cool burn of wind chapped her cheeks. By now she should be used to bitter Chicago winds, but the frigid bite of torment whipped and slapped her face the same way it had the day she'd been accused.

She'd stepped on the wrong toes, she reminded herself. Doing so left limited options and a wrongful accusation of murder.

A United States Congressman's son, Justin Lambert, found dead and alone in the bitter cold, winter street of Chicago. A small soul laid to rest due to an untimely death. A victim of a hit and run,

Congressman Lambert mourns the loss of his eighteen-year-old son and offers a \$250,000 reward to anyone who can help track down the missing suspect. Avery Johnson, Congressman Lambert's ex-campaign manager is a five foot five female, black hair, African American and drives a black Chevrolet Suburban. Johnson has been missing since the accident on January 30th and was said to be the driver of the vehicle that struck Justin. Driver believed to be intoxicated at the wheel.

Believed to be intoxicated at the wheel...

Avery never drank.

Congressman Lambert urges all citizens of Chicago to help him in his search for the campaign manager turned killer. The woman known for her eye for detail forgot the most important one – get a designated driver.

Avery rolled her eyes at the last sentence and pitched the paper in an overflowing trash can nestled near the alley. She'd been the designated driver. Most of the time her clients and their friends were too sloshed to make it to the car much less drive. So what had Avery done? She'd either driven them herself or provided their on staff driver to take them. She had to make sure they didn't make an ass of themselves ninety-nine percent of the time.

Just give me one honest politician... Avery thought as she gritted her teeth.

She'd even gone as far as keeping drivers on her payroll to ensure the silence of a public drunken candidate especially during a campaign year. And driving wasn't the only thing she'd covered up.

She groaned inwardly thinking of all of the excuses she'd made up for the sake of successful campaign measures. But the simple fact was she'd not been found or questioned on the night of the accident to do a blood alcohol count. Secondly, Avery didn't drive that night.

She gathered her trench coat tight at the collar, bunched it up with clenched fist and moved it close to her neck to block the piercing Chicago wind.

Invisible. She'd become invisible. Even more so, than she'd been her entire life. Weaving in and out of the crowds lining the streets. Only coming out of hiding on the busiest times of day and nights and only then, when the hunger pain gnawed at her stomach until she could bear it no longer.

"Excuse me." A younger woman bumped into her and dropped her purse.

Avery's first instinct was to stop and help her, but that was her old instincts. Her newly conditioned instincts told her to keep walking, which she did. Until a group of men grabbed her and pushed her into an empty alley and pinned her against the cold block of the wall.

Fear lined her stomach and she knew she was probably dead at this point. Either dead or would face the death sentence after Lambert finished with her.

And that's when a man appeared from a waft of smoke.

Chapter One

“Hey, asshole, I’m down here.”

The glow of the vampire’s eyes, feral indigo, pierced the pitch black of night. Fangs exposed and after one hell of a hiss, he leapt from the building rooftop and descended to the darkened city streets where Jax stood waiting to kick his ass.

Sometimes Jax killed them slow for fun. Sometimes he killed them fast when he had something better to do. Sizing up the six foot seven inch vampire as he fell to the surface, he’d take his time with this one.

The sound of boots running over the wet street slapped the asphalt as Jax and Dagger ran to meet the latest Etrux member.

This one was taller than the last, draped in solid black leather from head to toe, a stark contrast from his pale ivory skin. When he smiled, bloodlust darkened his lips, barely covering ruddy gums.

Jax chuckled inwardly. The bastard really thought he had a chance, didn’t he?

In a flash of a second, Jax withdrew his sword from its holster strapped diagonally across his back and preceded to slice and dice. The vampire took the offense, kicking and gnashing fangs.

Amateur.

He hissed again.

Amateur with bad breath.

As Jax swung his favorite weapon, the vampire dodged. Jax caught him with a nick to the abs with the sword’s razor sharp tip.

“Nice try,” the vamp laughed, lunging at Jax with a knife. Jax flipped mid-air and missed the attacker’s knife with practiced ease.

“Well, well. You did find me finally.” Jax wielded the sword over his head in circular motions, toying with him. “Thought you didn’t want to dance tonight, Sweetheart.”

“I’ll dance.” The vampire dipped his torso and did a spin kick that connected solid with Jax’s jaw.

Jax spat blood. “Oh come on, you can do better than that,” Jax coaxed, throwing a punch and connected with the smooth jaw of the vamp. He followed it with a flip kick that knocked the vampire to the ground.

Drawing in a breath, Jax grabbed the shirt of the vamp, bunched it in his fist and bent low. “You’re out of your territory. East Side belongs to the Brethren.”

The vampire’s head wobbled from side to side as he rested his back against the brick building. “Just in the neighborhood.”

“I say we end this asshole now.” Dagger came up behind him, resting a hand nonchalantly on his back.

“Now you decide to help.” Jax slanted a gaze at Dagger.

“I’m here now, brother. You looked like you had it handled.”

Jax spat blood once more, spraying the ground below. “Child’s play, but it would’ve ended about one point five seconds earlier had you decided to help.”

“What? And miss the show?”

The man never changed. Even when he was human, Dagger was an asshole. Now that he'd gone vampire, he'd morphed into a bigger one.

Jax returned his attention back to the Etrux he held against the wall. "Has to be a reason you've come all the way across the tracks. Feeding on your side not what it used to be?"

"Feeding is good everywhere. You know that my brother."

A shudder ran the length of his spine. Jax backhanded the vampire. "I'm not your brother and the fact you said that makes me want to hurt you more."

"Either way," the vampire smiled, "I'm not talking."

"Suits me," Dagger admitted proudly, extracting his custom dragon chakram and sent it sailing into the vampire's chest.

He disintegrated immediately, the remaining particles slid through Jax's palm.

"Damn it, Dagger. Couldn't you have waited about ten seconds?"

Dagger crinkled up his blonde eyebrows. "No?"

This is what he got for taking in a white boy. "Well, learn to." Jax stood and scuffed the toe of his boot along the asphalt. "Next time wait for orders."

Dagger curled his lip and rolled his eyes. "Whatever."

"Let's go, Superstar."

"Where, Boss?"

"To find out what a member of the Etrux was looking for in this part of town."

It didn't take long. The woman in question was hidden, tucked snug against the corner of a dumpster in the back of Timmon's Wine and Spirits. The woman appeared unconscious, slumped over with her head resting against the side of the dumpster.

Jax inhaled deeply.

There wasn't a trace of alcohol near the body; she must've been passing by instead of a customer.

The pale moon light bled through the mouth of the alleyway, radiated just enough light to make out the wounds. Long ebony hair cascaded over one side of her neck. Coalesced eyes, devoid of emotion, stared blankly into the night as if they could see through his very existence.

Jax cursed under his breath. "Guess we found it." He bent down, cupped her face in his hands and tilted her head to the side.

"Damn." A trickle of blood dripped down the base of her neck.

She'd been bitten – twice.

"She complete yet?" Dagger asked, his voice slightly above a whisper.

"Why are you whispering?" Jax flipped his full-length leather coat back and knelt beside the Etrux's latest victim. "She can't hear you. Just had an embrace."

"Three?"

"No." He tried to hide his annoyance at the fledgling's constant questions. "Only two. We got to her just before the third. I can still smell the slimy Etrux scent on her." It was what he told Dagger but the truth was the scent of Devlin, the eldest, most powerful member of the Etrux, was all over her.

The fact that the Etrux entered the domain of the Brethren was serious. They knew better. Their territory ran south along the bay area bridge and never passed Kingston. Did they think they could enter their territory and recruit?

Never.

Yeah, they met and fought on common ground, but they knew without question if they entered their turf, they were as good as ash. So what was so important to risk this tonight?

Furthermore, what was Devlin doing hunting? He had several blood slaves. Devlin only came out when necessary. Mostly, he ruled from the Etrux's compound and sent his minions out to do his dirty work. The bulk of the Etrux were low life blood-letting fools.

Something about this victim, she was familiar in a way he wasn't certain he was comfortable with. The curve of her chin, the line of her neck all the way to her barely exposed cleavage. Could it be—

"Brother, they are here." Dagger no more said the words when glass splintered through the air and four vampires jumped through the window of the seventeen story building. They coasted down, toying with him.

Fire lit his veins at their confidence. Time to take these boys to school. Jax and Dagger didn't give them time to land. They soared, launching an all out air assault on the minions.

They wouldn't get her tonight.

Bodies flew into the side of the building as Jax and Dagger fought two vampires apiece at one time. Jax's adversary went into a triple flip mid-air then shot straight for Jax. Even though Jax wore a Kevlar vest that protected his heart, it didn't help too much when they caught him from the side.

Blinding pain crept through him at the incision. Warm liquid drenched his new black muscle shirt. That pissed Jax off more than the injury.

"Lay off the leather," he growled the warning. You could touch many things on his body but if you ripped the leather, you were as good as dead.

"Too bad, clothing can't hide that face of yours." The blonde vamp teased.

A smile played across Jax's lips. Asshole, thought he was cute didn't he?

"You're going to remember this face of mine because it's the last thing you'll see." Jax let out a blood-curdling growl from the bowels of his existence. Reaching for the power deep within, he slammed the Etrux against the building. He gathered the long hair of the Etrux in his fingers, bunching it up and banged his head through a window. Glass shattered, sending shards of prisms sailing through the air.

Pricked his hand like a mother, but Jax was a fast healer and it was worth it to see a member of the Etrux suffer. He pressed the button on his leather strapped armband and out popped his Etrux killer. He jabbed the bastard right through the heart. Immediately, he burst into flames and incinerated into a glimmering breeze. Particles shimmered to the ground beneath him.

"One down." Jax descended, allowing himself to enjoy the cool air flowing past him.

Where were the rest? He'd been so busy in battle, it'd escaped his attention that the other vampire left and went after the woman.

"Dagger, you got it?" Jax yelled for his partner.

"Yeah, J. Child's play, Brother."

Jax descended from the air like a god. Landed on all fours with the grace of a panther waiting to prowl and kill. As Dagger ran for the woman, Jax sprung to immediate action, catapulting himself at the red-haired vampire who didn't seem to realize he was about to become toast.

Sad, really.

"You're not taking her today, my friend," Jax warned through fangs. If the lady was special enough for Devlin to want a taste, then maybe he'd sample. Not that he wanted Etrux leftovers. He didn't. But his gut told him there was something more. The Etrux never fought to claim a mortal.

The Brethren would find out why.

"Orders. You know about those don't you slave." A satisfied smirk glimmered across the Vampire's face.

Devlin trained his clan to go for the jugular. No one called him slave. He hadn't been a slave since the days when the Pharaohs ruled Ancient Egypt and he wasn't going to entertain the notion he was or ever would be again. An emotion close to blind hatred raced through Jax's veins. This vamp was one dead mother.

"You'll pay for your insult." Within seconds, Jax ripped out the throat of his opponent.

The body lit up like the fourth of July. Sometimes it scared him how much satisfaction came from watching his opponents light up. It shouldn't feel this good.

Jax's erratic breathing slowed and the steady solace that so often escaped returned.

"Speed and agility, my friend. Speed and agility." Dagger came up behind him.

Jax turned to meet him noticing Dagger smiled his 'after-kill' smile.

"I take it they didn't get the girl."

"You kidding? Of course not."

"Don't always be so sure of yourself. That's when you make your biggest mistakes." Dagger's confidence was also fledgling. In time, that would fade as well.

"Yes, Obi-Wan, I understand. You're ways with the force are most knowledgeable."

Jax sucker punched him in the arm. Dagger winched. "Yes, they are. Don't forget it."

Dagger nursed his arm, frowned a bit. "So, what's up with the chick?" He jutted an extended thumb at still unconscious lady.

Jax examined the woman again. The silhouette of her face. Vampirism allowed him to see things more clearly in the night, however, his eyes played tricks on him. What he saw wasn't possible.

It couldn't be...

"Haven't put my finger on it yet," Jax lied. It wasn't entirely a lie. If his nose was true, they held in their sweet little hands the woman Devlin wanted for his bride. Why would Devlin take a bride after all these years?

"Sure boss?"

"There's only one way to find out." Jax's slid a tongue over his right fang. It descended at the smell of fresh blood, flexed at the promise of battle. *Isis*, he'd wanted Devlin's head on a platter for far too long.

The bastard was some kind of evil.

Killing innocent people to serve his purpose. The Etrux didn't have to kill to feed. Vampires were beyond that now. Didn't matter to Devlin, he relished the kill. Actually

enjoyed draining the life out of humans, where Jax only killed bastards threatening his ground.

Although he had to give the Etrux credit, at least they'd evolved. Their most recent jolly was conversion. Sucking the souls almost entirely out of humans and replacing them with the promise of eternal life.

Jax drew in another breath and closed his eyes against the scent.

The Etrux were under the illusion there was strength in numbers. If they were weak, numbers didn't matter.

Bastards.

Jax drew in another breath, he wasn't mistaken. Hell, he was spot on. She was rich with his scent.

Devlin marked her for his.

"Do we go after them?"

"No. Let's go back, get with the others." Jax performed a quick scan of the area to confirm his answer.

"What do we do with her?"

"We'll bring her."

He bent down and lifted the woman's limp body into his arms. Immediately, his body jerked with reaction. Soft tendrils of hair tickled his chin where her head rested.

Isis, when was the last time he'd fed? Reacting to a mortal this way was unusual. As soon as they reached the compound, he'd feed. He couldn't walk around like this every time he neared her.

Jax placed her in the backseat of a midnight-colored Hummer then jumped into the driver's seat, turned the ignition and drove to the compound.

"You're funny for a chick." Dodge slapped Carson on the back before he doubled over with laughter.

Carson let out an audible gasp at the sting of Dodge's palm slamming between her shoulder blades. "Damn boy, you don't have to kill my ass."

She knew she was a potty mouth, but it came from running with men for entirely too long. Raised solely by her father, a retired sailor from the United States Navy, then living with Brethren, how the hell else would she talk?

"Like I was saying," she caught their attention once more and continued, "The last one was beggin' for his life like a wounded dog. P-p-please don't kill me ma'am. Pffft. What was I gonna do?" She straightened up her chocolate leather vest and wet her bottom lip with her tongue. "Take him home and brand him? Nah, I shot that little nuisance with a UV bolt right in the ass."

Sounds of laughter filled the air of the compound's game room. Crude and Dodge laughed the hardest, nearly falling from their chairs, knocking over the cold ones. Hunter and Slade were in a heated poker tournament before Carson arrived and blessed them with the stories of her latest kill.

At least that's what she'd like to think she'd done. Not everyone enjoyed her stories as much as she loved telling them, especially at first. It'd taken them all a while to warm up to a

female after Hunter brought her home at the age of fifteen. Not long after she joined the battle against the Etrux.

Hell, after they'd killed her father, he'd only had to ask – once.

Hunter shot her a warning glare. He hated her cussing, but he wasn't her father and she'd cuss as much as she wanted. It wasn't like she was a teenager anymore, she was twenty. A woman. The sooner Hunter realized it, the better.

The problem with that was she didn't want to be Hunter's sister. Far from it. He was perfect if ever a man was. Brown hair, always styled and spiked up with the latest male styling product. Muscles rippled from under this trademark tank and for a vampire, he was surprisingly tan. Her gaze slid down his torso to the side view of his backside. Oh yeah, the seat of his leathers cupped that backside perfectly.

And he looked at her like one of the guys...or worse her father.

Just because he was friends with her dad didn't mean he was responsible for her now. She could take care of herself.

"And the best part was –" she began again only to be interrupted by the site of the front door swinging open and Jax carrying in the limp body of a woman. Dagger followed.

"What in the –"

"Carson, get my room ready," Jax ordered.

"Why me?" Carson asked, in her same old treat me as an equal voice.

"Because I said so."

Carson rolled her eyes. "Bossy, bossy."

"Secure the parameters. The Etrux is hot on our tail."

The team moved quickly, securing the compound, each taking their weapon of choice and running to man their posts. Standard procedure. Carson went to get the bed ready. Another bad thing about being the only woman. The boys weren't chauvinistic, but that didn't mean they didn't have the occasional slip up.

And she'd remind them of it as soon as she got the chance.

Carson climbed the stairs of the eighteenth century mansion. The Compound held a world of mystery underneath. At least she'd been surprised at what lay underneath. All the latest technology, computers, weaponry was just starters. There were corners and crevices she'd yet to explore. Maybe she'd do it when she got bored again. Whenever that would be.

Even though the bulk of the Brethren preferred to work with ancient weaponry, they pulled out the heavy artillery at times when the occasion arose.

Carson preferred modern tipped blow darts, electronic UV emitters, bombs, and even the soundproof interrogation room. The same old song and dance like you'd read in every vampire series around now a days, but the difference was, this wasn't a story.

They lived it.

Vampires did exist. The day she'd found out they truly existed was the day of her salvation.

All the high-tech mumbo jumbo was all well and good. It served the gang true, but she wasn't really here to play with weaponry. Hell, it had its perks, but she was here for the kindred. The solemn promise of belonging somewhere after her family had been taken away from her was enough for her.

The weaponry was an added bonus provided courtesy of Crude, the ex-military intelligence member of the Brethren. He'd gone vamp after a drunken day at a bar and a bad decision in choice of dates. Wasn't too long after that, he'd met the Brethren.

He was a good recruit, too. He sure knew a lot about the modern ways of fighting, not bad looking, was a tad bit lacking in personality.

Okay, he was a lot lacking in personality. Never brought home a woman like the other members of the Brethren. Maybe it was because he was so quiet? Hell, either way, she didn't think she'd ever seen him with a woman. Most women ran from him.

Jax on the other hand had brought home an occasional date though they were few and far between, and never allowed to stay for breakfast.

Why was this one different? Never bring a mortal home. House rules. So what was he doing carrying one in himself?

Carson studied Jax's expression. Worry lined his brow as he cradled the woman snug to his chest. Protective.

Carson scratched her head passively. Jax wasn't the type to go around rescuing damsels in distress. Hell, no.

Something was up. And she was going to find out what.

Jax opened the door to his bedroom and carefully placed the woman on the bed. The warmth of her skin played along his, sending shivers through his body. Smooth hair ribboned along his arm, her neck rested in the crook of his arm.

Isis, she was beautiful. Skin supple and tender covered her well-built body. Cream and mocha, a splendid combination. It looked soft, felt even softer.

And there she lay on top of his bed, looking deliciously inviting.

She could have the bed, hell, he wasn't in there for too long of a time anyway. Even though the bedroom was large—with her in it, the walls closed in.

The subtle scent of Coriander wafted into his nostrils. Sweet and tangy. Causing places to arouse, he thought long died. Hints of familiarity gnawed at his memory. The sweet summer breeze and warmth. *A female lying in his arms – again.*

It'd been so long.

Sure, Jax brought home the occasional donor. Junkies really. Women that got high off a vampire's kiss. They wanted it, he needed it. It worked out for both of them. They used him just as much as he'd used them. A bargain of sorts.

But he never slept with him.

Sure he'd felt a tingle of desire here and there. What vamp wouldn't? Although he wasn't completely celibate. The urge for sexual satisfaction was high in a vampire. That was no secret and he satisfied the urge occasionally.

Jax prided himself on the fact he'd never let an erection get in the way of his mind. Brethren business always came first. Orders came down from the Senate.

They followed them to the end.

Hell, he'd been dedicated to the service of the Brethren for so long he couldn't remember the last time business hadn't come first. It was a purpose held high in regard, ahead of all others. A duty owed to mankind and others.

It gave him purpose. Importance. He was their leader. They all relied on him for their well being and survival. It was a duty he took seriously.

As his gaze slid down the woman he'd held today, he wanted to serve himself. *Isis*, she was an angel.

Or the antichrist, he thought as his gaze dipped lower.

The faintest curve of her breast barely visible above the white lace top caused him to ache all over. Coaxing him from under the slightest cotton covering. Fitted jeans clung to the tempting curve of her hips.

She was beautiful. Why hadn't he noticed it before?

It was a darkened alley, but in the stealth of night his vampire vision should've provided him sight. At least enough to capture a glimpse of that gorgeous figure.

Vampires shouldn't go around converting humans in their army. A fate worse than death awaited those that stepped across the line.

If the decree was ordered from the Senate, the Brethren would carry out the sentence.

In the blink of an eye.

It's what they did. What they were trained to do. What they weren't trained to do was to lust after the Etrux's victims. Most of all mortals.

And yet...

Jax dragged a reluctant finger down the base of her throat.

Bastards almost got their wish...

Devlin. That son of a bitch. Why after all of these centuries did he want a bride? With all that's unholy, Jax couldn't put his finger on it.

"Hello," he whispered, trying to rouse her from the trance Devlin superimposed upon her. "Are you awake?" He didn't want to alarm her in any way. And he didn't really know what to expect from her when she did rise from the trance.

She didn't move.

Only the subtle rise and fall of her chest.

Oh damn, he shouldn't have looked there. He fought the descent of his fangs — hard.

Wasn't he supposed to be one of the good guys? Then why did he crave a taste? Why did every corpuscle in his lips screamed to sweep along the column of her delicious mocha neck and latch on? That did it. Fangs lengthened uncontrollably, ached, begged to sink into her flesh.

Rolling his eyes back in this head, he fought the urge.

He was better than the slimy Etrux. Had to be. As fast as they'd emerged, his fangs sank back into his mouth and a subtle relaxation washed over him.

"You're a hard up asshole, you know that right?" Jax turned to see Hunter propping one arm up on the doorway and wearing a big grin. It jarred him a bit that he noticed.

"Yeah, well at least I don't deny it like you." Jax slapped a hand into Hunter's and shook.

"That's saying something isn't it, my brother?"

He twisted the side of his lip and made a screwed up face. "Guess so."

Hunter released his hand and to jut a thumb toward the bed. "What's the story with the girl?"

"Devlin."

Hunter wrinkled a brow, scratching slowly at his goatee. "What?" Hunter was his oldest and truest friend and second in command of Brethren. So when Hunter asked a question, he needed to know the answer. In this case, Jax wasn't in a place or situation to order a command.

"When we found her, the Etrux was all over, casing the turf on East side. Devlin's scent drenched her."

Hunter wrinkled his nose. "Dagger notice?"

"Nah, knew something was up, but the fledgling wasn't told. He still has much to learn."

"Yeah."

"That's not all."

"Oh?"

"I think Devlin was claiming her for himself."

"No kidding." Hunter slanted his gaze to the bed and gave the woman in question the once over. "Can't say as I blame him." Hunter gave him a jab in the ribs and laughed jokingly.

"Would you be serious for just a minute?"

"Sure, sorry. He marked her huh? Why?"

Jax folded his arms, and leaned against the tall bedpost. "Don't know, but I intend to figure it out."

"You know they're up to no good."

"Yeah. They'll be coming for her."

Hunter nodded in agreement, a trace of worry lined his face. "Do you think it's safe to keep her here?"

"Don't tell me you're pussing out to the Etrux."

"That's not what I meant and you know it."

"These walls have held for hundreds of years," Jax answered.

"I'm not talking about the walls." Hunter clearly noticed the way Jax looked at her. Hunter knew Jax better than anyone.

"I'm fine."

"You're sure."

Jax nodded his head.

"It's just she looks just like that painting in—" Jax waved a hand, cutting him off at his thoughts. *Meroe*.

It was true. Every cell in his body screamed it. She was Alpha and Omega, his beginning and end. The only woman he'd ever truly loved. The daughter of a noble. The future queen and now her likeness lay resting on top of the bed like the sweetest summer breeze.

Jax's chest tightened. He'd buried the memories deep long ago. He didn't want to visit them again. He didn't want to think about the pain.

When he thought his chest would burst, Jax drew in another breath and let it out in a gush. "We can't let him get to her until we can figure out what's going on. Got it?"

"Sure, boss." Hunter's dark eyes held suspicion. "That's a job twenty four-seven, right?"

"Guess so." Jax folded his arms over his chest.

"Who's going to do it?" Hunter asked with a raised brow.

"I am."

He was there again, seducing her dreams. Calling. The phantom existing within a realm between reality and darkness. He'd come to in the darkest of hours. During the time there'd been nothing but night.

The day she'd lost everything.

The beginning shreds of solace needled into her veins. Now each time he visited turned to shrouds of terror. A man behind a mask of fear and solitude.

He felt her pain. Fed from her loss. It all seemed too make it better...for a while. She wasn't a murderer. She wasn't. She couldn't be.

She loved life and she would never rob anyone from theirs. Would she?

Avery searched her mind, trying to rekindle a shard of memory of the night. Everything was foggy, blurry, but she knew she hadn't been drinking. She'd only drunk a soda at the party. That was all.

Justin Lambert was killed. His lifeless body wedged helpless under the wheel of her parked car. One minute she'd been in the club the next...

She wasn't the driver. She didn't even remember being behind the wheel when she'd woke up.

But she'd be the one to pay for the crime.

In a blink of the eye, she'd lost everything. Her job, her apartment, her life.

Lambert. He should've spoken up for her. Surely, he knew she wasn't capable of murdering his son. After all she'd done for him. Lambert had pointed his finger as if her service meant nothing to him.

Avery stretched her arms above her head. Let out a restless yawn.

How are you today? The calming voice sounded in her mind.

Her eyes shot open and she took in her surroundings.

Avery was in a large bedroom, on a bed four-posted bed with random art hanging on the walls around her. The scent was unfamiliar yet appealing.

Spice and musk. An antique appearing armoire was in the left corner and lots of brass fixtures. Wherever she was, this person had money and taste.

I asked you a question. Are you not well, my love?

"I am well," she answered as if answering a voice in her head was a normal thing to do. There was something so eerily dark, yet powerful about the man whose face she'd never seen.

The man lived in the shadows. He offered peace, solace and the drunken elixir in a time of weakness when she'd needed her problems to melt away. At the time she'd thanked him. Wanted more.

Now the time between his visits seemed a blur. A good portion of her brain deduced she was crazy. A complete and utter nutcase. The other portion of her brain said the other side really does exist.

Her neck ached, throbbed. A constant reminder he'd staked his claim. Taking over her life. Was there anything more intense?

She wanted to fight it. To break free from the bonds wound tightly around her mind. But she couldn't.

No matter how much she tried, a relentless ghost eerily stalked into her subconscious.

Fight.

Darling, I've missed you so. We'll be together soon. I promise.

Master? Why couldn't she control herself around him? She wasn't a weak person by any means. She'd been strong. A force to be reckoned with in the tough world of politics and now she fell prey to a man that owned her lock, stock, and barrel.

He had made the pain fade for a moment. Isn't that what she'd wanted in the first place? Yes, she had. It was what she'd wanted. Now she realized it was the last thing she needed.

For some reason, she couldn't say no to him. She just couldn't.

Was he really here? In this room? In this bed?

Had he brought her to his house?

No. I can't come for you yet but soon. We'll be together soon. I have to go now.

Don't leave. Just as soon as the words left her mouth, a back bowing feeling streamed through her veins and sent evil trimmers along her body. Heat simmered along her arms, down her legs.

She had to get up. Get to him. He needed her, wanted her.

He owned her. Owned her thoughts and dreams and invaded her space.

And she wouldn't be complete until she lived the rest of her life in his service.

"What do you think is going to happen to her?" Carson asked Hunter as they watched the compound's guest writhe and twist on the bed. The poor woman hissed and turned, sometimes even reached for someone that wasn't there.

Carson had never seen anything like it. So this is what it looked like.

Oh, sure, she'd heard tales about vampires taking a bride. Mostly on horror films and old Dracula movies. It'd even happened in real life, at times, but she'd never really seen it.

Note to self – vampire conversion is not pretty.

"Don't know." Hunter opened his mouth to talk but was quick to shut it again. What was going on behind that 'man' brain of his?

"You don't think Jax did this, do you?"

Hunter pinned her with a droll stare.

"Okay, maybe not. Just asking was all." Sometimes she wondered the way Hunter thought. He had a loyal heart and was without question the sexiest of the Brethren to her anyway.

The problem was he mostly looked at her like she was crazy.

"Well, do you have any better suggestions?" Carson folded her arms over her chest and waited.

And waited.

"Yeah, stop thinking so hard." Hunter was nonchalant as though that wasn't supposed to hurt her feelings.

Why did she want him so bad? It wasn't like Hunter spent his every waking moment trying to impress her. No, he never tried to impress her or even have a conversation that was condescending or father-like.

Not some recruit that was raised in the midst of boys. No one wanted a tomboy for a girlfriend. Especially one that they'd help raise and had Psi powers. Positive, negative, solar, lunar. Any energy, Carson could derive power from it. It turned some men off.

Hunter emitted a negative energy around her. It wasn't like he hid it all that well, either. Sometimes being a Psi sucked eggs, like this particular moment. Other times it was cool as hell. Especially at dusk when she'd hunt and draw from the sun's rays and UV bolt a vamp's ass into oblivion.

"Were you going to say something?" he asked.

"What?"

"You're just quiet."

"You noticed?" she asked.

"Hard not to, you run that mouth twenty-four-seven." If she wasn't mistaken, he smiled a fraction.

She sucker punched him in the arm. "Matter of fact, I was going to ask you something."

"Enlighten me."

"Don't you wonder why Jax brought her to the compound?"

"No," he answered bluntly, "we don't question Jax." Hunter folded those taut arms over his cotton tee. A barbed wire tat outlined his left massive bicep. Well, that didn't last long. Within seconds he returned back to ice-cold asshole.

Carson sucked in a deep breath. "Yeah, I know. Can't help but shitting wonder, Hunt."

He curled his lip in disgust at her choice of words. Maybe she did cuss too much. Carson nibbled indecisively at her bottom lip. *Clear your head girl. You have to concentrate on business and with business comes no pleasure. Not for the Brethren.*

Why didn't he just tell her how he felt? I hate you or you get on my nerves. Something. Like Carson, you look nice today? Or Carson, kiss my ass? Anything would be better than the 'I'm your buddy don't touch me bull' he pulled all the time.

"Look, Hunter, I don't know what's your —"

"You two follow me," Dagger interrupted as he entered the room.

Thanks, Dagger, great timing. Dagger sauntered on in the room, unaware he'd just interrupted the first almost-conversation she'd had with Hunter in months. The damned fledgling was entirely too confident for his own good.

"Watch yourself," Hunter warned.

Dagger rolled his eyes "Ooo, I'm shaking in my boots. Jax wants you two."

That was an entirely different matter wasn't it? Hunter and Dagger left the room.

Carson's gaze moved to the bed. The woman appeared calm. The negative energy lifted from the room. Whoever was with the woman was gone now.

She knew one thing for sure, whoever wanted this woman was one evil son of a bitch.

Chapter Two

"Who *are* you?" Avery peered up at him, eyes wild. With swift movement, she jerked to a sitting position while Jax took a seat on the edge of the bed next to her.

He wanted to say don't be afraid we're going to save you, but he really wasn't into the superhero bullshit. The truth of it was she might not be able to *be* saved.

"Doesn't matter."

"The hell it doesn't," she spat out, crawling further toward the headboard like a frightened animal.

"Avery."

"How do you know my name?" Her chocolate eyes held mistrust, fear. It was only natural for her to be unsure of her surroundings. The fog Devlin induced was enough to cause confusion without adding the new environment.

Behind his strict reserve to complete the mission, Jax felt a slice sorry for her.

"Well," he paused, trying to come up with a better excuse than rummaging through her things, but thought of none.

"That's what I thought." The low tone of her voice played over his senses.

"You were hurt," he explained and rubbed his hands along the sides of his pants. "We brought you here to help you."

That was stupid. Use the old damsel in distress excuse.

She glared at him as if she expected him to strike out at her at any moment. "You work for him, don't you?"

"I work for myself."

Avery tilted her head, studied. "I suppose you do. What do you want with me?"

What he *really* wanted was to give her a tongue bath from head to toe. To taste her salty flesh glide under his lips while he feasted...

Stop. Jax's fangs throbbed at the thought. Biting her wasn't the answer. Seducing her sure as hell wasn't. It would only make things worse for her. Confuse her.

"I'm here to help."

"Good. Show me the quickest way to the exit and you've helped plenty." Avery pitched back the duvet. Jax offered her a hand but she shied away.

"People are after you."

"You're fast on the uptake."

Jax smiled at her wit. Oh, she had some bite, did she? Good. "The question I want answered from you, is who?"

She shot him a glare. "*Who* are you?"

A tic worked its way along his jaw. He wasn't used to being ordered around by mortals anymore. Wasn't something he wanted to get used to, although he'd play the game if he could get an edge on the Etrux.

"Call me Jax."

"Jax do you have a last name? Or does Jax the kidnapper work for you?"

"Jax," he corrected. He hadn't taken a last name. Didn't need one, reminded him of ownership and no one owned him.

The expression on her face changed immediately. Those eyes...

Those lips...

They were all too familiar. Jax moved from the bed, folded his arms over his chest.

Avery stood to meet him. The white-laced shirt hugged her curves, accentuating her shapely figure. She sauntered with purpose. Seductively, over to where he waited. "I know you, don't I?"

"No," he was quick to answer.

"Yes, I know you, slave."

His jaw went slack. How could she possibly know that? As he studied her face, the resemblance became remarkable, uncanny. Almost identical to—

This couldn't be happening. No. There was no way this was happening. *Meroe?*

Fate wouldn't do this to him, not twice.

Arms looped around his neck, she moved her lips to claim his. He closed his gaping mouth, mostly because his lips longed to touch hers. Kiss what was once his, but reasoning took over the dull ache between his legs and he didn't speak.

Didn't move.

A questing thumb came up, traced his lips. The softest caress. He smelled the salt on her skin. The simple scent of wafting coriander permeated the air, drifting into his senses until he was drunk.

For a moment he could lose himself in the fantasy. But this wasn't fantasy and she wasn't Meroe. Meroe was dead. She'd long passed through this earth.

"You've missed me," she coaxed, her voice deeper. Tender hands quested over his chest and drank in his flesh.

Jax caught her arm, glared into amber-kissed eyes. "You don't know me."

A glimmer of mischief shone behind those eyes. What in the hell was going on? He gripped her arm a little too hard because she winced. "Who told you to say this to me?"

Fear, tried and true, returned to her face. Tension seeped from her muscles and she relaxed. "Answer me," he demanded.

"I d-don't know..." she stammered.

"Oh, you'll know." Anger latched onto him hard, he dared hope to control it.

"Let go, you're hurting me."

He didn't. "Not until you answer me."

Avery answered him with a swift knee to the groin.

That went well. When he doubled over, she bolted from the room.

Jax groaned inwardly at the pain shooting through his nether regions, but he didn't take off after her. She wouldn't get far. Everything within the compound was secure. He just hoped he found her before Dagger did. That man thought with his dick. Not only was he the best fighter the Brethren had to offer, he was the best with the ladies.

What Avery didn't need was another vampire screwing with her psyche. The Brethren had enough to deal with at this point. Hell, *he* had enough to deal with at this point.

Ten seconds later a blood-curdling scream filled the air.

Dagger.

Jax ran, shaking off the dull ache streaming through him.

Dagger's sheer size could cause alarm all in itself. And it wasn't like Dagger couldn't kill her, it was that he wouldn't. Outside a fight, Dagger was a lady's man. More than not, he'd never hurt a female.

But Avery didn't know it.

"Calm down," Dagger pleaded, holding her steady against the wall. "Jax, I think we just need to let this one go. She's a bit feisty. More than your other ones."

Christ, Dagger, that really helped.

Dagger had Avery caged and pinned him with a glare. "Let her go."

"You sure, boss? This one's a spitfire. A few minutes alone with me and she'll never want to go home." Dagger's lips curved in a smart-ass smile.

"Fledgling, don't make me sorry we converted you."

Avery's gaze slid from Dagger to Jax and back again. Total alarm blanketed her face.

"Don't touch me," Avery warned, as she tried to twist free from his grasp.

"Dagger," Jax bit against fury. "Let. Her. Go."

Dagger feathered a finger down the column of her neck. "Come on, Boss, just a sip."

If it wasn't for the constant fever inhabiting her body, Avery would've thought she felt pretty good. There were worse things in the world than being captured by two of the best looking men she'd laid eyes on.

Surely, there were.

But her reality wasn't much of a reality. Reality had become hazy a while back when the line between dreams and the real world crossed.

Too much happened in so little time, she was beyond any form of reasoning. Thing was, she wanted her life back. And no one was going to stop her from proving her innocence and taking that life back.

Except for him.

The man that visited her in her dreams. When he was there, dense fingers clawed her mind and she usually woke feeling hung over and horrible.

Maybe he slipped her drugs? Maybe that's why she couldn't remember things?

Either way, she was two steps from the mental ward if these things didn't stop. She had to take control and take it now.

Avery's gaze lifted to the man standing to her left, Jax. Strong wasn't even a question. The man's muscles had muscles. Presence heavy with power and dominance, power radiated from his every pore.

The annoying one not turning loose of her, Dagger, was a card. The boy had a personality. On a normal day, Avery would've laughed at the way Dagger annoyed his friend. But today wasn't a normal day and she didn't have time for horseplay.

But Jax...

The power. That *voice*.

What was it about him? A sliver of fear, intriguing and relenting tugged at her.

Was he the man that made the pain melt away?

Well, screw that.

She wasn't about to become a victim of circumstance. Not while she had one ounce of her mind back.

Dagger released her arms. She rubbed where his hands had been. The man had a vise-grip for fingers.

"What are you trying to do to me?" It was a good question, one she damned well expected an answer to.

Dagger gave her the once over before turning to Jax. "I'm outta here, man. You brought her home, you deal with her."

Deal with her? Brought her home? What were they...a cult? Why else would a group of men live together in a house?

Oh God.

They were gay. *So* gay. It made sense! These men were entirely too good looking to be straight and wearing all that leather.

"Don't go far. We have an appointment tonight," Jax informed Dagger. Dagger gave him the nod and left the room.

"Is this a lover's thing, because I'm more than willing to give you two privacy."

Jax furrowed a brow. "Are you crazy?"

"Lately, yes," she admitted.

"I guess you want an explanation," Jax's voice trickled over her like the soothing flow of tepid water. Relaxing and smooth.

"I'm not into playing games. You have ten seconds before I make a run for the door." Okay, maybe warning him of her plan wasn't the best means for an escape.

No.

Actually it was very, very stupid. God! Why couldn't she think clearly anymore?

"He's coming for you." Well. That explained everything. Mr. Host-with-the-most inched toward her, his hand extended in a friendly matter.

"Who?"

"How have you been feeling lately?"

Not so good. "None of your business."

"Dry mouth? Achy?"

Yes. "No."

"Not eating as much real food?"

What was the man, a spy? Did he work for the C.I.A. or something?

Avery tugged at her shirttail, lowering it over the band of her jeans. "What do you know about it? I'm assuming you're not a doctor."

"Good assumption."

"What are you then? You're time is running out."

Jax was closer now. So close, heat seared her, warm and sensual. Her mouth ached to taste him. Her teeth throbbed to nibble his lips and make her way down that fit chest.

Avery closed her eyes, fought the fever running rapid through her body and pretended Jax didn't have this type of effect on her. Desire pooled at the juncture of her thighs. Erotic images danced through her mind of the two of them kissing, touching, and having one another here and now.

She wanted...to eat. Him. Alive. Fingers itched to cup his shirt and pull him into a kiss. His gaze sparkled, his expression amused.

Oh damn, he knows. He knows I want to throw him down and...*oh God!* She was crazy.

"It's the hunger, Angel." Strong fingers rested on her shoulder. "Sh..." he soothed.

"D-don't touch me."

"I'm not going to hurt you."

That's good. He's not going to hurt – she brought her hand to her head to steady the pain – me. The room whirled, lights blurred. Avery fought her eyelids to remain open. That's when the ache in her stomach took over again and the constant throbbing in her mouth wouldn't let go.

Hardness layered his charcoal eyes. The scent of bailey's and cream teased her senses. Jax smelled...*nice*.

No. He smelled like a bastard. A kidnapper and someone that could kill her at any moment or take her to the police for the reward. That's what Jax was, a killer. The man brainwashing her and making her believe she was insane.

Not a good thing. All of her emotions welled inside her, boiling to get out. The hunger, the loss, the – when did the room start to spin?

"Avery." That's right, Avery, he did know her name.

"Huh?"

"You okay?" The voice flowed over her like warm honey.

"I –" *Hang on girl.* "I think I'm dying."

Damn. Jax lifted Avery's sinking body from the wall where she blacked out. She was close to the change. *Too* close.

"You're not dying." He held her body impossibly close to his.

After only two embraces, Avery should still be mostly human. But she wasn't. Bloodlust. The look was there, nestled in her eyes. Quickened breaths and the way she fought the arousal thickening the air.

It was all blood lust. Which meant one thing, Devlin was stronger than they'd thought. Jax had known the asshole for more than a century, possibly longer.

The vamp first showed his face in the Northern territory of Chicago. Not long after, he killed the leader of the Etrux and stole a place on the gothic throne. Devlin's hunger for power was unsurpassed. Devlin made fledglings so he could rule them. Funny, it worked until the Brethren toasted their ass in battle.

"Where am I?" A weak voice questioned. Moving her to the living room, Jax ignored the throbbing between his legs. He still hadn't fed. Once in the living room, he sat her gently down on the sofa.

She lifted a hand to her neck. "Jax?" Her eyes fluttered open. Overtaken by weakness, Avery moved her hazy eyes and gazed into his. "But where am I really?"

"Avery." He settled down on the sofa next to her all civilized-like, resting his black boots on the table. "I'm here to help you. Don't worry over things like that. The important thing is you're safe." Was she? The bitch of it was Jax wasn't too sure. A part of him wanted to protect her but the other part of him was using her to lure in the Etrux. And ensure the Brethren's control of the city. Too many things lie beneath of importance. The city mortals had no idea what they walked over each day.

Not to mention feeding would be plentiful for his men and the feds would keep their asses out of the Brethren's business. Every time he turned around, the Etrux was there, pissing

with them. They weren't good covering their tracks. Left messes behind and caused suspicion to rise among the mortals.

Enough was enough. The turf war began mid 19th century. It pissed him off to think some vampire clans fed themselves the belief only one clan could rule per domain.

Wasn't true. If mortals could live together in a semi-harmonic note, surely vampires could.

Hell, they had. Chicago held its own with the vampire wars, though. Each sector contained regional and cultural vamps. Each to his own. On Westside, there were the Celts, vampires with a bad Irish temper but were funny as hell when you got them drinking. On the South where the brothers from the Oriental clan.

The only clan not represented were Nubian, like himself. Of course, there really weren't many that turned vamp.

A tick began to work its way along Jax's jaw. It wasn't as if he'd been given a lot choice in the matter of his vampirism. He'd been so hurt.

So alone.

He shook himself from his thoughts, turned his attention back to Avery, who shied away from him. "How do you know my name?"

"You had I. D. on you when we found you in an alley," he explained. Maybe she'd listen. If she didn't, it didn't really matter. She had no choice. Avery wouldn't be allowed to leave the compound as long as the Etrux were in the area.

Not until he found out what those bastards were up to.

"Oh." She calmed.

"I don't really know how to say this, Avery."

She furrowed a brow, waited on his reply. "Say what?"

That voice, subtle and smooth. Jax could close his eyes and listen to it. Just let it flow over him like warm milk.

What in the hell was wrong with him? The best thing was to be all business with her. Find out the agenda of the enemy and return her to her normal life.

The only problem is she wasn't normal, not anymore.

The Etrux had taken it from her and without even asking. "You're in trouble."

"Tell me something I don't know."

This one was frustrating to say the least, stubborn and downright trifling. But that's what amused him all the same. "I'll say this differently, you're being chased."

"Great. You're a real genius, you know that right?"

"Woman, you need to talk less and listen more."

"And you need to explain to me why you've kidnapped me and are talking about me being chased. I think whoever was chasing me caught me, don't you?"

"You think I've been chasing you?"

"Haven't you? Why else would I be here? Or do you just flit all over Chicago bringing back girls to your mansion filled with men?" She paled after the comments.

Putting it that way, she had a point and a damned good one.

"This isn't what it looks like," he tried to explain.

"It looks like I'm about to be on the next movie with Jodi Foster and Hannibal."

"You're not. I'm trying to save you from him."

“Fabulous, I have my own personal hero. Just what I needed.”

She was like talking to a blender. Everything she said was chopped up and dissected.

Jax wasn't her hero, far from it. If it came down to it, he really wasn't any better than Devlin. To say he didn't have her here to serve the Brethren's purposes would be a lie.

“I'm not a hero. But a man that can keep you away from trouble for a bit.” She wrinkled the bridge between her eyes in decision. It was hard not to study her. The longer he looked, the more difficult it became.

Meroe. The similarities were astounding, long ebony hair feathered over sweet mocha skin, stopping just shy of her shoulders. Full lips, tiny breaths escaped her mouth when she paused between words.

The tips of his fingers itched to cup her face, but he didn't dare. Hell, the past was best kept in the past. Touching Avery would cause too many memories to surface. How could this happen?

There was just something about being a complete and total bastard that made Devlin's cock hard. The search went according to plan. The woman wasn't too hard to find once they'd picked up her scent.

It was time for the Brethren to learn who ruled this domain. Those insignificant vampires had been a thorn in his side for entirely too long. Yes. He could picture it now.

Jax and the rest of the clan bowing before him, pledging allegiance to serve him and only him.

Devlin gnashed his teeth together and ground them. It was luck when he'd met the informant. Destiny when he'd delivered Avery to him.

It would be his pleasure to have her for a bride.

The night's steady allure beckoned him. Hunger gnawed at his stomach.

Need to feed. Not from the usual concubines, they weren't doing the trick for him these days. No, the elixir he'd sampled of Avery's was divine.

Liquid bliss.

Devlin closed his eyes, remembered the taste of her neck, her blood. He almost felt the spicy flow of life trickling down his throat. The way he's sampled her at first in tiny sips, then when she'd tasted so wonderful, he'd taken larger drinks. Reveling in the way his withered cells sang to life as her blood entered his body.

Sucking her until her life was almost drained then filling her up with his blood. Hell, his cock was hard just thinking about it.

Indeed.

She'd tasted good. No, the whore tasted delicious.

Just in time for season. The Etrux would harvest their new crop of souls the way they always had.

Only this time they'd keep a few.

It was in the prophecy. An Epitaph written long before any of these worthless souls signed on for his bidding. They'd carry it out to the letter. Just the way he liked things.

“We storm the castle?” Ruben's inability to await orders nibbled at his patience.

Devlin lifted a finger, moved to sit in the antique Victorian chair and sucked in a sharp breath of air, “We storm the ‘compound,” he corrected, “when I say.”

"But sire," Ruben paused, "they have her."

Devlin scratched his chin, passively. "I know."

Ruben furrowed a brow. "B-but she belongs to you."

"She does, doesn't she?" He smiled, raking a tongue languidly over his right incisor. Oh yeah, she was his and he'd have her again. Even if it was for a short amount of time.

Chapter Three

"Jax is a smitten kitten." Carson smiled across the table as she spoke to Crude. "Hell, he's barely been out of the same room since he found that chick."

She slapped down a three of spades and drew another card from the deck.

Crude grunted, pinned her with a suspicious glare. "Jax is not taken with this woman." Crude always pretended to be a hard ass, but underneath it all he was smooth as silk. "He's taking care of business."

The guy could fight too. Hell, he'd dusted a total of well hell...she couldn't even remember what the last tally was, but she did know this, it was a hella lot of vampire ass to slay.

"Bet me." Carson extended her left hand as her right one held a full house.

"I've already bet you." Crude rolled his eyes, but Carson didn't care. His bark was much bigger than his bite.

Much.

"Too chicken to double bet?" she dared him.

Crude's lips slid across perfect white-toothed smile. "Okay, Carson. What's your poison?"

"If Jax takes this chick on, you have to take me for a night on the town." She grinned, feeling Hunter's gaze pin her from across the room.

Crude's eyes widened then slanted. Hell, he knew she was up to something, but he humored her nonetheless. "Deal."

Carson grinned. Satisfaction would be hers. "You're on. So where are you taking me?" She coaxed, sliding her arms across the card table and leaned in.

She sucked at flirting. Deep down, she knew Crude realized she didn't want him. But it was fun to play around with him. He was like a scary big brother that no one knew how tender they were underneath but her. Plus, he sensed her feelings for Hunter. The energy radiating off him when he was around her let her know that much.

"Nowhere. I'm not losing." Crude pitched a card down on the table and drew another one from the deck.

"The hell you say," she challenged.

A warm shadow rested on her back. *Hunt.*

Strong fingers curved around the back of her chair. A strange aura bounced from him. Strong, pungent, one she hadn't felt before. A slow, heavy breath settled on the back of her neck. "Give the guy a break, Carson. Maybe he doesn't like girls."

Crude growled at Hunter then turned his attention back to the card game. "Easy, Hunt. You afraid I'm stepping on your territory?"

Hunter moved from behind her, folded his arms across his chest in a slow, smooth motion. "Hey brother, territory's all yours."

"I'm no man's territory." Carson turned to face him. How could he be so passive with her? Sometimes he was overly protective and others he was crazy.

"Right," Hunter agreed.

Carson's throat tightened. Why did she even bother?

She pitched her cards down on the table. "Forget the bet." She stood up from the table and left the room, pretending Hunter's comment didn't hurt like hell.

"You'd think it wouldn't bother you after so many years." Hunter crept into the room, his leather boots a silent tap on the floor. Hell that bastard could've been a member of the Special Ops and it wouldn't have surprised him.

"What?" Jax feigned innocence.

Hunter rolled his eyes, jammed a pistol in his shoulder holster, secured the leather strap. "Where is she?"

"My room."

"Keeping her close I see." Hunter wagged his eyebrows, pulled his black leather coat over his shoulders.

"No, closer than you keep Carson."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Jax drew in a sharp breath, let it out slow. "Nothing." He shouldn't have said that. He had no right the way he was running around the Compound for Avery.

Still, Hunter had skirted around the issue too long. Why didn't that vampire just admit he liked Carson? True, Jax was the one that didn't think taking in a mortal was a good decision. But Hunter owed her old man and Carson was no normal mortal. She was special. Jax knew it.

Hunter knew it.

"Where we casing tonight?"

"North side."

"Senate orders?"

"Yeah."

The cell rang less than an hour ago. Vamps from the Cian Clan were moving in on Eastern Territory. They had to cut them off before they did some serious damage. "Damn, and here I was hoping for an average Saturday night. You've gone and picked a tough fight."

"Yeah, there's no easy fight."

"No kidding."

"Get the others ready. We're moving out in five."

"Sure thing, Boss."

Five seconds after Hunter left the room, a sinking feeling rocked the pit of Jax's stomach. Being a leader left him with a responsibility the others couldn't fathom. Their souls. Their well being rest in his hands.

He'd made sacrifices, kept secrets for the well-being of the Brethren. The preservation of the race, which is exactly what the Senate, did. They preserved the race. They were the ancients gone to rest and rule. One day, the Brethren would be there, ruling along side them. After they paid their dues.

They would never fully comprehend what could happen if ever the curse was broken. Jax's chest tightened. They could never find out. And so to protect the turf, no one could ever know out what lie beneath the city.

"Ready to roll boss?" Hunter slipped the Kevlar vest over broad shoulders as he entered the room.

"Yeah, give me a minute." He followed Hunter out of the room, down the long halls, pausing at Avery's room.

She was locked in. They had to keep her in the compound against her will. He felt like hell for forcing her to stay, but it was for her own good, even though she didn't understand.

It was for the preservation of all. Didn't make him feel like less of a prick though. "Load up. I'll be there in a second."

Hunter turned to his direction gave him a nod. Jax drew in a sharp breath and turned the knob. It wasn't easy to convince her to stay there for a few days. Down right hard as hell truth be known, but in the end, she'd agreed.

A voice in his head told him she'd done it to get him off her back. That was probably the truth was a slice of him wished it could be more. For a bit, he wanted her to stay.

Avery faced the window; hair flowed behind her like ribbons of silk. As she turned, he caught a glimpse of her profile. She was whimsical.

Isis, he could watch her all night. The way the wind played through her hair, the subtle dip in her back when her head was arched. She let out cry.

She called her master.

Seeing her like that stabbed Jax in the gut. The thought she pined for him sickened him. *If that bastard placed one finger on her, just one, he'd rip out his throat.*

Devlin's presence dripped from her, her body movements, sensual and longing. The tips of her hands questing over her thighs, tugging the dress up, preparing for him...

It wasn't even her fault. It was part of the conversion process. The spell the master wove in order to weaken their victim's mind. Hell, it was a lot of trouble for a wife. If he had to get through all that, Jax would just as soon stay single forever.

Who wanted a woman that didn't want them of their own free will? A sick bastard, that's who.

"Are you there?"

Jax cleared his throat. "Avery."

Startled, she turned, her eyes wild.

Damn it. She was under the trance. Falling prey to the trap Devlin carefully engineered. The psychological connection was strong, true, but it could be broken. Hell, it had to be.

A tic worked its way along his jaw. Didn't matter, if Devlin wanted to come over and play, they'd be ready. At that moment, Jax knew he had to do whatever it took to save this woman.

"Jax?" she asked, confusion buried in those amber eyes. Her body appeared frail, color washed from the softness of her face. "W-what do you want from me?"

How could he answer that? He didn't really want anything from her. Well, if you discounted the obvious need to relieve the throbbing pain in his groin every time she was near, nothing.

"I came to tell you I'm leaving for a bit. Have some business to take care of. A few members are hanging around so you'll be in good hands."

"Why are you telling me?" She took few tiny steps in his direction and paused as if he were going to lash out at her. "It's not like I'm allowed to go anywhere."

Sadness fell over her face.

"I just need you to understand something. We mean you no harm." Jax wanted to reach for her, but thought it would only frighten her further.

She didn't appear to believe him. Couldn't blame her. They didn't exactly look like the Welcome Wagon. Something inside him wanted her to believe him.

Isis, he was turning into mush around her. She'd been in the compound less than twenty-four hours and already he acted different.

Avery tilted her head to the side, allowed her gaze to travel his full six foot six frame. "Why are you playing with my mind?" She lifted a palm to cup her neck in a protective gesture.

Oh Isis. She believed it was him? Breath literally caught in his throat. There were many things Jax was. Many horrible things he'd done in his life, but not one of them was take a bride without her consent.

He'd never do that. A woman's life belonged to her. Being Brided was considered a rare gift in his world. When a woman loved you enough they decided to leave the mortal realm and join you in the undead. It was just something that wouldn't happen to him. He didn't want to be in love.

Love was a myth, one of those things that didn't exist.

"I'm not."

"It's you, isn't it?"

"Just relax," he said, "I'll be back soon."

"Don't go."

Muscles coiled in his arms. A band wrapped around his heart at the thought Avery serving Devlin. His thoughts drifted to his mother and sisters. All of them Nubian slaves forced to live a life of servitude to another human. And here he was, faced with another woman who'd have to serve Devlin unless he did something about it.

Yeah what in the hell was he doing about it? He was using her, too. For different reasons, but it's using someone all the same. Using another individual was something he never wanted to do. Not after the life he'd lived as a mortal.

"I—I..." he found himself closing the gap between them. Her essence filled the air like the biting winter wind. Swift and hard. Sweet and sensual. "I don't mean to hurt you."

"You didn't. Not really." She averted her eyes. Not able to fully look at him. "You came when I needed you most."

He bit down on the inner lining of his jaw. Was she talking about him or Devlin? Did she even know?

Fierce possessiveness streamed through his veins. Memories of Meroe flooded his psyche. He closed his eyes, blinked back the pain as he inhaled the scent. Her scent. Sweetest lavender intermingled with coriander.

Opening them again, he fought the restraints of his erection pressed solid against the zipper of his pants. Why hadn't he noticed what she was wearing before? Avery's white silk gown flowed to the floor, stopping at the tops of her bare feet. Breath literally caught in his throat. His fangs ached.

Pale pink frosted her lips. Even though she appeared pale and sick. Her face held a look of serenity. Peace. He couldn't help but wonder what Devlin had put her through. Had he touched her in anyway?

Devlin was a strong vampire, true. But she had to have been in a weakened state of mind to fall into his trap.

Had to have been.

There were so many pieces to this puzzle. And he wanted to understand all there was to know about Avery Johnson.

Stop. This is too much. He needed to clear his mind and fast. It would lead to nothing good. Nothing at all.

Avery studied the man in the room. He was breathtakingly gorgeous. Ripped, brown muscles and long black leather. The embodiment of every hot male she'd ever seen on a billboard. His voice was slightly gruff, but powerful and it didn't really frighten her. Should it?

The subtle caress that washed over her every time he entered the room captivated her once more. Something about Jax made her body hum to life and zing with anticipation of his touch.

He was the one. Wasn't he?

"Why me? Why do you want me?"

Jax's expression changed immediately. A bit of color moved from his face. What was he about to say?

"I don't."

"Then why am I here?"

"Like I said, protection."

If she were a betting woman, she'd bet Jax could put a hurt on someone. The sheer size of him alone was enough to frighten her, but for some reason, she wasn't so sure he'd hurt her. "Don't I need protecting from you?"

He laughed.

Annoyed. That's what he made her. Before she couldn't put a finger on it, now she was positive of it. Annoyed.

"Don't worry about the details of all of this. Just know you're safe as long as you stay here."

As she moved closer to him, the ache in her mouth throbbed uncontrollably. So much she reached up to cover teeth with a palm.

"I know they hurt." In an instant he was at her side, soothing her with that voice. A large hand rested on her shoulder and did anything but settle her nerves. A wave of desire bolted through her body.

"Oh." Escaped her mouth. Why was he like a panther one minute and the next a lamb?

He stiffened. Heat filled her cheeks, burned her face. Need welled inside her like nothing she'd ever experienced. Her muscles went to Jell-O, so much so she braced herself for the next wave.

"T-tell me what's happening to me." Her voice quivered. Desire licked at her skin, down her chest, between her thighs. Would this ever go away? She couldn't walk around like this all the time. It was ridiculous. Maybe she should call her doctor...

She couldn't call her doctor because he'd turn her in. Avery placed a hand to her forehead. God, she was burning up.

Jax slanted his eyes. What was he thinking? What had he done to her? How could he stand there and be so unaffected by what he'd done to her.

"Jax, my man, you coming or what?" Hunter's voice echoed down the hallway.

"Yeah," Jax called back to him.

When he turned back to her, his gaze ranked down her methodically. Her entire body. Those eyes burned her skin.

"S-stop."

"Are you alright?"

"Hell, no I'm not alright. Will you stop that?"

Once again, Jax looked at her like she was crazy. "Do you want me to do something to you?" He wagged his eyebrows, totally shocking.

"No."

He nodded. "Have it your way. Rest, I'll be back soon." Jax turned and left the room.

One...two...three...four...

Less than forty-five seconds later, the sound of cars zoomed from the large house.

Time to blow this joint.

"Hell's bells, Jax. Could you keep your pickle in your pants long enough for us to defend what's ours?" Carson snickered, cast a droll stare in his direction.

"Just drive." Jax straightened his weapons, threw back his coat and got in the passenger side of the Hummer. He didn't even roll his eyes at her this time. He only thought of Avery and keeping Devlin the hell away from her.

The servants were alerted to watch for anything suspicious and to alert them immediately. He'd fly and be there in a blink of an eye if he had to.

Why didn't he take her? The scent of her arousal was thick in the air. Isis, her body practically trembled from it. He was hard, rock hard still thinking about the lilt of her voice. Imagining the silk of her body sliding under his in bliss.

"Okay, boss. It's your call." Wheels spun and Carson burned rubber as they peeled out the compound and onto the street.

Carson's voice shook him from reverie.

"The boys are already there. I waited for you, Boss," she teased.

"I knew you would."

"Don't flatter yourself."

He chuckled. "I'm not." Of all the Brethren, Carson understood him. Really understood him and the responsibilities his position in the Brethren held.

He liked Carson. She kind of reminded him of his baby sis. Only she loved to be crazier and drive a stick shift. The sound of gears grinding as she turned the curve made him flinch. "Take it easy."

"Shut the hell up Wuss, I'm fine." She wasn't fine. She was about to tear the Hum-V up—completely. As the wheels squealed around another corner, the street came into view. Dim lights hummed, flickered light so the street was barely visible.

Jax had vampire vision, Carson didn't and he seriously doubted she could see the forest for the trees at this point.

“Well, thank *Isis* we’re almost there. I might actually get to keep my vehicle another day.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “Come on party pooper. Let’s go kick some tail.”

Best idea he’d heard all night. It’d be nice to work off some frustration.

Snow flurried under the beam of the headlights, skittering about, just as bodies were about to fly. They jumped from the parked vehicle simultaneously. Jax draped his sword’s leather strap over his shoulder and ran. Carson gathered her crossbow.

It didn’t take long. The scent of the Celt group was thick in the air. Most of the time, they reeked of citrus. He had no idea why, it’s just the way things were. Citrus and cream. The sweet scent made his gut curl in repugnance he’d sniffed it so much.

Crude and Hunter already had three members of the Cian going at it with a fury. Spin kicks, drop kicks, and kicks to the groin.

Hell, it was so poetic, a tear nearly fell.

Nearly.

Dodge preferred the one on one battle and took on a big bastard near the alley. Doing a damned good job of it from what he could see.

Carson joined in, grabbing her custom built cross bow and ran like the devil. Within milliseconds, she pierced the first vamp that dared get in her way. The sugary scent was too much. The Brethren were trained well. For the first time in a while, Jax set back and watched the sheer excellence of the moment. For a group of unorthodox vampires that’d come together, they weren’t bad.

Two more were dusted before Carson arrived at the actual fight scene.

Jax took long steps. Yeah, he could fly, but that would end it all too soon. And he kind of got a kick out of the stomping rival’s asses slowly. Staking their claim.

“I got this one,” Carson called back over her shoulder as she shot the cross bow with rapid precision. He’d taught her well.

The Brethren fought hard and true, whipping blades out and pulling out artillery and aiming with fixed accuracy. Blood pumped through his veins at hyper speed. The battle approached and he lusted for the kill.

Swift movement of his boots meeting the pavement ricocheted at lightning speed as Jax ascended into the air. One of the Cian met him, clashing mid-air—teeth gnashing, claws extended. The two leaders tangled and growled. They flipped and tangled through the cool night air. “Lot of visitors on this side tonight.”

“Haven’t noticed,” the leader toyed as he belted Jax across the jaw with the back of a fist. Sweltering metallic coated his lips, trickling down into his mouth. Jax growled and launched back at him, flipping him, clawing his face.

They fought for so long and so hard, neither opponent noticed both gangs had stopped fighting and were just watching.

Hell, this wasn’t a spectator sport.

Might as well give them a show. Jax extracted his sword, still levitating mid-air and poised for attack.

“I call a meeting,” the leader said.

What? Was he cowering out so soon?

Pity.

This was serious. There hadn't been a meeting of clans in centuries. Something was going down and big time. By-laws passed down from the Senate meant the clans must stop fighting and forced to meet.

They stopped dead air, Jax spat blood. The other vampire swiped his jaw with a fist and breathed out a frosted breath. "Where?" Jax asked.

"Cromsmith. Midnight tomorrow."

"If this is a trap, you'll never see sunset again," Jax's warning was more than that, it was an oath. And if the oath just happened to promise going ape shit on the Cian Clan, so be it.

"No trap. We came to call a meeting tonight but your guys jumped us."

They descended to the ground, keeping a good four feet apart for good measure. Jax nodded his head as both clans moved with stealth-like movements behind their leaders. "Is that so?"

"So."

"We'll reconvene, but heed my warning, you will be dust by daylight if I get even a whiff of something wrong. Got it?"

The Cian Clan was tough, tougher than tough but they knew enough to respect the Brethren. "Be here. You won't regret it."

Both men separated, and Jax hoped like hell he was right.

Chapter Four

Avery's feet were sore from running. She'd been on them since the accusation and the other half of the time she'd been somewhere between dream and reality. Well, it all ended here. Ended now.

Her fingers almost bled from tugging furiously at the window, trying with all her might to pry it open. They were electronically locked. Jax secured the place before they'd left. The place was tighter than Knox. Everything was to be opened and closed by a code or retinol scan. Lights came on by timers to feign appearance of occupancy even if the house was empty. For the life of her, she couldn't figure out if she was in the hands of the enemy or saviors.

The group returned less than an hour ago and the place was still bolted shut. Her heart thrummed in her ear, breath sped up, and the promise of getting her life back sang through her mind.

Every minute she stayed, the walls closed in on her. She had to get her life back. She had a good life, one she'd worked hard for and she wasn't letting anyone rip it away from her and just sit idly by and let it happen.

Even if the most handsome man she'd ever laid eyes on just happened to live here. She had to get out of here and fast.

Three, seven, two...

What was the code she'd watched him enter?

Avery closed her eyes, trying to remember.

Three, seven, two...eight! Quickly, ran to the door and pressed the numbers. *Please.* With a small click, the door opened.

A chance to escape.

Avery crept down the side of the wall. Back flat to the wall, she felt her way down the hall until she felt a doorknob. She turned it and quietly entered the room.

There had to be a way out of this place.

As silent as possible, she slipped into the room and turned.

She'd never been so surprised. The room was sophisticated, a four-posted antique bed rested in the center of the room with what resembled a Monet painting behind the bed. A brilliant blend of scenery and pastels. Not something in she'd expect to see in a house of killers. Or whatever they all were.

Window...door...someone around this place would slip up and leave something open.

A slight breeze teased her face. The window – it was cracked open.

Avery made a mad dash for it. She would escape. Find her friend Molly and come up with a plan to leave the country or something.

"You know it's rude to snoop in someone's bedroom while they're not in it."

Avery jumped, turned to see a woman standing in the doorway. "I-I'm sorry, I didn't know that...I didn't realize..." She didn't dare move for fear. Holding her hands behind her back as if she was just enjoying the view.

"It's okay. Just watch it in Dagger's room. No woman enters there and leaves without having given him a jolly or two. Or he then come to think of it." The woman smiled at her like Dagger pleasuring women in the house was a normal occurrence.

"You know this from experience?"

"Hell, no. Just know all the women that come and go from the compound. Mortals aren't allowed though, so that narrows his choices a bit."

"Uh-huh. Thanks I think." Mortals weren't allowed? Oh hell she had to get out of here. The strangest thing was most of the time they seemed nice and then one of them would spout off something like mortals aren't allowed here?

"No problem," she extended a hand, "name's Carson."

Avery took her hand and shook a calm washed over at her touch and she knew she meant her no harm. "Avery." She was, however, interfering with her leaving.

"I know it's probably strange to live in a house full of strangers for a while."

"I'm not living here."

"Right." Carson screwed up her face a bit. "So, you think Jax is just going to let you sail right out of here, huh?" Carson leaned back, stretching playfully on the bed. She wore brown leather dusters, cowgirl boots and a leather vest that barely covered her tank. A leather band was strapped and secured around her muscular upper arm. The chick obviously worked out. For a girl, she looked tough as nails. Underneath the tough exterior, Carson was pretty. Long blonde hair, tousled and windblown, hang loose and landed wherever it landed. Enormous sky blue eyes and a smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose.

Carson rested her arms behind her head on the pillow and kicked one foot over the other. "So, whatcha think of him?"

"Who?" There were a lot of 'hims' at the compound, referring to any particular 'him' might make her seem like she was concentrating on the him...which she wasn't. She *rationalized with herself over a guy in the height of her escape attempt. Smooth Johnson, real smooth.*

Damn, she wanted to roll her own eyes at her stupid logic.

"Oh shit, girl, how stupid do you think I am? I see the way he looks at you."

"He who?" Heat filled her cheeks. Why did she care how Jax looked at her?

"Jax who. Who else is following your every step?"

"He doesn't do that to other people forced here and locked in against their will?" Sarcasm, at times, was a gift. Others a curse.

"First of all, no one is brought here to stay against their will. You're a first."

Wonderful. "I feel special." Again sarcasm.

"You should." Carson lifted her brows when she talked. It was a bit like a teenager. Avery couldn't help but wonder why she chose to live in a house full of men.

"He doesn't look at me that way."

"He so looks at you that way. I've been around Jax for most of my life. Never seen him look at anyone that way." Carson twisted on the bed, restless.

"Are you serious?" Avery didn't know whether to be flattered or frightened at this point. She wanted to be flattered, but experience told her to be frightened.

"Oh yeah, I know Jax. Hell, I've known him for a long ass time and you know what?"

"What?"

"He's really taken a shining to you." Carson's pastel lips curled up and she scrunched her nose like this was a good thing. How could a man doing these things to her be good? This man was messing with her mind, trying to take over her life and keep her in the compound in order to 'protect' her.

Oh God...what if he worked for Lambert?

Carson's eyes held a strange innocence, a trust for the world she lived. "I have to get out of here."

"Nah, Jax won't let you." Carson began to whistle the tune of Moon River as if she hadn't just reinforced the fact Avery was being held captive against her will.

"Well, Jax might be surprised to find out I'm not doing what he tells me."

Carson stopped whistling and started gnawing on her nails. Between bites she managed, "You'd be the first."

"What is it with all this macho bullshit here? The place is dripping with it."

Carson sat up, scooted to the edge of her bed. "You have no idea where you are, do you?" The slant of her gaze told her it she'd entered something far more dangerous than Congressman Lambert's lair.

Far more.

"Leave her, Carson," Jax's voice commanded the woman on the bed and to Avery's surprise, Carson complied. After a crinkled face and roll of the eyes.

"Man, take it easy. I wasn't filling her head with any delusions of your white horse and carriage." Carson pinched his cheek on the way out and Jax tugged away.

Avery couldn't figure out the exact relationship between the two of them, but they seemed to respect one another. She couldn't help but like Carson. She was almost like a child in a way and a grown woman in another.

Carson left the room, and she was alone, once again, Jax.

The room's frigid interior sent a chill down her spine. The atmosphere changed immediately with the woman's departure. Jax wasn't exactly menacing, but damn, he had a presence about him. He was about six-foot-six for one thing. Well muscled for another. And then there was the issue of leather...

Jax drew in a deep breath. "We need to talk."

"I'm leaving." Good. There. She'd said it. She even inched toward the door for good measure.

He blocked. "Can't leave."

"You can't tell me what I can or can't do," she challenged. For a moment, she felt her mind become her own. Out of the web he'd so carefully spun.

"You're wrong, I can," his voice was matter of fact and extremely unapologetic.

The man had balls. Probably made of steel, but she didn't have time to check.

"There are laws against kidnapping you know."

He lifted the left side of his mouth in a half-smile. "Didn't kidnap you. I saved you."

"You keep saying that. What exactly did you save me from? It seems the price on my head is pretty damn high these days. I can't imagine you being any different, bounty hunter."

Jax laughed. "Bounty hunter? Is that what you think I am?"

Many things made her angry, being laughed at was at the top. "What in the hell are you then, a Good-Will Ambassador?"

"Why don't you stop worrying about what I am and thank me for helping you out?"

Was he serious? The nerve of this man! If she wasn't a wanted woman, she'd called the police hours ago. "And what were you protecting me from...you?"

His expression changed. "Among other things."

He didn't deny it, instead, moved closer. Paralyzed to his presence, Avery stood there as Jax inched so close she struggled to breathe. Tiny electrodes pulsed down her arms, tingled to the tips of her toes.

When she was around him, she felt. Scared, weak, and down right turned on at the same time.

"I'm not staying." The insides of her mouth turned to cotton. Nerves skittered up and down her arm.

Kiss me, she thought. What do those lips taste like? What would that body feel like holding me close?

What was wrong with her? She lusted after her kidnapper. Fabulous. Really, she needed to get out more. After this is over she would find herself a date. It was amazing how easily turned on she was by Jax. Surely it was because dates were sparse when you're a wanted woman.

"You can't leave." Or maybe not. His dark gaze captured hers. Flecks of amber burned behind those irises. For a brief moment she'd swear a flame actually flickered behind them. But that was crazy, wasn't it?

"I'm no idiot. I realize something's not right here. I haven't put my finger on it, but there's nothing normal about a bunch of people living together in a mansion."

"Maybe not." He didn't deny it. He didn't act phased by her comment, either.

Jax was so close, his breath fell on her face, tickled it. The faint beat of his heart played in her ears.

"Tell me what's going on. Why do you have me here?" Avery's throat tightened. Maybe she dreaded the response? Maybe he was a drug dealer...! Was that why her worries melted away when he was near? He was probably pumping her full of Ecstasy. She inched back.

"I know about Lambert."

Backward and kept moving until the wall pressed flat against her back.

He followed.

"You've been spying on me?"

"It's all over the news. Not like I hired a P.I."

"I want a straight answer."

"You ask more than you're entitled to." Complete asshole. She'd never been so frightened and so unbelievably...unbelievably...hot in her entire life. One second she wanted to slap this man silly, the next pounce on him like a panther. Sheer power and dominance radiated from him.

Sexy, gorgeous...dangerous.

Avery allowed her gaze to travel over those enormous pecks, peaking out from under the black fitted t-shirt. Bad decision. Real bad decision. Heat streamed through her body at an uncontrollable pace. Hot, heavy and downright uncontrollable.

"I...I need to know. Are you the one doing those things to me?" her voice, barely above a whisper. What would she do if it was him? Clearly he had the upper hand here.

At the moment, she didn't seem to care why he did those things. She just wanted to feel the rush, the high. The pain to melt again.

"What types of things would you like me to do?"

What in the hell was happening to her? The resolve to fight wilted. "Let me go." It really wasn't as demanding as she'd liked it to have been. Honestly it sounded more like a question rather than a command.

He wasn't falling for it. Jax rested a palm on the wall behind her. The scent of leather and soap, he was clean from a fresh shower. The flame tattoo on his upper arm called to her, she wondered absently what it would feel like to run a fingertip over it.

"I'm not letting you go."

Okay, so don't let her go. Hold on for as long as you like...wait! No. Let her go!

Hmm...he smelled nice. Too nice.

A strong fingertip came up to toy with her earlobe. A tingle shot straight through her body. "Are you supposed to touch me before you kill me?"

Kill her? Jax wasn't going to kill her. Although he realized how it must look. He had tattoos; he wore leather, lots of it. He lived in a house full of weapons. Hell, he even had a cool Hog he pulled out on a special occasion, but he didn't kill humans. No. He only took what was necessary for survival. Avery didn't know what he was – yet.

Avery released a breath she'd been holding entirely too long. Maybe he did look untrustworthy the odds were against him being a Good Samaritan. "I'm not going to kill you."

"How can I be sure?"

He should tell her. Shouldn't he? At that point, Jax realized he hadn't stopped tracing her earlobe. Damn, she felt good. Silky skin coasted under his fingertip. His gaze fixed on her full lips. The kicker was he could almost taste her delicious, mocha kisses. They would be delicious, he had no about.

It's been too long since he'd had a woman. A real woman, not just a vampire wanting to satisfy lust, but a woman that truly desired him. The painful ache between his legs was a reminder of the fact. "When we found you, you were injured, abandoned." He dropped his hand, moved back an inch or two for good measure.

"I don't understand why you care if you're not working for Lambert." She lifted a chin in defiance.

"Lambert? Is that what this is about?" Jax moved back, let her moved from her place on the wall. "I don't work for Lambert."

She wrinkled her brow, pressed her hands firm to the wall like a frightened kitten. "Then you're trying to get me killed."

"No." He hoped like hell not. He was trying to stop Etrux from converting her. Why he wasn't sure, her life as a mortal might not be able to be salvaged. Once conversion begins, it's difficult to tell whether the mortal will survive. She seemed strong enough, but sometimes that wasn't always the deciding factor.

Avery's expression changed in an instant. She crossed the floor with the grace of a panther, smooth and dark and Jax wanted nothing more than to – "Tell me why I'm here or I'll draw a lot of attention to this place."

"That would be unwise of you."

"Well, Mr. I-saved-you is threatening me now. Excuse me if I'm all with the not believing you when you tell me you don't have an illegal operation going on here."

He didn't answer.

"I thought so." She lifted her chin again.

He was more amused than threatened. No one stood up to him that way in a long time. Not in years. He'd almost forgotten how much he enjoyed it.

"Why do you fear me? Have I done anything to harm you?"

"No. Yes. I don't know."

Taking her arm in his hand, Jax feathered caresses down her bare arm, reveling in the feel of her skin under his. The other hand he used to cup her face and tilt her head back.

"Does this hurt?" He watched her intently as she quivered beneath his touch.

"N-no."

Avery couldn't believe the way she reacted to a simple caress. Every time the man neared, she melted. The way his touch teased her flesh was unmerciful.

His finger came moved over her face, tracing the outline of her jaw. "Does this hurt?"

There were no words Avery simply shook her head. She'd been lessoned to a nonverbal creature by a simple touch. Unreal. Completely unreal.

When his thumb came up to outline her lips ever so softly, her mouth went completely dry. Jax's gaze fixed on her mouth, his tongue came out to wet his lips.

He was going to kiss her. Stop him. Don't let him do it.

Closer.

Those lips crept closer. What would they taste like? Feel like.

"Does this hurt?" he asked as he cupped her chin with both palms. Desire licked at her skin and for some reason she wasn't even able to shake her head in denial. Hell no, it feels great!

Avery felt her lips part. *Kiss me*, she thought. After a man sent electricity skittering up her spine by a simple caress, it didn't take much to imagine what those lips would taste like. Would he be a gentle kisser or a commanding one?

"You want me to kiss you."

Yes. No. Still, she stood there under his spell. It was a spell wasn't it?

"Tell me." Staring intently on her lips, he coaxed, "tell me what you want."

"I want to feel your lips on mine." Had she just said that?

Before she had a chance to refute, powerful lips crushed to hers, kissing her senseless. There was a moan in the air and Avery realized it was her. Sweet Jesus, his lips were divine. He tasted of peppermint and smelled of soap. His tongue swept against hers, drinking her fast, slow and all kinds of thirsty.

His hand came up to tangle through her hair and pull her head back even further so she was more receptive to his kiss. Hell, if she was anymore receptive, she'd attack him, throw him on the bed and see if he loved half as good as he kissed.

If she were a betting woman...

She couldn't *have sex with a stranger*. Her mind reasoned but her body disobeyed.

Muscles flexed under her exploration. She rubbed the hard planes of his chest before and wasn't even aware she was captivated under the spell of kiss.

Avery reached to loop hers arms around the large column of his neck.

He caught her pulled away breathless. "You will stay here."

Her lips still throbbed from his kiss. "What if I don't agree to your terms?"
"You have no choice. If you leave, you'll die."

Devlin threw back his head as he slammed a whiskey sour at *Bleeders*, a local Goth Bar. *Bleeders* was part of the underground Chicago nightlife. Full of willing, stupid mortals to do his bidding. He'd found a few recruits here, too. Mostly Goth wannabes. Some survived the change, some didn't. He wet his lips with his tongue.

Part of the thrill.

"I'll take another." He slammed the shot glass on the countertop and waited for the man dressed in solid black all the way down to his fingertips to pour another. It wasn't blood, he couldn't just ask for that here. Gave away his cover plus attracted more of the vamp wannabe scene. Those begging to be changed, those that had to beg were unworthy.

And what *Bleeders* called the powerful elixir was nothing more than a damn bloody Mary. None of them understood the true power that vampirism offered. None of them appreciated it. They couldn't. Mortals were beyond comprehension of such a gift.

But not Avery. She embraced it. Wanted it. Begged for it...

Devlin's fangs throbbed uncontrollably as he remembered sinking them into that delicious neck. She'd tasted sweet and spicy. She wasn't frightened. Hell, no. She'd been a woman on her last limb.

Beautiful and willing. And she had no idea who she was, which made it all the more sweet.

The bartender sat the shot glass on the bar and no sooner than it was sat down, Devlin lit it, and slammed it again.

"You're crazy," the bartender informed, "I saw a man do that once. His entire face caught fire."

Devlin growled low, a friendly warning. Stupid bastard better take it, didn't give them often.

The bartender held up his hands and left to serve the other customers.

"Buy me a drink?" A tall, dark woman asked from behind him.

Devlin turned in his seat. Deep auburn hair hanging in curls, crimson leather halter and black pants. She wasn't exactly beautiful and she wasn't exactly ugly either.

"How about I make you mine?"

Chapter Five

The meeting with the Cian Clan was tomorrow night on the corner of 5th and Duncan. Good thing, too, because Jax was exhausted. The break of dawn rounded the corner and his entire body went into lethargy with each rise of the sun.

Most days at the compound, the Brethren slept. On rare occasion, one of the gang volunteered to stay up. Only if a member of a rival was in the area. The Brethren always took proper precautions. Rooms shielded and all entrances, including windows, had automatic shutters that easily slid to provide solid protection from the sun's merciless rays.

The Senate protected their own. The Senate was where the ancients went to serve when the monotony of this realm became too much. Ancients had to be protected. If an ancient was killed, their entire bloodline evaporated—instantly. It was safer for them to be away and pass down orders.

Jax wasn't much on following them at first. His days as a Nubian Slave was enough reason. However, The Senate served a purpose.

The Senate was different. They gave down orders for the survival of the race. It was the best thing for his people and being given a chance to actually stick up and protect his own kind gave him a sense of pride.

Belonging.

Jax loved that. His kind were no longer Nubian, they were vampires.

It was a choice he'd never regretted.

Until now. All the power in the world couldn't undo what Devlin had done to Avery. She had vampire flowing in her veins now. Nothing would change that.

Carson was in charge of Avery during the day. Not that he felt she needed someone in charge of her, but he did know the Etrux could send partial conversions to come after Avery during the day. She needed to be protected.

Whether she realized it or not.

Avery. What was he going to do with her? Was it fair to keep her locked up like this? When it came down to the age old battle of right and wrong, it wasn't. But when it came down to letting her walk the streets while under the spell of the Etrux wasn't fair either. Jax offered her protection.

Yeah from who? Jax groaned inwardly as he thought about it. She was a spitting image of the women he'd loved all those years ago. How could that be? He lifted fingers to his temples, massaged gently. Who in the hell was playing tricks on him?

A part of him prayed it was coincidence, but the half with reasoning skills opted nothing was coincidence. Everything in life happened for a reason.

She wasn't Meroe. She couldn't be...

Jax pulled out his stone and began sharpening his sword. Helped him to think. With each swipe of the blade, the more he thought of Avery and how much he desired her. That's how he knew. There was no way he'd still desire Meroe after all the snake put him through. No way.

You served my purpose. Meroe's words played like a broken tune in his memory. *Did you think I would marry beneath me? I am daughter of Pharaoh. I must marry from my class. You are just a slave, nothing can change that.*

The pain of her words still cut right through him at times. It wasn't long after, he'd chosen to become more than a mere slave. He'd become immortal, almost godlike. More powerful than Meroe ever dreamed of being.

The slow burn of his hand brought him back. A trickle of blood pebbled at the small cut. He'd been so busy sharpening he hadn't realized he'd sliced his hand.

Jax pitched down the weapon and went to the bathroom for a towel, wrapped it around the wound and went back to his room. Within a span of five minutes, the wound completely healed, not trace of an injury. Another good thing about being a vampire.

"Compound is secure boss," Carson's voice echoed from the intercom system. Jax pushed the button and responded. "Good. I'm going to get some shut eye."

"Okay, Boss, sleep tight. Don't let the bed bugs bite."

Yeah, with Carson in charge, the only danger Avery was in was her ears bleeding. Carson could out talk a group of politicians.

"Be careful. Keep a close eye on the girl." He released the button, let out a troubled breath, rubbed a hard hand over his face.

"I don't need anyone to watch me."

Avery? Jax turned to see the woman the beautiful voice came from. "Meroe."

Isis, this wasn't happening. She wore a pure white robe that swayed across the tops of her feet. Its waist gathered outlining a perfect figure. Her breast pressed tight to the material, peeping up above the lined bodice. The contrast of white on her bronze skin...well...she glowed.

Jax closed his eyes against the blinding lust he felt toward her at that moment. Damn, his eyes played tricks. Lengthy ebony hair, swept up and tied behind a long elegant neck. A few tendrils of curls framed her delicate face. Her eyes were the same, vexing and full of love for him.

But she hadn't loved only him...

"Come to me." She extended a hand.

Meroe?

"You're not Meroe. You can't be." His chest drew impossibly tight. His heart ached. Practically ached at the sight of the woman he hadn't seen for centuries.

"I am. I know it's hard for you to believe, but I'm back." She practically floated toward him. No, she was no angel.

Isis, could this be happening?

He lifted a hand to her face to make sure she was real. *Tangible.*

The heat of her skin seared his palm. She was real. Hell of a lot more real and more than she needed to be. "But I saw you die. We buried your body. I know it was you," his voice was barely above a whisper.

"Your eyes play tricks on you, my love. I'm real." She took his hand in hers, moved it from her face down to her chest. "Feel me."

The softness of her skin coasted under his callused palm. Just one touch, one feel and he went rock hard. *Isis*, he wanted her. Wanted to feel himself buried deep inside her until they screamed from the pure pleasure of it.

No. Did he still love her?

Jax hissed in pleasure as her arms draped around his neck and pulled their bodies impossibly close to one another. "You are now worthy of me, Jax. You have proved your loyalty..."

There she was, the same heartless woman he grew to love and hate.

His arms snaked up to catch hers. "What are you doing?"

"I need you. Haven't you missed me?"

His jaw clamped down hard.

Flecks of gold sparkled behind her eyes. There was an innocence, a good that Meroe never possessed.

Sweetly, slowly, the woman stood on her toes to reach his lips.

Once those precious, plump lips brushed along his, he was a goner. He sipped her at first, lazily, casually.

She was the reason he was who he was. What he was. The pain, so unbearable after her death...

What was he doing kissing her?

He moaned against her lips, vibrating. His arms wrapped around the small of her back, pressing her close to him. Nipples shot to attention, calling to him through her gown.

Coriander wafted into the air, shocking his nostrils.

Meroe never smelled of coriander.

Jax stopped thinking with his cock and pushed her away. "Avery?"

Avery jumped back. The taste of Jax still heavy on her lips. The feel of his embrace warmed her. What was she doing in his room? In his arms?

"Oh. I-I uh..." She stepped back, moved a palm to her mouth in embarrassment. "Oh God." Fear lined her stomach.

"What game are you playing?" Jax growled, deep and menacing. The man was angry, whatever she'd done hadn't been good.

"I-I'm not playing games," she tried to explain but he cut her off.

"The hell your not." A muscle in his jaw jumped. Avery had never seen anyone that angry.

Ever.

His eyes glowed. Seriously, glowed in anger. For the life of her, Avery couldn't figure out the answer to his question.

"Who told you to do that?"

She stood there, quiet.

"Answer me," he commanded, fists bunched at his sides. "Who told you about Meroe?"

Blood pumped through her veins at lightning speed. She searched, desperate for a way of escape. To lift herself from the unrelenting nightmare that was her life.

There were no doors. No windows. Who had a bedroom with no windows?

Someone that didn't want anyone to see in. "N-no one. I don't know what you're talking about."

"The hell you don't." Jax stormed her, pinned her slender shoulders rigid against the wall. "How do you know about her?"

Avery's eyes widened. What if he actually did kill her? It wasn't so far a stretch now was it? Lambert aside, she was in worse hands now, she was sure of it. Dark, menacing eye pierced hers. Anger's flames ignited beneath them. Oh damn, she'd really pissed him off now. What was going on? What in the hell happened to her life?

"I don't know about anyone. I don't know what you're talking about." She wanted to cry. Put her hands to her face and cry like a two-year-old girl.

She was homeless, jobless, without a present or future. Death lurked around every corner she turned. The gaps in time grew worse and worse and to top everything off, she had a toothache from hell.

Unconsciously, she lifted her fingers to her temples and rubbed. "I don't know what's happening. I'm losing time. Please..." A tear slid down her cheek. Her legs weakened to a state of Jell-O, and she was hungry.

"Please what?" his tone harsh.

"Please tell me what's happening to me."

Jax studied her for a moment, unclenched his fists, and relaxed his stance. The hard line of his shoulders sank. "You really don't know do you?"

Swiping a tear with the pad of thumb, Avery shook her head. "No, I don't." *Don't cry, please, don't cry. She was tougher than this.* Funny thing was, lately she didn't feel so tough. She felt like a scared child unsure of anything anymore. She was alone. Utterly and miserably alone. Her parents had passed away, both of them having had her at an older age. No brothers or sisters.

Here she was at the end. Her total wits end and no one to turn to for help.

No one to dry her tears.

Jax let out a sigh. "You're going to be alright." He said the words but somehow she wasn't so sure.

Another tear slid down her cheek. "I don't know what's happening to me. I-I..." it was uncontrollable now, so much so she sat on the bed even more bewildered than before. She shouldn't trust him.

He was the one doing this to her. Wasn't he?

Quickly, he sank down beside her. Just sat, not touching her and let her cry. Then he did something that shocked her. He looped his firm, secure arm around her and embraced her head on his shoulder.

It wasn't Meroe. His mind played tricks on him, it was Avery. The woman he desired in his room was Avery. That might be what scared him most.

The aura around her radiated. She was a good person. He sensed it. Everything he wasn't. He was hard, daring, and undeserving of any further contact with this woman other than official Brethren business. His intentions weren't noble.

Yeah, easing the constant throb of his cock was far from noble. The vise grip around his heart tightened. She was a person, with true feelings. Not just a pawn of Devlin. And at that

moment, Jax knew he'd save her from whatever fate had in store for her. Whatever the consequence.

He rocked her gently back and forth, combing his fingers through her satiny smooth hair. It took all his strength not to lay her back and take her. The cadence of her breathing soothed him. *Avery.*

The scent of her uncertainty pierced him. The smell of her arousal enthralled him.

"You haven't answered me." Those eyes peered into his, pleading for answers, help. Solace.

He took her chin with in his palm, tipped it up so he could focus on those pastel lips. "There are some things that just don't have answers. You just have to go with it."

"I don't want to just go with it. I want everything back to the way it was. I want Justin alive and laughing like he used to. I want my penthouse apartment and my career back."

What could he say to that? She didn't want irrational things. She just wanted to be herself again. Couldn't blame her.

Damn, she deserved to know what she was up against.

Jax allowed his arm drop from her side.

"The person after you..."

"Is you?"

He laughed.

"You're laughing at me." She wrinkled her eyebrows like she did every time she was mad. Had he really taken the time to notice that about her?

"I don't mean Lambert." He stood, gave her a little comfort room.

Her face loosened. "Who are you talking about then?"

Jax paced. The clunk of his boots tapping the floor sent his nerves further on edge. This wasn't anything new for the Etrux. So why did he care about what this woman thought? The truth was he had no business taking care of her. Especially the considering who she looked like. And if Jax didn't stop thinking with that brain inside his pants, the Brethren would fall to the Etrux's ploy. Whatever the hell that was...

"Who?" She stood meeting him. She was tall for a woman, not overly, but just enough wouldn't have to lean down too far to capture her breast with the tip of a fang. *Damn, she had to stop this. She had too...*

Half of the time, she was a lion. The other half a scared kitten. She'd been beaten down by many powerful people. For some strange reason, Jax wanted her to be his.

"You'd better sit back down."

Avery listened while Jax explained about the different gangs and how the turf wars affected the City and adversely, the entire world. She sat doe-eyed at the cadence in his voice. The way deep vibrations tingled along her skin as he spoke. She found herself not even listening to what he was telling her. Just loving the way his voice rippled over her skin.

It was like being in a dream. A sort of rhythmic therapy – that voice.

"And their leader wants you for his bride." She almost didn't catch those last words she'd been so focused on the musical lilt of his words, those lips.

"What?"

“He wants you for his bride and I need to know Avery, do you know anything about what I’ve just told you? Anything at all that could clue us in on what Etrux wants with you.”

Bride? Oh. God. He was crazy! Totally, irreversibly a nutcase. Why are all the gorgeous men gay or nuts?

“How can anyone want me for a wife I’ve never met?”

“We have a few leads.”

“You think?” Sarcasm dripped from her lips at record speed. This entire universe had gone stark raving mad. First the corrupt politics. Well, that wasn’t a big surprise, the accusation of murder, a price on her head, and now a stranger wanted to marry her.

What in the hell?

“I think I’d better be going now.” She bolted toward the door, past Jax, but before she could turn the knob he was there, blocking the exit. His body, large, a hard mass of muscles. Even without a loss of breath.

“How did you do that?”

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me. The fact that I’m fast is just one of them.”

This wasn’t the dark ages. Men just didn’t go around taking brides.

Did they?

Chapter Seven

Carson spent the day researching. It was boring her to the bone to sit around and watch Avery breathe. She was tied to Jax some way. She didn't know exactly how or why, but it was there just as sure as she was sitting there.

Energies didn't lie and they were a full kilowatt a piece when they were together. Hell, it was five hundred wonders everyone's hair didn't stand straight up when those two were in a room together.

Jax didn't date much and when he did, he damned sure didn't bring them in unconscious and hold them captive in the compound.

It was no secret where the books were kept. Jax encouraged the Brethren to read up on the legacies and about the ways of the ancients. Not that she ever did much, she wasn't a vampire and hadn't seen the need until now.

Though she'd seen members make their way down to the chamber many times, even Crude. Just finding which book was the kicker.

You'd think a race that wanted to keep humans unaware wouldn't leave a written trail.

"Okay, which one are you?"

Maybe they didn't want anyone to find the important books. That's why there were so many? Everyone would be too tired to keep reading and give up. Although if it was important, they wouldn't tell her. Truth was she had a mouth and a half. She could talk the horns off a bull and then some. But she could keep a secret and the fact they forgot that pissed her off at times.

Carson lifted her hand, closed her eyes. She walked her fingers along the spines of the books. Relaxed and channeled energy.

The first few were like touching a rock, cold and boring. She cleared her thoughts then tried again. "Some of you bastards have to contain something worth a shit to keep you here."

A slow burn started in her fingertips, jolted all the way to her elbow.

She jerked in reaction.

"I got you, you bastard!" She grabbed the book and took a seat at the table.

As she plopped the old book down, dust drifted into her nose, tickling her nostrils. So much so, she squelched a sneeze.

After the tingling in her brain stopped, she refocused her attention to the book.

The detail...

Leather bound, worn a bit, but still in good condition considering how old it must be. The acrid texture of the pages caused grit to form on her fingertips.

Running a palm over the pages with the vigor of a spy, she felt for energies. Something...that's about all she could do since the book was written in a language she couldn't understand. With every turn of the page, every scan of the hand, anticipation lined her stomach.

She'd found something, something big. This book threw off some major negativity. Inanimate objects just didn't do that unless someone was messed with them. Feeding off the power of the words.

By the third paragraph the tips of her fingers burned. When she reached the fourth, a surge of electricity bolted through her arm, slamming her against the wall.

Dazed and confused, she rubbed her head. "Damn, that's not your average afternoon read."

When Carson sat back down at the table, she experimentally touched a finger to the page.

Nothing.

"Just checking," she said, as if it could answer. Maybe the thing could? It sure knocked a hole in her ass.

When she looked at the words this time...she understood everything. Every single word. Carson peered over one shoulder, then the other. This was some weird shit.

The Prophecy of the Unborn... no, that's not it. The Prophecy of the Dead Dragon...what was this book? This was the one piece of literature the Brethren deemed irreplaceable? Hell, she'd thought for sure it'd been playboy, when she'd searched for it, but to each his own.

The bride taken has to be born of a soul already spent. A soul belonging to the family of a god must be slain. Then only then, shall he rise, taking those that awaken him to rule. The governance is rendered immobile against the power unleashed...Moons will collide....

Governance? Helpless? Whoever wrote this was into some freaky stuff.

Yeah well, who was she calling freaky? She lived with a vampire clan and she was in love with one of them for the sake of Peter. Focus. Why couldn't she get him out from under her skin? He was like a bad case of hives. When he's not there, you feel okay. Not bad, not good, just okay. But when he was there, he was under her skin and itching.

She wiggled in her chair at the mere thought of how that man affected her.

"What are you doing down here?" Carson jumped as if she'd been speared with a tipped arrow.

She closed the book, turned to feign innocence. "Just reading."

The large frame silhouetted the dimly lit room. Spice scent drifted through the air as Hunter descended the stairs and stopped just short of her.

"You don't read," he corrected, as he flicked on another light and grabbed a book from the shelf.

Of course not, he thought Carson illiterate along with a tomboy and potty mouth.

"Damn, Hunt. How do you know what I do besides kick vampire ass?"

He rolled his eyes at her and for a second, Carson thought he might smile. "Like I asked before, what are you doing down here?"

"And I'll tell you again, reading."

Holding his book in one hand, he extended the other. "Let me see."

"No." She tucked it protectively against her breast. "If you want it you'll have to come and get it." Well, damn, that sounded like a seven-year-old but it was the best she could come up with.

"Don't tempt me."

"Don't worry." She bit out sarcastically.

Hunter's eyes widened, coalesced and confused. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing." Damn it, she wanted to hide behind the one of the shelves of books lining the hidden room's interior. How was it she could engage in combat with the most fierce

vampires around, but she acted like a mouse around him? “Did you come down here just to badger me?”

“Jax sent me for a book.”

“You always do what Jax says?”

“You ever quiet?” Muscles bunched under the white cotton-ribbed tee. A light sheen of sweat covered him. The air was stuffy.

He smiled a satisfied smile and she wanted nothing more to slap him. Wasn't really his fault though. He didn't know how she felt. And she'd be damned if she'd ever let him know.

Why would she tell him? She wanted to answer him, but that would just prove his point. That she never did shut up. Instead she walked up to him, gazed deep into his eyes then walked away.

Jax blocked Avery's escape, his body hummed with desire at the proximity. Everything vampire in him sprang to life as his gaze slid to the bend of her neck. The beat of her heart pounded in his ears, the flow of blood ebbed through her veins, beckoning him.

Just a sip...

She'd taste of heaven, he knew it. Jax's fangs lengthened uncontrollably, throbbing to sink into her soft flesh and sip life's nectar. He closed his eyes, steadied his breathing.

Isis, she drove him mad.

“Get out of my way.”

“No.” He opened his eyes, propped a hand on the door frame.

“Yes.”

He stood, thick and stubborn. A mass of man. “Are we having a battle of wills? I may not be myself, but I can assure you, I'll win.”

“So sure?”

She groaned aloud. That did nothing other than draw his attention to those delectable lips.

“Why did you kiss me earlier?”

“I didn't,” she corrected, her warm breath trickling over his hand.

He shuddered it affected him so. Jax clucked his tongue, “Don't tell me you've already forgotten.”

She'd said she didn't know what was going on. And she probably didn't. But he couldn't get the image of her lips caressing his, warming his. For some reason, he didn't want her to forget the feel of his lips this quickly. Maybe it was pride, maybe not. He wanted her to remember ever movement as his lips slid possessively over hers. He wanted her to moan into his mouth while he drank her hard, fast, and all kinds of thirsty.

Isis, what had gotten into him?

He wanted her.

As crazy as it was, he wanted this mortal. If his cock got any harder, he'd never walk again. It throbbed, hell, it had ever since he'd laid eyes on her.

“I didn't kiss you.” She was impossible.

“You did.”

“I didn't want to.” She pushed at him.

He almost laughed. If he didn't want her to, there was no way she'd move a millimeter. It wasn't that he was a total asshole, he was just that strong.

"You did." His lips curved in a smile.

"Let go of me," she repeated, this time her voice lower.

The thought of filling her mind with lust crossed his, but he didn't want to do that. He'd never done that to a woman to have her. He never would.

"I'll bet you can be a hellcat when you want to be."

"Excuse me? Don't pretend to know me. And I don't remember kissing you."

"Then you need reminding."

In an instant, Jax captured her mouth with his. She should've protested. She should've kneed him where it counts and ran, but she did neither. Instead, she melted into his embrace. Loving the way he felt on her lips. Powerful, hungry and downright delicious.

Jax tasted of coffee and mint. The scent of spice and man drifted around her. His lips were soft, hard and manly the way he drank her with his kiss. His massive frame pressed solid against her, and before she knew it, she was away from the door and flattened to the wall inside the room.

How did he do that? Make her forget her senses? Make her forget where she even was. The man made her forget everything but those lips, that body.

God, she felt this man all over—from the top of her head to the tip of her toes, tingled with excitement. Jax's tongue swept into her mouth, coaxing it open further meeting hers in a tangle of passion.

Her arms at this point lay motionless at her sides. No more. She reached up and looped them around the back of his neck.

The steel length of him bore into her. She molded against him in delight. Normally, a man's touch didn't do this to her, but something deep in her mind told her this was no ordinary man. His touch, his rough essence radiated danger.

He was powerful, she felt it to her bones and for once in her life she wanted to feel that power. She wanted to feel...*Jax*.

He moaned in her mouth as he skillfully took control of her lips. Resting one hand on the wall, the other pulled her to him from the small of her back. His powerful erection pressed solid through his leathers.

Oh damn, he felt good. His hips persuaded her to mimic his movements and enjoy the touch of his skin on her.

She was breathing so hard, it was a wonder any oxygen made it to her brain.

"You are a delight."

Was she? No man ever said so. Sure, she'd had a few men, but none of them acted as though they could eat her alive.

Jax did. And the oddest part of it was she wanted him to.

Avery slid her palm under the leather, peeled his jacket off and let it fall to the floor. Her fingers itched to drift over his rigid pecks and feel the power coast under her palm.

Jax dragged a finger down the crook of her neck, pausing just shy of her breast. Desire, thick and heavy moved between her legs and it was all she could do to stand.

"I'm going to enjoy this," he growled, spreading her legs with his knee. Her skirt was bunched past her waist. His hard cock pressed to her core from behind his leather pants. Her center dripped in anticipation of knowing what a powerful lover Jax could be. Would be. And she couldn't wait to feel him drive inside her.

"I..." shouldn't she protest? Tell him to get off her or something? Yeah, she should, but her body sang a different tune. She was about to have sex with a man she'd met less than twenty-four hours ago. All the same, a man playing with her mind but something inside told her to trust him. He'd given her every reason not to. Every reason to fear for her safety in his arms.

Somehow, she didn't.

Jax made her feel. Not all of the emotions were good ones mind you but she felt. His hand came up to cup her mound and rubbed as his tongue darted and swept in her mouth. She moaned back at the feel of large fingers rubbing her where she craved. She was wet and wanton. Dripping to have all of that masculine power tearing her insides into shards of ecstasy.

Jax tore his lips from hers, "Were you going to say something?"

She couldn't speak. Hell, she couldn't form words. The only thing she could do was think about how good it would feel to have him inside her. Pumping. Moving. Making her writhe in pleasure.

She shook her head.

"Good, because your body says it all."

Jax never had an arousal so painful in his life. His cock throbbed to sink into her heat and pump her until they both couldn't walk. He had no business doing it. But that made it all the more appealing at the moment. With a swift movement, he tugged her to the floor, resting her on top of him.

Isis, it's where she belonged. She looked so good sitting there...perfect.

He wouldn't have touched her or kissed her if she'd not been completely aroused. Her scent was thick in the air, true.

Avery felt him, needed him. For a moment, he wanted to be needed for something other than the Brethren's business.

She is the Brethren's business. The tiny voice in his head reminded him, but he ignored it. She was *his* business for the next few minutes and he planned on doing his business with her.

He released her center and inched his fingers along her inner thigh.

It was when she let out a hiss, he stopped.

Devlin called.

Avery reacted the same way any mortal did when being Brided.

"Damn." Jax moved away as she hissed and thrashed about the floor. She even touched herself a few times, calling out to that bastard. He could easily take advantage. His body wanted to feel her.

Oh hell, no. When Jax took her it would be because she thought of him, not that bastard Devlin was playing God with her mind.

Who was he to think he could take over her mind? Take over her life? What right did he have to convert without permission?

None.

Something fierce welled in him. He thought of Meroe and the man that had taken her from him. He'd sat back and idly watched it happen.

Not this time. He'd never do that again.

In that moment, *Isis* help him, Jax knew he wanted Avery to be his. Whatever happened, she would be his and he'd share her with no one.

"Avery."

She didn't acknowledge his voice, just lay back and moaned.

Jax reached down lifted Avery like she was a feather and laid her gently on the bed.

"Avery. Come back to me."

"Master?" She called and it made his heart ache. Devlin was no one's master. He was a shell of a vamp and got his rocks off on power. He wanted to play games, Jax could play.

"You have a new master now."

Chapter Eight

A knock sounded at the door. "Boss, can you come here for a bit?"

Jax turned to Avery, lying on the bed. "I'll be right back."

She nodded in agreement, fading in and out of sleep. She looked peaceful now, serene. Free of worry and confusion.

The knock sounded again. "Be right there." He opened the door and as soon as he did, Carson's started in without a warning, just jumped right to it.

"I know what's happening," Carson's accusatory tone made him wonder if she'd been spying on Avery and him.

He met her in the hallway, shut the door behind him. "Talk."

"Hunter told me everything." She folded her arms over her chest, leaned against the wall.

"Everything what?"

She rolled her eyes. "You know everything what, Jax. What you two have been up to behind my back."

Jax let out a sigh of relief. She wasn't talking about Avery. "Hunter was instructed to silence."

Anger radiated from her face. "I knew it!"

"Knew what?"

"Hunter didn't tell me. Why do you tell him everything and not me? It's it because I'm a woman? I'm white?"

He laughed out loud. "Do you know how stupid you sound?"

"There you go calling me stupid! I'm getting to the bottom of what's going on and for once everyone here is going to see me for what I'm worth."

"Everyone?"

"Yes, everyone," she said, realizing he had her pegged. A sudden color crept into her cheeks.

"Carson, you don't have to prove anything to me."

Her face fell and instantly he knew who she wanted to see her as an equal. His heart went out to her. It was horrible to have the person you loved right in front of you and not really care. He knew how that felt first hand. He'd been played a fool.

Once.

He'd never be that again.

Jax lifted her chin with the crook of his finger. "Be yourself. If he can't love you for you, he doesn't deserve you."

There was a dull pain behind her green eyes. "Thanks, Jax." She swallowed.

"Now go to weapons detail. We meet the Cian tonight and I need you solid."

"I'm solid."

"Good."

"Still pissed you tell Hunter everything though," she called as she walked away.

He laughed again. "Get on with you."

So many things about Carson were still like a child. He guessed it was the Brethren's fault. They'd taken her in and knew nothing about how to be a father to her. While other girls her age were taught about makeup and dating, she was taught to fight. He let out a long breath and turned the doorknob. Avery was calm now, serene. Breathing slowed and her pulse normal. She looked beautiful in underneath the blanket, sleeping.

Why had he lied to her? He wasn't her master. He had no intention of bridging her to save her from Devlin. Hell, he'd only just met her. That was for life and his life was entirely too long and dangerous to put up with someone else.

Still the same, Jax didn't make a practice out of lying to women. Hell, he usually did just the opposite. If anyone was the most noble of the Brethren about bedding women it was him, true. He didn't get his rocks off by using and discarding young women the way some vampires did.

The simple truth was this. He didn't want Avery calling to Devlin, feeling anything for Devlin, and damned sure wasn't going to allow her to be seduced by Devlin for one more moment than she had to be.

Her eyes fluttered open, glossy. She was in another world, another place in time.

With him.

That son of a bitch just went around bedding and draining mortals as if it were nothing. Jax peered down at her gentle face, her delicate curve of her body.

She was becoming Devlin's. Converting. All she needed was one last embrace and she'd be Etrux. The one clan Jax wouldn't piss on to put out the fire. The thoughts of it curled around his esophagus and squeezed. Devlin would have his day, hell, every dog did and his day was coming soon.

"Jax?" she whispered and swallowed hard. "Help me?" It was a gentle plea. Under the circumstances it was normal. Avery could've asked for anyone's help. She hadn't. She asked for his.

He gathered her limp, fevered body in his arms, pressed her tight to his solid frame. "I'm here. I have you now." He smoothed her shirt down to where her stomach now showed. Even though they'd just almost been intimate, she wasn't herself and he had no right to look at her in this way.

"I'm glad." A strand of hair fell over her docile cheek. He brushed the hair from her face, tucked a stray strand behind her ear.

Damn, he'd probably regret what he was about to do. But the cards needed to turn and turn in their favor.

Devlin couldn't be allowed to get his way.

Devlin barked out orders as if he'd been in charge centuries upon centuries. It was bred into him and when he'd become a vampire, it was a skill he'd fine tuned. Avery was perfect. Hell, the bitch was stellar. She'd make a fine bride indeed. That was until she fulfilled his purpose.

She'd be easy to dispose of and cause a wrath upon the Brethren like nobody's business. The cell phone rang.

Devlin flipped it open, "Yeah."

"You've lost her," the voice said. "I'm not paying you to screw this up."

"You're either too brave or too stupid. I haven't really decided which." Who did he think he was talking to the Etrux in this manner? The Etrux could tear off his head in an instant.

"Persistent is the word. Find her, damn it. And when you do, finish what you started or they'll be no place for you when all is said and done."

There was click followed by a dead silence.

A tic worked its way down Devlin's jaw. He slammed the phone hard against the wall and watched it shatter to pieces. No one told him what to do. No one!

As soon as the plan was carried out, he'd rule over all.

He'd be the most powerful vampire the world has ever seen. After he took that bastard's money, then he'd be disposed of as well.

And he might shove the phone down his overly confident throat.

"Jax. Brother, I've found it."

"True?" Jax eyed Hunter as he lifted a steak from the grill and took a swig of whiskey.

"Yeah. I slipped into Carson's room, lifted the book." He slapped a steak on the plate and offered him one.

"She's resourceful," Jax said.

"Meddling is more like it."

Jax moved over to sit in the chair and propped his boots on the lawn table. There were few things better than sitting outside in the night and grilling. Jax usually never afforded the break, but if he didn't do something to get his mind off of the woman lying in his bed upstairs, he was going to go stir crazy. "Yeah, well, she means well, Hunt."

Hunter rolled his eyes, turned over another sizzling piece of meat. "He wants the ancients, Jax."

Jax ran a hand over his smooth head. "I kind of figured."

"Yeah, boss, dangerous as hell."

"We do dangerous."

"We do."

"So tell me, how does that worm Devlin plan to accomplish this?"

"The bride. Prophecy reads he takes a bride of a reincarnated soul and spills her blood over the seal."

Jax's feet dropped from the table and he stood. It couldn't be. Hell, he wouldn't allow it. "No."

Hunter paused. "That's not the half of it, brother." Should he even ask? "What is?"

"The epitaph says the reincarnated must be special. Have a lineage dating back to well, your time period."

Jax couldn't believe his ears. Meroe. The son of a bitch thought Avery was Meroe? Oh gods, this wasn't happening.

"Anyone else know about this?" He tried to force his temper down a thousand notches, but it was hard.

"Possibly Carson, that's all."

"Well, she won't say anything."

"There's more."

"Sweet Isis, what?"

"He has to slay her. Seems her blood his will open the tomb and raise an ancient." Jax covered his head with the palm of his hand. Sweet *Isis*, no. This wasn't happening." The man is screwed up."

"Yeah, no kidding, brother."

"The Brethren will be protected."

"I know boss." Did he? Doubt lined his brow and Jax had a feeling he was trying to ease his worries.

"I'll never let it come to this."

Hunter nodded. He was all too aware the implications if an ancient rose. They lay buried securely under the city. Had for centuries. They didn't want to be awakened, not until their time. If this happened, Chicago would turn into a slaughter house.

Jax swallowed hard. How had he missed the signs? Devlin had planned this for a while. A slow burn, gnawed at his stomach.

He'd lived through torture, slavery, but he wouldn't live through this if it happened.

No one would. And with Devlin ruling right along side the ancients, it could be apocalyptic.

"Gather the boys."

"What about the steak?"

"Looks done to me, not get the gang," he repeated, then walked away, he had to get to Avery. If Devlin believed her to be Meroe there was a damned good reason.

Jax knew what had to be done. She couldn't be taken by the Etrux if she belonged to him. It was risky, but it just might work.

Avery felt a little better. A huge emphasis on a *little*. Her head still throbbed and the annoying pang in the pit of her stomach hadn't let up. But she was well enough to get out of the robe and back into some jeans and a tee. What she wouldn't give for her favorite business suit and pumps.

A shudder ran the length of her spine. That world seemed a million miles away.

What was wrong with wanting your things with you? She wanted the comfort of her own home. To curl up in her bed and sleep only to wake the next day and this all be a nightmare.

Maybe she was sick? Too many changes were happening to her body. She needed tests done and she needed a doctor for medical attention.

She needed to leave the city and go where no one recognized her. Pretty hard to do since she'd been national news.

"Hey, I figured we were about the same size." Carson bounced into the room carrying an arm load of clothes. "Jax said you'd be here a while and well, he doesn't understand women need a lot of clothes." Her smile lit up the room.

"No, he doesn't," she agreed.

Carson handed her some jeans, some leathers, and a pair of boots. "What size boot are you?"

"Oh, a seven."

“Holy shit! It’s like we’re sisters,” the woman exclaimed. “They’ll fit. I’ve never worn them. Matter of fact, I ordered them and thought I’d save them for a special occasion. I think having another woman around is it, don’t you?”

The boots were brand new. Black leather, a small chain around the ankle with a small heart fastened where the chain met. They were gorgeous. Avery had never really worn leather before, aside from pumps. The idea of so much leather appealed to her. “I won’t be around much longer, Carson. These are my problems. They belong to me and I have to solve them myself.”

She smiled as Carson hung up the clothes in the armoire. “Honey, I said I wouldn’t ever live with a house full of men myself, but I’ve been here for some time now.”

“Really?”

“Sure. Jax is the best. He recruited me.”

“Recruited you? Into what?”

She closed the armoire, turned to her. “I’ve got some extra bottles of shampoo, conditioner and even some lotion. I’ll you bring some back and you can get a bath.”

A bath sounded nice. She hadn’t had anything but quick showers and rag baths while she’d been on the run. But that’s not what she’d meant. “Recruit you into what?”

“Service of the Brethren of course.” Carson wrinkled her brow as if to say ‘don’t you know anything?’

“What kind of service?”

“We’re fighters.”

Fighters? That didn’t come as too much of a shock as muscular as they were. Maybe they were professional wrestlers? That would explain a lot of their peculiar behaviors. “Are you any good?”

“Oh, hell yeah.” Carson beamed. “Hey get dressed, we’re having steak tonight.”

Well, she was hungry. “Okay, I’ll be down in a bit.”

Maybe she’d eat a meal before she went back on the run.

The beat of her barely human heart thumped loud in his ears. Jax’s gaze searched for the her. *Avery.*

Descending the stairs, black leather clung to the delicious curves of her hips. That was a fabulous view, but that wasn’t what got to him. It was the soft leather coat barely zipped exposing a hint of cleavage. The bottom of the jacket was cut up to her mid drift and exposed her flat stomach.

Jax ground his teeth at the sight and hoped none of the other members noticed the changes in him when she was near.

Avery’s cheeks had sunk only slightly, giving her face definition. She’d even taken the time to put on lipstick and smiled on her way down. *Gorgeous. Breathtaking.*

Vampire.

“Doesn’t she look pretty?” Carson ran to her side, meeting her at the bottom of the stairs and turned to the Brethren as if to present their newest member. Damn, Avery looked the part and then some, another ravaging beauty in kick-ass leather.

His cock shot to attention at the thought of tearing the zipper out with his teeth and sampling the tender flesh of her breasts over and over. Carson brought her over to where Jax

stood and he hadn't even realized the entire compound was stunned silent. Crude stopped his poker game and Dagger even looked up from his *Fitness* magazine.

They all saw what he saw, Avery, and she was a vixen.

"Let's eat," Hunter strolled into the living area and stopped short at the site on the stairs. His eyes searched Jax's and he let him know everything would be fine. Inside, he wasn't so sure.

"You need someone to help you out of that get up, just you let me know." Dagger's lips curved in a sly smile.

Watch it, brother. Jax sent him a warning.

I didn't realize you had such an interest in the mortal.

I don't.

Then you won't mind if I test the waters, it's been a day since I've had a female and even longer since I've sampled a mortal. Dagger smiled at him from across the room.

You touch her...lay one finger and I'll...

I knew it.

Knew what?

You like her, don't you?

Don't be ridiculous.

Yeah, you either. Dagger jeered.

Jax pinned him with a stare, then turned back to Avery.

"I think I can manage on my own, thank you," Avery informed Dagger.

Take that.

No problem, Jax, she just needs a little persuasion.

Like I said you lay one finger...

Damn, boss, she's got you by the strongholds. Dagger's laughter echoed through his mind.

He decided to let that one slide if Avery hadn't been standing there, he'd clocked him one just to remind him who's in charge.

"Who's hungry?" Hunter repeated

The boys snapped out of their stupor and followed Hunter to the kitchen. There were many things about them that weren't normal, however, one normal thing they did do was grilling steak and eating. Nothing was better than a medium rare steak charred over flaming embers.

"Are you hungry?"

She shook her head. "I really am. I haven't eaten anything satisfying in a while."

"Hunt cooks a mean steak."

She gave him a smile. "I'm sure he does. It smells delicious."

Jax didn't know why but he extended his arm to her and she took it. The feel of her fingers wrapped trusting around his forearm caused something possessive to rise up in him. It felt too natural.

For a moment, he wanted to pretend she was his and that he had a right to claim her, but that was just a fantasy he needed to push from his mind.

Avery paused.

"You okay?"

"I haven't seen this part of the house before."

It hadn't occurred to him she hadn't. Her eyes took in everything. The chandelier, the brass candlesticks, and the works of art hanging on the walls.

"It's beautiful." Her hand dropped from his arm, the absence of her touch bothered him more than it should.

Jax wasn't used to being a gentleman. He could, it wasn't that he couldn't, he just hadn't had a call for it and he wasn't exactly sure how to do it anymore. He reached for the back of the chair so he could pull it out for her but Dagger beat him to it.

"After you," Dagger said.

"Thanks," Avery replied.

Gotcha. Dagger aggravated Jax further.

Lay off, Dag.

Yeah, yeah. Don't want you getting all worked up. You are an old son of a bitch.

Jax laughed out loud.

Everyone but Dagger turned to look at him as if he were crazy. Instead of answering them, Jax took a seat next to Avery.

Maybe he'd made a statement just then for the rest of the Brethren to back off. He'd hoped like hell he had. Because if he hadn't made one, he might need to.

Looking as good as she did he didn't want to chance anyone making a move on her tonight. The way their eyes devoured her, she was game for any of their hungry vampire appetites. He'd have none of that. Oh, he'd have none of that.

The food smelled delicious. Avery's stomach rumbled at the scent of the newly cooked meat. She was living with a group of wrestlers. It was kind of surreal since she'd always prided herself on being 'normal' and boring. Lately, her life was anything but. Man, what she would give for some boring about right now.

Hunter emerged from the kitchen wearing jeans and a long cooking apron that read 'kiss the cook, you get hurt'. It made her smile. He slapped steak on everyone's plate not even asking how they liked it cooked. The potatoes were already on the plate and goblets of wine on the place setting in front of everyone.

"Hold 'em up boys, I'm coming around." Dagger grabbed the wine and poured the glasses full. Carson chose to forgo the wine, but hell if Avery would. After all she'd been through she needed a drink or two or three.

Avery held her cup up for Dagger to pour, immediately Jax's hand clamped over the top of the glass. "None for her." Dagger moved away and proceeded to the next cup.

"Excuse me?"

"You wouldn't like it."

"Don't tell me what I would or wouldn't like. Dagger, please come back with the wine."

Dagger looked at her as if undecided. Did they all listen to everything Jax said? It was crazy. "I don't care what Jax says. I'm a big girl I can have wine if I want."

The man was clearly demented if he thought he was going to tell her what she could and could not drink. Damn it, she'd lost enough choices lately and she wouldn't have the simplest of decisions taken away from her as well. It was up to her what she did or did not put in her body.

Dagger walked back, looked sheepishly at Jax and poured a small amount in her cup then backed away as if she had bubonic plague.

Everyone held their cups high as Jax stood. "My brothers, I have spoken with the leaders of the Cian. Our clans plan to ally tonight. The two clans together will be a strong alliance, true."

There was a series of grunts in agreement as they held their mugs high into the air. Crude spoke, "The Brethren has a strong leader in Jax. We'll follow you to the end."

They all growled in agreement.

Well, it's settled. They're barbarians. The leader spoke and everyone grunted. Why not eat dinosaur meat off a drumstick and run around the cave in a fur toga?

"Tonight, we also have a special guest at our table, Avery Johnson."

All eyes moved on her and she didn't know whether to smile or duck under the table. The latter was the most appealing.

"Treat her with respect. Protect her to the end. She is important to us."

What was that supposed to mean? It was like he spoke to them in a language only they understood. Didn't they question her presence here?

"To Avery," Carson stood with her glass of water.

"To Avery," they all chimed in and drank.

Avery turned up her cup as well and drank. Jax watched her as if she were taking a sip of arsenic, which was silly because it was the most delicious wine she'd ever tasted. She gulped and gulped. Spicier than any other wine she'd tasted, but she assumed must be homemade. It was...*fabulous*.

She didn't even noticed everyone else had already sat down, all eyes focused on her drinking. Heat filled her face. Had she done something wrong?

The room fell silent. "Uh...great wine." What was she supposed to say? They were all acting as if she were a critic and was going to rate it or something. "Can I have more?"

Crude laughed, "Give the woman more wine, Dagger. The lady obviously has taste."

Jax stared in amazement. She already had the taste for it, true. Hell, she'd practically inhaled the contents of the goblet. What would her reaction be if she knew what she'd ingested?

Avery might not know what was in the cup, the Brethren certainly did. Suspicion of the men would double now they'd witnessed her blood lust first hand. There was no hiding it now and damn, he had some explaining to do.

Even worse, Crude kneed him under the table as though Jax had been the one converting Avery. *Dude, It's not me. Swear.* Jax sent him the message and Crude nodded.

Isis, things were just getting worse. The longer the woman hung around the compound, the weirder things would get around here. He had too much else to worry about rather than worrying over a woman. She was a liability.

As he watched her lips curve around the edge of the goblet, he remembered the way their softness played over his own lips. The taste of her still lingered in his memory. *Isis*, he shouldn't want her in that way.

Jax cut into his steak and took a long bite. Juice drenched his tongue, tasting of seasoning salt and steak sauce. Hunter did cook a mean steak, but it wasn't enough to attract his attention away from the woman sitting next to him.

The men finally quit gawking and Avery was working on her second glass of wine. It was cute, the way she cut her meat in tiny little pieces. Forking the meat and then bringing it into her mouth and chewing it slowly.

"Hmm..." she moaned as she chewed. "This is really good."

"Thanks," Hunter answered and took a seat next and started working on his own steak.

"*Amharic*," Avery said, then wrinkled her brow in confusion.

The men stopped chewing, stopped drinking, hell, they even stopped breathing for a while and just gaped at her.

"What did I just say?"

Not everyone there knew what she'd said, but Jax did. "You said thank you."

"Oh."

"In Egyptian," Jax added, trying to form words past the constrictive knot in the back of his throat.

Crude shot a glance to Carson who shot a glance to Dagger then they all began eating again as if it were nothing. The tension in the room remained thick.

Jax pitched his napkin on the table. "Excuse me. I have to make a phone call."

No one said a word. They didn't ask any questions, just kept eating as Jax made his way from the room. He didn't have a call to make. He had to get the hell out of there and away from Avery.

She couldn't be Meroe. Devlin was messing with his head. It was impossible. This woman seemed nice, honest. All of the things Meroe turned out not to be.

You've only just met her, he reminded himself. As a vampire, he sensed the presence of evil. Avery wasn't evil. Only the times he sensed evil were those when Devlin called her.

So many pieces of the puzzle remained to be solved, but the largest piece belonged to Etrux.

Devlin had to be stopped at all costs.

No matter who it hurt.

Chapter Nine

The Brethren met with the Cian at *Bleeders*. It was a good place to blend. Hell, the mortals looked so screwed up in their costumes no one would think twice about looking at them.

Crude set up a rack of pool and broke. The clank of the pool balls was a subtle roar in the background noise of the bar. "I don't trust them."

"You don't trust anyone," Jax reminded him.

A cloud of smoke circled the bright green lamp swung low from the ceiling. A couple clad in leather from head to toe was in the corner, necking hard. Totally unaware anyone else was even in the room. Something squeezed on Jax's heart. What would it feel like to have someone that into him? Wanting him so much the entire world melted away?

His throat tightened. He'd never know.

"Maybe I'm the one with the right idea." Crude kicked up the left side of his mouth in a wry smile and tapped the cue ball sending eight solid into the right corner pocket.

"I understand, my brother, but you understand this. The Etrux is strong. Any help we can get from the Cian is necessary."

"When do you plan on letting the rest of us in on what's *really* going on?"

"Soon."

"Is it that girl? Everyone thinks she's holding something over you, boss. I'm not one for gossip, but if someone's screwing with your head, Brethren needs to know."

Jax scratched. The cue ball went in right after the other. "Damn."

Crude laughed. "See what I mean?"

Yeah, Avery had his mind clouded, true, but he could still handle business. He always has and always will. "I'm fine."

Crude nodded his head and leaned over for the next shot.

"They're here." Jax nodded as the leader of the Cian entered the back room. Dagger and Hunter immediately rushed to his side, folding their solid arms across their chests in a warning.

"Thought I smelled nasty east-siders," Dagger said, standing to the right of Jax.

"Have manners, Fledgling." For once, Dagger obeyed Jax's orders and was quiet.

Rave extended his hand. "Thanks for coming, Jax."

He took his hand, shook it hard. It never hurt to let him know he still dealt with power. "No problem."

The vamp looked around, nervous. "Have a seat."

They both moved to the booth where they slid across from one another. "What do you need, Rave?" It was always good to cut straight to business. Pressing issues were at hand and he didn't have the patience for small talk, especially from a rival gang member.

"The Etrux." Rave's expression held worry. "Our two territories join by the northern quarter."

Jax nodded.

"An uprising would be the end of us all."

He knew. How? Jax pinned him with a suspicious glare as the other members of Brethren went back to their pool game. "Don't screw with me, Rave. How do you know this?"

"Calm down, brother."

"I'm not your brother. You see, other vampires make the mistake of thinking because we are the same breed, we're all in this together."

Rave lifted a palm to sooth him. "Okay, okay. I come in peace. We've spoke of this before, I thought you were in favor of an alliance." The tension in Jax's shoulders seeped out.

"If it meets the Brethren's needs, then yes. I've already informed our members there'd be an alliance so they wouldn't stake you on site tonight, but you've not completely convinced me yet."

"What will it take?" Rave fiddled with the salt shaker, spilling a few grains and running them over the table top with his forefinger.

"Say what you have to say. I'll hear you out."

"We need an alliance. The Etrux is recruiting members right and left."

"Fledglings," he reminded.

"Members no less." Rave lifted a cig and silver lighter from the inner lining of his jacket, rested the filter between his lips and fired it up.

"I'm not afraid of anyone with Etrux blood in their veins."

Rave gestured to himself. "You think I am? We've been beating the hell out of the Etrux for almost as long as you guys, but this is different. They're different."

"What can I get you boys?" A waitress strolled up, holding pad and pen in hand.

Rave knew things. He would make a strong ally and picking his brain for information could prove helpful.

"Potato skins," Rave informed.

"Those things not give you indigestion?"

"Hell, no, smooth sailing all the way down," Rave said proudly, patting his chest.

"Make it a double order," Jax said and slammed a shot of whiskey.

"I'll have it out in about twenty." Then she walked away.

"We need to ally. You can't fight them off on your own."

"Speak for yourself."

"Fine, man. Be a stubborn bastard if you want to. But when the ancients come to life and dust your ass, you'll wish you'd listened."

"Talk."

"Devlin has it out for you. Everyone knows that. The question is why?"

Jax knew why. Because he was the leader of the most powerful gang around and if he could defeat him, the stupid bastard believed he would be the new leader of the Brethren. Too bad the Brethren didn't operate like the Etrux. That's the way of it for those vampires. Not the Brethren, they had the secret Senate that selected their leaders. Not fight and defeat. Not challenge and take over.

It was their way and it was sacred.

"He has a penchant for good ass beatings, is my only guess," Jax joked.

"Joke if you want, but word is on the street, he has your number this time."

Rave knew. He ran a methodical gaze over the vampire across from him. Spiked hair with too much hair product and processed blond streaks down the sides. A jagged scar ran the

length of his right cheek. A skull and cross-bone earring dangled from his left ear. Rave spoke with an Irish lilt mixed with the new English he'd picked up since coming over from the mother land years ago.

Jax let out an exasperated breath. Sometimes you just had to go with your gut. "What's the plan?"

Avery. The voice soothed her mind.

"Yes?" A tinge of fear lined her stomach at the voice.

It won't be long. We'll be together. Tingles shimmered from head to toe. Tension coiled around her spine. The thought of being with him somehow made her cringe.

"They've told me who you are."

He laughed, an eerie echo splintering through her mind.

They? You choose to listen to the Brethren rather than me? Listen to yourself. I'm the one that's been here for you. Wait for me, I'll be with you again soon.

Avery covered herself with her arms, squeezed tight. Maybe she needed to feel the pain? "Stay away from me. I want nothing to do with you." Avery frantically searched the room for a sign the man. For a sign of anyone trying to harm her. *Come on you bastard, I'm ready to fight.*

What's gotten into you, Avery? I don't want to fight you. I want to spend eternity with you.

Yeah, you forgot one part.

What?

You forgot to propose.

He laughed again. The sounding raked over her sharp like fingernails dragging along a chalkboard.

We have forever to get to know one another, my dear. Don't worry over such trivialities.

She didn't want to get to know him. She didn't want anything to do with him. What she did want was to find out what really happened to Jonathon and clear her name and get the hell out of this nightmare.

Justin, his face appeared in her mind. Innocent. He was such a nice boy. Tall, smart, and had a promising future. It'd all been taken away. Stripped from him by the turn of the ignition. She hadn't killed him. She hadn't.

Had she?

She sat on the edge of the chair, leaned her head down into her palms. Everything was so fuzzy. Her memories distorted.

Close your eyes, let me help you.

"Go away. I need..."

I know what you need.

"No. Leave. Let me rest."

Rest darling, let those long lashes feather your cheeks. Let me take the memories from you. Let me in your mind.

An eerie calm fell over her body. Slow, whimsical. Her body almost float toward the bed where she climbed, leather and all still clinging to her body.

Sleepy, she was so sleepy...

That's it, darling. Let me in.

And that was the last thing she remembered.

The moment Jax shook Rave's hand, the Etrux attacked from all corners of *Bleeders*. Jax immediately shoved the table at Rave knocking him backward. "You'll pay for this."

Crude, Dagger, and Hunter joined the fight. Blood splattered from the mouth of one member. It wasn't hard to tell what they faced were new recruits. Their fighting skills surpassed that of the usual Etrux fledgling.

Tables knocked over, drinks spilled over the floor, glass shattered everywhere and still the men kept fighting. "Devlin send you to do his dirty work?" Jax asked the brown haired vampire he sparred with.

"Devlin sends you and his lady, best wishes." The vampire caught him in the mouth with a spin kick. Fervent liquid coated Jax's mouth. Oh this asshole was gonna get it. The thought of Devlin anywhere near Avery pissed him off to no end.

Jax tucked and flipped into the air all the while extracting his dagger from the strap around his ankle. When he landed, he caught the vamp in the chest. Cinder and ash littered the air as he disintegrated into a pile of molten dust.

"Who's next?" He turned to see Dagger and Crude were handling three Etrux a piece. Not a surprise.

Carson cornered one to the back of the pool room, pretty much beating it to a bloody pulp. Carson?

If Carson was here, that meant one thing...Avery was alone.

Son of a bitch! They'd fallen right into Devlin's trap.

Jax took flight, not wasting any time. The compound was secure, true, but he didn't put anything past the Etrux. Slimy bastards. The dark ground whizzed by, the blur of the lights barely noticed as one thing lay heavy on his mind.

Avery.

He needed to be able to protect her. He couldn't bear see another woman he cared about murdered. Even though Meroe wasn't true to him, he didn't want to watch her die. He'd never wanted it to end that way. He'd realized he didn't love her after he'd moped about for over a month after she'd left him. But he'd never wanted to watch her die.

Jax shut his eyes against the blinding pain of the memory. He wouldn't stand by and watch history repeat itself. He couldn't.

Wind bit into his skin, still he flew faster, slowing only as the compound came into view. He glided down, floating to the ground. He landed and pressed the security buttons for entrance.

Blood pumped through his body at such a rapid pace he swore he actually held a full-beating heart in his chest. If Devlin harmed one hair on her head he'd...

The moment the door slid open, he drew a deep breath.

Etrux. Their foul scent clung to the air like dirty laundry.

As strong as it was, they might even still be there. If they were, they'd never leave the compound without being ripped to shreds.

Jax crept along side the wall, inching toward the room where Avery slept. *Let her be alright.* The thought of Devlin's slimy hands on her made him want to wretch. Jax fingered the holster where he kept a UV pistol for emergencies.

This was one.

The closer he got to her room the signs they'd entered the compound weren't just faint, they drenched the joint.

How could he be so stupid? To think the Brethren could ally with another clan was crazy. It'd been a failed attempt Jax wouldn't repeat. If the ancients rose, it'd be every vamp for himself. Help them all.

The door to the room was open, wide open. The sound of silence pierced his ears. The relenting panic owned him for the first time in centuries. She had to be okay. She just had to be.

Jax peered around the corner, UV pistol still in hand and crept in.

No one was there except for an unopened window and Avery's peaceful body lay on the bed.

The beat of her heart, faint, her breath shallow.

Placing the pistol in the holster, he rushed to her side, lifted her palm in his and massaged the fading pulse in her wrist.

"Wake up," his voice was a whisper, his request a plea. What had they done to her?

She groaned, only a slight movement on her legs.

"Avery. Wake up."

"Why does it hurt?" Her soft voice came over him.

He continued to rub her hair, "What hurts?"

"My body. It aches." Her eyes opened, the look wild, crazed. The sickness had already entered her blood. She was hungry. She was in a world in between mortal and vampire and really wasn't either.

Damn it.

Without her knowing, he examined her neck for new puncture wounds. Of course, Devlin could heal them with the swipe of his tongue, but a seasoned vampire could still tell when someone had been bitten. There was no scent of fresh blood in the air.

"Did you see who was here?"

"Hmm..." She moaned.

"Avery, try and think. Who was in this house?"

"Not the house...my...mind. I'm going crazy." The dazed expression on her face tugged at him. Devlin was screwing with her mind, owning her soul and taking her life from her.

At that moment, Jax's heart bled for her. *Mine*. He was possessive, ruthless in his quest to keep her. Fangs lengthened. *Keep her, make her yours*. The beast within him, rose, begging to mark her and make her his bride for eternity, but he didn't.

He couldn't. Could he?

"Sh..." he soothed. "It'll pass." He said the words but wasn't really sure if he believed them. The truth was, now she was this far into the transformation there might be no going back. There was a way to keep Devlin from making Avery his sacrifice. Jax could make her his, but they run the same risk of her surviving the conversion.

Did he really want to spend eternity with this woman he'd only just met?

Chapter Ten

Faint voice sang to her. Calling her from the abyss of which she'd lost herself.

The slam of the brakes. The cries of the wounded. Jonathon! She'd killed him. Now she was certain of it. Wasn't she? Blood drenched the street, images of the young man lying on the sidewalk in her rearview mirror seared her mind.

"No!" she screamed, trying to wake from the horrible vision, "No, I..."

Sudden warmth blanketed her from the nightmare, enveloped her in the promise of hope.

She didn't need that promise. There was no hope. She'd killed him. She'd done it.

Avery was a murderer. Wasn't she?

"Sh..." the strong voice soothed. *Hmm...it was nice. Deep.*

"I killed him. I—I...did it." Avery lifted heavy lids the blurred figure came into focus. A man held her with strong, wondrous arms.

Jax.

The well-defined bone structure of his face, the smoothness of his skin moving along his jaw. Those full, kissable lips. He was like a drug when she was around him. Magnetic and forceful. One that could engulf her entire being. At that moment, she wanted to be engulfed. She wanted to feel him touch her, to be with her and think of nothing except the way she felt when she was around him.

"Thank God, it's you." She threw her arms around the back of his neck, squeezed hard.

The palm of his large hand came around, grabbed her arm and slowly tugged it away. "It's okay, they're gone now."

Gone? Who? Avery had been the only one in the room, hadn't she?

"What are you talking about?" her own voice so hazy she barely recognized it.

"It doesn't matter, they're gone."

His arms felt incredibly powerful, protective. "What's happening to me?"

The chocolate eyes peering into hers faltered. "You just have a little fever."

Fever? That explained a lot. She must be hallucinating. That's why her body ached and throbbed. That's why heat filled her cheeks every time Jax neared.

Fever.

"I'm sick?"

"A little." The sound of his voice played over her skin, deep and smooth like bathing in honey.

"I have no where to go." Had she really just admitted her vulnerability to him? It wasn't as though she could escape their clutches sick. And it wasn't as though she hadn't suspected something was wrong with her body. She felt it.

"I know."

"So many things are happening to me." Had she already told him this? The feeling this wasn't the first time they'd had this conversation washed over her. And why did she feel that she could share anything with him? Strange. She felt close to him. Like she'd known him forever...

"Sh..." he soothed. *Hmm...* his hands felt good. The thought that those hands might not be there for long, shocked her from her reverie.

"How long before you all go on the road again?"

Jax cocked a quizzical brow. "Road?"

"Carson said you were fighters," she said, her throat parched. "Don't you travel with the World Wrestling Federation or something?"

He laughed. What was so funny about that? Weren't most wrestlers proud of their occupation? Carson acted like it was the best thing since sliced bread. Avery could only imagine Jax and how powerful and dominating he'd be in the ring. Rock-hard and solid. That's what he was, every delicious inch of him.

"We are fighters, Avery. Just not like that."

"Oh." Well, what kind of fighter would they be then? Boxer? Martial Arts?

Did it really matter? She was a murderer. They were the kind of people that harbored a felon, kept her from being caught when she deserved to pay for the crime she'd committed.

As the fuzz in her brain dissipated, Avery realized she lay fully in this man's lap. Completely in his delicious, firm lap. It felt good, nice...

Made her tingle all over. Tingle in places she'd long forgotten could respond to a male presence in this way. He smiled down at her. Did he feel it to?

Avery sat up.

Bad idea. The head rush came back and back with a vengeance. Those arms, pretty darned handy as they caught her. "Easy now, just lay back."

He was impossibly...handsome. No, beautiful. Could a man be beautiful?

This one was. Dark and rich skin like melted chocolate. Tattoos peeked from under the vest of leather. His smooth head called to her fingers. What would he do if she just ran her hand over--

"I'll let you get some rest." Avery watched as Jax touched her arm gently to pull it from around his neck. So many pieces of the puzzle that was her life didn't fit, but somehow, he was a piece that could fit perfectly.

Jax wormed from under her, placed her gently back on the bed, and stood to leave.

"Don't go." Avery knew she shouldn't ask him to stay. But more than anything she wanted to be with someone. Be with someone that could offer her protection from whoever was messing with her. Possibly herself—if it was her mind that was giving in. It didn't really matter. What mattered for some strange reason, she felt safe when she was with Jax. Wanted.

Never since she'd entered the house had they treated her as if she were a criminal. Jax had offered her protection for no reason. Why would they do that? Why would these people protect her from someone they didn't even know?

Avery didn't have time to wonder as Jax ran the tip of a finger down her neck.

"Why?" he asked, and she wanted to hide under the blanket at the truth of the answer. *Because, I'm scared.* She couldn't admit that to this man. This strong, powerful man, and she couldn't admit she wasn't tough and she wasn't perfect. Because she was scared and completely unaware of what her future entailed. "Because you can't leave."

"Why?"

God, here goes. "If you go, the voice...it'll come back."

The words pierced him. She feared for her future. Who could blame her? It wasn't like she had much of one anymore. *She's not your responsibility. Leave, take care of business.*

Some things were easier said than done. The pained expression on her face killed him. Fear outlined uncertainty. The Etrux had put her through hell and back and for what reason? To get back at him for years of battle. Because they believed she was Meroe reincarnated? He couldn't speak those words to her. The very thought of it made him ill.

Yeah, then what? Hell, he was no better the Etrux, keeping this woman here because she played a roll in business. It was the same thing as Devlin using her for his reasons. Wasn't it? It wasn't fair to her.

She approached him, the curve of her hip cling to the leather as it swayed with each step. "Don't leave."

Her frail body trembled and he wanted nothing more than to take away her fear and replace it with hope. Something he'd never experienced as a mortal – or if he tasted a morsel of it, it was taken away.

Jax's throat tightened at the thought. Oh yeah, he knew exactly how she felt. He'd give anything to take her in his bed and show her safety for a moment. But it'd be a promise he couldn't keep. One he'd never be able to live up to.

"I-I have to." Didn't he? His mind was set. What he had to do...he couldn't get attached to this mortal. It was dangerous. Everything he knew he shouldn't do.

And yet...

That soft voice, that mouth. His gaze raked over her face. The way her lips felt on his, their warmth playing along his skin.

How would it feel to be inside her? Feel her coating his cock and having her scream in pleasure? The thought made him rock hard and solid in an instant.

Leather clung to her skin in places he truly had no right to look, but as sexual as vampires were, it made it impossible to not notice.

Not to want to feel her for real...

Screw that. "Why haven't you tried to escape? You were left alone. The window was practically wide open when I walked in. You could've left."

"True, I could've."

"Then why didn't you?"

"I don't know. I tried to leave, something wouldn't let me. I know you think I'm crazy." She swallowed. "I think I'm crazy..."

He wanted to reach out, cup her face, but thought better of it. "You're not crazy."

"I'm not?"

Let her know what was going on.

Isis, it was time to level with her.

"Earlier you thought it was me playing with your mind. You still think that way?" Why did he care? It wasn't like anything he thought made one ounce of a difference when it came to the Senate's orders.

The Senate doesn't know about this he reminded himself. Yeah and if he acted on impulse, council would tie him out in the sun and watch him fry for not telling them.

"I don't think so."

"Sure?"

"Well, are you?" She challenged him. The sound of her boots clunked on the floor as she took a couple of steps in his direction.

"No."

"There you go."

The way her body moved with each step, sweet and tender, sexy and wanton. Oh damn, it'd been too long since he wanted a female. What was the use in being immortal if you couldn't enjoy the things you had to live eternity for.

He lifted arms, rested them on her shoulder. "I'm going to kiss you."

Jax wanted to kiss her. Was going to kiss her and the truth be known she was on fire for his lips on hers. To feel his powerful embrace protect and work magic all over.

In an instant, Jax captured her, drinking her fast and slow, like he'd been in a forty year drought and her body was the only thing that quenched the thirst. The largeness of his hands played on the small of her back, rubbing and pulling her tight against his strong torso.

He was rock hard and solid, textured abs pressed against the softness of her skin. Steel against wool. His tongue swept against hers, toying and showing her just how much he wanted her.

The hardness of his erection seared her stomach through his leathers. For once in her life, Avery wanted to be the bad girl. Not the play it safe business woman. No, she wanted to be kissed like a wicked woman in leather by this man. To be taken like a sexual being and made love to until she almost split into.

A hard hand came up to cup her breast from under her leather waist-length coat. She wasn't sure she felt so much pleasure from this man's touch, but she was pretty sure she moaned in his mouth.

"You're sure?" He tore his mouth from hers, panting.

"I...I think so."

"You're sure, I smell your arousal."

He did? Was that normal? He tasted so delicious, she didn't even care.

"Then why did you ask?"

"Because once I'm inside you, there's no going back."

It wasn't a veiled threat, Jax knew if he got one taste there'd be no going back. He'd forced himself to never have sex with donors. So far, he'd made good on his promise. The thing was with Avery, he didn't want just a nibble. He wanted everything from her.

Avery tasted just as good as she looked and smelled. Her blood had to be the same.

"Take me."

Jax unzipped her coat and freed those delectable breasts. Taut nipples jutted outward as the cool breeze swept over them. She was a lost soul, a soul about to be ripped from her fragile body forever. And he wanted to experience Avery in her mortal form. Hell, he'd experience Avery in any form.

When Jax gazed into her amber eyes, they held answers, pain without saying. She wanted to be loved, accepted and moreover made to feel every bit the goddess she was. He dipped his head to her lips, worshipped the softness.

This was a frightened woman, betrayed by all she trusted and he was about to do the same thing to her.

Wasn't he?

Avery moaned sweet vibrations against his mouth. A soft tongue laved into his depths, he was a goner. Trembling, beneath him, he kissed her with passion, longing, all the feelings he'd held up bottled for centuries. She might look like Meroe, but she was nothing like her.

This woman was good in a life where he knew none. No good beyond that of the work he'd devoted his afterlife.

His cock burned, seared as it pressed against the leather of his pants. Throbbing to slide inside the warmth between her legs. What wonders lay inside Avery Johnson? What kind of torture had she encountered through the hands of Devlin?

Whatever it was, it stopped now. Stopped with Jax. He couldn't bare another moment of her pain. *So why was he confusing her further?*

Because he had to have her.

Avery moaned and writhed underneath him. Not with fever, with longing, wanting. He'd filled her mind with lust. Not Devlin, he'd done it and he'd be damned if Devlin ever laid a finger on Avery ever again.

Mine. The thought blinded his mind. Protective instincts rose up within him like never before, his fangs craved to mark her, brand her as his own, but he held no right to her. Not when he knew what role she played in the unfolding the Etrux's plan.

But he could damn sure take her now.

Jax's hand came up to cup her mound through leather. She moaned at the pure sensation. Her body, pliant under his touch. She was so receptive. Burning, searing his palm.

"Hmm..." she moaned in his mouth, the vibrations racking him to the core.

Jax pulled back, gazed into her eyes, lifted his finger and traced the curve of her neck, reveling at the feel of the pulse beating under his fingertip.

He had to fight the urge of his fangs—hard—as he closed his eyes against the promise of bliss. The simple thrum of liquid pulsing through Avery's body, sexual and sensual beckoned him.

How would she taste? If she tasted half as good as she kissed, he was in for a treat. *No, he couldn't take from her. She's too close to conversion.*

The scent of the Etrux melted from her skin as he dragged his fingertip over the softness of her skin. Momentarily, he broke the kiss. "I need to be inside you. You want me there, don't you?"

"Y-yeah," she moaned barely above a whisper, "I do."

Avery blinked back lust-lidded eyes. She had no clue why she was about to sleep with Jax, but she knew this. She wanted Jax more than any man she'd wanted in quite some time. Strike that, ever. Avery wanted to bury herself in his scent. Feel him slide inside her body and make her forget everything in this world but him and the way he made her feel.

It was a bad decision to get involved with anyone at this point in her life, but she had the feeling she he didn't want more than a fling. Men like him weren't the settling down kind. Which was a good thing for her at this point, he wouldn't want attachment, and she could enjoy this pleasure and then leave as soon as she got the chance.

No, he was perfect for something like that.

Jax raised himself from her, almost tore the pants from her body. It was if he'd ripped them apart by just looking at them. The fever must be worse than she thought. And it was, her body filled with heat to the point of no redemption. Aching and hurting to be possessed by this man.

And she was about to be. Hot lips pressed to her neck like it was the only one in the world, kissing a fiery trail down the nape, his skillful hands all over her breast, kneading them. Taking an erect nipple between his thumb and forefinger and twisting slightly. She hissed in pleasure, her hot throbbing body, melting under this man's strong touch. Her center dripped with longing.

There was a void she needed to fill. Needed to feel, she just needed...

Her head examined. That's what she needed. What was she doing? About to sleep with a man she barely knew?

Yes. Yes she was. And to hell with being the good girl. Just once in her life she wanted to be the rebel. The person that didn't care about the repercussions of her actions. To be wild. Uninhibited. Wanton.

Secure.

Avery laved her tongue into his welcoming mouth. She swore she heard him moan in satisfaction. Soft and sweet all at the same time. Callused hands cupped her breasts, massaged in circular rhythms.

She drew a sharp breath as his forefinger and thumb pinched her nipple as he continued to toy with it. Before she realized it, she pressed her hands against his chest. Contoured muscles coasted under her palm. Funny, she didn't remember taking his shirt off. At that point, she didn't care how it got off, the important thing was it was off and she enjoyed the feel of his skin playing under her fingertips.

Jax loved the way she felt underneath him. Her mouth receptive, her body humming with desire. He felt it, tasted it, and smelled it. She was ripe for his picking and nothing no one could stop him from taking her at this point. Not the Etrux, not the Brethren, not even the Senate. The last thought should've scared him, but it didn't.

At that moment all things vampire rose up in him and he knew she'd not leave this room until she was his. Completely. Utterly.

His...

Fangs burst in his mouth. He drew back his head as his eyes rolled backward. Trembling lips covered what he truly was, a monster who needed to feast on her flesh. Long fingernails scraped down the planes of his chest, arousing him further.

Avery's body, hot and consumed with fever. The thought of how warm her blood would be. Just how the molten liquid would coat his throat on the way down to his stomach made his cock even like stone.

Jax opened his eyes and studied her face.

Dark skin paled slightly, even since her arrival at the compound. Her face—slender—high cheek bones more prominent. Amber kissed eyes that sparkled beneath the luster of the fever. And those lips. Red and swollen from his kisses.

The thrum of blood coursing through veins beckoned him to the point he worried he could control the urges to drink her dry. He had to. There couldn't be another *embrace* for her. She didn't need to share blood with him.

If she did, the conversion would be complete and he'd be no better than Devlin.

He slid his gaze over that gorgeous face.

Vampire. She was becoming more like his kind with every touch. Every moment he stole. Every precious inch of her radiated want. Need. *Hunger.*

Life's essence that was a gift to his kind and Avery had already experienced it. Even before she was complete. The tug of her eyes, the craving was already there. It would only intensify as the progression unfolded.

She won't if you don't bite her. Damn, he couldn't give into the craving.

Jax blinked back the blurred vision of lust. Forced his fangs to withdraw, and lifted himself off of her long enough to discard her pants. When his gaze dropped on her bare skin, breath caught in his throat.

Exquisite.

Honeyed skin, tender and beckoning, pressed solid against his hardened body. The only thing that separated him and bliss surely lay ahead was his leathers. That could be taken care of easily.

With a simple command, his clothes vanished. His aching cock trembled at the closeness of her body to his. Jax closed his eyes, breathed a deep breath and imagined just how sweet sliding into her would feel.

Heaven. It would be pure heaven.

Jax positioned himself to her side, unbuttoned her leathers and pulled off her boots. Gently, he tugged the pants down the length of her legs.

Isis, the sight of her nude body. The curve of her dainty waist begged his lips to nibble. Jax listened. Immediately he kissed a trail along the feather softness of her skin. Warmth played on his lips from the contact. Agreeable hands cupped the back of his head, her back bowed at the touch of his mouth.

Languidly, he inched his hand through crisp hairs to reach the warmth and promise of arousal.

When he touched the sensitive flesh, she gasped. "Hmm..." The velvet caressed his finger as he slid inside, readied her. The heat of his cock seared his stomach, if he didn't get inside her and soon, he would die from deprivation. He was certain.

The sensation of Jax's touch sent tremors through her body. Steady and building with each movement of his skilled hand along her thigh and his fingers inside her, had her senses reeling in a million different directions. For a moment in her life, Avery was doing something totally unlike herself. There was no plan, no safety net she'd laid in place for herself. It was just her and this man. This man that was doing a damned good job of making her forget her problems.

When Jax extracted his finger she moaned in protest.

"Careful. I want to be inside you when you come."

"Then you better hurry." Pressure was building. Nothing had ever excited her as much as this man's touch, the way he moved his hands over her body.

Jax maneuvered himself between her welcoming legs. Avery wanted to touch him, feel the steel in her palm of his sex, but he was already there, nudging her aching flesh.

His eyes, parallel to hers and seared her to the very core. "You're sure?"

Was he kidding? As crazy as her life had been lately, she was sure she wanted to feel his power inside her. Something about his touch, made her melt into a puddle. She wanted him and she wasn't stopping until she felt him inside her, moving, thrusting.

Avery answered him with a nod and wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders, pulling him to her in a kiss. His tongue swept over hers, dominating her mouth, playing with her emotions. The scent, deep spice filtered into her nostrils, the slight scrape of whiskers teased her chin. And then he was there, where she needed him, inside her. The entire, incredible length of him, and Avery knew then, her life had changed.

The sweetness of Avery blanketed his cock, tugging at his restraint. Never in his life had Jax been so aroused or so turned on by a single woman. She felt incredible. Like a warm brook running through a valley. Warm and willing. Slowly, appreciating all she offered, he moved almost completely out of her, then tortuously the full length in, soaking himself with her.

If it'd been under different circumstances, if she hadn't been through so much, he might've enjoyed a little rough play with her, but as it was, sweet sex sufficed. She needed to feel protected, needed to feel safe for only a moment. He'd sensed it all over her every time she neared and he was happy to comply.

Nails bit into his back and he rode and grasped onto the last ounce of control he had left. She was fabulous, freaking fabulous. "Oh..." Had he moaned? Really, he couldn't remember a time he'd been so lost.

Hands came up to cup his face. "I'm here." Was she? Was this really Avery or one of Devlin's tricks?

Avery moaned and writhed under his power, completely lost in the moment. And hell, he was too. She was extraordinary. Her hands worked their way down his back, cupped his ass, and urged him onward. Her center dripped around him, blanketing his cock in her sweetness.

The rhythm, the cadence of her moans, drove him to the brink. He leaned down, the tips of her nipples dancing over his chest. She nibbled along his neck, laving her tongue along his sensitive flesh.

He felt it immediately, fangs burst forth. The rapid beat of her heart. Thumping, preying on his ear. *No, don't. Easy...control.*

It wasn't easy, but Jax fought the call of her blood, just millimeters away from his lips. Avery continued to kiss his neck. *Isis*, she turned him on. Tiny kisses. Hints of teeth scraping along—

Scraping? Sweet, *Isis*, she had fangs! Before Jax could stop her, Avery bit him and began to suckle.

White hot pain seared his neck, followed by a pleasure he'd never experience. No one had fed from him since his conversion. Never during sex had he experience such pleasure. He'd always refused to drink from those he'd had sex with, he didn't need the bond.

Isis, if this is what it felt like when someone drank, what would he experience if he was to bite her?

She moaned and lapped him up like he was the best tasting thing she'd ever placed lips on. "Avery," he pleaded for her attention. "Stop, Avery, you don't know what you're..."

"Mmm..." she continued to drink all the while wriggling underneath, coaxing his cock to release the pressure building.

The allure of her hips was too much. He drove himself into her hard, eliciting her moans, while she drank furiously from his neck.

"Avery..." was the last thing from his lips before he drove himself into her once more, hard and came.

Chapter Eleven

A shriek buried itself in the recesses of his throat and crawled its way out in a noise that could peel the paint from the walls. Devlin's gut wretched at the thought of anyone touching his new bride. Even though Avery wasn't going to be his bride for long, he still wanted his rights to her. He'd marked her. *Him*. The passionate thoughts flooding in her mind were there because another man touched her. Was bedding her and Devlin would bleed the bastard dry who'd done this.

Crimson anger filled his face, hot and heavy. Someone would die for this. And he'd be the bastard to do it, watch while their souls slithered to the heavens, or hell, whichever the case may be. It didn't matter to him.

"Sir, is there..." Grandor, the Etrux recruit from about two years prior entered the room, to be met with a smooth back hand. The vampire hissed back at Devlin, all the while nursing his face with the palm of a hand.

Devlin didn't care. Grandor knew better than to enter the room without warning. "What is it you want?"

"Sir," Grandor began again, "we were defeated at Bleeders. The Brethren jumped us."

"You are useless."

"Sir, please. We did our best."

"It wasn't good enough," Devlin barked, "leave my presence."

Grandor scampered from the room.

He had no patience for failure. Not anymore. The Etrux would be taken more seriously, or he'd spill blood until they were.

When he marked something, he damned well meant for it to be his. Avery was marked. She was his conversion, his recruit, his bride. And he had grand plans for her, that one had spirit. Spunk.

He lapped a tongue over his right sharpened tooth. *Charisma*. Having another servant would be great, but bedding her would prove even better. And oh would he have his way with her. Avery was the key to power beyond his imagination. And when it was all over with, she'd hold a special place in his heart, if he had one that was. He laughed inwardly at himself.

The ring of his cell phone broke his concentration. He lifted the black razor and answered. "Yeah."

"Where is she?" A gruff voice demanded from the other end of the conversation.

"It's under control."

"It better be or I'll have your head, Devlin, you got that?"

"I relish the challenge." This one had balls—big ones. "I have the girl right where I want her."

"You'd better."

"I don't take to threats. Just so you know."

"Right." The line went dead.

Devlin closed the phone, pitched it on the dresser. Time to pay a little visit.

"Oh. My. God." Avery clasped her hand over her mouth, shook her head in disbelief. What in the hell was wrong with her? She'd bit Jax! Metallic liquid still coated the back of her throat. The worse part was she liked it and actually wanted to drink more of his blood.

Someone get out the white coats, she'd lost it. Did anyone in her family have mental illness? She frantically combed her memory for a distant cousin, uncle, someone that would prove this was genetic. She had officially lost her mind due to a family trait. Because if it wasn't that, it had to be nervous breakdown.

Oh man, she'd gone Goth. She was an ex-suit turned Goth. Although she looked good in black—it had always been her color—she just wasn't cut out for the lifestyle. Was she?

Panic surged through her veins as she unconsciously grabbed the duvet and covered herself. "I bit you."

She lifted an accusatory finger to his neck. Well, that was an intelligent statement if ever there was one. Of course he knew she'd bit him. Surely he felt it. Damn, the man acted as if he actually enjoyed it.

Jax threw her a puzzled expression, lifted himself off of her and began to dress. "You didn't enjoy yourself?"

Didn't enjoy herself? She'd drank from him like he was an all-you-can-eat buffet and he didn't act as if it fazed him a bit. She was at a loss for words. "Do you like to be bit?"

"Really haven't been in a long time." He fastened the button on his black leathers, zipped up. The play of sinew over bone was astounding. Ripples of muscle cascaded down his stomach. And those tattoos, almost primal, outlined his waist and spanned to the small of his perfectly sculpted back.

Stop this! What in the hell was she doing? Giving this guy the once over again like he was breakfast and she was about to rise and shine? "But I bit you. I drank your blood." Heat filled her cheeks and disgust lined her stomach at the mere thought of what she'd done. She was a murderer and she had the bloodlust to prove it.

"Easy, A," he soothed, "nothing at all."

What? The man was clearly more mental than she was. "I...I don't know what came over me. Oh God..."

She should gag. Stick a finger down her throat and make herself throw up. It couldn't be healthy to drink blood. It contained all types of antigens and cells and...damn it, why wasn't she a medicine major? Okay, so she didn't know everything in blood, but she did know it could carry disease. Fatal kinds and that certainly wasn't good.

Jax moved to her, sitting down slowly as if not to alarm her. Just his presences sent alarms pulsing through her body. Hunger pooled between her legs and the precious taste lingered on her tongue.

Her gaze drifted to the hard column of his neck. She wanted more.

Oh God. What was wrong with her?

"Don't go anywhere." He lifted his hands. She hadn't realized but she was edged against the elaborate headboard. The only way out was up and she'd crawl the wall if he came any closer.

"I...I have to leave." Avery got up, wrapping the duvet around her. Shame filled her conscious. Not shame because she'd slept with Jax, no, but shame because she'd enjoyed biting him. Enjoyed the taste of the warm liquid coating her tongue, flowing down her throat.

“No.” His tall body stood, immediately blocking the entrance.

“No? And how do you keep doing that? And what in the hell is going on?” An underlined courage emerged from the fog of fear.

“You’d better sit back down.”

The line of worry about his brow didn’t ease the tension. For some reason, Avery didn’t know what to do but just that – sit and listen.

Jax inhaled before he began. The scent of her arousal, still tight in the air. The feel of her writhing under his body still fresh in his mind.

Fear lit her face.

He straightened his stature, watched as she trembled in anticipation of what he’d say. Strange. After all the years he’d become a vampire, he’d never once had to tell someone that’s what they were. Never trained anyone on how to survive or how to make it in their unique world. Hunter usually took care of that.

And you’re still not, he reminded himself. She hasn’t converted he breathed in a deep breath, yet. Now that was one hell of a word, wasn’t it? Only one bite. One tiny bite and she’d change. Her life taken from her and to be newly reborn.

“I’m waiting.”

Jax snapped out of his thoughts and back to the woman on his bed. “Of all the strange things happening to you, biting is the least one to worry about.”

“Oh good, here I thought drinking blood was something to worry over. As it stands it’s the least of my worries. Ever think of becoming a counselor? You’d make a dandy one.”

This wasn’t going well.

“I wish I were joking.”

She sat there undoubtedly reasoning his words in her mind.

“Then tell me why I bit you.”

“Biting was just a natural reaction to your arousal.” He sounded clinical. Like a psych or something.

Avery’s eyes dull of emotion, her face held tight to a grain of solitude. Yeah, well, he didn’t think she’d just buy it either. “You’re changing.” He moved back slowly to take a seat beside her on the bed where they’d just been intimate.

“How? Changing how?” Her voice was a fraction above a whisper.

“You’re becoming one of us.” Why did he feel like his guts were being ripped out? Was it so bad to be a vampire? Hell, he liked it for the most part. Something inside him didn’t want this for her, which was crazy because they’d only just met.

Folding her legs under her, she cradled her knees with her arms and pinned him with a pointed stare. “But I don’t know how to fight. I’m poor at it actually. I’ll be killed.”

She still wasn’t getting it. It wasn’t that she wasn’t intelligent. She was, he could tell it from her vocabulary alone. She was having trouble accepting things that weren’t known to this world. Things unspeakable and unimaginable.

“We fight, true. It’s our job, but not like you think.”

“Oh?”

Here goes. It was money shot time. “We’re different.”

Her stare ate him alive. The hot gaze raking his length made him light anew with desire. But this wasn't the time for desire. This was the time for the truth.

"Avery. You're being chased."

"I know that already."

"By vampires."

"Vampires?"

"The Etrux. Adversaries of the Brethren."

"Speak English."

"Their leader wants you to be his bride, Avery. I've explained this to you. He's a vampire." Jax stood. Lifted his bunched up shirt off the floor and tugged it down over the display of muscles.

She stiffened. God, she had to get out of there. Leave. But the place was like Ft. Knox. Every bolt secured with heavy metal doors, cameras, and a surveillance system to rival the likes of which the FBI could ever imagine. It was crazy.

"I don't believe in vampires." She lifted a defiant chin, keeping her arms folded soundly over her chest.

Just then, a knock sounded at the door. "Boss, need to speak to you." Avery recognized the voice. It was the man they called Hunter.

"Be there in ten," Jax answered as he pulled up his boots, and then proceeded to strap on leather holster over his chest.

He turned back to her. "I have some business to take care of. I'll be back."

"You're not going anywhere until you finish this conversation," she warned. He liked the spunky side of her. The side he's just experienced in the bed. The side that had kept her alive in the mass of people and on the cold streets of Chicago.

"Avery, the man trying to get you is very dangerous. He's looking for you as we speak. He's not just going to let you go like you want. Stay, stop trying to escape the Brethren will offer you a certain amount of protection."

"What if I want to go with him?"

Was she serious? The thought hadn't even occurred to him. And now that it did, he felt as though someone had dropped a two-ton boulder on his chest. "I wouldn't advise it."

"Maybe I'm tired of everyone advising me on what to do. Maybe I'm the bad guy."

He almost laughed. "Doubt that."

"Well, don't. I am a bad person. I'm running from other people, too. The government to be exact. I'm a murderer."

Now he really wanted to laugh. She wasn't a murderer. If there was a fraction of doubt there before, it'd dissipated. There was no way Avery Johnson ran over Congressman Lambert's son. It was just another piece of the puzzle Jax planned on solving. "You're no murderer."

"Yeah, then why did I drink your blood?" she countered as she stood and began dressing herself.

He let his gaze drift over her luscious body. "You're becoming a vampire."

"I thought you said I was becoming like you..." She paused, then looked like she'd been shot. "Oh..."

Jax turned and left.

"Crude, you have to do this for me. You just have to." Carson would get down on one knee if she had to.

"I don't have to do anything. Be warned," Crude's voice, a hard tone, came at her. Everyone at the compound feared Crude, knew he wasn't one to be pissed with. But he'd always been sweet to Carson. She saw through the tough exterior. Hell, if she'd been through an eighth of what Crude had, she'd be a hard ass too.

Well, an even harder ass.

The man was a POW before they were labeled Prisoner's of War. Abused and tortured for years before released. The man had issues from it. Mostly he was trigger happy and jumpy at times. Couldn't blame him, hell, she'd been the same way if all that had happened to her. He kept his shirt on at all times. Come to think of it, Carson had never seen him with his shirt off.

And neither had anyone else in the Compound. He was private at best and Carson respected his privacy...most times.

"I need to get out sometimes, you know? See the town."

"You see the town every night."

"I don't want to fight every night. I'm a girl, Crude. I want to go and have a nice dinner. Dress up."

He laughed. Was it that ridiculous sounding?

"And stop laughing at me."

"I'm sorry, Carson, just didn't realize you felt that way."

She lay back in the lazy chair, kicked up her boots on the end table and rested her hands behind her head. "Well, I do."

"Why?" Crude continued sharpening his weapon, so fast sparks flew from the dagger and wet stone.

"I told you."

"The real reason."

"I told you the real reason." Damn, she sounded like a teenager trying to convince her daddy to let her drive for the first time. Or worse, go on her first date.

"Then it's not good enough." Crude went straight to work again without so much as a grunt or growl.

This would be harder than she thought.

"You know, being seen with me could be good for your reputation."

He glowered. "How?"

"Well, I'm not ugly and if you're out, women might think you're actually interested in dating one. You're phone will be ringing off the hook." She shook her head, although she wasn't so sure how convincing she was.

"Oh joy."

"Crude! I'm serious."

He paused, looked up at her with those onyx black eyes. "Why is this so important to you?"

Heat filled her cheeks.

Crude moved over beside her, kneeled down where no one could hear. "It's Hunter. Isn't it?"

She wanted to lie and say no, because deep inside she wanted to get out and forget about Hunter for a while and the fact that he was a gigantic asshole to her. But the fact that Crude and Hunter didn't always get along could play right into her hands.

"Hunter told me the other day that you would never date."

"Really?"

"Yeah said you were too ugly of a son of a bitch for anyone to look at you cross-eyed."

"That so?"

"So," Carson said, knowing the entire time she'd go to hell for lying. Technically, it wasn't a lie. It was a minor fabrication of the truth. Hunter did believe Crude couldn't get a date.

"Interesting."

"So would you do it if you thought it'd piss him off?"

A calculated curve formed on his lips. "Oh yeah."

She immediately wrapped her arms around his neck, squeezed him tight he coughed. "Air, I do have to have some you know."

Loosening her grip, she reached up and kissed him on the cheek. Could've sworn she saw a blush creep into them.

"Thanks Crude, you're the greatest."

"Don't go telling anyone that. You'll ruin me for sure."

She laughed. "Okay. This is going to be fun, you'll see. We both need some time away from this place."

"Sure." He knew she lied, but that wasn't the point. Truly, she needed a break now and then. Vampirism didn't run in her blood. She was mortal and needed to feel pretty. No longer did she want to be viewed as Carson the teenage tag-a-long. She'd grown into a skilled combatant and most importantly into a woman. Maybe it was the presence of another female in the compound that inspired this. Maybe it wasn't.

All she knew is she'd grown up. "Pick me up at eight pm."

"Where are we going? And don't expect me to wear one of those monkey suits. I'm not gonna. You hear me, Carson? I go in leather and chains or I stay here."

"Deal."

"Where are we going?"

"The opera." The twisted expression on Crude's face made her smile. He was totally mortified. That made it all the more exciting.

Avery quickly slipped on her new clothes thanks to Carson. How could she be so stupid? Well, she knew how, because she'd been in an emotional coma since the accusation. The shallow bit of it was she was so worried over losing everything she'd accomplished, she couldn't reason. How selfish. A boy lost his life and she was worried over her career.

Fighting a groan at the truth, she fastened the leathers. She was safe, boring, and had no life. This is why she had no one to turn to when the accusation occurred. She'd devoted

too much of her young like to her career. Sometimes it got lonely. Sometimes she itched to have an adventure.

You got that wish. Maybe she should be careful what she wished for in the future?

The sleekness of the slipped over her hips. Avery buttoned the waist and zipped her pants up. Normally it was the business suit, uptight professional look. Normally, she'd never dream of wearing such a thing. Considering her new life, leather fit. She might as well dress tough. Heck, she'd better get tough.

Feelings weren't something to be easily worn on her sleeve, including what she'd just experienced with Jax. Avery shut her eyes as her mind raced in a million and one directions, all of them leading to Jax. The way his hands felt questing all over her body. She'd had boyfriends before. Most of them casual and never anything serious. And none of them ever made him feel the way Jax did. Filling her stomach with butterflies and her body with tremors.

Girl, you have got to get a grip. As she inhaled, the smell of him still lingered over her arms, her hands. She lifted them to her nose to get a better whiff. *Hmm...* all her life she'd never felt so drawn to a person. So...

So what? She bit him. With teeth! She drank his blood! What in the world was wrong with you?

It was like being a nightmare with no dawn. Where was her life? She searched the room frantically for something of hers. Anything. Something to touch and remember her old life. She was Avery Johnson, daughter of Clive and Darla. Magna Cum Laude, political strategist. The girl who could get Charlie Manson elected to office. The girl that...*had committed a horrible crime.*

Doubt coiled around her spine. She didn't do it. It all made sense. *Let me in your mind.* Devlin. Vampires held the ability to mess with your mind. Couldn't they plant memories as well? In old vampire books and movies they could.

Avery lifted the phone receiver from the phone on the bed stand and dialed.

"Hello."

"It's me," she whispered into the mouthpiece as if everyone on the compound could hear her. All her nerves bunched. She took a chance, but life was a series of chances she was learning.

"Avery?"

"Yeah."

"Oh my god! Are you alright? I've been worried sick," Molly, Congressman Lambert's secretary, answered. Relief washed over her. Maybe someone in her life did care?

"I'm fine," she answered. "No one's around you right now are they?"

It wasn't a complete lie. What she could've said was she wasn't fine. She was a murderer, a criminal on the run, and most recently added to the list, a cannibal. Did life get any better than this? Hell, she prayed it did, because if it didn't she was more than screwed.

"I'm in the office alone and don't lie to me, you're not fine." Molly was smarter than she appeared.

"Molly, listen, I don't have long. I need to know if Lambert's been in the office today."

"Yeah, he was there all day. Why?"

"Did anyone strange come to see him?"

"Avery, he's a Congressman, of course strange people came to see him." Avery laughed slightly. To say Molly was eccentric was a severe understatement. The girl followed the path

of a different drummer – literally. And that drummer just happened to be in one of Chicago’s finest bands.

“That’s not what I meant and you know it. Anyone other than the usual come in this week?”

Pause.

“Yeah. There was an afternoon appointment. Lambert insisted on working over last Tuesday. Told housekeeping he was expecting someone, to be sure and let them in.”

“Did you see who it was?”

“I didn’t work late Tuesday, sorry, A. What are you up to? You know the cops have been all over this place looking for you.”

Her heart sank at the thought. “I know.”

“I believe you’re innocent, Avery. You know that, right?”

Avery blew out a hard breath, “I am innocent. I didn’t kill Justin, I know that now.”

“I know.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. That’s what friends do, they stick together. Now I want to know where you are. Do you need anything?”

Yeah, a brain transplant, a new libido- preferably one that doesn’t work- and an appetite suppressant that curbes the craving for blood, please. She couldn’t say any of those things. Molly believed her, after all that’d been said. Molly’s confidence in Avery would waver if she spouted off things like that. The sad thing was they were true. All of those things, she needed.

Footfalls echoed from the hall.

“I have to run. I’ll be calling. Keep your eye out for me. I need a copy of his visitor log if possible.”

“Sure. Anything. How do I get it to you?”

Avery clicked the receiver just as someone turned the doorknob.

Chapter Twelve

The room was dead silent. Hunter glared at Jax and he knew all too well the look. He hadn't had time to wash Avery's scent from him. The sad thing was he didn't want to wash it off. He wanted to go back and bathe in her essence. Feel her silky skin rub along his as he melded their bodies together.

He nibbled indecisively at his bottom lip. Hell, this had to stop. It was getting past the dangerous point and Jax damned well knew it. Avery drank from him tonight. She had the taste for it and she now had a bond to him.

Surviving the change was a risk, making sure Avery could be normal again was another.

"Boss, I know it goes without saying..." Hunter began and Jax didn't give him the opportunity to finish.

"It's not for discussion."

"I'm not discussing. You know I'd never gone against you in anything. But..." Hunter approached with caution. The hell of it was Jax knew whatever he was going to say was right. "Her presence here marks us." Bingo.

Jax leaned over the desk, pressed both hands solid to the flat surface and inhaled a deep breath. "No more than our own presence does. She's becoming one of us."

"Boss, she's trouble, true."

He knew it. You could put a glass eye in a duck's bum and see a mortal at the compound meant trouble, but Jax didn't care. He knew what needed to be done. At whatever costs, Avery couldn't become Etrux. He'd given it a lot of thought since he'd left her bed and the biggest wrench in the Etrux's plan would be to never let Avery become one.

Devlin planned for Avery to be his; Jax had other plans. "It's too late. It's begun."

"What's begun? Etrux? Yeah, they're a bunch of sorry mothers, but we can take them. Always have."

Jax shook his head. "It's more than that."

Hunter sat down on the sofa, but didn't lean back. The vamp was uneasy, rightfully so.

"Boss, she looks like her, that's all. Surely you don't believe it could be..." he trailed off.

Hunter treaded gingerly around Jax at times. Even though the vampire was old, and was great in combat, he respected the hierarchy of things. Hunter had been a man of wealth and social statue in his day and Jax a mere slave. That itself spoke volumes of Hunter's character. Vampire life was different. Social order as a human meant nothing.

Hunter wouldn't have cared. He was a good recruit, true. The best, and although made heaps of sense, Jax didn't want to hear it.

"I don't know what to believe anymore. We both know life after death is possible. Hell, just look at us." Jax moved from the desk to around it, leaned back and folded his arms.

"You got that right, but do you really believe?"

"No," he answered with certainty, deep down he wasn't so sure.

"Then why is this different?"

He didn't answer.

"Boss, I don't mean to pry, but her scent, she's all over you. Are you planning on converting her?"

Jax saw red. Utterly, red. Within seconds he gripped Hunter's neck tight in his hand. Squeezed and slammed him against the wall.

"See what I mean?" Hunter managed between gasping for breaths of air.

Isis. What had gotten into him? Tension seeped from coiled muscles, his stance easing. "I-I..."

"Jax, man, you're my brother. I've followed your lead for centuries, but if you screw this up, I'm going to kill you." Jax knew Hunter was exaggerating, but he was right. He'd gotten personally involved with this woman now. Like it or not, she'd drank from him. They were connected.

Devlin would know she'd taken from him. And when he found that out, she'd be dead. Sacrificed possibly before the Brethren had a chance to stop him.

Avery had to be watched all the time.

There was no escaping. No where to run. The problem was she no longer knew what she was running from. Vampires, politicians, the police...they were almost all the same.

Memories flooded her. Those hers, those not her own. What world did she live in now? She'd always been the type with direction, focus on the future and now it seemed the future was just a dream. A life in prison or chased by psychopaths. Either run from them or live with them. That wasn't much of a choice.

But then there was Jax...

Something about him made her feel safe. His body was heavenly, hard, and menacing at the same time. He could snap her neck like a twig and yet, he didn't. There was also a little matter of him believing himself a vampire.

Couldn't forget that one. Could vampirism be true and not a legend? The explanation made more sense than any other theory she'd explored.

If Devlin was a vampire then that explained the voice in her head. Vampires could do that sort of thing couldn't they?

And how else could she explain biting Jax's neck?

Oh man, vampires were real?

A few months ago she wouldn't have believed it. Now she wasn't so sure.

The important thing was Molly would have the information she needed soon. And this nightmare would all end.

"How do you feel?"

Jax's strong build silhouetted the doorway. He looked at her, but at the same time, didn't.

"Better." That was a lie. She wasn't better. She'd slept with him. If her life became any more complicated Dr. Phil would host a primetime special.

Jax nodded.

"About your neck," she said, as she gestured to the wound. Only there wasn't a wound. It had completely healed.

"Neck's fine."

"How?"

"Always been a quick healer. You barely made a mark."

No, she had made a mark. A very big mark, if she wasn't mistaken. The taste of metallic bliss seared her memory. Immediately, her teeth reacted, aching and throbbing.

It was time to take control. To pretend she didn't know she was different anymore was lying to herself. "Tell me what I'm becoming. The truth."

She watched as he inhaled a deep breath. "You're becoming one of us."

"Yeah, you've said that before. I thought you said," she paused, lifted an accusatory finger toward him, "you were a vampire. Ridiculous, huh?"

Jax gathered her hand in his. "It's really not so bad."

Not so bad? Not so bad? She was living with a group of people professing to be vampires and it wasn't so bad. Oh yeah, let's not forget she now had a penchant for the taste of blood!

"Just what exactly does this mean? You expect me to believe I'm a vampire?" She swallowed at the dryness tickling the back of her throat. It wasn't like she was stupid. She'd suspected a cult. Just not a cult of vampires. It wasn't as though Chicago was without rumor. Tales of vampires existing in the city floated around for years. Part of her believed them, part of her thought they were just rumors about people the city had no explanation for.

"You're becoming a member of the undead."

Seconds seemed like hours as her brain processed exactly what Jax was telling her. "Undead?"

Earlier he'd mentioned a crazy guy thought he was marrying her and was a vampire, however, crazy people walked the streets of Chicago all the time. She really hadn't believed the man was really a vampire. And now Jax was in front of her using possessive pronouns like 'us.' Meaning...

"You're a vampire? Are you sure?" Why did ice run through her veins at the question?

He laughed. "I'm sure."

"This is bad."

"No, it's a good thing. It means I'm powerful, older than Devlin. I can defeat him."

"Then what's stopping you? Go. Fly away. Shoo." She waved her hand at him like he was a bug or something.

"He's your master at the moment. If I kill him now, you could die."

"Brilliant! This just keeps getting better and better. Have you considered a career in fiction? Vampire novels are hot right now. You could be the new Anne Rice."

"Will you stop?"

"What?"

"Being so defensive."

"Are you nuts? Defense is what kept me alive and out of jail these past few months. Defense is what is going to get me out of this house and away from crazy people like you."

"Is defense what kept you out of my bed?" The smug look on his face garnered a slap, but she didn't deliver.

"Don't speak to me like that. Sleeping with you was a moment of insanity. The worst decision I've made in my entire life!" *And the most pleasurable.*

If she'd actually slapped him, she doubted he could look more hurt. For a moment, a tinge of regret welled inside her. The record needed to be set straight. Things were entirely too

complicated. She needed to meet with Molly and clear her name. Then she could hire body guards to keep all the psychos away.

What she didn't need was a man/vampire/psycho thinking they had some sort of relationship. There just wasn't time for it.

"I'm sorry you feel that way."

"I do," she lied.

"You still need to stay," he moved in closer touched her hand with his.

She jerked back, inched backward away from him in the chair. She wanted to run...

She was going to run...

Before Avery realized it, she'd bolted from the sofa, out the door and down the hall. Doing pretty darned good too until she opened the door, and the piercing rays of the sun assaulted her.

Oh God. She was going to die. After all this...She was going to die simply by opening the door.

Tears streamed down her cheeks at the contact of the sun's light. Her skin burned as though someone had coated her with kerosene and lit her afire. *Shut the door.* Her mind kept telling her arms, but they were incompilant. Numb, not moving.

In split-second, she was knocked to the ground. A quilt pitched over her and she heard the slam of the door. Jax scooped her up in his considerable arms, carried her up the stairs. The pain was almost unbearable. Avery heard her voice moan, but it was distant. Like someone else made the sound.

"That was a stupid thing to do."

Not going to argue that one. So she really was becoming a vampire. Before, she was able to walk in the sun. What changed?

You drank Jax's blood is what changed.

"You'll heal, but not fast." He placed on her gently on the bed, removed her boots. "It will heal. You're not fully converted, which is what saved you. Next time, don't walk out in sun. It's not a myth and it will fry your ass. Understand?"

She nodded, the back of her throat too dry to respond. Pain splintered through her body at a staggering rate. The low timbre of Jax's voice swam over her, soothing her nerves.

"We have to get you out of these clothes. Cool water helps the healing."

She tried to lift herself up to tell him don't bother, but weakness over took her and she fell back down. The sound of water running in the bath next door eased her. Why hadn't she listened?

Thinking back, maybe not. Why did she have such a drive to succeed? Why did she feel necessary to cover up so much for these people? Her life was good, a cookie cutter family. But within every family there were cover-ups. Her mother's indiscretions, her father's tears. Everyone hadn't known. It was kind of perfect that way. The way the community kept congratulating her on her next success. The way she'd felt wonderful on the outside while her inside were churning.

Now everything churned.

Except for when she was with him. Surely, she wasn't falling for Jax. *Please no.*

The subtle tug of her shirt, the burning, she winced.

"Sorry, I know it hurts."

Hurts was an understatement. It bled pain. When the shirt was finally off her skin a little relief came. Then the hiss of the zipper sounded and felt a cool air over the naked flesh of her legs. She should care she was completely nude and at his mercy, but she didn't. If this made her feel better, she'd let him parade her down her street screaming she was a vampire to the top of his lungs.

It was hard to be a gentleman. Mostly because he'd never been one. It was even harder to see Avery in pain. The burns weren't too bad. He'd seen and inflicted worse, but the fact was she wasn't completely converted meant the burns would heal slower. He just hoped it was without a lot of pain.

"This might shock you a bit, if you need to hold onto me, I'm here." Carefully, he placed her limp body into the lukewarm water. Her arms wrapped around his neck. So trusting...

The front of her neck, the left side of her face, and tops of her arms were the worst. Clothes afforded some protection. When Jax found out who forgot to secure the door, they were in for it.

She jumped slightly as he slid her body the rest of the way into the tub. The lights were dim, to help with her now sensitive eyes. Water sluiced down her body, her head rested softly against the back of the tub. "Relax."

She nodded her head and leaned back.

There was a sponge just under the sink. He opened the cabinet, grabbed it and unwrapped the plastic covering before moving to his knees beside the tub. Dipping the sponge in the water, he began to wash her injuries. She was quiet for the most part. With each swipe of the sponge, Jax found himself studying how beautiful her body was.

She moaned. Lips slightly parted, her head tilted back. Chill bumps lined his arms. He remembered the other time he'd made her moan, in pleasure. Jax shut his eyes, concentrated on helping.

Avery's eyes fluttered open. "Thank you."

It stole his breath, the way she lay there and trusted him. He could end her, right here. Right now. Save a hell of a lot of trouble for the Brethren.

He couldn't.

It wasn't that she was identical to Meroe. It was more. She was three times the woman Meroe had been. He knew it. She was everything he'd wanted Meroe to be and wasn't. Avery had influence. Money, but it never once affected the way she looked at him. Not like Meroe.

And she needed him. Whether she realized it or not, she needed his help in dealing with her new life. He just had to make sure she made it through this mess in order to start a new one.

Deep down, she'd gotten the raw end of the stick on many occasions. After he took care of Devlin, Lambert was the next in line. No one messed with Avery, not while he was around. Not anymore.

"You can't just go around like you used to. You're different now." His voice sounded gruff, but he didn't know how else to get it through to her. She could be pretty stubborn when she wanted.

"I'm hurting so bad right now, if you told me it would help to jump off Mt. St. Helens, I would."

He laughed. "I'm not going to do that. Just see if you can stand on your own now."

Jax's arm came up under hers as she pushed into a standing position. He handed her a towel and pulled the plug. "Can you do it?"

Avery couldn't believe how sweet Jax was being to her. Here she was injured and in severe pain all because she hadn't listened to his warning. All her life she'd been so determined. So independent, it actually felt nice to have someone take care of her. "I can."

He handed her the towel and turned around as she dabbed off the excess water. The bathroom scent was clean, like disinfectant. Thankfully, he hadn't put fragrance in the water, so it didn't burn. She wound the towel around and tucked it under her shoulder. A wave of dizziness moved through her. "Jax..."

"Yes?"

"Can you help get me out? I'm still a little woozy."

True concern showed on his face as he turned. Surely he wasn't starting to care for her?

"Take it easy." His arm came around the small of her back. Solace, that's what she found in his touch. The world melted away and there was him.

What are you thinking? Truth was, she had no clue what she was thinking. The newest development was something she would've never believed. Vampires exist. They truly exist and she was one. *Almost.*

"Will it hurt long?" she asked as another wave of pain splintered through her.

"No. It won't. You'll heal fast. Not as fast as if you were fully converted, but fast."

As they reached the bed, Avery was relieved. She couldn't wait to feel the white cotton over her skin, the crispness of fresh sheets. "Fully? I'm not a vampire yet?"

"No. You have another exchange. Don't worry over this, okay? Let us worry. You get better."

"What kind of exchange?"

She lay back, the cool pillow a comfort to her aching head. "A vampire must drink from you once more."

"Hmm..." her lids felt heavy. Struggling to keep them open. "That Devlin guy?"

"No. He's never going to touch you again."

Comfortable. Tired. And at the last promise of Jax's voice, Avery drifted off into the healing abyss of sleep.

The game had increased ten fold. Avery knew what she was becoming and Devlin would be more than happy to get her there. The constant nagging in the back of his head was one thing. Knowing the voice was right was another. Jax had gone too far with Avery. He'd gotten involved with business on a personal level. The Senate would have his ass for it and he knew it.

As he sat beside her, watching the rise and fall of her chest, he didn't really care. Studying every grimace and wince she made while sleeping. He tucked her back into bed twice when the blankets slipped from her body.

The most difficult part was overcoming the urge to crawl in with her and just hold her until she felt better. Everything about him since she'd come into his life was crazy.

Never lose sight of the prize. The advice he'd heard years ago still held true. He'd joined the Brethren for a higher purpose in life. Led them for the same reason and here he was about to sell his brothers down the road for a female.

Jax's chest tightened. As the sun set, an eerie calm washed over him.

He stood up, kissed her lightly on the cheek. Then vanished into thin air.

"I need you to make me pretty," Carson admitted, as she screwed up her eyebrows and walked into the bedroom.

Avery blinked, trying to regain focus of the room and everything around. The pain... was gone. Completely gone.

She lifted her arms to examine them, not even a scar! It was remarkable.

Truly remarkable and Avery felt like a complete different person.

"You are pretty," she reassured, sitting up with her hands.

"Sorry, I forgot my manners. Glad you're feeling better." Carson popped gum in her mouth, came over and plopped down in the chair, legs apart.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome. You know, Avery, you should listen to Jax. He knows what he's talking about."

"He does, does he?"

"Yeah and you might not have got burned if you believed him."

Avery let out a tired breath. "I do believe him, Carson." *Now.*

Carson smiled. "Good deal. I think you guys make a great couple."

She furrowed a brow. "What makes you say that?"

"Because you are?"

"We're not a couple."

"Yeah. Okay, believe what you want. I just need to know if you can make me pretty?"

"You're already pretty."

"Not pretty. Pretty, pretty."

"Oh, pretty, pretty. That explains everything."

"Date pretty."

"Oh." Avery listened more intently. "That does change everything, doesn't it?"

"I've lived here for a long time. Men aren't exactly the best at showing little girls about makeup and styling hair."

Good point.

The irony of it was Carson was drop-dead gorgeous. Didn't she know this?

Blonde, blue-eyed, and beautiful with creamy skin, a nose like Heidi Klum, and cleavage to die for. Why would she want to change? "I think you already look like a lady."

Carson narrowed her gaze. "You're shitting me, right?" Well, she did curse more than a lady, but that could be worked on.

"No, I'm not *shitting* you."

"But I don't wear makeup much. I don't diddle with my hair all the time. I don't even know how to put on panty hose." She leaned up, rested her arm on the inside of her thigh.

Avery let out a chuckle. "Really?"

Carson straightened her stance. Hopefully she hadn't offended her. "My mom left when I was two. My dad raised me until he was killed and I've lived here ever since. There haven't been many occasions when I needed to wear panty hose."

"I'm sorry Carson, I didn't realize..."

"No problem," she cut her off, "there's just not any other females around and I thought you could help. If it's too much trouble..." She got up, but Avery stopped her.

"No trouble." Despite herself, she really liked Carson. She had innocent qualities about her and at the same time she was wise to the world. A peculiar combination.

"So, you'll help me?"

How could she not? "Sure."

Carson jumped up and practically tackled Avery, squeezing her arms around so tight she could scarcely draw a breath. "I owe you one."

Avery lifted the corners of her mouth into a smile. Carson 'owing her one' could be a good thing. "I plan to collect. Now, who is the lucky guy?"

"Crude." Avery blinked. At least she thought she did, her eyes were so wide she couldn't tell. Crude? He didn't seem like the kind of person that would like a lady for a date. No. He was the more rough and tumble-wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am-type guy from all that Avery had seen. Cool and calculating, a beast ready to strike at any time.

Carson must've read the expression on Avery's face because she immediately jumped to his defense. "He's not as bad as he pretends to be. Really, he's a good guy."

Avery gave her a reassuring nod. "Where is he taking you?"

"Opera." That, she hadn't expected. "Which one?"

"You mean there's more than one?"

Carson really needed to get out more without the men. "Sure, I'll tell you what. Let's phone the ticket booth and see what's in town and get your tickets reserved. Sometimes it's hard to get seats."

"That's okay. Crude's already gotten our tickets." Well, again, she could've been knocked over with a feather. The man was scary and then some. He'd only answered Avery with a grunt and further more, never smiled. Maybe he'd bought tickets to a touch man contest, but an opera?

"Great." She swallowed, refocusing on Carson. "I think you'd look lovely in red. Do you own a red dress?"

"I don't own a dress." Okay. So it was going to be a teensy bit harder than she'd anticipated. The look of worry shone behind Carson's blue eyes. Then, Avery studied her. Studied her like notes for an exam. All of her curves were in the right places, her body fit and athletic. Carson was tall where Avery was average. Carson was voluptuous where Avery was just thankful to have enough to be considered female. Although Carson didn't wear makeup and mostly wore her hair down straight, a little tussled, that was easily fixed.

"Well, that means only one thing." Avery felt a smile spread across her lips. It'd been a while since she'd felt needed, wanted. All of her training in the socially elite was going to be put to good use. Might as well use it on someone who would appreciate it this time.

Carson bit her lip in nervous anticipation. "What?"

"A shopping trip."

"No." The answer came quicker than she would've liked, but Carson didn't give up easily.

"Why not?"

"Because, that's why," Jax's tone was crude, knowing his word was uncontested law.

"Damn it, Jax. You sound like my daddy."

"Well, someone needs to. We're on the brink of something big. You've been snooping around. Don't pretend you don't know it."

Caught.

Instead of looking like a child with her hand stuck in a cookie jar, Carson countered. "I'm not pretending, I do know. Matter of fact, I know lots." There, make him wonder a bit.

"Oh?" He challenged, "Like?"

"Like how you look at Avery and how the Brethren's business isn't top priority anymore." Not the best way to get her way. Nope, not at all, but hell, it needed to be said. Wasn't like anyone else around here had the balls to say it besides maybe Hunter and Jax let Hunter get away with murder.

"Enough," Jax's voice boomed, "I've always put business before pleasure."

"Not this time. And I can't blame you. I like Avery, too. I really do." She did. It was nice to have another woman in the compound to talk to. Even though they were from completely different walks of life, Carson still couldn't help but like her. But business was business and Jax wasn't adhering to business.

"She is business." If she wasn't mistaken, she'd swear his eyes glowed feral silver then morphed back to normal charcoal.

Shaking her head, "Jax. Look, you're good to me. I'll be ready for battle when the time comes. I just need this."

"You have everything you need here."

"It's not the same. I..." she looked away. "I want to feel pretty. Feel like a woman."

He lifted a brow in surprise. Was it that big of a surprise? It shouldn't have been. They'd all watched her grow up in front of their eyes. They'd noticed, though it was easier to think of her as a child still. "It's that important to you?" She saw his shoulders fall. Yes, he was giving in.

"Yes. It is."

Jax let out a ragged breath. "You can go, but I'm taking you. No question."

"We'll be fine –"

"Those are the stipulations. You're Brethren. You go out, one of us comes with you."

Defeated, Carson realized it was her only chance, so she gave in. "Fine."

"Fine."

"Oh yeah, Avery's coming with."

Oh hell no. Jax tempered his emotions, but just. "Not possible."

"Who's going to help me pick out a dress? You?" Jax opened his mouth to respond but nothing came out.

"Thought so."

"We can't endanger her. She's important, you know this, Carson. Who's the one not putting Brethren business first now?"

"Yeah, she is important. She's going to raise O'Sirus."

Anger seeped into his pores. Welling and cascading down his spine in rivulets of sheer frustration. "How do you know this?" It was his voice, but the sound of it, belonged to a demon. An old demon buried long ago.

His owner, the royal blood that Meroe betrayed him with and the bastard that had murdered her to obtain sole ownership of the throne. The bastard had laughed as Meroe's helpless body lay bleeding to death on the ground. How in the hell did they plan to raise him?

"Calm down." Carson held up her hands to ward him off.

"How do you know of this?"

"I-I uh..."

"Tell me!" Again his voice screamed at her. Could he control himself? O'Sirus. It wasn't possible. Was it?

He'd been dead for centuries. *Dead*. Not a member of the undead, not a vampire, but dead as in he should be a rotted corpse. So what in the hell was Devlin trying to pull?

For the first time in centuries, Jax was light headed. Dizzy. His world had come crumbling down around him in the span of a few days. The past truly did come back to haunt you.

"Jax, leave her alone."

They turned in unison to as Avery entered the room.

"Mind your business," he ground out.

He didn't want to be a dick to her, but if the circumstance called for it. She'd come into his life and in less than two days totally screwed up his existence. His ability to reason and any ability he had to rationalize past his libido.

"No."

"Avery, now isn't the time."

"I'm fine," Carson assured her, but Avery didn't buy it.

"Why are you screaming at Carson?"

"I wasn't screaming at—" He tried to explain but Avery didn't leave an opening.

"Yes you were and it needs to stop."

"But, I—"

"No buts. There isn't any reason to yell at her. I'm sure whatever the problem is you two can talk about it like civilized adults."

A growl teased the back of his throat, itching to crawl out, but he swallowed it down. Had he just cowered to this woman? Hell, he had enough on his hands with keeping up the turf, battling Etrux, and now O'Sirus. The absolute last thing he needed was to battle two stubborn women.

He'd never win. Avery was being every bit as stubborn as Carson and they both had a target—him.

Jax opened his mouth to say something, but closed it again in defeat.

"Thought so."

"It's dangerous," he reasoned.

"Only to your wallet," Avery countered.

“It’s stupid. There’s no reason for this.”

“Only because it’s not important to you. This is important to Carson. She’s loyal to you. She risks her life every night and why? Because she loves you.”

He hadn’t really thought about that. Carson could be killed.

“And you owe her, Jax.”

Damn it, she made entirely too much sense. “I’m going with her. Avery, you’re all over the news. The entire city is looking for you. You’re still not used to—you don’t know how to survive.” Surely she would be reasonable about all of this.

“They are, but they’re looking for the way I used to be. I highly doubt they’d look twice for me with you.”

There was some truth to that. The most resounding part was it stung a bit.

What was wrong with him? Just because Avery came from high society, carried big clout, didn’t mean she’d never be seen with him.

All of a sudden, Jax it was though the air had been sucked right out of his lungs. Meroe. He was a slave. She was an aristocrat.

Any shard of hope he’d had she would love him, withered when he’d learned of her lover.

She’d given her life to be with that lover. When the Pharaoh learned she wasn’t pure, Jax had been blamed. But it wasn’t him that had taken it from her. It was the one who fathered her child, O’Sirus.

O’Sirus, Egyptian god of the dead, fathered the bastard child of a priestess and sat back and watched her be killed by the hands of the pharaoh. A ruthless pharaoh that chained Jax up and forced him to watch as he killed Meroe.

It was almost as painful as the day he learned the child he carried wasn’t his.

Anger anew splintered its way up Jax’s spine. That bastard wouldn’t touch Avery. It wouldn’t happen again. He wouldn’t allow it. Of all the things in his life he was certain of, it was that history would not and could not repeat itself. Whatever the cost.

A strong gaze met his. For an instant, he was lost in the rich amber hues, the warning they held was unmistakable. Hunger. Pain. Longing. She was a woman in a new world. And she was the most beautiful creature he’d ever laid his eyes on. For a moment, he wanted to pretend she could belong to him. He wanted to pretend that he really mattered to Avery and this wasn’t just a form of survival.

Hell, he even wanted to pretend she enjoyed living at the compound even if she hadn’t been given the choice. Those were just notions, stupid and ridiculous notions Jax shouldn’t even be thinking.

Avery was changing. She was different. Even the curves of her body took shape. Not that there was a problem with them before, but now...

Heat filled his face at the thought of touching her, having her. A steady ache throbbed in his pants. And at that moment, Jax knew he would have her again. If it was only for a moment, he’d hold her, caress her...pleasure her.

If he couldn’t have any other piece of Avery, he’d take it and curse himself for the bastard he was later.

Her touch was addictive, her taste would be catastrophic to his system.

You can't taste, he reminded himself. What he'd give for just a sip. Just one tiny drop of her essence.

"Hey dream boy," Carson called, "you still with us here?"

"Yeah. And I'm going with you," he informed the both of them, "It's not an option." With the Etrux's plan in the open, it was entirely too risky.

Jax turned to her, words spilled fluent from his lips in his native tongue.

Avery just looked at him. "What?"

She didn't understand. Relief washed over him. It was possible and everyone was trying to screw with his mind.

Brethren couldn't wait for the Etrux, they'd seek them out. Squeeze the answers out of their miserable, soulless bodies and make them bleed until they begged for mercy. That he'd deliver. He promised.

They'd screwed with the wrong vampire. Messing with his brothers was one thing, messing with his emotions and his mind earned them death points. Game was over, time to collect.

"Thanks Jax." Carson flung herself in Jax's arms, squeezed a little too tight. "Thanks, big buy." She tenderly lifted up and placed a tender kiss on his cheek.

"Watch yourself with that mushy."

Color filled her cheeks. "Sorry."

Avery gave him a gentle smile of approval and the two women left the room, leaving him standing and wondering what in the hell he'd gotten himself into.

Chapter Thirteen

It was a little past dusk. The sky, eerily calm, smattered with ink-dark clouds. The night beckoned, pulled at all of his senses. It was the only time Devlin truly felt alive. Cool air nipped at his flesh, teasing with the promise of impending snow. Funny, he didn't like many things, but he liked the snow. Loved the sting of cold droplets tease his face.

"It is time." The woman's voice almost sang to him. The consonance of the timbre played over his skin like a finely tuned instrument.

She was beauty, grace.

Every bit the representation of a life he'd never had as a mortal, but longed for. All the women he'd desired were too good for him. He'd been a blemish on their existence. Just knowing he'd fancied them, made them wretch. And they'd each informed him of it at one point or another in his life.

All those feelings. All of those situations, melting away since this woman that stood before him entered his dreams. Each night this unlikely angel entered his room and pleased him in ways he hadn't thought possible and he wanted to please her right back. "What can I do for you my love?"

A smile spread across her face. That mocha-kissed skin, shining under the veil of lace and splendor. The white garment flowed to the tops of her bare feet and she walked with the grace and sleekness of a panther. A bright light illuminated her face, surrounding her entire aura as she approached him. Arms stretch, reaching to take him in an embrace. "You've found her. For this, my servant, I am extremely pleased."

"Yes. Yes. I have done as you have instructed." Oh, but it felt good being in her arms. To be accepted by a creature so beautiful. To be loved...

A fingertip ran down his face in the sweetest caress. He hissed at the sheer pleasure of the contact. "I am pleased. *Very* pleased."

Instinctively, he reached for her, the slightest brush of his hand to her shoulder and she shied away. "Do you not crave my touch as I yours?"

"I crave you, but there is much to be done. Time for frivolous behavior is yet to arrive. When the task is complete, we will be together forever. Until then we must remain focused."

The scent of lavender wafted into his nostrils, branded them with her smell, her essence. Devlin kept vials of lavender in his home when she was away and sit and inhale for what seemed like hours.

His cock immediately shot to attention. How he longed to feel her, the real her pant beneath him in pleasure. Not just ethereal visits that were short-lived before she faded back into the light. Devlin wanted the real person to live on earth with him and rein as his queen when the time came. She was fit for a queen, her beauty held no parallel. Even those that were blessed with vague similarities were no match for this woman.

And she wanted him.

"Have you sampled the chosen?"

"Yes, her lineage is pure, my love. The bloodlines run deep and strong. When should I bring her to you?"

"Excellent. Soon, the tides are rising in the west. The scripture has to be followed to the letter." The woman walked around him in circles, dragging a nail across his chest.

"It will be."

"The scripture is no longer in your keep?"

"I have it well hidden. It will emerge when you deem the time is right."

"You have done well."

Lifting up to her toes, the woman ran a tongue over the sensitive flesh on his neck. Gooseflesh immediately lined his arms. If it were possible to shudder more he'd go into a total epileptic fit.

"One more."

"Then do not tarry. Time is of the essence and chance is heavy in the air."

"Consider it done."

"Do not fail me."

Devlin nodded his head as he watched her disappear into the light. That woman made him crazy with desire, the woman that made him lose his senses, left him to business.

Seven stores and a serious back ache later, Avery and Carson finally decided on a dress. About damned time. If Jax would've been forced to stroll through one more fancy dress store with snotty attendants, he'd get all fangy on them and there'd be serious blood loss.

For the pure hell of it.

"Would you like this gift wrapped sir?" the lady asked from behind the boutique counter.

He cleared his throat. "No."

The elderly lady looked taken aback by the shortness of his answer, but they'd been there so long, his feet were aching in his boots from standing. Not to mention it'd been long enough for the turf to become volatile. It was dangerous business catering to the whims of women. Hopefully, this would put a stop to this nonsense and everything would just return to normal.

Whatever that was.

Without thanking her, Jax snatched up the bag and they all headed out to the Hummer.

"Did you have to be so hateful?"

"Hateful?" he answered as they wheeled in the direction of the compound. "I wasn't hateful."

"Yes, you were," Avery replied.

He wanted to say something, but what would be the point? His job wasn't to argue with her. His job was to keep the Etrux's slimy paws off her until the time for the prophecy had passed.

"You two are like an old married couple," Carson said, leaning from the back seat and resting her arm on the bench back.

"We are not," they answered in unison.

"See." Carson rolled her eyes as she leaned back in the Hummer and fastened her seatbelt.

They didn't have time to discuss it any further and a blue light special flashed in behind the car. Not long after that, the sirens.

"Damn," Jax's voice resonated in the air-tight atmosphere. If Avery were a betting woman, she'd bet the windows were shatter and bullet proof. Though, lately, her bets weren't on the money.

As quick as the lights appeared, they disappeared in the murky shadows of the night. Relieved, the thought of the woman working at the store recognizing her and phoned the police hadn't escaped her mind. The moment the lights flickered in the rearview mirror, an uncontrollable ach gnawed at her stomach.

What had she become? What was she now? Different. Somehow, irreversibly different. The walls of time closed in on her. The life she knew was over. The moment she'd gotten involved with Lambert, she should've known.

Mafia connections, money laundering, just to name a few. The tax increase greatly paid for by citizens of Chicago padded the pockets of the powerful conglomeration. The hit men, the prostitutes, the paid law, and the paid judges. It was like a bad remake of the *Godfather*, with a modern slant. The worst part of it was she was stuck right in the middle of it and the hit men wouldn't stop until she was dead.

"Close," Carson whispered again from the back seat.

Jax grunted. Lips pursed tight together. Tension coiled in the back of his neck.

She swallowed the dryness. Didn't help. She was parched, her mouth like cotton on a hot summer's day. Probably nerves, mostly thirsty...

"It's fine. Everything is fine."

Immediately, Jax jerked the wheel, tires squealed before the vehicle whipped down an old street. The tall buildings caged them, on the one way street, light dim except the faint headlights, which had somehow dimmed impossibly low.

"I hate it when you do that. You know I can't see a damned thing," Carson scolded.

Avery could've sworn she saw him smile. He actually enjoyed messing with Carson. It was like a brother/sister relationship. Jax took care of her.

It was really kind of sweet.

"That's why I do it."

"Well, hell, you could slow down not all of us have night vision you know."

The thought hadn't occurred to her until that point. She could see perfectly. Normally she was night blind. Couldn't see three fingers right in front of her eyes in the black of night, but tonight, everything was clear. Tiny flakes of snow fluttering in front of the headlights. Each movement of street rats. Seeing wasn't the only thing amplified, her hearing was as well. She even heard tiny heartbeats thump, of rats scampering down the street in her ears.

This was an advantage. Definitely. If she could hear a rat's heart, she could listen through doors. Hear conversations from several feet away. *Lambert*.

Jax rested a hand on her leg. The touch sent tremors throughout her body. Hard and heavy. The thrum of blood swimming through his veins beckoned her.

Heat filled her cheeks at the thought.

"Hold on," he warned.

The Hummer jumped a bump in the road, landed and then spun hard to the left. Once she regained control of her already tipsy stomach, she said, "Could've had more warning on that one."

"Yeah," Carson agreed. "You'd think I'd be used to this by now."

"Where are we going?" Avery asked.

"You two talk too much."

Avery sucker punched him. He winced, "Oh." Rubbed his arm like she'd truly hurt him. She kind of liked playing around with Jax. Matter of fact, she kind of liked Jax.

The next thing she knew, they shot out of the tunnel in was through an entrance to the Brethren Compound. It was like something off Batman. The Brethren had just as much money as Bruce Wayne. Jax pulled into the garage, threw the gear into park and they hopped out.

"Next time, I drive," Carson informed, "all that twisting and jerking that wheel about made my ass sick. You have to remember, we all don't have guts of steel, Jax."

Jax grimaced. Even though Jax acted like he didn't want to help Carson, Avery was pretty sure deep down he cared about her happiness.

"Don't go and tell everyone where we've been. I don't need more lip from the boys."

"Sure thing," Carson grinned, and walked into the compound.

The air in the room immediately thickened. She was alone, with Jax and it seemed every time she moved near him, her cells screamed to touch, to want.

Jax eyed her suspiciously. He sensed it. Vampires sensed those types of things if legends were true. "Your body's changing still," he explained.

"No kidding."

He laughed.

"What?"

"Just didn't expect you to say that is all. Maybe you've been hanging around Carson too much."

The corners of her mouth lifted in a smile.

"What's that? Are you smiling?"

She fought the urge to punch him like Carson. So many things had happened and she hadn't smiled in a so long, it felt good. He was making sense of her life for her. Many things spiraled out of control, but it seemed the one constant was Jax.

Albeit a strange and awkward situation she'd never dreamed she'd be in, but he made it make sense. "Do I have to become a vampire? I mean is it irreversible now?"

He furrowed a brow, walked over to stand close to her. The scent of spices drifted in the air at his closeness. Fingertips itched to touch the hard planes of his chest, pull him close and nestle herself into his arms.

It was where she was safe, where she belonged.

Safe? In the arms of a vampire? What was she thinking? But oddly enough it made sense. She felt at ease with Jax and in the compound.

That's not what bothered her the most. What bothered her most was the fact she liked being in his arms. She was a strong woman. Even the strongest of women had breaking points and she'd passed hers months ago.

"Sometimes choices are taken from us." His gaze fell to her hand as he took it into his, gingerly massaged the pad of his thumb.

"Like?"

"What we become."

"Are you saying I *have* to become a vampire? Even if I don't want to?"

"I don't know."

She dropped her hand from his. "What do you mean you don't know? How could you not know?"

"Calm down."

"Don't tell me to calm. This isn't your life."

"You're right, it's not."

She straightened her jacket as if to say, damn straight. Then she looked into his eyes and she saw. She saw his life. The life he'd led. He was a slave. Beaten.

Treated less than human. The choice of eternity and strength. He took it.

He *embraced* it.

Memories flashed through her mind, Jax's memories. She understood how so many choices had been taken from him. Except for the one. Becoming a vampire, defying those that hurt him, was his choice and it was one he'd never regretted.

At that moment, she realized just how much she cared for Jax. Avery's hands came up to rest on his shoulders. "I'm sorry."

"You're learning. You share blood with someone and everything in their mind can become your own."

"What if I don't want to share memories?"

"It can be controlled."

"Becoming a vampire was your decision."

Jax remained tight-lipped about his life even though she'd seen pieces of his memory. Maybe he wasn't ready to share.

She couldn't blame him, she hadn't exactly thanked him for protecting her. Or saving her. If what he told her was true, she owed him.

"Your decision was taken from you. There wasn't anything right in that. No vampire worth anything does something like that."

"No, they don't."

Jax paused. "You have his blood, which means..."

"I have his memories."

Jax grabbed her shoulders, almost too tight. "Can you see anything?"

"No."

He turned loose. "They may come to you and they may not. If you see anything at all that can help. You have to let us know."

"I want to find him."

"It's too dangerous."

"Let me decide what's dangerous. I'm tired of hiding, Jax. I need to get this over with."

He let out a hard sigh. "Alright." His finger traced the curve her cheek. Tiny breathes struggled to escape at his touch. Why did she turn into a puddle whenever he was near?

"So do I have to become like...like you?"

"I don't see a way around it."

"I just...this is all so new..."

"I know."

"No, you don't know. All my life I've worked hard to become who I am. And no one is taking that from me. No Congressman, no vampire, and damned sure not you."

"I'm not taking your life from you. It's not me. You're important to them, Avery. Something about your blood makes you valuable to the Etrux."

"What? What is it about my blood? There are millions of people in this city, why all of a sudden my blood is so precious vampires are after me? That makes about as much sense as...being accused of murder," her voice trailed off in thought.

Lambert required his employees to have a random drug screening every three months. It was the strictest policy of any employer she'd ever had. However, he reasoned it with avoidance of scandals. At the time, she'd whole-heartedly agreed.

Had he arranged to have her blood studied?

Was such a thing possible?

The man at the lab was creepy. Longish dirty blonde hair, thick glasses, his voice had an eerie likeness to Hannibal Lector, nasal and low.

Three months was up, she paused counting the dates in her head, last week if she was correct.

"I need to borrow your cell." She reached for the phone.

He eyed her warily.

"Look, I'm calling a friend. It's important I think I've solved something."

"Don't talk over two minutes."

"Why?"

"Trace."

Avery nodded then flipped the phone up and dialed. "Congressman Lambert's office."

"Molly, thank God."

"Hello, it's nice to hear from you," the tone of Molly's voice let her know she wasn't alone.

"Lambert there?"

"Yes, the appointment has passed. I can reschedule if you like."

"Okay, Molly, just give me yes or no. Can you do that?"

"Certainly."

"Last week, it was time for our drug tests again, wasn't it?"

"Let me check my calendar. Let's see...yes, last Thursday," Molly affirmed followed by a pause.

"Did you go?"

"No, oddly enough it wasn't mentioned."

Wasn't mentioned? They'd gone quarterly since she'd been employed there. "I need the name of the lab where he sent our blood. Can you look on the invoices?"

"Yes, I can, August 3rd at 12:30 to be exact."

Molly played along the best she could.

"Good find them and I'll phone you back for the address."

"Yes, ma'am. We look forward to seeing you as well."

"And Molly."

"Yes?"

"Thanks." There was a click.

All this time, she'd been so stupid. If something was different about her blood, the lab would know. Wouldn't they? There was only one way to find out.

"You're a regular detective."

She smiled. "I guess I am. I really think we have something here."

"I think we do."

There were things Avery needed to do like clear her name, pay a visit to the lab, and find out what it was about her blood that made a vampire want to convert her then murder her. "There are advances in medical science every day. Maybe they could reverse this vampire thing."

"Avery, you know I can't let you leave here alone."

"Why not?"

"Not without backup. It's too dangerous."

"Why do you care? It's my life. If they want me, they have a long line."

"I..." he tapered off.

"Like I thought, you don't. You have your own reasons for having me here. I've been in everyone's plans for a while now. I've been manipulated more times than you could imagine. It seems I serve a purpose for just about everyone but me."

"Sometimes we serve higher purposes than ourselves. Our own agenda isn't as important or the options are stripped from us, that's all."

"That's all? That's all? I want my options back! I had everything the way I wanted it in my life and all of a sudden, it's been ripped away from me. Do you not understand that?"

He paused, contemplating his next move. "You're not the first one this has happened to. You won't be the last."

She wanted to hang her head, let the tears fall, but she was too strong for that. Too strong to let her future be dictated any longer. She'd always gone for the things in life she wanted. Looking back, those things seemed trivial. A nice apartment, a good job, someone to love.

Okay, so maybe she was still working on that last bit. It all seemed so impossible now, she'd changed. Even if it'd been against her will, she had vampire blood in her now and she wasn't quite human. But being not human had its advantages, she was stronger, she heard better, her senses were astute. If ever there was a time to fight for something, this was it.

"Tell me what Devlin plans on doing with me, I need to know."

How could she fight for her future if she didn't realize what she was up against? The problem with that was they weren't entirely sure. When the Ancients were raised...

He said that as if Avery would be here. If the Brethren let her die, the ancients wouldn't matter to her.

Devlin would use her and discard her when his purposes were fulfilled. The thought of that made Jax's throat tighten.

The worry etched on her face, the uncertainty tugged at him. "He wants to kill you." He barely formed the words.

Her face dropped. "Why would he want to kill me, he doesn't even know me..." the softness of her voice, the cadence of her breathing, she was scared, confused...

"It has nothing to do with you."

"You're talking in circles."

"They need you because of me." It about killed him to admit that to her. The Etrux needed her dead to defeat the Brethren. To raise the ancients, only they weren't planning on raising an ancient...they wanted to raise his enemy. Why hadn't he thought of this before? Devlin wasn't trying to raise the ancients. The vampire wanted to raise O'Sirus.

How in the hell things got worse in less than ten seconds flat was beyond Jax, but the realization it was O'Sirus made the problem increase exponentially.

Meroe. Avery was a spitting image. Meroe worshipped O'Sirus. He'd seen her many times build alters in his honor. Pray to him as if he were *Isis*.

If Sirius turned to Earth, Earth was over as they all knew it.

"What could I possibly have to do with you?"

"It's an old vendetta. One I'd like to forget about."

"Make me understand this. If I'm going to be killed for something you've done, you owe it to me to make me understand."

A muscle jumped in his jaw. "When I was a slave..." he paused, searching her face for a reaction, when there was none, he continued. "I fell in love with my owner's daughter."

"Oh."

"Yeah, big oh."

"I still don't understand –"

"Let me finish."

She nodded her head and he continued. "I was moved to the home where I was requested as her personal slave." Avery stood, listened with intent. Although she appeared a little pale. Did she care about him loving another? "I couldn't marry her. She was promised to the Pharaoh."

"You couldn't marry for love? That's a shame."

"It's true. She went to marry the Pharaoh and I was left behind." It was the first time he'd told anyone the story of his heartbreak. He didn't mind talking with Avery, he felt as though he could talk with her for hours.

"I'm sorry, but I still don't see what this has to do with me."

"The man she married killed her," he swallowed, "while I was forced to watch."

"Oh God."

"When I became a vampire, I killed him."

She stood there. Not saying a word. Maybe she was in denial. It wasn't as though it was something people heard everyday. As normal of an existence as it was for him now, things like that were new to her.

"I ripped out his throat without a second thought."

"I thought the Brethren did things for the good."

"We do. That was before..."

"Oh. I know that was horrible for you. It had to have been, but I still don't see what this has to do with why Devlin wants me."

"Her name was Meroe. I don't think I've told you that," he continued, searching her eyes as a flood of emotions washed through him. By now, she'd moved to his side and had fastened her arm through his.

"No, you didn't," her voice as soft as a whisper.

“You look just like her.”

Chapter Fourteen

Avery's hand dropped from his side. So that is why he wanted her here. She reminded him of the woman he loved.

Great. This was beyond great, this was fantastic. Before this, she could've sworn her life couldn't get any worse. No, she'd bet what was left of her sanity on it. Now, she gave up entirely.

She lived a nightmare. A complete, utter nightmare and no one could wake her up but herself. "Why did you tell me this before? And I don't want excuses, I want the truth."

"There was no need."

Should she slap him now or save it for when she could deliver a real whopper? The urge to ring his jaws until he heard bells next Tuesday was stronger than any craving for Ben and Jerry's she'd ever experienced. Probably be more satisfying.

"No need? Are you serious? God, you're insane. You're even worse than Lambert or Devlin." She could tell his words stung and she meant them to.

"Fine, I'll take that, but the fact remains you're in danger and Devlin plans to spill your blood all over Chicago. Who would you rather take your chances with?"

"Honestly, no one. I'd rather die alone than to keep being in the middle of this circle of psychos."

"You don't mean that."

"Yes, I do. I've been tossed about ran over, dissected and morphed into a creature of the night without my even knowing it. I pretty much say whatever else stands in my way, I can handle. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm leaving. You're opening that door and I'm walking out of it and figuring the rest of this on my own, thank you."

Jax didn't respond. Part of her wanted him to ask her not to go and that he really cared about what happened to her as a person and not because she looked like his dead lover and not because she was the Brethren's business. The other part of her knew better.

Just watching the fire inside this woman, Jax knew she'd survive. Somehow, she'd live. *Isis*, she wanted to live more than anyone he'd ever met, that energy drew him to her.

"I'm not opening that door." He stood his ground. If Avery fought Devlin, he'd be by her side. Not tied up and forced to watch her tortured, not again.

She wrinkled her face in a bout of protest. "I'm telling you. I'm leaving here, Jax. Every system has a downfall and this one isn't without. I'll find out how to break the code and I'm out of here."

He stood in silence, thinking of the few attempts she'd made to leave. They'd been solid and still she'd failed. Which pissed her off, he'd bet she didn't fail much.

"If you wanted to leave so badly, why didn't you leave when we where in town tonight? The opportunity presented itself, didn't it?"

Avery tightened her lips.

"Are you sure you wanted to leave?"

"Of course," she countered, and scuffed the toe of her boot across the concrete floor.

The urge to be close, to touch her overwhelmed him, even in her anger. He wanted to taste her lips. Pry them open and sweep his tongue inside her mouth. When she was near, he lost all control. All sense of danger and all sense of what they faced.

Before he even realized it, he was at her, so close her sweet breath fell on his lips.

"Tell me you want to leave again." Was he challenging her? Oh, he did love a good challenge.

"I..." she swallowed, "I want to..." The beat of her heart amplified in his ear. Quickened breaths. She felt him. There was no mistaking it. The damned thing of it was he felt her too.

All over.

He lifted a finger, swept a loose strand of hair from her eyes. "You want to what?" he asked as he idly traced the swell of her breast with the tip of his finger.

"I said," she swallowed, peered into his eyes. "I want to leave."

"You're not going anywhere..."

Jax lips feathered against hers, coaxing them apart. Kissing them softly, teasing until they opened and allowed entrance. He tasted of cool mints and smelled of spice and man. The warmth of his mouth played over hers. Every time he neared, she was mush. A complete, helpless pile of mush. Why did he have this effect on her? It's as though she were a teenager with raging hormones. Silly and unpredictable.

Avery was neither of those things—until she was around him—it was ridiculous. Something she didn't care to be. But she was with him, whether or not she could control it or not.

Jax's hard body melded to hers, pulling her close. She breathed in the scent of him, spicy and clean. The subtle brush of whiskers grazed her chin. As she moved into the embrace, the hardness of his cock seared through his pants. She wasn't going anywhere tonight. Nowhere, but to his bed.

She needed to fight, but more, she needed to be closer to him. To crawl inside him and just forget everything but Jax. This feeling, this craving. It was unlike anything she'd ever experienced.

For a bit, she might become addicted.

Jax couldn't believe how delicious Avery was. Deep down he knew this woman was good. All good in the wake of everything evil in his world. She wasn't a murderer. She wasn't anything like Meroe. She was completely different, she had a heart and she cared what happened to others. None of that mattered anymore.

Then it was clear to him. Clearer than anything had ever been, he was falling in love with Avery. *Isis*, help them both. It was a dangerous game they played.

All thoughts of protests withered away when she moaned into his mouth. The vibration of it in his mouth made him steel hard. He'd been closed off for so long. She'd awakened his soul, if he still had one. Even if a spark of it was left, she touched it.

Even reminded him a little of himself back in the day.

The way he'd fought to become more than a slave.

The words of his master rang through his head. *You'll never be anything. Do not look at Meroe in that way. Don't even think you're worthy.*

A part of what he'd said was true. She'd never be allowed to wed a slave. Not that she wanted to. To Meroe, he was beneath her. And that's exactly what she'd thought of him. A mere slave to fulfill her every whim, her every fantasy.

Avery was different. He felt it to his bones. She wanted him. Her arousal, thick with the scent of lust, she wanted Jax for...

She wanted him for the same thing Meroe had, to fulfill the need building in her she couldn't understand. Part vampire, her sex drive had gone into overdrive. Not that he was complaining. Hell, his cock throbbed for her. Full of fever, but a tiny part of him wanted Avery to want him. The person, not the strong vampire that held the answers to her new life.

"Jax," she breathed. "Why do I want to eat you alive?"

"It's the change coming."

"No, I don't think that's it. I just...if you're not inside me soon, I think I might burst into flames."

He laughed. Did she mean that? Maybe she wanted him after all?

Fingers gripped his solid shoulders, biting into his flesh and letting him know just how ready she was for him. *Isis*, she was amazing.

Bliss.

Kissing her was pure bliss and he wasn't used to being so...

Enthralled.

Good lord, if she were any more turned on by man she'd explode. Literally, into a million tiny pieces. The hardness of his cock pressed into her. Her insides wept to possess the strength of it all over again. Her arousal was more intense than anything she'd experienced, crazy-mad and beyond control. She wanted him. Needed him. Not in a moment, but now. With everything in her she wanted to feel Jax slide into her and make love until they both couldn't stand it.

Jax had never wanted anyone the way he did Avery now. It was like she was a sickness over taking his body, possessing it and spreading through every cell in his system.

Zinging to life, his body roused like nothing he'd ever experienced. The scent strong, true and it was as though their bodies were out of control with lust. With want. His hand cupped her breast through her thin t-shirt. Hard nipples met the tips of his fingers. He teased them with her thumb and forefinger.

Gooseflesh lined her body at his touch. Her body responded instantly to his touch.

"Do that again," she requested breathy.

"I plan on it."

The feel of Jax's hands on her breast was more than she could stand. A strength rose in her like never before. She practically threw Jax onto the hard concrete floor of the underground garage and straddled him. Jax wasn't her first lover, but she'd never been one to take so much control. It was time. Time she took control of her life. She jerked the tee over her head and tossed it to the floor. All she had on were black leather pants and a black laced

bra. It wasn't her usual choice of undergarment, but she couldn't help but feel sexy, wanton. Jax's gaze slid hungrily over her breast.

"You are beautiful." He continued to worship them with his palm. This man captivated her. No doubt, he'd had many women in his day. Just the sheer size and looks of him, there couldn't be a lack of volunteers. Yet, he watched her with an appreciation. Captivating. Truth was, he watched her like he could eat her alive and God help her, she'd let him.

The sight of Avery on top of him in nothing but the bra and leather pants was the last straw. Fangs burst into him mouth, begging to sink into her flesh. The thrum of her heart, steady, beckoning.

Slow...steady... He couldn't allow even a sip. If he did, she would convert. And he wasn't like Devlin, Jax would never convert her without her permissions.

It would have to be something Avery desired. Not because he experienced a moment of passion and couldn't control himself.

Long hair fell loose, framing her near perfect face. She smiled, her teeth perfect white. He ran his hand down her back and brought her body close. So close he could taste her. Run his tongue over the dip between her breasts. She cupped his head.

He had to have her.

He *needed* to have her.

In an instant, he snapped the bra in two with his teeth and took a pert nipple in his mouth and suckled.

The taste of her skin...

Avery was about to explode and he wasn't even inside her yet. Right here, right now, and in the garage where anyone could enter and see. The strangest thing was she could've cared less. All reason fluttered away with the swipe of his tongue over her nipple.

She sucked in a breath at the warmth capturing her breast. The tease of his fangs, nipping from one to the other.

Did she want him to bite her? The thought made her drip with need. Oh yeah...she did. She wanted him to bite and drink. Whether it was her newfound instincts or not, she didn't care. With each scrape of the incisor, the desire to feed him grew and grew.

Do it, she thought. The mere thought caused her to writhe on top of him.

The brush of a tongue, the pierce of a fang. She allowed her head to fall back with pleasure. "Take, Jax. Drink from me." The anticipation was almost too much for her to stand. She closed her eyes and readied herself for the pleasure.

He stopped.

A tiny prick stung her breast, a tease. It was pleasurable and she couldn't wait to feel the rest.

His eyes must be silver, they had to be. Fighting the demon wasn't something he was used to. The demon eased his tension, solidified his fears. Deep down, he died for it to emerge and give her what she wanted, but circumstances changed. He couldn't do that to her.

Closing his eyes against the pain of lust, his lips crept up her chest, past her neck to capture her lips once more.

She moaned in disappointment, but once he teased her lips apart, Avery drank him like an elixir. Lifting her tongue up to rake over his fang. "You enjoy doing that entirely too much."

She answered him with a kiss.

Jax sent the call, the remainder of Avery's clothes disappeared from her body.

A slight breeze danced over Avery's body. How did he do those things? Intriguing how vampires possessed so much power. As Jax's fingertips skimmed the inside of her legs, Avery's heart thumped loud in her ear. She didn't hesitate, just continued to sample Jax and enjoy his touch.

His taste.

When his fingers reached the sensitive flesh between her legs, she wanted to shout in triumph. This man was golden. Complete and totally golden.

Breaking the kiss, Avery coasted her lips down his face to the tempting column of his strong neck. She nibbled playfully, but it made her teeth ache all the same.

"Easy," he warned.

She didn't want easy. She wanted to latch on. *What are you thinking? Surely you don't want to bite him again?* The truth of it plagued her. She did. With everything in her, she wanted to bite him again and taste the metallic bliss move over her tongue.

"Avery," his voice, breathy, "look at me."

When her gaze locked into his, she swore the earth moved beneath her. Or was that her lust? Either didn't matter, what matter is she wanted him here and now and nothing was going to stop her.

She was ripe. The air was thick with it and pungent. If Jax's nether region got any harder it'd break. Just when he thought he could bear it no longer, he lifted Avery and sat her down onto his lap.

They moaned in unison as her warmth slid perfectly over his hardness. Silk over steel. Nothing felt better. He was sure of it.

The cool floor beneath him was a stark contrast to the heat in his lap. She moved in a rhythm. Up and down the length of him, taking him in like he was a prize and she enjoyed every moment of it.

Had anyone ever looked at him that way?

All his years, he doubted it.

"Jax, I..."

Reaching up, he feathered a stray hair from her eyes, "Yes?"

"I...this, I'm..."

She was experiencing a heightening of all her senses. It was a normal reaction considering the changes. *Yeah, then what's wrong with you? You should be used to something like this? You've been a vampire for centuries.*

"It's okay. This is normal."

She furrowed a brow. "It's like this with everyone?"

"No," he admitted, "it isn't."

If she was to be Brided by another vampire, why did this on make her feel so good? She fit him perfect, with each thrust she felt herself tightening around his shaft.

Jax nibbled her neck. And she moaned in pleasure as she exploded into shards around him.

Not long after, he joined her.

Avery wanted to sit there in the moment, but paused, studied the area.

Quickly, Jax lifted her from him, with ease. "Someone's coming."

"W-what?" his words took a moment to sink in.

Footfalls sounded in the distance. Instantly, she grabbed her shirt and pulled it over her head, kicked the bra underneath the Hummer.

"Sorry to interrupt," Hunter admitted, looking a bit sheepish as he entered the garage.

"You didn't," Jax liked.

Oh yes he did, Avery thought. Color filled her cheeks and she wondered if Hunter knew what they'd been up to?

"What's good?"

Hunter stalked closer, the clunk of his heavy boots sounded with every step. "Boss, she's here."

She? What she?

Jax let out a deep breath. "Has she been here long?"

"About thirty minutes, but you know how she can get."

Jax nodded, "Yeah." He stuffed hands in the pockets of his leathers.

They looked like two children with their hands caught in the candy jar. She can get? Was this their mother? What was going on?

"Avery, catch up with Carson. I think she might need your help."

"Carson good?" Hunter asked.

"Yeah," Jax reiterated, "just has something new." He smiled and shot Avery a wink.

"Oh." Hunter looked even more confused. It was amazing how much Carson cared for him and he seemed oblivious to the fact. "I'm going to workout. If you need me I'll be in the weight room."

Jax threw him a nod as he left and then turned to Avery. "I have business to attend to."

"I want to go with you."

He exhaled deep. "I have to do this alone, Avery. But I want to finish what we've started."

"What kind of business?" Had she turned into his mother? Asking questions like some jealous, love-struck teenager.

"Business." When his eyes didn't meet hers, she wondered if she weren't right to be jealous.

Jealous? Of what? The very idea was ridiculous. Why would she be jealous of Jax? It wasn't like they were married. Truth was she was almost someone else's wife, which was almost comical aside from the seriousness of he wanted to kill her.

Oh God. I've completely, utterly lost my mind. Why could she even have such thoughts? How it'd changed in the past few months was amazing, even for her.

"I'll be back." He lifted a thumb to caress her cheek, but she tugged away.

Jax crinkled up his brow, gazed down at her. He acted as if another woman visiting him at the compound wasn't a big deal at all.

It was.

To her.

He turned and walked out of the room.

Messengers always bore bad news. Kalia, a direct messenger for the Senate, waited in Jax's room, dressed in her usual sexy get up. This one was black. Dark and dismal, short and sleek. Although she was pretty as far as pretty goes, she never did much for Jax.

Rumor had it Dagger wanted her, but it was against Brethren policy.

No one could lay with a messenger. They were purest of pure. It was against everything they were taught. Not quite vampire, not quite human. It wasn't really sure what they were, but it was known that they were special. Almost angelic.

"Kalia," Jax took her hand into his, lifted it to his forehead as he bowed.

"Jax." Kalia removed her hand, allowing him to rise to his feet. "I wish I could tell you this was a social call." Yeah, so the did he.

Whenever Kalia appeared, the Senate was pissed. And if the Senate was pissed it meant someone's head would likely roll. Mainly, his. Crazy how he thought becoming a vampire he'd be his own man. Not have to answer to anyone. Damn, was he ever wrong. Whatever the Senate sent to the mortal realm for, he just hoped like hell it could be fixed. "Speak, my lady." Jax's tone, somber.

"Kane has sent down orders." She stepped lightly over the floor, feigning the appearance she was gliding.

"And?"

"The Etrux is strong. The strongest it's been in four decades."

"We are well aware of Etrux numbers. It's something we're going to remedy tonight."

"The Senate will be pleased," Kalia said, emotionless. Messengers weren't supposed to feel pain, remorse, or even attachment. It was what the Senate bred them for. To service the race without as much as a thought of their own. To do the Senate's bidding in the mortal realm and return until they were needed again.

Which left the question of what they did while they weren't here. Rumor had it, they served the Senate in every way. That's why no one here was allowed to touch them. But rumors were rumors. No one knew the truth unless it happened directly to them and even then, it's biased.

"Why are you really here?"

Kalia kept her gaze from him, instead, focused on the painting on the wall. "Has she seen the portrait?"

Jax rubbed at his jaw pensively. "No."

Moving with graceful strides, Kalia made her way to the painting of the landscape. "This one is nice, reminds me of the Senate's realm." The painting had dark and light greens scattered about. Weeping willows blowing in the wind. Most people had art hanging in their home as a status symbol. Jax just appreciated it. Loved the way different paintings made him feel.

"You didn't answer my question. Why are you here?"

"I think you know the answer to that."

Did he? Hell, he'd like to think he wasn't piss-stupid, but lately, he'd not reacted with his brain. "Do I?"

"The Senate sends orders, Jax. You are not to touch the mortal."

"What?" It was as if the wind was knocked completely from him, which was crazy. It was something he'd known since the moment he'd laid eyes on her. So why did the thought of her not touching her again bother him so much?

"They'll be times, when I'm protecting..." he tried to avert the truth, but the more he talked, the more Kalia doubted.

Her expression still unfazed, "The Senate knows she's taken from you. There was never a reason for a joining. The Senate would've alerted you if she was to be converted."

"But she's not converted. She still needs one exchange. And I can't sit back and let Devlin take her." Isis, just listening to himself, he couldn't believe it. He spoke as if he actually cared for her. He didn't. Did he?

"Precisely, which is why you are not to touch her again. They feel your defenses are down. You're not using good judgment around this mortal."

"That's ridiculous."

"You've lost site of the task."

"And what exactly is that? We've been busting our asses down here trying to figure out what in the hell is going on and the only advice the Senate offers is for me not to have sex? Well, thanks, but no thanks."

Kalia approached him with small steps, trying to ease his building hostility. "You are not yourself," she said as her gaze raked the tall length of him. "Does this mortal have some type of hold on you?"

That was ridiculous, of course not. "No."

"Then why is there a problem? The Senate has never had difficulty with your compliance in the past."

They hadn't. And he had no idea how to answer that question. What was his problem? "Maybe the Senate and all their infinite wisdom could muddle it over for a bit and get back to me because I'm tired of trying to figure it out."

Kalia's eyes widened. "Surely you don't mean for me to relay this message."

Jax rubbed furiously at his temples. "No," he exhaled, "tell them we will handle this."

She nodded. "The existence of our kind depends on you, Jax. The Etrux means business. If they succeed, we'll all bow to a new king and the world will end as we know it."

Jax shook his head in agreement.

"Excellent. Devlin is coming for Avery. Keep her safe from him, but do not lay with the mortal. She is a distraction we can not afford."

Reluctantly, he bowed. Just once he wanted to love someone without anyone else butting in.

Love someone? Where did that come from? Did he love Avery?

"The Senate will be with you." And Kalia dematerialized.

Yeah, the Senate's with me, all the time. He'd only seen them once and that was a long time ago. It wasn't as if they came over for Thanksgiving Turkey or Christmas. Other than barking out orders, the Senate truly wasn't *with* anyone.

"Who was that?" Jax turned to Avery's voice.

"Huh?"

"Who was that woman in your bedroom?"

"An old friend." It wasn't a complete lie, he'd known Kalia a long time if you called a few conversations 'knowing someone.'

"Ah." She nodded, but somehow he didn't think she believed him. Avery made her way across the room. "About this blood thing, I'm on to something here."

"You are."

Avery smiled. "Now where did we leave off?"

The scent her arousal drifted into his head and he went brick hard instantly. Then she was there, all of her, pressed against his torso. Pliant to his touch. The softness of her skin played along his. The smell of coriander wafted in the air, permeating his sense until he was drunk with it.

Isis, he wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her senseless. But he couldn't. The Senate had spoken. If he went against them, they'd be punished. He wasn't afraid to take any punishment for her, hell no.

It was what could happen to her that worried him.

The reality of it was something bad would happen to Avery either way.

The weight of her arms looped around his neck, she tipped her head back, her lips begged for his kisses.

He went rigid. Hell, he didn't want to, but he couldn't help it. If he gave into her, it would be all over. His control would dissipate, his stance waver. The next thing he knew she'd be in his bed and the Senate would mount his ass on the wall.

Avery stood on her tiptoes and lifted her chin so he had access to her lips.

"Don't."

She lifted a brow. "Excuse me?"

"We don't have time to be messing around."

She pinned him with a droll stare. "Messing around?"

"There is much to be done. We can't be wasting our time."

"I see..." Her arms fell to her waist and she backed away, a hurt look on her face.

"No, it's not like that." *Isis*, this got worse by the minute.

"It's okay. I get the hint. You and her." She gestured to where Kalia had stood.

He shook his head in denial. Surely she didn't believe that he and Kalia had something going on. "No. There are things in our world you don't understand yet."

"I'm sick of that macho crap. You tell me I'm going to be one of you. It hasn't been easy but I'm trying to accept this. Whatever you have for me should be a piece of cake."

"The Senate, they govern us. It's like a group of vampires that have ascended to our thrown."

She crossed her arms over her chest as if she didn't believe him.

Drawing in another breath, he started again. "They send Messengers and that was who was here. Kalia had a message for me."

"And what was that?"

"Just because you're going to be a vampire doesn't mean you have a right to all the Brethren's business."

Her face fell, the pain behind her eyes was unmistakable. "I've earned that right."

"Etrux blood flows through your veins." He didn't want to talk to her in that manner, but it was true. Avery was made up of mostly the Etrux and it was something they couldn't afford.

If he'd slapped her, she couldn't look less fazed. It killed him to speak to her this way. But it was better to cut ties now instead of waiting. Avery was amazing. The first time he'd breathed in years, but he had no right to her.

Unless...

"Jax, I..." Avery's eyes clouded, shields of silver covered the irises. She wobbled, her stance wavering. Within seconds, he was at her, cradling her against his body. The mere touch of her flesh against his had his desire kicked up into overdrive, but he tempered it. Held it back.

"Sh..." he soothed as he sat her down into the chair.

"I feel so...odd."

"It's okay. It'll be okay." Would it? Since the Senate was directly involved, he doubted it. And the problem with that was he wanted it to be right. The scent of her floated in the air. His cock responded at the proximity and the memory of being inside her.

Isis, he wanted that again. He wanted...

"He's coming for me. I feel it." Fear lined her fragile voice. She really didn't have a clue the battle that awaited her.

Jealousy stabbed him hard. Its powerful spear reaching to the depths of his soul. This woman wouldn't be used to cause an uprising. Not if he could help it. And not if Sirius was involved.

He owed that son of a bitch one.

As his hand came up to brush softened strands of hair, graceful ebony strands fell from her forehead. "He's not going to get you." Jax sat next to her, sinking into the softness of the chair and cradling her head against the hardness of his shoulders.

"If he doesn't Lambert will." She closed her eyes, rested her head in his lap. Even though Avery didn't realize it, she was hungry. He read it on her face. Felt it in the faint beat of her heart.

"No, I'll kill anyone that tries to hurt you." It was the truth. Anyone dared harm on hair on her head, he'd rip limb to limb.

"Don't you understand?" she looked up at him with question. "I don't want to run anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm going to him, Jax," she swallowed hard. "It's the only way this will stop."

Chapter Fifteen

"Are you ready to go or not?" Carson waited anxiously at the bottom of the stairs for what seemed like hours. These men were a hundred times worse than women when it came to primping. Hell, they were going to fight, not to a club. Why did they need to look good in order to do perform ass kicking?

"We're here." Hunter shrugged into his leather holster and fastened the small, silver buckle. Then inserted his always freshly sharpened blades. Crude and Dagger quickly followed, each securing their weaponry.

"Who's driving?" Crude asked.

"I will," Dagger volunteered, pulling up his leather coat over his broad shoulders. He was a handsome devil, even if Carson wasn't attracted to him. It didn't mean she couldn't appreciate a fine male when she saw one. Hell, she lived in a house full of them. She'd have to be dead not to notice. Plus, Dagger never had trouble finding women and donors hadn't been a problem for the short time he'd been a vampire.

"Damn, Dagger, I wasn't planning on dying tonight if that's alright with your ugly ass."

Dagger flipped her off.

"I'll drive," she offered.

"That's not better," Hunter grimaced as they all walked toward the exit in the basement.

She rolled her eyes at him and made sure he saw it. She could drive. She could do a lot of things Hunter never gave her credit for. Driving being only one of them.

"I'll meet you guys there, there's something I have to check out," Hunter informed, falling behind the rest of the Brethren and slipped off toward the west portion of the house.

What in the world was he up to? For a minute, she'd love to sneak behind and follow him, but she had a job to do and didn't need the distractions. She was the one mortal out of the bunch and the last thing she needed was to get her ass killed because she was paying more attention to a guy. Her father would roll over in his grave if he thought for a moment she even remotely considered being distracted over a man.

Get tough, he'd say. Men only cause trouble. He knew what he was talking about there.

Although, there were times living with a group of men was fun. Firstly, she didn't have to watch her language. She always had a poker match going and she could watch all the violence on TV she wanted. The biggest bonus was she didn't have to listen to a bunch of girls gushing over kittens and babies all the time.

But the best part about living at the compound was it held all types entrances and exits. Some known to all the Brethren members, some not. Carson knew a few but not all. Only Jax knew all the Compound's secrets. He'd had it built especially for this purpose. Housing the fighters. The protector of the territory.

That's exactly what they were about to do, protect their territory.

The Etrux were up to no good and their ass was about to get staked if she had anything to do with it. "Load up boys and hold on to your balls. I'm bringing the heat."

They mumbled and groaned under their breath. Not low enough she couldn't hear it. Snagging the keys from the key holder, Carson groaned back at them then opened the door to the car and slid into the driver's seat. As soon as all the doors shut, she turned the ignition and pulled away.

"Why don't we just fly?" Crude asked in his usual gruff tone.

"Because," she emphasized, "we all can't fly." Shit, could they not remember anything? It wasn't like they'd fallen off the turnip truck yesterday, hell some of these assholes had been around since Socrates and they still couldn't remember mortals don't fly.

"Yeah, we know you're a groundling," Hunter's voice piped up from the seat next to her as he materialized. It didn't matter how long she'd lived with them, she never got used to them just popping in and out of places without warning.

"Shit, Hunter, would you stop doing that? You scare the hell out of me every time." She placed a hand to her chest in an attempt to steady her heartbeat.

"I'll quit materializing when you stop using that potty mouth of yours." Hunter shifted in his seat and focused on the road as if he hadn't just insulted her.

Smug wasn't the word to describe him. Asshole, there, that's a better word. "I'll talk however I damn well please."

"Will you two stop it? You're like living with an old married couple." Dagger lifted a cigarette from the inside pocket of his leather coat, placed it between his lips and lit it up.

"We are not," she countered, only reaffirming how ridiculous they did sound. This had to stop. She was a grown woman. Just because the Brethren had taken her in when she was fifteen years old, didn't mean she was still a baby.

Yeah, she was acting like one now.

What would it take for him to see her as a woman? And why couldn't she stop thinking about it? Why couldn't she just focus on the fights, kick some ass and drink a beer afterward, just a like a man?

Because she'd grown up. She was a woman and everything woman in her sang when he was near.

Growing up sucked. Carson let out an exasperated breath, and turned down Pipe Avenue. It was a street less crowded and usually flooded with assholes from the Etrux. "Tell me when you boys get a whiff." She changed the subject.

They were dead silent. Concentrating on sniffing out the bad guy as they usually did when they went out. Although Jax was usually with them, she understood he had other things to attend to. It was important to protect the prize and in this case the prize happened to be Avery.

The streets, usually dark, held a few stragglers, mostly homeless and passers-by. Poor souls were probably lost. Several liquor stores stayed open twenty-four-seven and the glow of the neon lights faded at the end of the alley when they were out of site.

That's where all the action happened. On this side of the alley there were a few apartments where less than ladylike things took place. The Etrux loved shit like that. Go in, have sex with the women and then before they knew what hit them, bleed them dry.

They were sick bastards. But what they were trying to do with Avery was the sickest. After this bout of the Etrux evaporation, she was going back to the compound and diving back into those books. Knowing exactly what they dealt with would help every member of the

Brethren, not just Jax. It wasn't like Jax was thinking with his brain either. Thinking with their cock could get a man in trouble, big time.

And if it pissed Hunter off to no end that she wanted to learn about the Prophecy, then all the more better. She tipped her chin in imagined victory at the thought.

"There." Dagger gestured to a woman practically in a run as she weaved in and out of the now gathered crowd. Carson didn't know where the crowd came from so fast. But it was Chicago, weird things happened there.

The Hummer screeched to a halt and the Brethren stormed out, weapons in check. They were truly beautiful if you just sat back and watched. Their fluid movements, their tall, sleek bodies. It was like an art. All the days training, all the nights sparring had truly paid off. The Brethren took fighting to a whole other level that amazed her sometimes.

She was almost as good, too. She was the best mortal combatant around. Gang of opposing vamps feared her.

As they should...

Carson snatched her bow and arrow and packed a couple of ninja stars and ran to join the party.

The Etrux emerged from all corners and hidden alleyways. It didn't take long for her to realize they'd set up a trap. They knew they'd be coming as they always did. But this time, stakes were higher, the Etrux was actually on a mission of their own. It was different.

Four Etrux moved from the back of the alley, blocking the entrance. "Hey little boys," she teased, "whatcha hiding?" Carson gripped the handle of the stake held tight in her hand, stepped gingerly as if she was about to spook them. It was a hoot, screwing with them that way.

"My bitch killer," Gadston ground out. Gadston was tall and blonde and he'd been around a bit too long for her liking. Once you learned their names that meant a member of the Etrux had lived far too long. They should be dusted the minute they became an evil, piece of crap like the Etrux.

"Oh, I got your bitch killer right here. Come get it." She waved her hand in a 'come here' motion, taunting the evil soul suckers. In an instant, Carson whipped out her UV tipped arrows and fired. The first unlucky bastard to challenge her disintegrated in a million ash particles.

The others knew they had it coming.

The rest of the Brethren had already engaged in combat. Dagger with one a tall, lanky one. Crude with a shorter, stocky one.

Hunter with...

She couldn't see Hunter from where she was, but she was certain he dusting his fair share of the Etrux, as usual. And that's when it happened.

The Etrux filed in from the mouth of the alley, surrounding them.

"Well. Well, you all did come to out to play. More fun for me." The words left her mouth, but Carson had never seen so many Etrux. They were everywhere.

A blade sliced through her shoulder, warm liquid blood flowed from the wound. It burned like hell. The freezing wind must've picked up the scent of fresh blood because it was like a damned alarm went off. Every hungry vampire in the area turned and sniffed. Mortal blood was a prize for the vampire race.

Hers would be a trophy.

Immediately, Carson was surrounded. Three, no four of the Etrux circled her like sharks swimming around a stranded soul in the ocean. She'd been in tighter spots before, this shouldn't be so bad. She scanned the crowd. Her gaze searched for members of the Brethren.

Where were they?

A shattering pain tore through the back of her head. The dim street lights blurred through the fog. The flow of blood streamed from her wound. And the smack of her face to the sidewalk jarred her ears.

It wasn't that Jax didn't want Avery here, he did. The more she stayed the more he wanted her to stay.

Damn.

What was wrong with him? He wasn't supposed to care for her. The situation was too volatile. There'd be a fight. And not a pretty one. The reality of it was, Avery might not make it.

Jax swallowed hard at the thought. That was the problem. He'd left the rest of the Brethren to battle the Etrux tonight so he could look after her. Probably a stupid decision on his part. The Brethren needed him.

Avery needed him more...

Jax cursed himself, ran a hand over his smooth head. Nothing like sitting around and waiting. Hell, he wasn't one to wait. He wasn't one to sit.

If she wanted to meet up with Devlin, she wasn't doing it on her own. It was entirely too dangerous.

For a fraction of a second, Jax wanted to believe Avery wanted him in her life. Needed him to be there for her.

But it was a lie. She needed him to keep herself from Devlin and the cops. That was it, plain and simple and without refute. There was something about the way she looked at him.

Desired him.

It made blood pump hard through his veins and for the first time in centuries, he felt alive.

Hell, the only time in his life he'd ever felt alive.

Yeah and you're just going to set back and let her be Brided by Devlin?

The thought of that slimy bastard putting his hands on Avery in any way made his blood boil. If he placed one claw, one fang near her, he'd rip his head off and sit back and enjoy the fireworks.

There was something in the Prophecy explaining all of this. He hadn't read it in years, but all documents served a purpose. The Senate wouldn't send them down if they didn't.

Jax rubbed the faded binding of the book. Ignored the dust teasing his fingerprints. Maybe the key to all of this lay within the pages?

Jax flipped open the book Hunter brought up from the archives and rested it on top of the desk in his bedroom. He'd never really sat and used the desk for much of anything. Although it'd been there. Come to think of it, Jax never took the time to sit and enjoy the things he'd acquired as a vampire and never experienced as a mortal.

Money. Immortality. Most men spent a lifetime in search of these items and he possessed them both. Hell, he'd always been too busy serving the Brethren.

When are you going to stop serving a master? The thought passed his mind and the question couldn't be ignored.

When was he?

He owed his race, true. The race that'd saved him from mediocrity. Vampirism saved him from being a slave. In a way, it was poetic justice, the thing that actually took his life, saved his life.

Leaving the fate of the race in his hands was another thing entirely. And that's what The Senate had done.

The first couple of pages, brittle and worn from being written years ago, afforded a little insight.

The descendent, the light of the world will be born. She is the truth. The mirror reflection will be that of evil blood. A server of their own will. The second soul into the darkness will bring forth this light and make her eternal. With the spill of the light's blood onto the seal, the dead shall rise and become flesh once more.

Isis. Jax thumbed to the next page.

The page, ripped from the book. Jax didn't have to read it to know the plan.

They were going to kill her.

It was simple really. Even though it didn't make entire sense, one thing was certain. Etrux was going to spill Avery's blood.

Brethren was powerful, the most powerful clan to ever walk the streets of Chicago and Devlin knew it. That wasn't a secret, but Devlin's motivations ran deeper. He was a worthy adversary, gave good fights, but everyone knew he wasn't smart enough to figure a plan like this on his own.

A shudder ran the length of his spine. *Avery.*

Jax tucked the book back into the desk drawer and locked it.

"Avery?" he called as made his way down the hall.

No answer.

Jax followed her scent to her room to where it faded at the open window.

She was gone.

Avery wasn't a sitting duck. She'd phoned Molly and planned to meet her at Midday Café just after dusk. It was usually quiet and most everyone came there to read a book or have a conversation. So, they shouldn't be bothered.

She looked much like someone off of Dick Tracy. She had the whole trench coat thing going on, but the only access she had to even a partial disguise was leather. The decision to forego sunglasses wasn't difficult since she could only venture out after sundown and wearing shades in the dark would draw unneeded attention.

A small bell jingled on top the glass door as she pulled it open and made her way to the back table where she'd instructed Molly to meet her.

Ten minutes later she was still sitting in the booth, had ordered water with lemon, and was about to leave when Molly came up from behind.

"Sorry I'm late," Molly apologized as she took a seat in the booth across from her.

"I was getting worried. You weren't followed were you?"

Molly wiggled in her seat and flung her purse on the table, clutched it as if it had ten million dollars in it. "I don't think so. But Lambert has been all over the place today. Phones rang off the hook and the nut even bought a telescope."

Avery frowned. "Telescope? The man who never looks up because he's afraid the sky will fall in on him bought a telescope?"

"Crazy, huh? He's been mumbling something about a lunar eclipse. I had no idea he was into Astrology or whatever. He's getting stranger everyday."

A sliver of hope ran down Avery's spine. This could be something important. Lambert never wasted time on anything he thought wouldn't be of use to him. Every detail was important to him. If he needed a telescope, he planned on using it for his own purposes.

"Interesting. How's his visitor log? Anymore people than usual?"

Molly removed a couple of pieces of paper from her purse and unfolded. "I made copies of his log for the past two weeks. I thought about scanning to get them to you sooner, but the cops are watching the place like hawks. I was afraid I'd lead them to you."

"Thanks, Molly, good thinking." Avery took the paper from her and tucked it on the inside of her coat jacket. "Did you remember the address to the lab?"

"The samples were sent to West End Laboratory, 33rd and Fox."

"You're a Doll." Avery scribbled down the address on her napkin and tucked in the breast of the leather coat with the visitor log.

"No problem." Molly smiled at her. "Are you sure you're alright? You look a little pale."

"I'm fine I'm just ready for this all to end."

A trusting covered hers and Molly gave her a reassuring wink. "I know you are."

It was relieving to see someone from her life and the way it used to be. She and Molly had lunch together on many occasions, but somehow, Avery had a feeling it would be the last. This wasn't her life anymore. As hard as it was to admit, it wasn't.

Everything had changed.

"Molly, be careful. I don't want anything happening to you because of me."

"I'm careful."

"I'm glad. I have to go before I'm recognized. You've been a great help."

"There's something else you ought to know." Molly's gaze shifted from one side to the other as she made sure no one could see or hear them.

"What?"

She lowered her voice to a near inaudible whisper. "Justin is alive."

If Carson was in anymore pain, she might just think she'd actually died and gone to Hell instead of sending people there. Hadn't they heard the expression don't shoot the messenger?

Not in Etrux Hell. The stench of the room was unfathomable. A distinct likeness to rotten liver worst and pig's feet. The hum of the lights over head was the only sound she'd heard in hours.

That wasn't a bad thing necessarily, considering the way the Etrux carved up her body pretty damned good. Lacerations burned along her right leg a tad more than her left.

From high up on her inner thigh to just above the knee, she felt the warmth of blood oozing down the long plane of her calf.

She really couldn't see the marks because of the blindfold. Cute at first, but now the damned thing skyrocketed to the annoying category.

There was no way to tend to the cuts blindfolded and she couldn't tend to the cuts because of the chains biting into her wrists and ankles.

She had to get out of there. Her mind whirled in different directions trying to find a way to worm free of the constraints, however, the lethargic pull of her body urged for rest. She'd lost a lot of blood. The Etrux had taken more than their fair share and laughed as she'd fade in and out of consciousness.

Energy low, Carson couldn't channel any powers. It took every last spark of energy she possessed just to breathe. Negativity blanketed her, tugging at what will she had left. And she had one hell of a will.

With each second that passed, however, she grew weary.

Where in the hell where the boys?

They'd just disappeared when she'd needed them the most. Hours passed since she'd heard from any of them. She'd risked her life on a daily basis for the likes of their no-good asses.

Figured.

If she did live through this and made it back to the compound, she was never speaking to any of them again!

"She's still out, My Lord." The sound of the Etrux's voice echoed through the room as he entered.

Carson lay deathly still.

"Good, keep her that way. When the Brethren comes for her, kill them."

She was a trap. Well, that worked out well, didn't it? None of them cared enough for her to even show up. This was the last time she ever risked her ever-loving ass to save their no-good ones.

Should've picked someone else, Devlin, baby. It's just not your lucky day.

Who was she kidding? It wasn't hers either.

"Can I drink some more? She's so spicy, this one."

Shit. Now she had to pretend to be asleep and listen to how great she tasted. If things got any worse...well, hell, she wouldn't know if things got any worse, would she?

She'd be dead.

"No, keep her alive. She's not bait if she's not breathing."

What a gentleman. Apparently, she didn't know any gentleman or she wouldn't be tied to a table, half-dead, cold, and wishing she were anywhere but here.

"When do you expect their arrival, My Lord?" The vampire asked, "I'll ready the other members."

Devlin growled low, "You should be ready. There should never be a time when the Etrux isn't prepared. Do you understand? We've been planning this for a while now and failure isn't an option."

A smacking sound reverberated through the air followed by an audible *oomph*. Devlin's aim must've improved since the last time they'd sparred.

Anxiousness crawled through her veins. What she wouldn't give for another chance. One more aim at that rat bastard. She drew up her fingers into a ball, barely able to make a fist. Damn, the Etrux for taking her blood and damn the Brethren for bailing out on her.

"Next time, you be ready or worse will befall you."

The world spun in her mind.

Was this some sort of nightmare? She was too good to be caught. She'd trained daily since she was fifteen. Training was always a priority.

Until lately...

Anger seeped through her pores. How much time had she wasted worrying over Hunter? How much time was wasted shopping and flitting around town worried over a dress? And for what, to make Hunter jealous?

Reality check, Carson . No one can be jealous if they don't care.

The truth smoldered in her mind, searing her with the fact of how stupid she'd been. Carson knew one thing, if she lived through this she'd never ever waste another second worrying over Hunter as long as she was able to draw a breath.

Jax scanned the city, flying lower than usual so detecting Avery's scent would be easier. He'd been out for hours. Dawn approached and still no sign of her or any of the other Brethren members.

He'd really gone and done it now. Screwed everything up. Why didn't he just tell her he loved her? That he wanted to be with her as long as he walked the earth?

Did he? Did he love Avery?

Worry lined his stomach so much he was sick with it. Of course he loved her. It was fast and furious and damn near knocked him off his block. *Isis*, he loved her.

He loved Avery and the Senate forbade it.

Well, he'd been the Senate's bitch for too long. All his life, he'd lived in service of others. Even sold himself on the lie since becoming a vampire.

Lived in service of the Senate and carried out their every wish. This time, he wouldn't. There was a way to save Avery and if he was lucky enough to find her, he'd do it. Whatever punishment the Senate handed down was just. He'd take it if it meant he could be with her.

Listen to you. You act as if she wants you.

Maybe she did or maybe she didn't. It was a chance he was willing to take. He just hoped like hell she'd accept it.

If she was alright.

No, she had to be. Failure wasn't a possibility.

Hunt, you there? Jax sent the call again, but got the same response. Nothing. Evil laced the night air and the Etrux, unusually quiet.

A few members of the Cian roamed the streets. Jax flew deep into their turf, methodically scanning for Avery. This was a dead end. There was no sign of her anywhere.

Jax.

Hunter? Thank Isis, where are you?

The Etrux took Carson, Jax. Hunter's voice practically quivered. *We're searching, but we haven't been able to locate her yet.*

Damn.

Yeah, they took her as we were fighting. Dagger and I followed a member into another alley and when we returned, she was gone and so was the Etrux.

Jax owed the Etrux twofold. If anything happened to either one of the ladies in his life, they'd pay with a death so painful they'd pray for the end.

Where are you, Brother?

We're on Etrux turf. The place is quiet, man, too quiet. Something big is going down.

Jax turned to fly back to the other side of the city. Even though his vampire sight was strong, the night was unusually dim because of the eclipse.

Eclipse? Damn it, how could he be so stupid?

With everything in him, he flew. He'd find them if it was the last thing he'd do.

Avery crept with the grace of a sleek panther. With acute vision and amplified hearing it wasn't as hard to tail Lambert as she'd thought it would be.

Justin's alive. Molly's words rang through her head. Why would anyone fake their son's death?

Sympathy.

The latest polls showed a trail. Avery even recommended to him a meeting to discuss points and how to gain before the election in the following months. She'd meant to meet with him and brainstorm some strategies. It seemed he'd beat her to the punch.

The storage building she'd followed Lambert to, appeared as though no one occupied it in years. Musty and dank, but Lambert held the key just the same. He was dressed in a black coat and jeans. Even wore an old Cubs baseball cap.

She had to hand it to him, at least he was smart enough to change his appearance. No one would expect him to dress casual. Honestly, it was the first time she'd seen him in anything but a suite. What he hadn't expected was she'd recognize the smell of vanilla mocha cappuccino and raspberry-filled doughnuts. Enough to follow him to his hideout.

His personal favorite.

He'd eaten some today. A calculating smile curved to her lips. This vampire thing wasn't so bad after all. It had its ups and downs, sure, but when she converted if she was half as powerful as she felt tonight, it would be one hell of a ride.

Strength coursed through her veins. What would she feel like if she actually became a full vampire? She couldn't imagine the power she'd have.

The thing was if she was to become a vampire regardless, she didn't want to be Brided by Devlin. She wanted Jax to do it.

Deep down, she knew he didn't really want her. She was a key to the undoing of his enemy. She was around because she had to be, not because he wanted it.

For a moment, she wished she could be his forever.

Where did that thought come from?

They'd become close. Closer than she'd ever allowed anyone in her life, but all of that was nothing if she ended up married to another vampire against her will.

Jax vowed to protect her, but what if he didn't want to? Could someone survive with this much vampire blood ebbing through their veins without a full conversion?

She doubted it. She'd probably go crazy. Living somewhere in between the vampire and mortal world wasn't something she wanted to do. It wasn't possible.

She couldn't think of Jax. She had to concentrate on clearing her name and getting some semblance of a life for herself. She wouldn't fall privy to Devlin and if Jax didn't want her then she'd have to make due with the life she'd remake. It wasn't as though she wasn't talented in other things, she was. She could make due.

Somehow...

Avery focused her attention to the task at hand.

Lambert.

If she wanted, she could snap his neck like a twig, laugh as his limp body crumpled to the ground. She might get some sick satisfaction from something like that, but it wasn't like her. No matter how much changed, she wasn't a killer. People had played with her mind and it all ended now.

The kind that was going to answer for it. Fury lit her veins, spider-webbed, filling her face. If she got near him, it would take every effort she could muster in order not to choke the life out of him.

Lambert unlocked the building, and entered. She inched toward the broken window. It was higher than she was tall, but Avery climbed a few boxes and peeped in.

He wasn't alone.

"How long do you expect me to live like this?" Justin asked his father, "This isn't what you promised."

Lambert pulled a few candy bars from under his coat and a drink and handed it to him. "I know, it all happens soon."

Justin took the candy, unwrapped it and immediately bit and began to chew. "It better or I'm leaving. I can't live like this."

"You won't have to for long. It's soon, I promise."

"See anything you like?" A voice whispered in Avery's ear.

Startled, she jumped, a hand came up over her mouth to muffle her scream.

"Easy, Avery."

"Jax? You scared me half to death."

"I scared you? Where have you been? I thought you'd been kidnapped."

"Ironic isn't it?" Sarcasm dripped from her mouth as she turned to face him.

"What are you doing?" Jax asked.

"Justin's alive, Jax. I didn't kill him."

Indifference darkened his face. She wanted him to be proud for her. She'd all but proven her innocence. All she needed was a photo of the two, or she could tip off the news. That would be perfect.

"We have to get out of here."

What? Did he not hear what she'd just said? "I just told you Justin was alive. Do you know what this means?" She looped her arms around his neck and squeezed as hard as she could. "As soon as everyone hears about this, I'm off the hook. I'll no longer be a wanted woman!"

She was so happy she could kiss him. She did.

The moment Avery's lips covered his, he lost all sense of reason. Her happiness was important to him. The sweet taste of her lips made him want to do nothing but devour her.

Every delicious inch.

Her shoulders relaxed. Poor girl had been so upset, so many changes in her life. *That's it, just let go.*

The warmth of her tongue swept against his. Damn, she made his fangs flex. They ached for her, pleaded for him to relieve his craving for her blood. The sound of her heart flitted in his ear.

Avery's body pressed hard against his, she was putty in his hands, moldable pliant putty and he wanted to lay her down and take her then and there. Let the Senate and everyone see how much he wanted this woman.

But he couldn't. There was too much at risk and Devlin would be there soon.

Reluctantly, he pulled back from her embrace.

His lips still wet from her kiss, "We have to stop."

"Why?" She frowned in protest.

"We have to get out of here."

"What? I'm not leaving until I have the proof I need to clear my name."

He clutched her arms, "Avery, listen to me. Devlin is on his way. Tonight's the night. He's coming for you."

She folded her arms over her chest and rolled her eyes. "How do you know that? Did he call and warn you?" She laughed.

"No."

"Oh, let me guess. Your intergalactic radar picked up an Unidentified Fiendish Object flying this direction?"

"Something like that."

"Fabulous. How's this? I'm tired of playing by everyone else's rules. Tonight, it's my rules. I'm not leaving until I have the evidence to clear my name. Then I can go back to the way things..." her voice trailed off.

"Avery." He let out a deep sigh. "Things will never be the same. Devlin is coming for you. He'll convert you and drain you."

"You're just going to let him? Why have you been keeping me so close, Jax? Why have you even bothered with me when you think I'm just going to die?" she challenged.

"Because."

"Not an answer. I'm tired of this because bull and it's just the way things are for my kind crap. It's not cutting it for me anymore, understand?" Amber eyes narrowed at him.

"I'm not letting him kill you."

"Maybe I don't need you to protect me. I'm stronger than ever before and maybe I just need for you to stay away and let me handle this myself."

He wanted to smile at her courage, but she'd probably take it as though he mocked her and he didn't want that.

"I'm sure you can, but I owe Devlin one and I'm going to kill him. I don't want that pleasure taken from me."

"I'd hate to take any pleasure from you," she said sarcastically, "I owe him more than one. At least he didn't Avery-kabob you."

He laughed, hell, he couldn't help it. "No, he didn't."

"Thought so." She lifted her chin in defiance.

More than anything, Jax wanted to reach out and feather a finger down her cheek. Feel her shudder beneath his touch once more, but time was of essence. The eclipse was tonight and whatever Devlin had planned, Prophecy read it would happen tonight. "Avery, I'm not letting anything happen to you. Devlin won't harm a hair on your head. I'm killing him."

"Well, that's a relief."

"Not really." Jax shifted his stance in a nervous bout of energy. "If he Brides you, the two of you will become one."

"And?"

"When he dies, you die."

"I can't believe you. You're going to kill me?" Avery's voice pierced his heart, "I should've staked you when I had the chance."

"And when was that?" He asked sarcastically.

She paused before continuing, "Instead of kissing you, that time could've been better spent and I definitely should've never made love to you."

She was angry, it was cute in a round about way.

"You did more than kiss me."

Crimson crept to her cheeks. "That was an even bigger mistake."

If Jax hadn't realized this was just her defense mechanism, he might've been offended, but the truth was, she was retaliating. He couldn't blame her.

"I rather enjoyed being inside your body. You're so full of life when you're mad." He reached out, traced the bend of her neck. Down, pausing just shy of her breast. Breathing erratic, skin warm. The last thing Jax expected is what he got.

As quick as he'd ever seen, Avery's palm struck his face, burned as it connected.

"What did you do that for?" He nursed the side of his face with his palm.

"Are you kidding me? You just announced you used me. You used me for sex and you're going to kill me! I can't believe I fell for you like that. I've never let my guard down and BAM the minute I do, look what happens. I fall in love with the man that's going to kill me." She continued to babble as if she hadn't realized what she'd even admitted to him. "Could I possibly make a hellacious situation any worse?"

Avery loved him? She actually loved him? Jax's heart welled with pride then deflated just as quickly. He'd waited eternity for a woman like this and when she does, they face more danger than anyone could possibly imagine.

"Well, I'm not letting you kill me, you bastard." The woman literally paced as she lectured. Her attention was completely off of Lambert and all directed toward him. It wasn't like he hadn't noticed that as well.

She really did love him. "I'm not going to kill you, Avery."

"And another thing, I'm not..."

"Are you not listening?" That was a stupid question, of course she wasn't listening. She was busy planning on how she would survive. She would, he'd make sure of it.

"Why should I listen to anything you say?"

"I'm not killing you. If you if you think for one second I'm going to set back and watch Devlin Bride you, you're mistaken."

Relief washed through her. *Thank God.* "But you said..." She pointed an accusatory finger at him.

"No, I didn't say I was going to kill you, I said if Devlin *Brided* you and I killed him, you'd die too."

"Isn't that the same thing?"

"No, because if Devlin touches a hair on your head, I'll rip out his throat."

Well, now that was more like it. How could she believe that this man that had stood by her side during all of this would harm her?

It was crazy. Jax would never hurt her. If he'd wanted to, he would've already done it. Most of the time, he just wanted to kiss her and she wanted to kiss him right back. So why were there all these rules and regulations? Why wouldn't he just quit being the leader of the Brethren for one second and just be a man? A man that wanted her.

Strong arms pulled her into an embrace. "I can't believe you love me."

Love him? "Did I say that?" Butterflies swam in her stomach. It was like being a teenager all over again.

"Yeah, you did. Unless you were talking about Devlin." The corner of his mouth lifted in a smile.

"No."

"No you weren't talking about Devlin? Or no you don't love me?"

If she was going to backtrack now was the only opportunity.

Did she love Jax? It was a good question. Most of the time when she was around him, she felt anger more than any other emotion. Wasn't there a thin line between love and hate? Sure, there was.

Avery knew the answer the moment those coal eyes bore into hers. She loved him. She loved Jax and there wasn't a thing she could do about it.

"I didn't mean to say that..."

"I'm glad you did."

"You are?"

"You have no idea. There's something I've been meaning to talk to you about. There is a way —"

The creak of a door and gun shots rang through the air.

Chapter Sixteen

Devlin paced the floor of *Bleeders*. Everything aligned. The stars, the moon the planets, or whatever went on during a lunar eclipse was moving. Everything was perfect. The Clan was in place. The bait was set.

He slammed a whiskey sour, enjoyed the smooth burn as it trickled down his throat and sat back to enjoy the atmosphere. Smog hung heavy tonight and the Goth band playing sounded a lot like Manson. Not bad, hell, better than the usual way they played.

Tonight was his lucky night. He'd kill the assholes, raise the dead, become king of the world, and get the girl. A wicked laugh escaped his lips. He couldn't help it.

It felt good to be king for a change. No more falling sloppy seconds to the Brethren. They were weak anyway. Anyone who had to answer to the Senate weren't anything to be revered. When Sirius, rose from the grave, he'd hold a power so strong, he'd take over the world. The Etrux would serve him and rule with him.

"It's the sweetest sweet..." Several people moved in and out of the club. Devlin wanted one person...the woman that orchestrated it all. When she became one again, she'd be his and they'd be together forever. Devlin's queen.

He let out a deep sigh. Damn, he could almost feel her skin sliding down his. Taste her kisses. Chill bumps lined his arms as he thought of his queen. He'd be second in command to Sirius.

That was a little bit of trivia his queen wasn't aware of. Not only did he have the politician in his back pocket, he morphed his blood with the mortals to ensure the power would be his.

That dumb ass Lambert had played directly into his hands.

Did he really think a male mortal would rule with them? What some people did for power. An evil chill slid down his back just at the thought of it.

Devlin almost laughed out loud at how stupid it all was. Mortals were easily manipulated. They played into the hands of vampires too easily. Next time he wanted a challenge. Maybe try to persuade a group of unicorns or mermaids. Mortals were entirely too stupid.

He'd lay low, played it cool and when the time came, he'd take over Sirius. The Etrux would not only recruit Chicago, they'd take over the world.

Whiskey soaked lips spread across his fangs in a smile.

"You looking for company?" A slow, seductive voice crawled over his skin.

Devlin turned. This one was pretty. Damn, if he were any luckier he'd have to bottle it and sell it on infomercial. Then become the richest and most powerful bastard anyone had ever seen.

Change was exactly what this city would see. The best thing he's ever done was to hook up with the good Congressman. Hell, politicians were more evil than any demon's he'd ever met. It wasn't by mistake. Nothing ever was. Avery was perfect; too bad she didn't know her roots. Ancestry was important to who a person was and who they would be.

And she'd be his for a moment...

If pain were more than a state of being, it'd rule the world. Lacerations throbbed down her leg, but if the sound of the room was any indication, she was alone. There was not better time try and escape than now.

Carson tugged furiously at the chains binding her wrists. Her arms ached behind her back. She'd never sat back and played the victim, and she'd be damned if she'd do that now. She was now off the table and bunched in a corner. The vampires revisited for another drink.

She was weaker than before. She'd lost too much blood. Even sitting up was a task.

Carson inhaled a deep breath, keeping her mouth closed so she didn't taste the stench of the place. *Think, Carson, think.* She'd gotten out of worse situations in her life, why was this one so difficult?

Because they've not come for you...

Never in all the time she'd been with them had they ever let a member fall behind. *They didn't leave her. They wouldn't.* She kept repeating those words over and over and over until, hopefully, she believed them.

Your boys don't want you. They set you up.

Jax would never do that.

Oh it wasn't Jax. It was that minion of his, Hunter. Seems you've been a deadweight for them and this was their way of getting rid of you, little girl. The vampire's voice ran through her head.

They'd never do that. The Brethren stood by their own. Carson informed the creature.

Deep down she couldn't help but wonder. Would Hunter lead the Brethren astray and sell Carson out to the Etrux? There wasn't a motive. Sure, she got on his nerves but she couldn't imagine he'd let the Etrux torture her like this.

But why else did they disappear just when the Etrux took her? And why else haven't they come for her? Carson wasn't waiting for anyone to come and get her anymore.

Shit, if you wanted something done right, you had to do it yourself. The old phrase was something to live by and she was about to do just that. Mustering all the strength she had left, Carson moved her arms from behind her, under her bottom and to where she could move her legs between the ropes and have her arms in front of her. It was hard. Dang hard. Her legs were ten bowls of wiggly Jell-o and her body wasn't cooperating like it should. Whirling.

Her head spun out of control. All of the blood left in her body didn't need to be running down, it needed to be running toward her barely beating heart. But if she didn't do something and something now, she'd never live to see the next day. The Etrux would drain her dry.

And Carson wouldn't die like that. She just wouldn't.

The freedom of her hands in front of her was just what she needed. She reached up and pulled the blindfold off. Blinding neon lights assaulted her vision. Blinking back the pain of their attack, she squinted, trying to bring the room into focus.

Broken dirty windows lined the walls made of metal. It was an old factory of some sort. Been out of business for a number of years from the look of it. Grime from the dirty floor covered her hands where she'd been laying on them. Tingles needled their way through her arms, trying to bring them from their sleeping state.

The buzz from nearly burned out neon light hummed low in her ears.

The Etrux wasn't anywhere in sight. They'd abandoned her, left her in the building to die. Hell, by the way she felt, she damned near had. And if those sons of bitches didn't have a

good reason for not coming to help her ass, they would too. Crude, Dagger, Hunter and the entire lot of assholes.

Anger lit her veins the same moment the door slammed open.

Caught.

The bullet barely missed Avery, but the weight of Jax's body pressing her into the ground didn't. The zip of a bullet missed her head by a narrow margin. Thankfully, Jax knocked her off her feet and into biting asphalt of the pavement where they both still lay.

They paused for a moment, waited for the second shot that never came. Tension clung to the air in a thick fog. Death knocked on her door at every turn. Cold air bit her lungs as she inhaled. More than anything, she just wanted all of the nonsense to end.

"You okay?" Jax lifted off her, if they weren't in danger, she might protest. The heaviness of his body, hard and muscular played over her senses, had them reeling.

"I think so." She stood up and swiped the ground bits from her clothes. "Where did that come from?"

They crouched low in case of anymore bullets. It wasn't like it'd kill Jax, but she was still semi-human, she could be killed. And she had too much of her life to live and straighten out to die now. There was no way she'd die. Not like this.

Jax took the bend of her arm as he scanned the area with a methodical gaze.

It felt right in his arms, too right. The second gun shot rang out, echoing in the empty lot.

"Come back here. You can't go out. Everyone will know," Lambert pleaded as Justin aimed the gun at his father.

"I'm not doing this anymore. I never wanted this." Sadness weighed down Justin's voice.

"Son, everything will be fine. We're going to rule everything. Not just Chicago, now put the gun down." Lambert attempted to calm him with his hands, but Justin saw no reason.

"Move away from the door." He gestured the gun toward the door, but Lambert didn't budge.

"Don't do this."

A third shot fired, catching the good Congressman in the leg. "Sorry, dad, but you're not the one starving and not having a life right now. I am. And you know what? I liked Avery, she didn't deserve to have this pinned on her."

"Justin, listen, come back. You don't know what you're giving up. We're going to live forever. Do you know what this means?"

"I never wanted to live forever. I always wanted to live out from under your control."

"You've had everything in your life because of my control. You spoiled unappreciative little..."

"Watch yourself, dad. I've never asked for any of it. Not a cent."

Lambert nursed the oozing wound with his hand all the while hobbling after the boy. "You're going to miss it. Son, tonight's the big night. Devlin has promised, we'll rule it all."

"The only thing you're going to rule is the inside of a jail cell. I'm going to the media then the cops. I'm just sorry I didn't see what a big jack-ass you were before." Justin pushed

past him, opened the door then bolted it secure leaving Lambert in the same prison, Justin lived for months.

“Come back.”

But Justin kept walking, leaving a steaming Congressman to await his fate.

She waited for Justin to leave and get clear then started toward the door.

“Where are you going?” Jax asked, clutching her arm.

“I have to see him.”

“This isn’t the best thing, A. It really isn’t. Just let it go.”

When she turned to see him, it wasn’t a surprise to see worry there. He’d had that same worry hidden behind his eyes each time he looked at her actually. She didn’t want to mistake it for care, but the truth was she’d love it to be.

Turning back to him, she dragged a finger down his chest, idly tracing the hard ridges of his abs. “I have to do this. I have to see him. I can’t let go until then. Please understand.”

He shook his head. “I’ll be close behind you if he tries anything.”

Gently, she reached up and feathered a kiss across his lips. “I know you will.”

There wasn’t a back entrance so she’d just have to go to the front and bust the chain and lock. It busted easier than she’d expected, only a few hits of a lead pipe she’d found lying close to the entrance and she was in.

The stench of the place was almost intolerable. How could anyone ask their own flesh and blood to live in these conditions? There were a few cracked windows, a table and a sleeping bag in the corner where Justin slept. The door was open to an old bathroom, so at least Justin had somewhere else to go to the bathroom.

An old metal shelf was placed in front of a broken window and Lambert had hobbled over to it and was climbing. A trail of blood seeping from his injured leg marked the floor and seared her nostrils.

Funny, there wasn’t anything appetizing at all about that rat’s blood. Strength lit resolve as she inched quietly toward the man who’d ruined her life. He was clumsy, as he climbed. “Going somewhere?”

Startled, Lambert fell to the ground, grabbed his leg and cursed. “You,” he accused. “You were the one that started all of this.”

She furrowed a brow. “And I’m the one going to finish it.” The look on his face was irreplaceable. Avery had always been a tough business woman, but she wasn’t tough physically – until now.

“What do you think you can do? I destroyed you.”

“And I made you. Way to show appreciation isn’t it?” She moved with the grace of a panther and the strength of a tiger. She could snap him in two the way she felt at this moment.

“You didn’t make me. I made myself, just like I’m about to do again.”

“You’re not going anywhere until I get what I want.” In an instant, Avery was at him. She didn’t even remember how she moved so fast or how his throat came to be in her palm.

Fear moved behind his eyes.

“What’s happened to you?”

“Like you don’t know. You sold me out for power. I was a good employee to you, but then I became easily expendable as soon as someone else came along. I made your career.

You'd never been elected if it hadn't been for me."

"And I'm going to have even more power because of you." He laughed, a twisted laugh. His vocal chords vibrated, tickled her hand. She slammed him against the wall and he crumpled to the floor.

Damn. Didn't know she had it in her, but she wasn't finished with him, not by long shot. "You are going to jail because of me. You're going to clear my name or I'm going to show you the power your friend Devlin passed to me."

"You're not complete yet. You don't have the power of a full vampire."

He was right, she didn't, but she could put a hurt on him so fast it'd make his head spin.

A shadow teased the corner of her eye. She didn't need to see who it was, she knew. Jax's presence in her life was so powerful, she recognized his breathing patterns, the way he walked and the calm that always washed over her when he was there.

Lambert eyed him warily. There was no question he knew who and what Jax was.

"This entire time I've been trying to get my life back, but you know what?" She folded her arms across her chest and began pacing menacingly across the floor in front of him, caging him in like a predator. "You've given me a better one than I could've possibly imagined. I'll live forever now, thanks to you. Can you imagine?"

"You're not complete. Devlin hasn't finished! He told me and you won't live, he's going to drain your blood over Chicago."

"Why is that? Why is my blood so important? It's a good question, isn't it?"

Lambert tightened his lips like he was truly keeping a secret from her.

"Well, I wondered myself. Then, I began thinking, as you know I'm pretty good at that."

He scoffed at her as she continued, "What other employer has mandatory drug testing every three months?"

"That was to avoid scandals and you thought it was a good idea, you told from your own mouth." He began to worm his way back up to a standing position.

"Yeah, until I realized there was something in my blood that needed to be checked. You see, dear Lambert, it's not hard to put two and two together. Why would I need to be checked so often?"

"You know so much, you tell me."

Jax growled a warning low in his throat.

"It's okay," she told him, and he relaxed.

Lambert looked back and forth from one to the other with suspicion. A smile curved to her lips as she went to finish him off. If he could play hardball so could she. "I went to the lab. It's amazing when you take a clan of vampires with you what you can get accomplished."

Lambert swallowed audibly.

"My DNA is important. You wanna tell my why?"

He wiggled a bit against the wall. He laughed as if he had one up on her. "Match. You're a match, my dear. Why do you think I hired you? It wasn't because you're the best, you're a match."

The remarks didn't hurt her. Didn't even make a scratch. She was the best at her job and he wouldn't be where he was if she weren't. He was trying to break her down. Truth was, he had for a while, but she wasn't breakable anymore.

"A match for what?"

"Don't you know?" Lambert mouthed, crinkling up his forehead with the question like she was a complete moron.

"Would I be asking if I did?"

Jax shuffled movement a bit like he'd like to be let in on the big secret.

Lambert let a slow calculated smile curve to his lips. "You'll figure it out in time."

She moved to him quick as she could, gathered his collar in her hands and lifted him at least two feet from the floor. His eyes widened. Maybe hers did too at the strength pumping through her veins. Oh yeah, she could get used to this in a hurry.

"Tell me or I'll rip out your throat with my new fangs."

Fangs immediately lengthened, she flashed them for good measure. Lambert shied away the best he could. *Hell, yeah, get you some of that you pitiful excuse for a human.*

"Devlin is lifting the dead, my girl. And you're the key."

"That much I know." She shook him harder, moved in closer to his neck, threatening him with her fangs.

"You're a descendent the priestess's daughter."

Jax straightened up at his words. Was that possible?

Of course it's possible, just look at her.

Meroe's baby...

Wasn't his and wasn't his responsibility. When her father arranged to have the baby hidden with another family, he'd never told a soul.

Muscles bunched in his neck, it was harder than hell to sit back not kill Lambert himself. But this was something Avery had to do on her own. If he understood nothing else in this world, he understood that much. Some things you had to do on your own. Avery needed to confront this asshole the same way he needed to confront Devlin.

"The priestess didn't have children. She was killed." Never play all your cards.

Lambert slid a gaze over his length and Jax wanted to rip him to shreds. "You don't know."

"I was there," Jax corrected.

Avery watched him with intent. Did she know what he was talking about? He could tell by the look on her face she wasn't completely sure of everything that had gone down. Maybe he should've opened up more to her.

"You lie."

Oh hell no. Jax was at him in an instant. Avery lowered Lambert, backed away slowly. "Listen to me. I was there. I've lived a damn long time. Long enough not to blink if a sorry excuse of a man dies like yourself." Jax lifted Lambert up by his feet, dangled him upside down like a carrot.

Inhaled deeply. "Hmm...I'm hungry. I haven't eaten since last night."

Lambert stuttered, but the words came out. "She lives. The Priestess lives."

What? "Meroe?" Did her name just come from his lips? Damn bitch. It all made sense now. Meroe lived. That's why O'Sirus would be raised.

Jax's mind whirled in a thousand different directions. Sirius dabbled in dark magic back then, even for a god of the dead, he lusted for more power. Consorted with the priests and their advisors. Not long after her injuries, they'd pronounced her dead.

Meroe hadn't died the day he'd become a vampire. All the times he was forced to watch Meroe and Sirius, he should've known he hadn't give up on her.

The Pharaoh blamed Jax. Forced him to watch as he slit Meroe's wrist and witness her blood ebbing from her wrists.

The Pharaoh ruled a few days after that.

Until Jax killed him...

And now, Meroe lived...

"She lives," Lambert repeated. Jax dropped him, he landed with an *oomph*. The same time police siren's wailed in the background.

"Time to go," he said to Avery.

"I hope you rot in jail where you belong."

And with that they left, locking the door on the way out.

Chapter Seventeen

She didn't want to talk, she didn't want to do anything. Numbness overtook her body in a way it hadn't in months.

The woman Jax loved was alive. And they were going to kill Avery to make sure she stayed that way. Hell, it's a wonder they hadn't gotten Jax in on the scandal. Hell, what if he was in on the scandal. God, she was stupid.

"I know what you're thinking."

"You couldn't possibly imagine how I'm thinking of feeling at this moment."

He quieted. "A. Listen, I don't care about Meroe. I only care for you."

"Yeah, because I look like her."

"You need to listen more and think less."

Maybe she did, but what would it change? She loved a man that didn't love her back.

If she was lucky, she'd let Devlin murder her. What other life did she have left? Be a half-human, half-vampire with a penchant for blood? It wasn't the best way to meet people and certainly wasn't her preference. How was she supposed to meet someone that way? She'd live her life alone.

"I don't want her."

She wanted to believe him, but it was hard. She was a descendent of the pharaoh? And possibly his daughter? The same woman Jax loved. Her stomach tied in knots.

"You don't want me." There, she'd said it. Maybe he'd been glad she loved him, but he'd never said it back. Probably helped his ego or something.

"Do you trust me?" he asked.

God help her, she did. After all of this, she did. "Yes." As his voice played over her skin coupled with the intensity of the moment moved over her.

"Then stop analyzing everything and let's go."

Probably a good idea. With that, Jax wrapped his arms around her. "Hang on."

Damn, that felt good. Avery buried her head in his chest. She hated to fly, but she wasn't going to tell him. *Don't look down.*

"You're trembling."

It wasn't she didn't like flying. It was because she had severe acrophobia. To fly one needed to be in the air and that wasn't something she really wanted to do.

Tonight, ice ran through her veins. Too many near death experiences and the promise of death lay ahead. Right now, all she wanted was to live. And she felt alive in Jax's arms. Every neuron in her body fired at a mere glance from the man.

"Better hang on." Jax pulled her closer to him, her body sang to life being in his arms. She loved him. How? She barely knew him. It was crazy, but Jax was the only thing that made sense to her anymore. However, the needling in the back of her mind wouldn't stop telling her he didn't love her back.

Could she live with that? Could she handle being with someone that didn't love her?

Maybe she was thinking too hard too fast. "Where are we going?"

"Home."

With those words, she pulled him tighter to him, so tight, he grimaced.

Jax held her in his arms. He was going to take her home and do exactly what he should've done when he'd first realized he loved Avery. To hell with the Senate's consequences. If it kept her alive, that's what mattered. She was the key in a ploy to bring him down. And he couldn't stand the thought of losing her to anyone, much less Devlin.

The flight home went fast, Avery stopped trembling and it was a good thing.

"They have Carson, too."

"No." She searched his eyes. How could he fail two women in the same night? Carson and Avery were both in danger.

"Hunter and the gang went looking for her."

"And you came for me?" Was she touched by his gesture?

He nodded.

"Thanks, Jax."

He didn't answer. It was less than an hour before the full moon hit its peak. That's when the ritual was to take place according to the Prophecy. It gave the Brethren just enough time gather and move out.

And enough time to...

Isis, his cock was hard just thinking about being inside Avery, but his guts twisted in a thousand different directions at what he was about to offer her. What if she didn't go for it? She said she loved him...he just hoped it was enough.

They landed and hit the floor running. "Come on, there's not much time." He reached for her hand and thankfully she took it.

"What are we doing?"

"Something we should've a long time ago."

They ran through the compound entrance, stopping briefly for the retinol scan and entrance.

When they arrived inside, Dagger met them.

"Get Hunter and the boys ready. We're moving out in a bit. Wait for my call, it's all going down tonight."

"Hunter's not here, boss." Dagger looked worried.

"Where is he?"

"He's still looking for Carson. Ever since the Etrux nabbed her up, he's been crazy, man."

Hell, Jax didn't doubt it. Hunter had a thing for her even though he wouldn't admit it. When it came to Carson, Jax was protective. The need to go after was astounding, but if he did that, that left Avery in the open so it was best Hunter go.

"Let me know the minute you hear news."

"Will do, Boss. Another thing," Dagger said.

"What?"

"He went alone."

Damn. "Let me know the minute you hear from him."

Dagger nodded in agreement. "Will do."

The moment Dagger left, Jax took Avery's hand in his. "There is a way to beat them at their own game." *Isis*, why was he so nervous? He really shouldn't be.

"Whatever it is, I'm all for it." Avery smiled, gazed into his eyes.
Oh yeah, he was doing the right thing.

Not long after Devlin fed, he went sent out a call, rallied the Etrux members to the meet at the building on Quarter Street.

The night was alive with the promise of power. Vampires ran the city, and the Etrux would move into first position.

"Ah, the sweet smell of success." Fingers itched to grasp the power and he would in mere moments.

Wind whipped through the streets, nothing smelled worth keeping, just the trash and rotted stench of some drunkards wasting away on the streets. That would all soon be a memory.

He'd rule next to Meroe, as they took down the cities one by one building their empire. And O'Sirus would be a chief council, wielding power and magicks like this earth has never seen before.

Brethren was going down. Tonight.
Now to get the girl.

"What have they done to you?"

Carson didn't answer Hunter as he bent down to untie the ropes still binding her ankles and wrists. If he thought she was glad to see him, he was wrong.

"Carson? Can you speak?"

Wasn't he the one that so many times had told her to be quiet and now the man wanted her to speak? Huh. She doubted he'd like what she had to say.

She wanted to stand up the moment he ropes fell from her feet, but when she attempted, she wobbled.

"Oh." She grabbed her head, trying to temper the spinning.

Hunter caught her, scooped her up in his arms. "It's okay, I'm here now."

"They..." she swallowed at the dryness in the back of her throat, "they said you did this."

"Sh..." he soothed, pulling her tight to his chest. As she rested her head on his shoulder, she nestled to the crook of his neck. *Hmm...*he smelled nice, like warm cinnamon. It was easier than holding her head up.

When she gazed at his handsome face, she could've sworn she saw a tear fall from the corner of his eye. "You look horrible." Maybe not.

"Thanks."

"That's not what I meant." Hunter placed two fingers on the pulse of her wrist, paused and listened. Worry etched his face. "Damn, they took too much."

"No shit, Sherlock."

"Well, I see your humor is still in tact. Can you walk?"

"Haven't tried." Right now her legs were water, doubted she could stand much less walk.

"Don't try then," his words came out gruff.

Don't worry. Pain splintered up her leg from just trying to move a millimeter.

"Answer my question," she demanded. As much as she'd gone through for the Brethren, he owed her that much.

Hunter paused, raked a methodical gaze over her body, slowing at the flesh-gaped wounds. Energy shot from him in almost beams. "I'd never hurt you."

She wanted to believe him, but if that were true where did they go? "Then what took your ass so long?"

"Etrux scrubbed your scent somehow, we couldn't follow."

Oh. So that's what they sprayed all over her. Hey, that was way better than what she thought it was—which was something to peel her skin off or something—which was ridiculous. Then again, she did have an overactive imagination. "How did you find me?" Her own words sounded weak, breaks in her voice. Man, when she got better Etrux was in for one colossal ass kicking.

"They couldn't scrub the scent of your blood away and the stupid bastards took enough to supply a hospital."

"Oh." That made sense, unless they started a blood-scent IV or performed dialysis, blood was near impossible to mask from a vampire. Or so she'd been told.

Spinning, the room was spinning. Once more, Carson rested her head on the cushion of Hunter's shoulder. The energy from Hunter was low at best, subtle, without the usual anger.

"Which ones did this to you?" His words found a fluttering conscious as if she'd dreamt them. Maybe she had. All her life, well since she'd been with the Brethren, she'd loved Hunter. Maybe it was time to move on and grow up.

She'd wasted too much of her life worrying over him and her life had almost ended tonight. Although, she was surprised Hunter came alone.

"Where are the rest of the guys?" she asked dreamily.

"Home."

"They not want to come?"

"I wouldn't let them."

She scrunched up her nose, "Why the Hell not?"

"Are you ever going to stop cussing?"

"Are you ever going to stop judging me?" Take that, here she was half killed and he wanted to argue with her and critique her use of language.

But he came for her. He came.

"You need to rest." Was that concern? Surely Hunter wasn't concerned for her well being?

And Carson realized something at that moment. Maybe Hunter liked her better than he admitted.

With that thought, she let the tug of sleep overtake her and let Hunter carry her from the building.

Avery ran steady behind Jax, wondering the entire time what he was up to. His hand grasped hers as he tugged her to the bedroom. Even in danger, she felt this man all over. Maybe it was new instinct, maybe it wasn't. She didn't know. If she was going to die, she'd rather die in his bed and in his arms than anywhere else in the world.

The moment he closed the door, he clasped her shoulders. "We need to have sex, quick."

He must've read the expression on her face because he started in again, "It's not what you think."

Running a palm over his head, Jax paced the floor in front of her. What in was going on?

"Then what is it?"

"A. there's a way to stop all of this, I was so stupid before not to bring it up, but then you said you loved me and well...that changed things."

A sinking feeling gnawed the pit of her stomach much like a two-ton brick laying dormant. "I see." Gosh, if he didn't want all he had to do was say.

"No, not like that." It was almost comical the way a six foot five male stammered in front of her, searching frantically for the right words to say.

"I'm lost."

He paused, drew up a deep breath. "Devlin can't bride you if you're already marked."

"Marked?"

"It's the only chance we have." In an instant, his nervous twitch disintegrated and he was there, at her. His breath falling over skin. Her lips swelled to kiss his and all she wanted to do was be devoured by him. For a bit, she'd love to be his. Is this what he asked?

"For what?" The words barely escaped her mouth, her voice heavy with want. Desire pooled at her thighs, more intense than anything she'd ever felt. If she wasn't mistaken, she'd think he was... "Oh." Heat pumped through her body at a staggering pace.

"There's no time, Avery. Do you want me?"

The tips of her nipples darted out as if he'd called directly to them. "Are you doing this to me?"

He looked sheepish. "Is it working?"

"Oh, hell yeah." At this rate her clothes would melt from her body and she'd spontaneously combust in less than a second.

Callused palms came up under her shirt to cup her breasts. The tip of his finger found her nipple, flicked it back and forth. Eliciting a moan from her.

"That's it, A. Let it go." Jax dipped his head to her neck, his fangs must've lengthened because they raked slowly over her neck. Gooseflesh lined her arms—strike that—her entire body at the tease he would take from her.

It made her feel good to think he wanted her that way. As a vampire. She let her head fall back and enjoy the sweep of his tongue along her flesh. "Do you take me?"

The words vibrated over her flesh. "Y-yes." They barely formed, her entire body was on fire for Jax. Flames licked at her skin and more than anything she wanted to feel him inside her, filling her completely.

Within an instant, Jax lifted her from where she stood and moved her to the bed. "Are you sure?" he asked. Could the man not tell? She was dripping for him, her entire body was complete putty and he could mold her all kinds of ways and she wouldn't complain a bit. "Yes, she answered. What's going on?"

"I'm keeping that bastard's hands off of what's mine."

"What?" That shocked her from the mood a bit.

"Devlin can't Bride you if you allow me too."

Holy...

For some reason she found herself stammering. "You haven't asked me."

His lips trailed down her neck to her chest and continued, where he caught a nipple between his teeth and bit playfully. "I just did," he lapped, "you said yes."

She did, didn't she?

"Okay, well, don't we need to talk about this or something? Marriage is a big step and all and I've never been married and I don't even know..." she trailed off her thoughts whirling in million different directions. Why was she doing this? Reacting like a pimpled teenager being asked to prom? She wanted Jax. So what was the problem?

"Be mine," he repeated.

She wanted to scream yes from the mountaintops, but the thought he was doing this just to stop Devlin needled the back of her mind. What were her choices? Devlin or Jax? Hell, there wasn't a choice. She loved Jax. She could live with the fact he didn't love her. Couldn't she?

She didn't have time to think about it as Jax tugged off her boots and threw them to the floor then went straight to work on her pants unbuttoning and unzipping them before tugging those of as well. "I can undress myself, you know."

"We're running out of time. Let me Bride you, it's the only way."

Disappointment streamed through her veins. Many times she'd dreamed of what a marriage proposal would be like, never was it like this. She wanted the romance, the love, and the respect of her mate. She didn't want to be some man's revenge.

"What will happen if I don't?"

"Devlin wins and we all suffer." His fingers slide between her thighs, massaging

Putting it that way...the options were basically marry a man that didn't love her or be responsible for the next apocalypse. Hmm...that was a hard one.

He'd pay and pay big time for this with the Senate, but he didn't care. All he could think of was getting inside her and now. *Mine*. Everything feral rose up in him, he didn't want much in life, but he wanted her.

All of her.

No one would ever touch her this way. This way was reserved for him.

The doubt in her eyes tore at him. Damn.

No matter what, he wanted her to be happy. "I won't Bride you like this. It's not right."

Scrunching up her brows in confusion, "Why?"

"You don't deserve it. Not like this." She deserved flowers and dinner and someone who could stay with her. Not Bride her and abandon as the Senate would order him do.

Of course he could leave the Brethren. That in itself was punishable by death. The Brethren held secrets, they policed everything in site. He'd know too much and they wouldn't allow him to live like this.

He let out a growl of frustration and Avery's eyes grew wide.

"Get dressed, it's time to move out." And with that he left the room to gather the men and to let Avery dress.

That went great. Absolutely fabulous! What was wrong with him? Sure she wanted him to take her, he couldn't have mistaken the signs of her body and she damned sure could read his. He wanted her so why didn't he take her.

Avery tugged her shirt over her head and went to find Jax. He needed to explain something.

"Avery?" Jax called. "You about ready?"

"Yeah, on my way."

She walked to the hall where they voice called from.

"Gotcha." Devlin grabbed her from behind, covered her mouth then led her out the door.

Shadows clawed the walls. More disgusting than Avery could've ever wanted to imagine.

Being dragged across town wasn't particularly comfortable, either. Even more uncomfortable when a gang of angry vampires did it.

Devlin ran a claw down the side of Avery's face, slicing. It burned and she shied back from his tongue snaking out to lap up the blood he'd produced.

"Stop touching me," she warned.

"Now, now dear, is that anyway to treat your future husband?" The laugh was sinister, eerie, and as he remembered from the streets. It wasn't that Devlin was particularly unhandsome.

Back in his mortal days, he might've even been considered handsome. Two long scars marred the right side of his face and his eyes were cold as glass. Men lined the corners of the room. Where was she?

Blinking, she took a moment to focus. She'd been blindfolded and cuffed on the way. What the hell for, she had no idea. If they planned to kill her it wasn't like she could lead someone there. Dramatic effect, she decided. Vamps like Devlin fed off fear. He wanted her scared, weak and running like before.

Well, she wasn't like before and she'd never be that way again. No matter what she became, she'd be strong.

The smell of antiseptic wafted through the air followed by Windex and—she inhaled again—a fresh coat of wax had been put on the floor. It was...*familiar*. Where did she always go that smelled this way?

The museum. It made perfect sense. The Egyptian exhibit. She'd been here with her father. She'd always loved the golden statues and art work. Mummies always gave her the creeps.

That's it. They weren't under the city as Jax thought. They were right here in the museum. That's why when they'd searched the underground, nothing turned up but the ancients they were protecting.

Her mind wandered back to her father. He'd told her how important it was to learn where they came from. *History is an important part of a person. You can't know where you're going until you know where you're from.* Her father's words were never as true as they were at this moment. Had she listened, she might've realized part of her lineage.

"First, I'm going to slice you." Devlin's hot breath moved over her face like a fog of trash. "Next, I'm going to dice you." Another claw came up and toyed with her shirt.

She tried to jerk away but there really wasn't anywhere to go at that point.

"And then," his tongue snaked out to slide over his left incisor, "I'm going to gobble you all up."

Etrux stood guard at each entrance, securing the building and reacting as if this was a normal everyday occurrence in their world.

She should be scared, but she wasn't. All of this could've been avoided if she'd just listened to Jax. At this moment, she should be in his bed becoming *his* Bride, instead she was here with Harry Hot Fang and his crew.

"You've done well, my pet." A feminine voice called from beyond the shadows.

The woman almost floated to her. Long hair cascaded over her shoulders, hanging in loose curls. Her skin, a gorgeous brown with olive undertones, practically glowed. She was dressed in gold and fitted white gown. Avery didn't have to be told who she was.

It was as if she'd looked into a mirror.

Tires squealed as the Brethren peeled out of the Compound. Hunter stayed behind with Carson. Even though Jax needed him, he'd never seen Hunter like this. And Jax was worried about Carson, too.

So with a couple of his best fighters left behind, this wasn't really the time to battle the forces they faced.

Devlin alone, Jax could rip to shreds. Devlin with evil spirits, well, they'd never really done that one before, so time would tell. There was one purpose on his mind.

Getting Avery back.

He should've told her he loved her. He should've challenged the Senate and said to hell with the consequences.

He almost had. She was in his home, in his arms, and in his bed.

If he didn't see Avery again, he'd as soon spend eternity licking ash off the bottom of an incinerator.

If Avery hadn't hesitated, she'd be his now and not in the arms of the Etrux. With a flick of the wrist, the engine revved. Tonight, he'd brought the Harley mostly because it was easier to weave in and out of traffic. He could fly, but something this big going down it was better not to draw the attention of mortals.

As he straightened out the motorcycle, he noticed Crude and Dagger following close behind.

The Cian Clan joined them. Rave lifted a chin as a greeting.

Not long after their meeting, Jax realized the Cian Clan was true. They didn't want this uprising to happen anymore than the Brethren did.

Until today.

Now, Jax wanted it more than anything.

Tonight, they brought the heat. Strong weapons, the merge of two powerful clans and a penchant for death. They'd take down the Etrux, Meroe, and Sirius and whoever else got in his way of stopping this.

The night was alive with the promise of victory. So alive, he tasted it. Sweet and palpable and smooth going down.

The hum of the motorcycles rode behind him and Jax trailed Avery's scent. Even though Hunter explained to Jax about scrubbing Carson's scent, he knew they wouldn't Avery.

Devlin wanted Jax to witness him kill Avery. Just like he'd witnessed Meroe. They wanted to be found. He'd find them, and the moment he did, those sons of bitches would be sorry.

Devlin's paws ceased crawling over her skin the moment Meroe entered the room. At least that's what he'd called her. It was hard in many ways to look at the woman Jax once loved.

No wonder he couldn't love Avery. It had to be difficult to even look at her face much less make fall in love with the woman's image that'd caused him so much pain. A stab of jealousy gnawed at thought of Meroe using him as her *personal* slave. Avery could just imagine the things she had him do.

"She's perfect." Meroe studied her, reached out to touch her face.

Avery gritted her teeth.

"A little tense, but that will make no difference."

"Get your hands off me."

"And feisty, I like that. It will make everything more fun."

The only fun Avery would have would be smashing her fist into her nose.

"My lady, should we begin?" Devlin's anxious voice dissipated as Meroe began walking circles around where Avery sat and chanting.

How was it possible she was alive? She wasn't a vampire. She could already sense them around her. So how had she lived so long?

Magick. She was an Egyptian Priestess. She'd gotten into the darker aspects.

"Jax is coming for me, you know." He would, Avery just knew it. He'd storm in and save the day just like he always did. And then they'd go their separate ways.

The thought of never seeing him again made her heart clench, but it was impossible. He didn't love her and she wasn't being with someone that didn't.

"Her blood has done you well," Devlin said, rubbing his hands together like he was about to eat fresh meat.

"Yes," Meroe paused, drug a nail down Avery's cheek, "She's pure."

"I'm nothing to you." Avery jerked her head away.

Meroe laughed. "You don't think so? It is no coincidence about our looks."

Avery lifted a defiant chin. "You think?"

"You have more attitude than you should a half-breed."

Half-breed? "What are you talking about?"

"You are the descendent of O'Sirus."

"You're crazy."

Meroe smiled. "That may be but you're my blood. What does that make you?"

"Unfortunate." She kicked and tugged. She was stronger now, why couldn't she escape this woman?

"There's no use in trying. Those bonds won't break. Not until I've drained you dry."

They'd planned this down to the last detail. But something else was up. Something in Devlin's eyes. They filled with mischief and longing.

"There's no time for this."

"You tell me."

Meroe cocked a quizzical brow. "Sometimes, little girl, it's better if you don't learn the truth."

Avery tugged furiously at the ropes binding her arms. "How do you speak English?"

Devlin cackled. "She truly is innocent."

Avery's gaze slide from Devlin to Meroe and back again. When she got up from here, she was going to throttle them with her bare hands.

"You see, my love," Devlin moved to her, raked her hair from her face. "I shared your blood."

As he touched her, anger coursed through her veins, thick and powerful. "I'm not your love. You won't Bride me. I'll see your head roll first." She wasn't threatening, after everything he'd put her through, she was promising.

"You're a confident one for someone tied up and helpless," Devlin informed as Meroe began circling her again.

"I'm confident you're not touching me." She jerked furiously at the ropes and lifted her bound legs to try and kick. No such luck.

"Stop moving and this won't hurt much."

"You're so thoughtful," she mocked.

"Of course."

Meroe stopped in her tracks and turned to Devlin. "Why does she have your blood?"

Devlin turned to meet her, a sly smile spread across his lips. "I have a surprise for you, my dear."

Fury lit from beneath Meroe's eyes, dark and haunting. "What have you done? You know she was supposed to be pure."

At that moment, the door burst open and all hell broke loose.

Jax wasn't much for small talk or reunions. Not with the bitch, Meroe. Avery sat in a circle, candles lit around her, emitting a soft glow on her copper skin. She was alive. Relief washed over him.

Alive.

"You are still a fool I see." Meroe narrowed her eyes, mocked him.

"You are still moping over Sirius after all these years?" He clucked his tongue. "Pity, I thought you were smarter than that."

"Sirius will awaken with the blood of his flesh."

Jax thought on that statement for a moment. Did the world really need another pissed off god of the dead walking around? And what a queen he'd picked. Ruthless, manipulative and downright evil, come to think of it, they made the best pair.

"Leave and I'll have Sirius spare you." She walked over to Jax trailed a seductive finger over his chest. His breath caught in his chest, not from being effected the way she'd like to believe.

It was disgust, complete and utter distaste. How could he ever have thought he loved this woman?

He caught her finger, squeezed hard. "I want Avery," He ground out the words threw gritted teeth, "and I'm not leaving without her."

The Etrux caught him from the corner with a sucker punch. Jax shifted his jaw experimentally to see if it still worked. After it did, he, Dagger and Crude lit in on the vampires like nobody's business while Meroe and Devlin went back to protect Avery.

Meroe started circling and chanting again while Avery fought and tugged at the constraints. "I'll deal with you later," Meroe warned Devlin.

She wouldn't deal with anyone, because in a matter of seconds, the Brethren accompanied by the Cian Clan had wiped out the entire Etrux Army. There was nothing going to keep him away from Avery.

Nothing.

Devlin bent low to Avery's wrist, lapped a tongue to her pulse and exposed his fangs.

Jax saw red. Literally red, not blood red but anger seeped so deep within his soul, he knew the moment he reached Devlin he'd rip his head off.

Avery was brave. She knew that now. How else could she have survived all she had in such a short time if she hadn't been? She closed her eyes, mustered up all her strength and kicked Devlin away from her just before his fang pierced her wrist and made her eternally his.

Jax was immediately there, sparring and countering Devlin's attack.

He really is a hero, she thought.

While they fought, Avery wormed her way from the center of the circle only to find Meroe trying to stop her. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Away from you."

Avery reached deep inside herself. The more she concentrated, the looser the ropes became. Was it magick? She didn't know.

She had to help Jax and get rid of these two creeps. In a swift movement, she lunged at Meroe who had now gathered a knife and was swinging it at her. She nicked her side, but not enough blood spilled from it. "You know, I've read the prophecy. I've heard you say Sirius's blood will raise him."

Meroe lunged again and again Avery dodged, trying to form some sort of aversion tactic in order to keep Meroe from spilling her blood before the moon set and raising the Egyptian God of the dead.

Avery didn't know him, but she knew she didn't want to meet him in any fashion. She'd met enough weirdoes to last a lifetime, she didn't need one more.

"I have Sirius's blood before me. Now be still so I can watch it pour and raise my love."

"I'm curious," Avery said, as she scooted toward the exit. "How does that work? Does he rise from my blood rejuvenating him?"

"Among other things. His blood brings him life again. A sacrifice and the blood of who raises him will rule along side him."

"Interesting. I guess I will then."

"You will?"

"Yeah, ruling with a god sounds like a good plan to me."

Meroe clucked her tongue at her. "You really are young and stupid."

The insult didn't bother Avery in the slightest. "Do you think I'm going to let you live? My blood runs through those veins and I'll rule with Sirius the way it was meant to be years ago."

There was only one thing to do. Everyone had a purpose in life, Avery knew hers. Grunts from the fighting sounded in the corner. Avery studied Jax. He really was a good person. Much better than he believed himself to be.

She inhaled a deep breath then moved to Meroe

What was she doing? Jax tried to focus on Avery and Meroe as he continued to battle with Devlin. Dagger and Crude got the hint and immediately joined forces.

The three of them engaged, Dagger slammed a fist across Devlin's face while Crude attacked from the back.

That's when he saw Avery offered her wrist to Meroe.

What was she doing? Meroe instantly took her palm in hers, began chanting words in her ancient language. Lightning streaked the sky, spider-webbing across the ceiling of the museum basement.

Oh, *Isis*, no.

"Go to her, my brother. We have this bastard," Crude informed.

Meroe placed Avery under a trance. It was the only explanation. Why else would she. Seconds turned to minutes and minutes seemed like hours before he reached them. He just prayed he wasn't too late.

"Take it," Avery offered Meroe.

Meroe hungrily studied her wrist all the while chanting.

Just as Jax thought he would never make it to her in time, Meroe sliced Avery's wrist, and blood spilled from her wound steadily.

"Avery stop! Don't do this."

Avery's gaze locked on his, she gave him a knowing stare.

Meroe squeezed and allowed the crimson liquid to flow from the wound.

As he reached them, he backhanded Meroe, she flew clear across the room and caught Avery under her arms and cradled her. "Why did you do that?" he asked, pain tearing through him at a monumental pace.

"Whoever's blood runs through my veins rules with Sirius."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Had she lost her mind?

"Your blood, Jax. I took your blood. Meroe and Devlin will have to rule with you."

Oh damn.

She was right. It was the only way Avery saw that she could stop Meroe. She'd never share rule with the two of them. The bitch was too selfish.

"You sacrificed yourself?"

Avery nodded then winked.

She was entirely too clever. He played along.

Meroe screamed as she overheard their conversation. "This can't be happening. No!"

In a fit of anger Meroe stormed at Devlin, jumped in the midst of the battle. "You bastard. You tried to trick me into letting you rule."

Devlin laughed, "No more than you did me."

Crude and Dagger backed off and allowed the two of them to take care of each other.

Jax turned his attention back to Avery. She was dying, all the color draining from her face. Her life's blood flowing from her arm to the floor.

He wanted to cry, to scream in defeat. "Avery, come back to me. Avery." He tapped her cheek with his palm.

She roused slightly. Her eyelids fluttered open. "Are you going to change me or let me die?" She gave him a half-laugh.

Jax's eyes rolled in the back of his head at the scent of her blood. Without a second thought, he lifted her wrist to his mouth and drank. She tasted of warm spice and the sweetest divinity he could imagine. Hungrily he drank, careful not to take too much and listened.

The faint flutter of her heart teased his ear. At this point, no one or nothing would've stopped him from making Avery his for all time.

Especially the Senate. The warmth of her flesh coasted under his lips.

He stopped drinking and bit into the flesh of his wrist and lifted her head to it to drink.

Avery latched on and drank. The touch of her lips to his wrist aroused him. It was a natural reaction to the blood he'd drank, but damn it was also a natural reaction to Avery. He loved her. With everything in him he loved her and he wasn't sure he'd ever love again.

Cradling her head with one hand, Jax stroked Avery's hair as she nursed. Then when she'd taken enough he removed his wrist and lifted her from the floor. Fear aligned with worry that she'd survive the change as he cradled Avery's limp body in his arms.

He turned just in time to see Meroe send a splintering blow to Devlin's heart and he disintegrated to thousands of fiery pieces. "I'm not sharing power with anyone."

She turned. Noticed Jax carrying Avery's body.

"She's dead." Rubbing her palms together as though she was about to eat breakfast.

Meroe reached for her as if Jax would just hand Avery over. "I want her."

A tic worked itself along his jaw. "I've long since given you anything you want."

"Give her to me, Jax."

Jax nodded over his shoulder and Dagger, Crude and the rest of the gang left the room. They'd be close by if he needed them. He had a feeling he wouldn't. He wanted to deal with Meroe by himself. It was something long overdue. Once the Brethren cleared the museum room, he began, "You had me believe you carried my child. You had me think you loved me."

The memories that had once tore through him no longer held any amount of pain.

"Pity for you. I chose you because you were a fool."

"You chose me because I was convenient. I've never been a fool."

"Give her to me, Jax. I've waited many years to be reunited with Sirius."

The void of emotion in her eyes was priceless, typical. "You always were a selfish bitch."

Meroe took a different approach with him. "That may be darling, but I loved you. Daddy would've never allowed me marry a slave. You know that."

The truth should've hurt him, it didn't. He was proud he'd never married this woman. She was truly evil to the core. "No, because I'm marrying someone else."

"Her?" She gestured to Avery's body. "She's dead."

"She's undead," he corrected, "and she'll be my bride the moment I take her home."

"Poor, Jax. You have to have a substitute for me? How sweet."

He gritted his teeth. "She is twenty times the person you were or will ever be and there's a difference."

"What's that?" She smirked.

"I love her."

Meroe twisted her expression.

With that, began reciting the words he'd memorized on the way over from the Prophecy. They rolled from his lips in his native tongue as though he'd spoken the language just yesterday. Meroe slowly began to fade.

"Don't do this. Come back." Meroe shot a lightning bolt from her palm, striking the wall next to them.

Within an instant, the Brethren attacked, sending her knocking to the ground.

Jax stepped to Meroe's dazed body lying on the ground.

"You stay put this time. You don't belong in our world."

She twisted up her nose. "You don't belong anywhere slave."

The window cast a small light through the basement. Jax peered through the hole. "Looks like the Eclipse is over." A smile spread across his lips. Then he chanted in his ancient language, sending her back to the depths of her realm.

"I want Avery."

And Meroe disintegrated, as her voice echoed, "I'll get you for this."

Only one thing left to do.

Jax placed Avery's body down on a corner desk and removed his sword from behind his back. Holding it with both hands he went to the statue of Sirius, with all his force, chopped off the statues head.

Alarms sounded, blaring in the museum.

He lifted Avery up and nestled her in his large arms. She looked so fragile and soft against the hardness of his muscles. "You're going to be alright, Avery. You'll survive. You will."

As Jax lifted her in his arms once more, Crude and Dagger met him at the door way. Escorting the wife of their new leader in a regal manner.

They understood, asked no questions and Jax respected them all the more for it.

"I had to," he explained.

"Love does that sometimes, Boss," Crude said as they walked out of the building started to the Compound.

How did Crude know? Jax couldn't help but wonder.

The only important thing was Avery making it through the conversion.

"Something weird happens every time the Egyptian Exhibit comes to town," Dagger mouthed in a low tone.

Jax smiled, "Yeah, guess so."

The Brethren wasn't just his responsibility, they were his family. And he was giving them a queen.

Worried, he knew he needed to get Avery home as fast as possible to rest. He turned back to them. Flying was the quickest way. They knew that.

"Go, we'll get the cycle home. Go. Be quick, my brother." Dagger placed a hand on Jax's shoulder and it was all he could do to fight a tear.

She was his. His to love, to protect and his to spend the rest of his life with as long as she survived.

And she would, or hell hath no fury on the hatred he'd unleash on the world.

The ache in Avery's body fell to dull versus sharp excruciating, which was an improvement. Somewhere she existed, this was all she knew. The euphoria engulfing her moved her in a way she couldn't imagine.

And when she woke to male voices, she thought she was still dreaming.

"Has she woken yet, Boss?" Hunter's voice was unmistakable from the corner of the room.

"Not yet." Jax studied the floor.

"She'll be alright."

Jax didn't answer, just continued looking at the floor. "She'd better be. How's Carson?"

"Tough as nails as usual. Ordered me out of the room a little bit ago."

Avery wanted to laugh but she didn't want to interrupt. That was typical Carson.

"The Senate come down yet?"

"No. Not yet."

"Best of luck, Boss. They'll understand."

"If they don't, you do me proud." Jax patted Hunter on the shoulder.

"Don't talk like that. It's all good, true?"

"True." Jax nodded, but Avery got the feeling he wasn't so sure.

What would the Senate rip him to shreds over?

Hunter left the room and Jax moved over beside her bed. She closed her eyes and pretended to be asleep for a moment.

"Come on, A. Wake up."

The air thickened with the tension. Jax, extremely unsettled, laying in the bed next to her felt more natural than anything she'd ever experienced.

"Please be okay." His hand raked the hair from her face. That strong touch.

Why wouldn't she be alright?

You might not survive the change. The words played through her mind. He didn't know she was fine. Actually, now she was fully roused, she felt better than she had in months. Years. Ever actually.

"I know I haven't been the best to you, A. Things have been so screwed up. I should've just told everyone to kiss my ass the moment I knew I loved you. I didn't."

He loved her. Her heart soared. Leapt practically from her chest at the words, but she didn't open her eyes, just let him talk. It was nice to listen to the deep cadence of his voice. Have it vibrate over her skin.

"Be okay and I'll make it up to you. I..." She felt his weight sit on the bed next to her. He was really worried.

"You'll?" she whispered.

"Oh thank, *Isis*." Jax's lips crushed hers in a powerful combination of relief and passion. This, she could get used to. This she could live the rest of her life for.

"Jax." Kalia's voice called from behind them. She was beautiful, dark and fair at the same time, long hair hang in ribbons down her back. She dressed in a crimson red dress that clung to every part of her body.

Jax rubbed Avery's hand. "I have to go now."

"Where are you going?" What? They'd just finished conquering the world and they couldn't be together?

"I have to speak with Kalia. I want you to know, I might not be allowed to see you for a while." Jax feathered his thumb over her chin. "I love you."

He stood to leave.

"You're not taking him." Avery jumped from the bed in almost a pounce mode. She'd never possessed such exhilarating strength and she had a feeling it wouldn't take long to get use it. "I've just fought the world to be with this man and no one, including you is going to take him from me."

Bold words considering she was talking to some Messenger chick, however, Avery was fed up with everyone else's bull. If Kalia wanted Jax, she was going to have to fight for him.

Jax smiled. "Avery, it's okay. There's not another way. I'll face the Senate and take what's coming to me."

"No, you won't. We'll face them together."

Jax couldn't believe how much Avery changed since he'd met her. In all his life no one had ever sacrificed so much for him and his heart swelled even more. Whatever his future held, it was well worth it.

Just to feel his love returned was enough. She'd fulfilled every expectation he'd ever asked for from anyone. To be loved.

Isis, if he never got to see her again, he'd never survive. But that's not what this was about. This was about Avery and he'd given her life eternal. She was safe and that's all that matters.

"Listen, bitch, I don't know who you are or what you are, but you're not leaving here with Jax."

Kalia threw up a hand. "Please, the both of you. Will you just let me explain?"

"You have seconds."

"The Senate has sent me to tell you how pleased they are with your selfless acts in order to save the realm. Sirius being raised would've been detrimental to us all."

"Can't argue that," Jax agreed.

"However there is something that needs to be addressed."

Jax was ready, whatever awaited him, he was ready.

"The woman, Avery. You converted her without permission."

"My Lady, I did it to save the rest of us. She's not completely my Bride. We haven't completed the mating ritual. Her blood mixed —"

Kalia cut him off again. "You did it for yourself as well."

He nodded. It was true. He did have selfish purposes for converting Avery.

"Because of this, the Senate has sent down a decree."

"Which is?" Avery put her hands on her hips.

"Because Avery is the Brethren now and no longer mortal. The Senate will allow a union if you see fit."

"You mean I don't have to face them and be judged?"

"No," she laughed, "The Senate sent this gift and wanted me to welcome her to our family."

"What are you talking about?" Avery asked.

"Saving you saved the realm. Jax was wise in his decision and acted like a leader would. The Senate sends blessings."

Kalia extended package to Avery and bowed. "I am in awe of your bravery. Many blessings your way." And with that, Kalia disappeared.

Avery took the gift and unwrapped it. It was a beautiful silk gown. A black bodice laced up and fitted with a sheer skirt that flowed to the floor.

"It'd beautiful."

"You're beautiful. Put it on and let me see you in it."

Avery quickly put on the gown. The way she looked stole his breath. She was completely fabulous. The most beautiful woman he'd ever seen and she was his.

His.

He liked the thought of that.

"Now what?" she folded her arms and asked coyly.

"Come here and let me show you."

"First," she paused, "what were the things you were going to make up to me?"

"I'll tell you I love you everyday. I'll stop hiding the way I—screw it, I'll just show you."

Before she could move, Jax scooped her in his arms and held her close to him, so tight she could scarcely breathe. "I'll marry you if you'll have me."

A slow smile spread across her lips. "You will? What makes you think I'll have you?"

A look of worry crossed his face.

She punched him in the arm. "I'm kidding! Of course I'll have you. I love you."

His lips came down on hers hard. It was nice to wake and know she'd have the rest of eternity to spend with Jax.

"Wait," she pulled back.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't want to be married."

"You don't?" He furrowed his brow at the question.

"No, I want to be Brided. I'm a vampire now, right?"

"You are. You're my vampire." And he kissed her lips and she melted into an eternity filled with love, life, and a new future. Sometimes the best things in life weren't planned.

Epilogue

"Crude is going to be blown away," Avery assured Carson as she pinned up the last ringlet of hair.

Makeup sort of itched and hairspray tickled her nostrils, but she had to agree with her. She wasn't half bad all dolled up.

"Do you really think he'll like it?"

"If he doesn't, he's crazy."

Carson propped her weight on the cane and lifted herself to a standing position. It'd been a month since Etrux abused her body and she still felt the after effects.

The dress hugged her figure, a fair amount of cleavage exposed and really, she wasn't certain if it wasn't just a tad too cool to be wearing a get up like this.

"He's waiting."

"I can't wait to see Crude in a monkey suit."

"I can't either to tell you the truth."

Carson slipped her free hand around Avery's neck. "Thanks so much for all you've done. You're a good friend."

"You're welcome."

"I hope I find love like you and Jax one day." Although, she still doubted she ever would. Hunter did look after her until she was better, but since then, he'd gone back to his old ways. Avoiding her wherever possible.

Old habits die hard.

It was time to give up on that dream and create a new one.

"You will. I know it. Good luck."

Carson feigned a smile, the truth was she hadn't been this nervous since she'd lost her first tooth.

She walked with her cane and made her way to the stairs.

When she reached the stairs, couldn't believe her eyes. Crude stood, well the backside of Crude stood with a monkey suit on!

Carson reached for his shoulder, "I can't believe you're wearing one of these?"

He turned, holding a single red rose in his hand. "I owe you one."

"Hunter?"