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Deanna Lee

THE VAMPIRE ORACLE

Circle of Life In The Cards



The Vampire Oracle:

CIRCLE OF LIFE

By

Deanna Lee

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Circle of Life

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Dedication

For all the authors of the Vampire Oracle,
it was my pleasure to share this series with you.

Chapter One

In the five hundred sixty-seven years since I became an undead nightmare, I've learned to live with what I am...if it can be called living. In the space of hours in the year of 1441, a man took everything from me and left me to survive on my own. Sometimes, if I allow it, the pain and horror of the night come back to me in jagged flashes of memory that cut so deep they make breathing difficult. That I survived was a miracle; that I came out of it with even a few scraps of humanity clinging to my soul remains a complete mystery. To survive, I learned to live by a very simple code. Never kill the innocent, never turn anyone against their will, and never, ever fall in love with something so fragile as a human.

Yet, as I watched Tessa Carson enter my inn, I knew I'd done something I'd vowed to never do. I saw her over a year ago in a crowded airport in Atlanta. She had been so obviously uncomfortable, and grief had poured off her in nearly visible waves. Pain and confusion had hit my mind like a fist, and for a long moment I could only stand and stare at her. I'd never met anyone human or vampire with such a powerful mind. It had taken a few hours to find out that Tessa was a fully documented sensitive who sometimes worked with the FBI and other law enforcement agencies... anonymously.

Her desire to remain invisible to the world suited my needs as much as her gifts did. For more than a year, I used her to find the humans who would help my own vampire children find love and contentment in the eternity I gave them. I have fifty-one living fledglings, and now

twenty-five of them had found love and, one could hope, contentment. Life is full of uncertainty, but in the past few years, I've learned that many minds can not handle the years of solitude. How many lifetimes could anyone be expected to drift through before madness set in?

Not long after I'd sent her the first card, I found myself entering her dreams. At first, it'd been easy to take her over and use her in the dream world we shared as I saw fit. But as the months passed and our connection had intensified, I'd lost control of the situation and most certainly my heart in the process. It still stunned me that a human woman had reduced me to such a state...that she had slipped into my soul and heart before I'd even thought to shield myself from it.

"Our little human has a nice ass."

"We have to tread carefully with her, Dorien."

Dorien Pierce laughed and displayed a daunting set of fangs. He was the oldest of my fledglings, and our connection was as intimate as any I'd ever known. We'd shared many things through the years...blood, women, and even a bed. He was a hard, relentless man...a glutton for sex and all the other pleasures a vampire could leech from the human world. My best friend, lover, confidante—he'd run roughshod over my heart for longer than I'd care to think about. But Dorien wasn't fragile. He was a five-hundred-year-old vampire, and very little that came his way was truly a danger to him. No, it had been a long time since I'd worried about losing him.

"I know we promised each other to take it slow, to introduce the full extent of our relationship carefully." Dorien sighed. "But she looks delicious."

"Yes, and now that our plan is succeeding we have to be even more careful." I purposely kept my more primitive emotions to myself, though closing my mind against his was no easy task. The fact was that just looking at her made my entire body clench, my fangs ache. "Tell me what you've found out about the killings."

"Certainly a vampire, the locals have few clues and no physical evidence. At least the messy bastard isn't leaving DNA behind." Dorien lit a thin black cigarette and sighed. "Probably not a good time to bring that

sweet piece into town.” He motioned toward the camera. “Whoever this vampire is, he’s already proven he has no respect for your territory. It would probably amuse him to take something so fresh and lovely from us.”

My gut tightened and I pressed two fingers against my lips as I considered my words. A part of me wanted to keep it to myself, but I’d never kept secrets from him, and after five hundred years it seemed ridiculous to start. “I didn’t send for her.”

“Excuse me?” Dorien sat up in his chair. “Then how the hell did she get here?”

“Max found the final card on my desk and sent it out without telling me. I didn’t realize what he’d done until the day she got it. I’ve been so distracted with the killings that I hadn’t noticed it was gone. It certainly was not the plan to bring her to me like this.” I grimaced at the anger that surged in him; Max was a sore point between us. I’d taken the young vampire in after he’d been abandoned by his maker, and Dorien was of the opinion I should have put the young one out of his misery rather than try to save him. Considering his recent mistake, the thought was beginning to have merit.

“I told you that final card was a dangerous one to make.”

“Yes, I remember.” I looked back to the bank of security monitors and found Tessa in an elevator. Just looking at her made me nervous, and that was certainly an unusual state for me to be in. “But I had to have her.”

“Why?”

“Why what?” I forced myself to look away from her and concentrate on him.

“Why did you make the cards? Why her?”

I stood from the chair and shrugged. Dorien had asked the same question over and over again in the year since I’d started to send cards to Tessa Carson. How could I admit to him that I’d been lonely, so lonely that the sadness and isolation that I’d felt from all of my fledglings had made life almost unbearable? If I did, he would know that his own hurt and desolation cut into me daily, and that was the last thing I wanted for

him. Dorien was the first of my blood family and in many ways the first person I ever loved without reservation. We'd been together for so many years, yet we both knew something was missing between us, and he'd never addressed it.

"You should feed before you see to her." Dorien shrugged out of his jacket as he stood.

I allowed my fangs to descend as he turned to face me. I could hunt and often did, but taking blood from Dorien always made for a better meal. He roused something wild in me in a way few people in the world could, and feeding from him sated me physically and emotionally. I pushed him against the door and laughed at his intake of breath.

"I'm certainly in the mood for a taste of you." His scent was fresh, male, and intoxicating in its own way. I knew him well in this way, knew his pleasures, the things that would make him hard and feral with a need not so easily sated within the heated depths of the fragile female humans we both sometimes used for sex.

I turned him roughly, pressed against his back until his chest met with the door, and pushed one thigh between his legs. He parted for me slowly. Dorien was many things, but submissive had never been one of them. That he was easily indulging my need for control tonight spoke of his own need. The desire to ease that in him made my gut clench. Of all my fledglings, Dorien was the one I would not manipulate in that way. Never him.

He tensed against me briefly as I pushed my fingers into his hair and pulled his head back to expose the sweet expanse of skin that covered his pulse point. The blood he offered would be rich and delicate as he never fed from anyone unhealthy or unclean, and if he had he certainly wouldn't have brought it to me. I lowered my head, and his body relaxed against mine as my lips met with his flesh.

"Nervous?"

Dorien pressed back against me in a way he hadn't in a very long time. Things had changed between us since I'd found Tessa. The months of separation that I'd unwittingly forced on both of us seemed unbearable in that hot, dark moment.

“Never, Sire.” His breathless answer obliterated what little control I had left.

I sank in hard, my teeth pierced his skin and he groaned. As I allowed my fangs to probe more deeply and connect with his jugular, I pushed into his mind with my own and found myself drenched in the intimate pleasure that had moved between us for hundreds of years. The rush of blood in my mouth forced my eyes to close, and for several long moments, I allowed myself the simple pleasure of feeding. His heartbeat quickened with each draw of my mouth, and his breath came in ragged jerks. I could barely remember the last time he’d gotten so aroused while I fed from him.

The scrap of nails on wood filled my ears, and a full shudder ran down the length of his body as I slowly pulled my teeth out of him. I held him tight against the door, using the weight of my body and the press of my thigh to remind him of his place in my world. “Come, love.”

He groaned, jerked, and then relaxed slowly against my hold. “You son of a bitch.”

The power of his orgasm rushed through our mental connection, and my cock hardened against his ass. “That’s no way to talk to your sire. Fortunately for you, I enjoy you too much to punish you.”

Dorien let his head fall forward slightly until it rested on the door. “Are you sure that she’ll accept us both?”

“What makes you ask that?” I released him and took several steps back.

“Because you’ve invested so much of your time and attention in her over the last year.” He ran his fingers through his hair as he turned and looked at me. “That’s the first time you’ve come close to *any* sort of sexual contact with me in months. You’d rather sleep and dream with her.”

“Dorien...”

“No, it’s okay.” He shrugged. “We’ve known each other for five hundred years and I have no worries that I’ll be replaced in your affections.”

Something dark and hard inside me that I’d barely acknowledged over the last few months softened. In the past few months, I’d grown

concerned that he might push away from me and leave once I brought Tessa into our lives. I knew he meant his words, that I could trust him to be at my side as he always had been. "She's getting anxious."

Dorien nodded. "Yes, she's practically broadcasting her unease and fear in FM. We'll need to teach her some basic discipline on that front. There are some vampires that would find a mind so powerful as hers threatening. It's difficult to even fathom a human woman so gifted with psychic ability."

"I know."

"Will you turn her?"

"Only if she sincerely wishes it. Else, I will take all the time her brief mortal life will give me and be satisfied to have known her."

Dorien sighed. "I'm not sure I will feel the same about such a situation."

No. He never had, and that was one reason why Dorien found his friends among other vampires, had never once considered creating a blood child of his own, and rarely allowed himself to enjoy more than sex with humans. He didn't accept loss or even disappointment well, and death was the ultimate loss.

"Good night."

"Good night, Sire."

Chapter Two

I walked down the hall toward the room my staff had assigned her. It had been almost a week since the card had been sent out, and the moment her plane had landed, I'd known. I'd felt her moving through my city, toward my place—the strength of her mind and our connection was an intoxicating experience. And now, only a few inches of wood separated us.

Palms pressed against the door, I leaned there and took several deep breaths. Her worry, fear, and a sharp feeling of anticipation slid into me. She feared rejection, even censure for her arrival, and I realized I'd let my irritation slip into her mind. It certainly wasn't her fault Max had sent the card too soon. He'd sent all the cards before it, and I'd left the damn thing on my desk already addressed.

The calm I was seeking, the peace I thought I needed in my mind before I came into physical contact with her for the first time, simply wouldn't come to me. In all the years that I had walked on Earth both as a man and then as a vampire, nothing had ever felt so beyond my control. What moved between us—hot, desperate passion—was so far out of my experience that I could barely name it.

Then the cool, elegant presence of Dorian moved against my mind, and I relaxed. Dorian hadn't gone far, just retreated to the suite of rooms I kept for him on the third floor. His presence in the inn soothed me, once again reminding me how different life would be if he were suddenly gone, and how important it was that this first meeting with Tessa go well.

If I did not have her complete trust, the rest of it would never work.

On the other side of the door, Tessa's mind quieted slightly. Her fear melted away into nothing, and all that remained was the excited passion we'd been sharing for months through dreams. I slipped deeper into her mind and swallowed hard at the pain I found lingering there. I'd never known another soul to carry such a burden, and most of it wasn't even hers. She appeared to have no ability to defend herself from the misery of others. Instead, she took it inside and pushed it so deep into the recesses of her mind that it seemed tolerable. A practice that would have eventually driven her insane.

It didn't matter. Now she was with me, and I would do all that I could to protect her. I stepped back from the door and leaned against the wall across from the room. As I relaxed completely, Dorian slipped away. Tessa was pacing back and forth in front of the door, arguing with herself for leaving her home. Her quick, even steps resounded in my ears despite the thick carpet that covered the floor. Her mind was a tangle of regret, pain, and want. I could ease all of that, and I would as soon as she opened the door.

I knew what would happen once it was opened, and so did she. So I waited for her to decide when it would happen. When she stopped in front of the door, my own heart stuttered as if I'd been hit in the chest. The months I had waited had seemed an agony, and now I was going to be rewarded for my patience.

She pulled the door open, and our gazes met. I tensed against the wall, my entire body surging with the need to move. My cock pressed painfully against the pressure of my jeans. The stimulation and pleasure of feeding on Dorian lingered in my mind and body. I looked over her face, taking in bright green eyes, flushed cheeks, and those full lips I'd kissed a thousand times in the dream world we shared. Dark brown hair fell down on her shoulders in a mass of springy curls, and a pair of loose-fitted jeans and a dark green sweater hid her curvy body.

I left my place against the wall, and as I advanced into the room, she took several steps back. The click of the door shutting barely registered over the sound of my own breathing. This woman, so soft and

amazingly sensual, had filled me a thousand ways in the past few months, and I could barely wait to fill her with my cock.

Her gaze met mine, a challenge shining brightly in her eyes, and my will shattered. I moved, too fast, and seconds later pressed her against the mattress of the bed. Her gasping breath filled my mouth shortly before I pushed my tongue between her lips and took my first *real* taste of her. She tasted like cinnamon and sex.

Small hands clutched at my shoulders, and her body arched up against mine in demand as I jerked at the front of her jeans with one hand. The need to be inside her, to claim her in the most primitive way, overwhelmed everything else. I jerked my mouth from hers, ignoring her moan of protest as I lifted slightly away. Moving down her body, I pulled off her shoes and tossed them away. I needed her naked, naked and under me with her legs spread wide.

“Sam.”

I looked up, met her gaze, and jerked her jeans and panties away. Her eyes were dark, full of emotion. The need to soothe her warred with my more pressing physical needs. Carefully, I slipped off the bed and undressed while she got rid of her sweater and bra. With one hand wrapped around my cock to relieve the ache, I watched her relax on the bed and spread her legs for me.

“Wider.” I cleared my throat, surprised by the hoarse quality of my voice. “I want to see everything that you are.”

She slid her hands over her thighs as she opened for me completely. The soft pink flesh of her bare pussy made my mouth water, the fragrant scent of her arousal drew me back to the bed, and I moved to kneel between her thighs. Since nothing remotely civilized could have come out of my mouth at that moment, I said nothing. Instead, I lowered my head and ran my tongue along the slightly parted seam of her labia. Tessa gasped and her hands fisted into the bedding beneath us as I dipped the tip of my tongue into her clenching entrance. She shuddered and groaned my name.

I pushed both hands under her, cupped her ass, and began to lick and suck her pussy as I had so many times in our dream world. The

difference, the vivid reality, made the dreams pale in comparison. How had I ever been satisfied with so little? The urge to feed should have been dormant, but as my lips settled on her clit and I pulled at it for the first time, my fangs trembled. My whole body demanded that I take more than the sweet juices her pussy offered me.

I lifted my head and closed my eyes briefly as my fangs fully descended. Her breathing grew ragged, and I looked upward. Our gazes connected, held for a long moment, and then I slowly turned and sank my teeth into her thigh. Her blood rushed full and sweet in my mouth.

“Oh God, Sam.” One of her hands pressed against the back of my head, and she shuddered. “Please.”

Pulling my teeth from her flesh, I paused to lick the small wounds I’d caused until they closed, and then I moved over her and settled between her thighs. I sucked in a breath as my cock slid against her slit, and tucked my face against the side of her neck as I used the head of my cock to tease her clit. She lifted her hips against each stroke and dug her small hands into my back.

I stilled as her body strained and then tensed against mine. I pushed into her with one solid stroke as she came. Tessa screamed and reared up against my invasion—each movement of her body a demand for more. She wrapped her legs around my waist and held on tightly as I quickened my pace.

The slick, wet heat of her cunt clenched around my cock with each thrust I made, and my control slipped by degrees until I was slamming against her violently. Her nails bit into my skin, the scent of my own blood filled the air around us, and I clenched my body against the pleasure of it.

“More.” The word was a fierce demand as it fell from her lips.

I pulled my cock from her body and ignored the ache that intensified in my balls. “Turn over.” Tessa moved to her knees and presented. I ran both hands down her back, over her ass, and sucked in a breath. “Open for me.” She spread her legs wide and leaned forward against the bed in submission.

I pushed deep into her body and groaned at the heat that

welcomed me. She pressed backward against me with each thrust, moaning and begging me to continue. With her pussy clenching around my cock with each stroke, I knew that I wouldn't last long. My balls tightened as I slid one hand under us and caught her clit between two fingers.

"Come, Tessa. Come now."

She arched deeply, her body bowing against mine, the walls of her cunt clamping down on my cock like a vice, and I came so hard my vision blurred. I held her tight, pushing deep into her body as I jerked with release. I could feel the pleasure ebbing over her mind and body as we both relaxed on the bed. Nipping at her shoulder, I carefully pulled my cock from her body and rolled onto my back beside her.

"So much for the civilized conversation I wanted to have with you."

She laughed softly and buried her face in the bedding with a groan.

"You are a stellar conversationalist."

I rolled to my side, leaned down, and bit her shoulder blade gently again. "I don't normally feed on women like that."

"It didn't bother me."

"No, that was obvious."

I nipped again and paused when a shiver ran down her back. Intrigued, I slid on top of her with ease and pressed my semi-erect cock against the swell of her ass as I found a new, untouched place to bite. Her breathing quickened as the next bite found a home, and I clenched on her flesh until she groaned then released it. My fangs pushed against my gums, but I forced them to remain sheathed as I settled on her skin again.

"What other sorts of pain do you enjoy?" I asked softly as I found another place to taste.

"I—" She sucked in a ragged breath and lifted slightly off the bed as my teeth found a temporary home in the crook between her shoulder and neck.

"It's a thin line, is it not? Between intense pleasure and intense pain."

"Yes." Tessa hissed in a breath and pushed her ass against my cock

as I slid it between the cheeks of her ass. "Yes."

"Answer my question." I bit the top of her shoulder, and her skin beaded with goose bumps. "Do you like to be spanked?"

"Never been..." She stretched her hands out in front of her and buried her face against the mattress.

"Maybe I'll spank you so we can find out." I sat up on my knees and ran both of my hands over her ass. "Then while your ass is still burning from my hand, I'll fuck you."

"Whatever you want, Sam."

"Tell me you belong to me."

"I do." She gasped as I gripped her hips and pulled her until she rested on her knees. "I'm yours."

"Tell me I can fuck you anytime I'd like."

"Yes. Yes. I'm yours to fuck any way, anytime."

I pushed my cock into her without another word and lost myself in the heat of her pussy.

Chapter Three

"I really meant to be a gentleman."

Tessa ran her toe along the center of my chest and reclined on her end of the bathtub. She'd piled all of her hair on top of her head, and her eyes were lit with humor and understanding. "You hide little from me. I can see into your head as easily as I see into my own."

I snagged her foot and rubbed her instep with my thumbs. "Then you know I love you. That I've loved you for months."

"Yes." She closed her eyes and sank down in the water a little. "Where did you learn to do that?"

"Paris. 1581." I grinned when she opened one eye to look at me. "Learning to pleasure a woman proved to be a worthwhile endeavor."

"So you were a whore?" She chuckled as she asked the question.

"When it suited my needs and it most often did. My sexual appetites are varied and in my youth voracious. I could fuck for hours, go through several partners before being sated."

"Men and women," she murmured. Not a question but a statement, I expected some sort of censure in her tone or hidden deep in her thoughts, but I found none.

"Yes, when it interested me."

She pulled her foot free and crawled on top of me, straddling my thighs. "Tell me about him."

"Him?"

Tessa put a hand on my chest and raised one eyebrow. "The man

who is in here. And the one that lingers even now in your mind.”

She meant Dorien. That she could feel him shouldn’t have come as a surprise, but it did. It seemed that I would never have secrets from her, and that was disconcerting to say the least. Did she know what we planned? How far we planned to take her? Would she accept us both in her life and in her bed?

“His name is Dorien. The first of my blood family, and the only one that has stayed near me throughout the years. After I was turned, I left West Africa and traveled up in my search for my sire. Oftentimes I was overwhelmed with bloodlust and had to learn to control myself on my own. It’s a wonder I survived at all. In the city of Sinai in Egypt, I found refuge in the mines, feeding on workers while they slept but never killing. One night, I came upon a man badly beaten and near death. By that time I’d been alone for nearly fifty years and it had taken its toll on me, to say the least. I told him that I could give him an eternal life, that I could make him a vampire. I spared him none of the horror. I think a part of me wanted him to say no.”

“But he didn’t.”

“No. He didn’t. We eventually traveled to India where I found the man who had created me, but the bond between sire and fledgling is profound. I could have no more hurt him than I could sacrifice my own life.”

“Dorien flourished as a vampire.”

I laughed. “That’s an understatement. We separated through the years, but we always managed to come back together eventually. He is the first of my blood family and the only one I keep close to this day.”

She stretched out on top of me and rested her chin on my chest. “You love him.”

“Yes. He is special to me.”

Her lips brushed over my heart, and she smiled. “Then he will be special to me as well.”

I slipped my fingers into her hair as her lips caught my nipple, her teeth grazed briefly and then she drew the tight, sensitive flesh into her mouth. “You’re a naughty girl, my Tessa.”

She released my nipple and moved upward, her breasts scraping deliciously against my skin as she sought my mouth. "I'll be anything for you."

I accepted the soft brush of her lips on mine and then sighed when she relaxed on me once more. "Your mind is a safe harbor for the pain of others." I kissed her temple and held her close. "I never met anyone, human or vampire, so mentally powerful."

Tessa let her face rest on my chest above my heart. "It's a gift and a curse, but I've always tried to use it for good." She lifted her head and met my gaze. "You've told me very little about the cards, even while we dreamt. I know I remained connected with them long after I'd sent them on their way. Oftentimes, I had waking dreams or visions of events and people that I've never seen before."

"The connection I share with Dorien allows me to share his loves and his sorrows. I know his pain and his pleasure as I know my own. It is the same with all of my blood family. Over the last few years, I found that many of them were lonely and without purpose. They seemed to move through life without anything tangible. Then I saw you in the airport in Atlanta. Your mind was the most amazing thing I'd ever encountered."

"And I have this great ass." She wiggled her eyebrows.

I ran my hands down her back and over her ass. "Yes, an incredible mind and a great ass. It was an interesting combination. I knew you were someone who could help me settle my fledglings down and give them love. In each case we were very successful."

"It's beautiful what you've done for your family."

"I don't know what I've ever done to deserve what I've found with you. I never expected to love a woman like this ever again."

Her cheeks flushed, and a smile flashed briefly across her lips. "When I first arrived I felt your irritation. You didn't want me here."

"Not true."

She sat up abruptly. "Don't lie to me. I know."

I grabbed her hands to keep her from leaving the tub. "No, don't get mad and run away. I've wanted you here for months. Wanted you in my life and in my bed. I would have brought you here long before now,

except in the summer a vampire in my city started killing. Dorian and I have been searching for him practically every night.

"I didn't want you to be in danger, and that is the only reason I was irritated when you arrived. I knew the moment your plane landed. I knew you were here. Had I truly wanted you gone, I would have been at the airport waiting on you and sent you home on the next plane. The fact is, I'm a selfish bastard for not doing it.

"But instead of thinking with my head, I let my heart rule me, and here you are exactly where I need you to be." I remained tense until she relaxed against me. "I didn't send the card. I had it sitting on my desk with a few other letters, and I foolishly addressed it. My assistant, Max, sent it out."

"Oh, that must have been irritating."

"Yes, displeased doesn't exactly cover how I felt when I found out what he'd done." I touched her face, struck by how innocent she looked, and sighed. "I think you could use a meal. I'll have the kitchen prepare you something."

"Sounds good."

Chapter Four

Dorien was at the stove when I entered the kitchen. I paused and watched him for a few moments. "Where is Henley?"

"He is gone for the night and Max is busy with a guest. I figured you might need help feeding her. We both know cooking isn't one of your finer skills."

Henley and his wife had come with the inn; she handled the cleaning staff, and he handled the kitchen. I figured that when it was time to move on, I would deed the inn to them or perhaps their children.

I leaned against the counter and watched him put together an omelet. "I'll never understand your obsession with food. You certainly don't need to eat it."

"I enjoy it. The texture, the flavors, and even the preparing." He shrugged. "It is a craft, an art if you will."

Nodding, I considered my next words. "She asked about you."

His shoulders stiffened briefly, then he cleared his throat. It wasn't what he expected to hear, that was certain. "Do I need to leave the city for a while?"

"No, of course not." I reached out and put my hand on his arm. "She seemed intrigued by you but not threatened. It may be that we don't have to ease her into wanting a relationship with both of us."

Dorien nodded. "Okay." His gaze darted toward the toaster, and the toast popped up. "You need to get a better toaster, by the way. The settings are way off on the thing. I am surprised your cook hasn't thrown

it out the nearest window by now."

"I think Henley mentioned wanting a new one. But I forgot to order one." I went and retrieved butter from the walk-in refrigerator for the toast. "I'm sure he'll remind me. You said Max was busy with a guest?"

"Yes. A late arrival apparently, having a fit about lost luggage and the lack of shuttle service to the inn." He glanced toward me. "Told you."

"Fuck you." I glared at him briefly. "If I didn't love this place and this city, I would sell the lot of it and stay out of business. I'll get with Max on Monday and discuss what it would take to buy a passenger van for shuttle service to and from the airport."

"Might be cheaper and less hassle to contract services. I use a similar service for the club. Keeps our very drunk patrons off the road at night, and the city thinks I'm practically a saint for it."

"You don't look like a saint to me."

We both turned at the feminine voice. Tessa lingered in the doorway of the kitchen, her hair once more falling down around her shoulders. A very thin T-shirt covered her braless breasts, and she'd put her jeans back on from earlier. They accented her narrow waist and the flare of her hips.

She tilted her head. "Maybe an angel. A naughty, fallen one."

Dorien laughed softly. "Juice or soda?"

"Orange juice if it's handy." She shoved her hands into the pockets of her jeans, and Dorien refocused on the food. "That smells great."

"Almost ready," he murmured.

I set down the plate I'd pulled from the counter beside him and went searching for a glass. "Did all of your luggage make it in with you?"

"I only brought a carry-on." Tessa slid up onto a stool at the center bar and leaned on her hands, her gaze focused on Dorien's back. "I make him nervous."

I laughed. "Stop picking on him, baby. He's not really prepared for a woman like you."

"Oh, I think five hundred years could prepare a man for practically anything." She took the orange juice I offered and grinned. "Besides, I'm just the little human."

I shook my head. "You need to learn boundaries."

She had the grace to flush but didn't offer an apology. "My grandmother always said that even if I can't control what I hear or feel that I can control what I say."

I sat down across from her as Dorien brought the plate to the counter. She plucked up a rolled up set of silverware from the basket between us, and I relaxed as Dorien slid up on the stool beside me. I'd assumed he'd run as soon as he got a chance.

She ate in silence, her gaze lifting every few minutes to assess us both. After a few minutes, she set aside her fork and picked up her juice with a sigh. "No, Dorien, I'm not afraid of you."

He shifted on the stool and folded his hands in front of him. "What exactly are you capable of?"

"I've been able to move objects with my mind since I was a child, but it is very painful. I can read the history of an object and often connect intimately with the person who owns it. Metal or cloth seems to work best, but I can do it with limited success on plastics and glass. I can connect with the emotional states of individuals, and since I can't control when that connection happens, being around lots of people can be painful and exhausting. I've never had success with paper until the cards started arriving." Tessa grabbed the fork again and took a stab at a piece of sausage. "I've never been successful at controlling the actions of people. I can pick up emotions, past events from individuals even with casual contact, but it's rarely painful or difficult to control. It's the present and being around people that is the problem. I have no refuge from it." She frowned a little. "Except for the last few hours. I know the inn is full of people, yet I sense little if anything from them. I know there are five small children here, one of them had a nightmare earlier and woke certain that there was a monster in her closet."

"Anything else?"

"There is another vampire, the young one that checked me in. His mind is crowded and very unfocused."

"You said young?" I asked softly, curious as to what she might have picked up from Max.

“Yes, much younger than the two of you.” She met my gaze without flinching. “Both of you are controlled and determined predators. But the other one, Max, is barely leashed. Leashed by you. I can practically see the mental pressure you put on him, the control you give him because he has none.”

Dorien cleared his throat. “Is he dangerous?”

“Yes, of course he is.” She shrugged. “Much the same way both you and Sam are dangerous. You are after all, no matter the elegant clothes you both drape yourselves in, something far different than the average human male. I’ve never encountered a man who wasn’t dangerous in some way or another. As a vampire you just have a sharper edge to it. Max has that edge as well, but it is jagged and misshapen because he’s driven by hunger.”

“His sire abandoned him when he was first made and as a result he wasn’t nurtured through his first few feedings. If you’d met me during my first few years as a vampire, you would have seen me in much the same state.” I regretted it as soon as I said it.

Dorien shifted on the stool beside me, his gaze hard. “Is that why you keep him here? You worry that you would have ended up like him?”

“I *was* like him.” I clamped my teeth tight to keep from saying more. It was suddenly very uncomfortable to be in the same room with both of them.

“No, you weren’t.” Tessa reached out across the bar and put her hands on both of us. “If you were like him, the man sitting beside you, your best friend and lover of five hundred years, would have been a meal for you and nothing more.”

Dorien turned his hand under hers and thread his fingers through hers. “Lover?”

“Don’t play innocent with me. First and foremost, no man who looks like *so much sin* could never get away with it. Second, as I said before the past is no secret to me. The moment I laid hands on him a few hours ago I was surrounded by memories of the two of you. Hard, sexy, and amazingly hot memories.” She cleared her throat and pulled both of her hands away from us. “You’re right, I really need to learn boundaries.”

I watched a blush slip across her cheeks. "Yes, I think you might need to be spanked for such a breach of privacy." Her lips parted, and her eyes darkened. My gaze dropped to her breasts and found that her dark pink nipples were rapidly hardening against the thin fabric. "Yes, punishment is most certainly in order. Don't you agree, Dorian?"

"She does have the look of a woman who's never been properly disciplined."

Her breath caught, and it became all too clear what was to come next.

"Then perhaps we should take her upstairs and show her what she gets for teasing two such dangerous predators."

* * * * *

Dorian waited to speak until Tessa had left the room. "Are you sure?"

It was a fair question considering how I felt about her. I'd spent the last year in love with a woman who existed in my head and the reality of her...the depth of her acceptance of me left me exhilarated and relieved at the same time. "Yes, it's exactly what I've hoped for."

His gaze darted upward briefly. "Her mind is fascinating. She takes leaps and bounds...imagining herself in situations that I don't think I would have considered for her. I should say no to this."

"Why?" It was the last thing I'd expected of him.

"The emotional connection that burns between the two of you is beautiful, and I don't want to interfere. You know I don't allow myself to fall in love with humans." He turned and looked at me for the first time since I'd sent Tessa upstairs to strip. "I don't want to create a situation where you find you have to choose between us."

"Hours ago you said you weren't concerned that you would be replaced in my life." I put my hand on his shoulder and brought him close with just that single touch.

"Yes, and then I laid in my bed for hours while you were with her, in her. The emotional satisfaction you had with her...the only time I've

ever felt that in you was when you were with me." He sucked in a breath and laughed a little as if to relieve the tension. "I sound like a woman."

"No, not at all." I ran one finger down his cheek, across the line of his jaw and rubbed his mouth with my thumb. "There have been women in my life before, we've shared so many I couldn't even give an accurate account."

"You never came close to loving any of them."

I pulled him closer, shoved my fingers into his hair, and fisted my hand as I covered his mouth with my own. He opened immediately for the kiss, accepting the invasion of my tongue with a groan. Was I using our sexual connection to get my way? To ensure that he would come upstairs with me? Yes, but I wouldn't feel guilty about it because I needed to make sure he was just as connected to her as he was to me. I couldn't lose him just when she'd come to us. Selfish bastard that I was, I needed them both, and I intended to have my way.

He sucked in a deep breath as I left his mouth and trailed my lips across his jaw to his neck. His heartbeat leaped slightly as I flicked my tongue over his pulse point. "Come play with me, Dorien."

"Bastard." His fingers dug into my arms as he pulled me closer. "You know I've never denied you anything."

Dorien leaned into me briefly, the thick ridge of his cock pressed against my stomach and my mouth watered. Had it really been so long since I'd known him in an intimate way? His earlier words came back to me, and for the first time since I saw her, I resented my single minded pursuit of Tessa. I wanted her with me for the rest of my days, but not at the expense of him.

"The wait is making her nervous," Dorien murmured. "Does she taste as good as she looks?"

"Yes, better if that's possible." I eased my hold on him reluctantly and looked over his face. "Have you ever regretted meeting me?"

His eyes widened, and he shook his head. "No, not ever. Since the night of my transition...I've always felt as if it was meant to be. As if no other path would have suited my soul."

"Good." I took a steadying breath.

The clearing of a throat pulled my attention from him, and I looked toward the door that led out into the inn. "Max."

"Sir. I've checked in the final guest for the night, engaged the answering service, and secured the door." He looked us over, missing nothing of our embrace, and I felt a sliver of envy snake through him.

Dorien's body tensed against me, and I ran my hand down his arm as I took a step back. "Good then. Did you get your delivery?"

"Yes." He frowned. "I don't know why I must continue to feed from bottled blood."

"It's always fresh." I made certain of that, as old or tainted blood would kill him.

"It's not as fresh as it could be." His gaze darted toward Dorien.

Max knew that Dorien hunted for me, and the thought that I would let him feed from someone I cared so much for would have been amusing if not so insulting. "You presume too much." I trailed my fingers along Dorien's neck, finding nothing but perfect skin over the place I'd fed from earlier in the evening. "If I do not trust you to feed from strangers, what makes you think I'd let you feed from someone so very special to me? The first of my blood family?"

He flushed and glared at Dorien. "Of course, I apologize."

"Leave us." I glanced back at Dorien and found him just as visibly livid as he'd felt in my mind. "Do not let him bait you that way, and get rid of your temper. We have a lovely and eager woman upstairs waiting on us, and she deserves all of our attention."

He rubbed his face with both hands and nodded. "Of course, you're right."

Chapter Five

She was naked and kneeling on the bed, just as I'd instructed. The bed had been stripped of everything but the sheet that covered the mattress. Dorian's breath grew shallow as he stopped to stand beside me. Tessa glanced up as the door shut, and the scent of her arousal increased on the air. She adjusted her position slightly, still on her knees, and bit down on her bottom lip. It was obvious she'd never played submission games but was gamely trying to do exactly as I'd told her to. The combination of eagerness and innocence fed the hunger that already stirred in my gut.

I took a step toward her and reached out to her mind, hoping that I wouldn't find fear. What I found instead nearly made my knees weak and confirmed that she had absolutely no problems with either one of us crawling into the bed with her. One glance toward Dorian confirmed that he'd also been treated to the heady mental image of both of us fucking her at the same time.

Dorian jerked his shirt over his head, tossed it aside, and jerked his belt free from his jeans as he walked to the edge of the bed. "Turn around, face the wall, and grab the headboard."

"Tell me if this is too much for you, Tessa."

She nodded and bit down on her lip. I ran a hand down the smooth line of her back before I stepped away from the bed and started to undress. All the months I'd spent dreaming with her simply hadn't prepared me for the reality of it all. The silky feel of her skin, the alluring

scent of her arousal...all of it coiled around me and mixed with the more familiar scents and mental musings of Dorien. I had a feeling they'd be the death of me, but what an amazing way to go.

Dorien slid onto the bed and pressed an open-mouthed kiss against the small of her back. She arched in response and moved backward against him.

He trailed his hands over her ass as I joined them on the bed. "You've been such a bad girl, Tessa. If you are to be the companion of the oldest vampire within hundreds of miles, you must learn to temper your thoughts and your words. My sire can be an exacting man." She spread her legs as he slid one hand downward to cup her sex from behind. He pushed two fingers into her cunt, and she cried out. "Will you be able to meet all of his expectations, his needs?"

Her answer was a hissed "yes".

"If there comes a time when things are too much for you, when you can not take it...you'll say the word 'oracle'." I ran my hands down her arms as I spoke and hoped that my words were gentle enough. "Your body can take a lot, baby, so much pleasure you can barely speak...so much pain that it burns in you like the sweetest kind of fire." I lowered my mouth to her skin and nipped at her shoulder blade. "We're going to hurt you in all the ways you want, fuck you as we please, and teach you what it means to be owned by creatures such as we are. Do you understand?"

"Yes. Please. Whatever you want." She pushed back against Dorien's fingers and gasped when he smacked her ass with his open hand. "More."

"It is not your place to take, to demand." He smacked her ass again, and a soft moan escaped her lips. "You are here for us, for our pleasure. It's your place to meet all of our needs, deny us nothing. Do you understand?"

"Yes." Her head dropped forward slightly as his hand connected with her ass again. I could feel her pleasure rolling off of her. She loved the way his hand felt as it connected with her skin, the scrap of his fingers inside her as he fucked her with them. "Yes."

He pulled his fingers from her cunt abruptly. "You're not to come until you've permission."

I relaxed on the bed and took in a deep breath. I knew he was giving her something that I couldn't, and she was enjoying the hell out of it. Dorien was slowly stripping her of every ounce of control she had in the situation, taking away the emotional pain of others and the guilt from enjoying her circumstances. I trusted him not to hurt her, yet as he picked up the belt he'd left at the end of the bed, it startled me.

As he looped the belt in his fist, he met my gaze across the expanse of the king-sized bed. His gaze ripped over me, taking in the hard length of my cock with a wicked smile. His tongue flicked out and wet his bottom lip, and he shook back his hair until it fell down his back. He *did* look like a naughty fallen angel.

Dorien chuckled and traced the line of Tessa's back with the looped end of the belt. The touch of leather on her skin had her back arching and her breath labored in an instant. I knew that she'd never been in such a situation but had often wanted it, often fantasized about the kind of pleasure/pain a man with an even and knowing hand could give her.

As he leaned down and placed a series of biting kisses along one of her shoulders, I let my gaze roam over his body. He was a strong man, muscular from his years as a human working in a mine. The muscles of his flat stomach clenched as he leaned over her, his cock thick and as long as my own leaking with pre-cum. I swallowed hard and resisted the urge to cross the space that separated us and take him into my mouth. My mind filled with that image, and they both responded.

Tessa moaned, and Dorien hissed, his fangs bursting free in a single instant. He nicked her skin, and blood beaded on her shoulder. With a curse, he flicked his tongue out and sealed the tiny wound.

"My sire is playing games with us, little one." Dorien closed his eyes and placed a soft kiss over the skin he'd inadvertently opened. "Do you remember your safe word?"

"Oracle."

"And what happens if you use the word?"

"You stop." Her hands tightened on the headboard as he lifted

away from her and used the edge of the belt to scap a path down the center of her back.

“Yes, but be cautious. A safe word should only be used when you can truly take no more.”

“I understand.” She arched backward, her hands tightening on the headboard. “I need...”

“Shh, we’ll give you everything you need, love.” His words were both a promise and a warning.

The first strike fell across her ass, leaving a wide pink mark across her flesh that made my whole body tighten with awareness. My words from earlier surfaced in my mind, and I could easily imagine shoving my cock into her at that very moment. The fourth lash made her scream, and she started to shake. By the tenth, her body and mind were humming with the most pleasure she’d ever known. He never struck in the same place twice, never hard enough to break skin or bruise.

Her body rocked backward with each lash, her nipples hard, her cunt so wet that her juices slid down her thighs. After the seventeenth, he stopped, lowered his mouth to the heated flesh of her back, and placed a series of soft, open-mouthed kisses across her shoulders then down the line of her back. Her breathing was labored; her body bowed in anticipation of each time his mouth connected with her skin.

“Do you want to come?”

His question was met with a soft gasp and an even softer reply. “Yes.”

“Do you know why I’m making you wait?”

“The longer I wait the better it will be.” She lowered her head, her hair fell around her face, and a full shudder ran the length of her back as he sank his teeth, fangs and all, into her shoulder. The intoxicating scent of blood mixed with the heavy aroma of arousal already permeating the room.

He held her tight as he licked the two tiny punctures to heal them then lifted away from her. “More, Tessa?”

“Yes.” Her voice was ragged with emotion and pleasure. “Yes, please.”

He snapped the belt in the air, and she jerked. Then he allowed the belt to trail down her back gently, and she relaxed as much as she could considering the position she held. Dorien stilled and then began again, light taps that steadily became harder. Then he looped the belt and smacked across her ass.

“Come.”

Her body bowed as she met his demand, a sob burst from her mouth, and an intense sense of shame fell over her mind.

Dorien tossed the belt aside, carefully pulled her hands from the bar, and sucked in a breath. “Sire.”

I moved across the bed and took Tessa in my arms. She pressed her face against my chest and clutched at my shoulders as she cried. “Easy, baby.”

Dorien ran his hands carefully down her back and ass over and over again, soothing her heated flesh while I delved deeply into her mind. The mental walls I’d erected to shield her mind from the other humans in the inn were still in place, and the only pain that filled her mind was her own. I’d felt the same pain in her before, but I hadn’t lingered over it, hadn’t tried to make sense of it.

Finally she grew quiet, and Dorien relaxed on the bed behind her. His relief was enormous, though we both knew that what he’d done to her wasn’t the root of her distress.

She turned until she rested on her back between us and rubbed her face with both hands. “I’m sorry.”

“No.” Dorien propped his head on one hand and traced her lips with a finger. “It was just too much too soon. Your mental needs don’t mesh with the needs of your body, and that is nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I wanted more. I still want more.”

“More pain?” He leaned down, caught one rigid nipple between his teeth, worried it until she turned into him with a sigh, then flicked it gently with his tongue as he released her. “There are many pleasures to be found in pain, and I know them all. We’ll explore them, but just more slowly.”

She flushed and closed her eyes.

"Nothing you enjoy or want would make us turn from you." I touched her face and softly kissed her lips. "Nothing."

"No one has ever accepted me for all that I am without questioning or judging me."

"That we understand." I brushed her hair from her forehead as I spoke. "How long have you known about Dorien?"

"Since the first dream." Tessa flushed and swallowed hard. "I know you tried to hide him in your mind, even separated yourself from him physically so that you could keep it a secret from me. But he is such a large part of what you are, Sam, it was impossible for me not to see something was missing or hidden. It didn't take much for me to find it in your mind. To find him. Though you were able to hide who exactly he was, I always knew there was someone else. Someone else that would be waiting on me when I came here." She turned her head and looked at Dorien then. "But you never came to me in dreams."

"No, dream sharing has always been difficult for me."

With a small frown, she reached out and touched his face. "Don't run from us, Dorien. He'd never be the same without you, and I'll do my damndest not to die on you."

"There is a way we could make that aim easier to achieve," he murmured.

"I know, but I'm not ready to discuss that yet." She pushed her fingers into his hair and sighed. "No frowning, it's not off the table. I'm just not ready for the 'what's it's like to be a vampire' conversation. Kiss me."

The kiss was soft, languid in a way that I'd never seen in him before. She was getting to him in much the same way she'd gotten to me. Both of them reached out for me then, turning as if of one mind. I found myself being pressed onto my back, Tessa's mouth on mine as she slid astride me. Dorien's fingers slid down the length of my cock as he helped her move into position and then slide down onto me.

Her pussy clenched around me as he fondled my balls with nimble, knowing fingers. It was too much, and my vision blurred. I lifted my hips in demand and sucked in a breath when she started to move. The wet heat

of her cunt, combined with Dorien's gentle stimulation, had me speechless.

His fingers slid downward, and he pushed two into my ass. It had been more than a year since I'd known any kind of penetration. I thrust upward against them both and groaned when she dug her nails into my chest. Her pussy clenched on my cock just as Dorien pressed more deeply into me. The dual stimulation had my heart racing and my body screaming for release. Then he started to thrust into my body in time with her downward plunges.

I came hard, jerking against Tessa and digging my hands into the mattress beneath us to keep from grabbing her. She shuddered and clenched on my cock as if my orgasm was her own. Dorien lifted her off of me, maneuvered her back on her knees and thrust his cock deep into her cunt.

"Fuck!" Tessa arched, and as she did, he started to move. Every thrust of his body into hers made her clench and push back against him. "Yes, Dorien, yes."

I lifted up, caught one nipple in my mouth and sucked hard as he gripped her hips and forced her to be still. I sucked the other, drawing on it hard and deep until she shuddered against my mouth. Licking a path upward between her breasts, I sucked on her throat, clenching on her skin with my teeth, and she moaned.

"He loves being inside you," I whispered. "He could fuck you all night. *We* could fuck you all night. Do you want that, Tessa?"

"Yes. Yes."

I slid back down, nipping at one breast before sucking the tip into my mouth and clenching my teeth down. When I released the hard, distended nipple, she cried out. "Come, love."

Her body tightened, bowed against Dorien, and tears streamed down her face as she met my demand. The heady mental echo of their mutual orgasms washed over me, and I met Dorien's gaze over her shoulder. That they had both responded to my command didn't surprise me, but I knew that the control I had just unwittingly exerted over him was difficult for him to accept, even after all the time that had passed

between us. He kissed her shoulder softly as he pulled free from her body and then laid down on the bed beside me.

I held her close as she relaxed against my chest, rubbing her back in a lazy circle as she trembled.

Finally she lifted her head and offered me a small smile. "If I'm to be punished in such a way whenever I misbehave—I'm likely to become a discipline problem."

Chapter Six

"She's exhausted and will be fine until we return," Dorien muttered as he all but pushed me out of my bedroom.

We'd taken Tessa upstairs to my suite more for security than anything else. I engaged the security for my rooms as I exited out into the hall and glared at him. "We shouldn't leave her alone."

"No, we shouldn't. But we have no choice, the longer she is in the city the more danger she is in. If we are to protect her, we need to find our little problem vampire and put an immediate end to that situation." Dorien jerked on his jacket with a frown and glanced back toward the door as we walked away. "I don't like it either."

No, it was obvious. His displeasure, even a bit of distress, filled his mind. "I was right then?"

He flushed as we entered the elevator. "I enjoy her, and you love her. Since your happiness has been a priority for me well over five centuries, it stands to reason that I would see that no harm came to her."

There was more, it lingered in his mind. A sense of possession, a desire to please her...and more. Yes, so much more. "The first time I saw her I felt the same way. You don't understand the amount of control I had to exert on myself to keep from taking her home with me a year ago."

"Don't go there. I can't discuss this right now, not and keep a level head. I'm supposed to meet Aimon tonight. He found a witness for me to talk to about the last killing."

I grimaced and straightened away from the wall as the elevator

doors opened. Aimon Marseau. The two-hundred-year-old Frenchman had been in Savannah a little over three years, and while he hadn't made himself a complete nuisance, I found his presence in my city unnerving. In the beginning, with the first killing I'd even suspected that it might be him. But as the killings had grown daring and far too frequent, I realized that it was a very young vampire glutting himself on the female humans of Savannah.

Dorien's favored club was only about ten blocks from the inn, and we made quick work of the distance. Hard, heart-thumping music poured out of its entrance as one of the bouncers pulled the door open for us. Alternative rock, the smell of sex, and marijuana assaulted my nose as I entered. I'd come to this particular club often to feed when I hunted for myself. After a few minutes, I forced myself to stop staring at the writhing crowd of dancers and followed Dorien through the crowd to his office.

When I entered his office, I found him at his desk, browsing through a series of reports on his laptop. "Seems profits are up."

"Always pleasing to our bottom line." I walked to stand in front of the large window that overlooked the entire club. "There are a few young ones in your crowd tonight, but none feel dangerous."

"No, I have a few of Aimon's fledglings on staff." When I turned and looked at him, he leaned back in his chair. "Do I need to say it?"

"No, I've known for quite sometime that you were fucking him." I'd never asked for his fidelity, never even considered it an option until I pictured him with Aimon. I wanted to gut them both for it, and the violence of that emotion shook me so hard I turned away from him. "Your appetites are strong, Dorien. I've never required your fidelity. It's my fault we've been apart these past few months, and I don't even really know how it happened."

His hands drifted over my shoulders then, his breath brushing across the back of my neck. "I tried. I honestly did. Then I cut a path through the female humans that frequent my clubs until I could walk into this place and every cunt in here would soften, grow wet for me. But eventually that wasn't enough."

"Glutton," I accused softly.

"We all have our cross to bear." He nuzzled my neck and sighed when I relaxed back against him. "If it bothers you, I won't do it again."

"I've never trusted him with business." I covered his hand with my own when it came to rest against my stomach. "And I could never trust him with you." Threading his fingers with mine, I allowed myself the pleasure of that simple physical contact. "But in all the years that we've known each other, I've never once put such a restriction on you."

"Did it ever occur to you that such restrictions might be welcome?" He jerked back and put some distance between us shortly before the door opened. "Aimon, you should learn to knock."

I turned, faced the Frenchman, and leaned back against the windowsill as if the urge to rip out his throat wasn't crowding into my brain. I'd never been jealous of Dorien's liaisons before now. "Marseau."

His smile stayed firm, but I knew he felt the hostility rolling around inside me that I didn't bother to push down.

"I didn't expect you for this meeting, Bosan."

"No, I imagine not." I crossed my arms and motioned for him to sit. "Dorien tells me that you have information about the last killing that will help lead us to the rogue."

"The victim had a friend, and that friend managed to get away during the attack. I found her hiding in a motel downtown and went to question her. She is scared out of her mind, but it was all too easy to extract the information out of her." He dropped into one of the chairs in front of the desk as Dorien took a seat.

"Does she understand *what* killed her friend?" Dorien asked as he reached out and closed his laptop.

"No. She knows about the other killings, they are all over the news. But she's convinced like the rest of the city that it's the work of a serial killer, a human monster. Such beliefs have always worked well for us in the past, and in this instance it's proven very handy. With the cops on television promising everything will be fine, it's kept the city populace from losing their collective minds. And we all know how bad it gets when the humans rile up and start forming hunting parties of their own."

It was never a good thing. Once the stress level reached that point,

they would start to believe that no mere human was killing in their city. They would have elaborate tales of werewolves and vampires running amok among them. And situations like that made regular feeding something of a problem for vampires. No, a human serial killer was a much preferred culprit, and like in the past when the killings abruptly stopped, the police investigation would grow cold and finally disappear from the headlines.

“Where is she?”

“I let her go once I had all the memories she had of the killing. It took some work, but I convinced her to return home and forget about the worst of it.” He smiled then. “I came here on good faith, Bosan, and have nothing to gain by keeping this information from you.”

“Yet you hold those memories very close and put a great deal of mental energy into protecting them from us.” I glanced toward Dorien; he was getting frustrated. “Tell me what you want, Marseau.”

“I find I like Savannah.”

“It’s a beautiful city.”

“Yes, but perhaps too small for the both of us.” He steepled his hands under his chin. “I’d like to have it all to myself.”

“Savannah has been my city for many years, and it will remain mine until I’m ready to move on. If you would like to challenge me for it, you are welcome to do so.” I smiled when Marseau jerked and straightened in his chair. “Even if I do not take the information from you tonight; I will find the rogue vampire and I will kill him for his transgressions in territory. You think because Dorien finds you amusing I would spare you discomfort? That I wouldn’t reach into your mind and rip out the information I need? It’s true that among all of my blood family, Dorien is by far my favored.” I stood away from the window, walked around the desk and trailed my fingers along the back of Aimon’s chair as I moved behind him. “He and I spent the last five hundred years making our way in this world. It’s also true enough that I’ve always found it difficult to deny his wants and desires. But I am his sire and no matter what else might move between us, that fact remains.”

“I may not be as old as you, but I’m strong. You won’t find this an

easy task.”

“No, it’s obvious you are strong. A lesser man would have already left that chair. Your self-control is stunning, even admirable.” I met Dorian’s gaze, and he immediately stood. “I suggest you give the information we seek to him, Aimon. You won’t like it at all if I’m forced to take it from you.”

“Fuck you.”

Dorien jerked him from the chair by his shirt and pulled him close. “Do not ever speak to him that way. Now show me what you know, Aimon, or you’ll find out exactly what a death feeding feels like.”

I reached out with my mind, wrapping myself mentally around Dorian’s thoughts to keep him centered and to prevent Aimon from even attempting to hurt him. The images came in a ragged succession of horror, and the moment I saw the rogue vampire, my entire world shifted out of focus.

Dorien released Aimon abruptly, shoved him away, and his eyes went entirely black. “Tessa.”

We’d left her in the very hands of the killer we sought. I left Dorian’s office at a dead run, rushing through the crowd in the bar without a single thought beyond getting back to the inn, getting back to our fragile little human. I cut across the streets, moved through alleys, eating up the mere ten blocks that separated me from her in a matter of minutes. The moment I entered the inn my mental connection with Tessa shattered. The pain of it was so overwhelming that I staggered, but Dorian was there...pushing me toward the stairs and her.

Chapter Seven

What greeted us in my suite nearly put me on my knees. Tessa was standing in the middle of the room, her head thrown back, her chest heaving, a fine sheen of sweat covering her skin, and Max lay at her feet. The air in the room was so still that it made breathing difficult.

"Tessa..." Dorien moved forward and reached out for her. "Tessa, love, come away from him."

She looked down at his hand and then looked toward me. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Sam."

"It's all right, darling, take his hand." I released breath I hadn't even known I was holding when she let her fingers slip into Dorien's and he was able to pull her away from Max.

Dorien swept her up into his arms and brought her to me. "I'll take care of him."

"Yes." I took her, pulled her tight to my chest, and with one glance toward Max, took her into the bedroom.

Carefully, I laid her on the bed. She was still wearing the thin nightgown I'd slipped onto her after the second bath we'd taken together. "Did he hurt you?"

"No." She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. "I'm sorry."

"Don't." I crawled into bed beside her and gathered her in my arms. "I'm sorry. I can't believe I was so foolish."

"Your control on him was strong, I don't know how he managed to do it. I don't know how he managed to slip past your restraints. He

seemed so much stronger suddenly. As if he were hundreds of years old, like you and Dorien." She turned into me and pressed against my chest. "I didn't mean to kill him. I thought I could hold him in place until you came back. I knew you were coming, the anger and fear from you both is what woke me up."

"You didn't kill him, love." I kissed her brow. "When we die, we disintegrate, leaving only ash behind."

Tessa shuddered at my words, and I regretted being so blunt about it. "I killed his mind. Broke it open like an egg. I didn't even know I could do something like that."

A part of me had always known what she was capable of that first day I'd seen her drowning in the pain of others. I understood all that she was, all that she would become. "There is no shame to be found in protecting yourself." I curled my fingers into her hair and tried to quiet the fear that still festered inside me. "I should have been here to protect you, and I'm sorry I wasn't."

"He hid so much from you."

And that troubled me more than I wanted to admit. "Yes, more so than even seems possible. You severed our connection." I gently pressed my lips to her forehead. "Why?"

"I didn't want to hurt you. When he came in here and pulled me from the bed, he told me he was going to kill me." Her fingers curled into my shirt, and I pulled her closer. "I couldn't risk hurting you. Sometimes when I'm scared, I can't control it as well as I do."

"This is why you devote no energy to protecting yourself from the thoughts and pains of others. You invest all of your energy, all of your ability into protecting everyone else from you." The realization was stunning and explained so much.

"I can't risk hurting someone innocent. Not ever."

"No, I understand."

"Dorien?"

I paused and considered what I should tell her. When she recovered and opened herself back to the two of us, she would know the truth of what he was doing. Lying to her, even in an effort to sooth her,

would be pointless. "He's taken Max from the inn."

"To kill him?"

"Max has killed seven young, vital women in the past year, all innocent and none deserving of the horrific moments that were their last." I lifted away so that I could see her face. "He managed to do this all while under my protection, and he did it undetected. So, yes, Dorien has taken his life. No vampire of his like can be tolerated. It was painless, quick and far less than he deserved considering what he had planned for you."

"I don't understand. The connection you had to his mind seemed complete and very strong. I don't know how he kept anything from you."

I didn't understand myself, but the evidence to the contrary was quite clear. I stiffened briefly when the door opened and then relaxed when I realized it was Dorien. My senses were so overloaded I barely recognized myself, so it was no surprise that I hadn't realized he'd returned to the inn. He slipped onto the bed with us, moving to lay behind her, and buried his face in her hair.

When he lifted his head and met my gaze with his own, I opened my mind fully to his and let him see and know all that I'd just learned about Tessa and her gifts. His mouth dropped open briefly before he closed it shut with an audible snap. He covered my hand, threaded his fingers with it, and we let them lay joined on her hip. I'd known plenty of psychically gifted people, vampires mostly, but none of them had ever been able to kill with just their mind. She hadn't outright killed Max, yet she could and probably would have.

"Tessa, where is your card?"

I stiffened at Dorien's question, unprepared for him to ask about the oracle card that had been sent to her. "Why?"

"Isn't that how you established the connection with her?" He glanced down at our joined hands, and stroked his thumb over mine. "You used your own blood in the cards. That's how you built the psychic connection to her and in turn to the humans she sent it to."

"Yes, of course."

"Is that dangerous for you?" Tessa asked, drawing my immediate attention. "Should we retrieve the cards?"

“No, not particularly dangerous, but it would be painful for me if any of the cards were destroyed.” I released Dorian’s hand and touched her face. “And how would you retrieve them for me, baby?”

“I could ask them to return the cards to the inn.”

“Them?”

“The men and women who received the cards; it would be easy for me to reach out to them and tell them to return the cards.” She sat up from between us and pushed her hair back. “I need my card.”

I watched her slide down the bed and dash out of the room silently, then I turned to Dorian. “Did he tell you anything?”

“No, his mind was gone. She decimated him. I’ve never felt anything like it. Whatever he had inside, whatever it was that allowed him to slip past you—it will remain a mystery to us.” He propped his head on one hand. “You move pretty fast for an old man.”

I laughed and relaxed against the bed. “I thought my heart was going to burst from my chest when I realized he had her and what he intended to do to her.”

“Yes.”

The moment she touched the card, we both responded. Dorian’s breath quickened, and my heart slowed to a normal rhythm.

“She’d have more control over it if we turned her,” Dorian murmured.

“It’s her choice. She’s a young woman, Dorian. We have years to convince her that she can live an eternity with us. It’s a hard choice to make, especially for women. She’ll never have children, and for some females that’s a deal breaker.”

“I never intended to have children.” We both turned and looked at her. She was in the doorway, the oracle card pressed against her chest as if it were somehow more calming to have it so close to her heart. “My own mother suffered horribly with her gifts. She was a medium and had no refuge from the dead until she herself was killed in a car accident. My own gifts, for all their terrible wonder, are so much worse than her own. I would never subject another person to that, especially not one of my own blood.”

I held out my hand, and she came back to the bed without another word. She crawled over me to sit between us and placed the card on the bed between Dorien and I. He reached out to touch the card and jerked back his hand with a barely controlled hiss. "What the hell?"

"He embedded a series of psychic commands. Ones that would make the human receiver very attached to the card while discouraging vampires from even touching the cards." She stroked the picture on the card, a drawing of myself, and chuckled. "Your sire is a vain thing, Dorien."

Dorien laughed. "Well, when you're beautiful like that you have reason to be vain."

I groaned and flopped back on the bed. "It wasn't vanity."

"No?" Tessa mused. "Perhaps not, but you're still pretty." She plucked up the card, reached over me and placed it on a low table beside the bed. "This is a great big bed you've got here."

I held her fast as she started to draw away. "Well, when you are shopping for a bed for three you have to plan for space to sleep and *play*."

She relaxed against my chest and grinned. "I see, and would Sire like to play with us?"

I stroked her face with my fingertips. "More than you know, but Dorien and I both need to feed. We've had a very taxing evening."

Tessa tilted her head, regarded me with a critical eye, then turned to give Dorien the same treatment. "The sun will rise soon."

"Yes, but we're old enough that it's more a nuisance than a danger. It can be uncomfortable if we are out for hours, but I won't be gone long." Dorien leaned in and kissed her. "Then we'll teach this old man a thing or two about how this bed can be played on."

"But you both need to feed."

"I will take enough for us both." He brushed his lips over her mouth again, and my stomach tightened.

I never thought I would enjoy watching them together. The fact that I did enjoy it *a lot* wasn't lost on either of them. Dorien slipped from the bed with a grin and left the room without another word. The moment the door shut, Tessa turned to fully face me, her expression concerned.

"Who is this Aimon guy?"

"A vampire, turned about two hundred years ago in France."

"By Dorien?"

"No, Dorien has never sired a blood child. He has no interest in it. Aimon was turned by a much older vampire named Ila. It was rumored that she was close to seven hundred years old when she was killed." I touched her face, drawing a path with my fingers along her jaw line. "Aimon worries you?"

"I saw him in Dorien's mind."

"Dorien and he have been lovers for several months." I felt her immediate displeasure at that. "He and I have never had an exclusive arrangement...we both enjoy women as well, and while we've shared them in the past, it hasn't always been the case. I've never asked for more than what he was very willing to give."

The way her lips pursed told me that was not going to be the case with her. She was very prepared to demand things from both of us that we'd never given before. Rather than continue the conversation, I pulled her into my arms and kissed her. The tension left her as she came fully into my embrace, and I allowed myself the simple pleasure of exploring her mouth. I loved the taste of her, could have drowned in her happily, but she lifted her head away and glared at me.

"I don't want him seeing that man anymore. He's not..." She sighed. "Aimon is not what he needs."

"Dorien is no innocent, love. He understands exactly what he can and can not expect from Aimon."

All I felt moving through her mind was sadness, and that disturbed me. The last thing I wanted was to see her hurt because of the arrangement Dorien and I had always enjoyed. Though, he had made it clear that he might consider a different sort of relationship now that she was in the picture. Change. It was something I avoided as much as possible, and for a man who had lived for as long as I had, that made for some monumental accomplishments in that department. Hell, I hated buying new clothes or parting with old cars. Very little in my life had been stable, constant since I was turned—and now the people in my life that I

loved most were rearranging things without my permission.

I glanced toward the card, and my stomach clenched. "Max brought you here to distract me."

"What?" She turned slightly in my arms and picked up the card. "Do you think he planned to hurt me all along?"

"No. I think he figured you would distract me enough that he could play as he saw fit and that maybe he would be able to slip free from me completely." She put the card on the nightstand and rested on me. "I should have put him down when Dorien suggested it."

"It's not wrong that you tried to save him."

"It cost seven innocent women their lives, and that's entirely on me. My vanity killed them."

"Who sired Max?"

"He kept that information from me. It's one gift that a fledgling is innately reborn with. The ability to shield their sire completely from other vampires. I asked him repeatedly, but he always refused to name the man or woman responsible. I know he was turned in the late 1940's in Los Angeles, but I know little beyond that. When I found him, he'd been abandoned here in Savannah. His sire had always controlled him instead of teaching him the control he needed. He wasn't even able to retract his fangs on his own."

She raised one eyebrow. "Say again?"

I let my fangs descend and slid my tongue across them for her benefit, then slowly I pulled them back up. "Like that."

"That was creepy and sort of sexy all at the same time." She leaned forward and pressed her lips against mine. "You were left in the same way, were you not?"

"I was turned and left on the ground where I died." I closed my eyes against the memory, the most vivid of all moments in my life. "When I woke, my body was on fire and I had a hunger that defied explanation. I crawled into a hole to die, but I didn't. My wife found me." She stiffened against me, her eyes growing wide. "She was horrified. My skin was burned from the sun exposure, what clothes I had were covered in blood, the wound that killed me was still open. I was ravenous. I attacked her."

"Sam, it wasn't your fault."

"No, it's the truth of it. She escaped me because I was so weak, but she knew what I was. Over the next few days she came to that hole, an abandoned den of some animal, and brought me food that I would not eat and animals that I killed for their blood. Finally the leader of the village realized what had happened to me and prevented her from returning to me. A group of elders came and told me to leave or they would kill me.

"So, I left. I had three children...a boy and two girls. I asked that the elders find my wife a new husband and that they tell the village and her that I was dead. They agreed."

"You never returned to check on them?"

"No, they were better off without me. Better off with a human man who could protect and provide for them. If the entire village had learned of my condition, my whole family would have been shunned and forced away from the only home they'd ever known. In leaving, I gave them a chance to live the life they deserved."

"How did you survive?"

"Luck and insanity. I wanted nothing more than to find the thing that had made me a monster and kill it. I hunted him for years, always close but not close enough. Yet he lingered in the back of my mind, and sometimes while I slept he would reach out to me. Perhaps he sought to comfort me, I'll never know. I learned to control myself. I learned to hunt, survive, and most importantly to hide what I am."

Chapter Eight

I was sitting in the corner of the couch when Dorien returned to the suite. To say that he looked irritated was an understatement. "Problems?"

He shrugged out of his jacket and glanced toward the closed bedroom door. "Nothing I couldn't handle. Had a minor fight break out at the club, and it took me longer than normal to find a few sober persons to entice out of their blood. How is she?"

"Sleeping." I tossed aside the TV remote and wet my lips. A hunger that was rarely ever completely sated burned in my bones. "She's worried about your relationship with Aimon."

"I know. She didn't exactly keep her displeasure a secret." He came to the couch, knelt between my spread legs without a word and pushed his hair back from his neck.

I sat up, settled both feet on the floor and cupped his face. "There have been times in my life when I did not know if I wanted to continue. When I considered crawling back into a hole and finding refuge from this hunger in death, but each time that insanely selfish idea came to me my mind was immediately full of you." I rubbed his bottom lip with my thumb and swallowed hard.

"When I decided to bring Tessa into our lives, it was with the thought that she would be the one to help us settle, to help us find the peace that I've worked so hard to give the rest of my fledglings. I knew that she would fill all the lonely places inside my soul and yours." His black eyes brightened, perhaps in denial or anger, but he said nothing as I

ran my fingers through his hair. "Remember those first few days after you were turned?"

"Yes."

"I'd been alone for so many years, forced to live in a way that was so contrary to my own needs for companionship. Loneliness was my only companion until you came into my life. The first time I fed you, your mouth on my skin was the most sensual experience of my life. In that moment, I wanted to possess you in every way possible. I'd never once had such thoughts about a man."

Dorien laughed softly. "Inexperienced but eager. We both learned the way of pleasing each other pretty quickly."

I nodded my agreement, moved closer, tilted his head to the side and sank my aching fangs into his neck. He jerked against me, moving so that his stomach was pressed against the hard ridge of my cock. When I'd had my fill, I pulled my teeth from his throat and sought his mouth. Thrusting my tongue between his lips, I pulled against him until he was as close as possible. The taste of blood lingering in my mouth mingled with his, and I got instantly harder. I pulled my mouth away and rested my forehead against his.

"I love you. I've always loved you."

"I know, Sire. You're the truest part of my existence. The love of my life." He placed a soft kiss on my mouth. "I will not see Aimon again."

"I didn't ask that of you."

"It makes you furious that I might seek him again, and it hurts her. If I can't be faithful to the two people who mean the most to me, then I have no business even thinking about remaining with either of you." He kissed me again, leaned in closer, and finally whispered, "She's the perfect choice for us, for our future. The first time I saw her...you were right about that...it was like something I'd been missing all of these years fell into place."

"That's relieving to hear." We both jerked, our gazes snapping to the doorway of the bedroom. She stood there, her arms wrapped around herself as if to ward off a cold air, her eyes bright and wet with emotion. When I started to speak, she shook her head and bit down on her lip.

“When I woke and Max was in the room with me, I thought perhaps he’d just made a mistake. Because surely he would’ve not sought me out for a feeding. I knew you wouldn’t have allowed it.”

“No, I wouldn’t.” The thought of it made me furious, so furious that I could barely breathe. Dorien slid one hand up my thigh, and it served to remind me that my temper was a secret from no one in the room. “It was my own fault he sought you out; he’d all but demanded to feed from Dorien last night, and when he saw that you were alone—he considered you easy prey.”

“His mistake,” she murmured as she entered the room fully and walked toward us. Dorien moved up onto the couch beside me as she came to stand in front of us. “In that moment, when I realized how badly I could hurt him—when I realized I could kill him, I almost ran.”

I frowned. “What?”

“Over the past year, I’ve allowed myself to be drawn into your game of cards because I thought if there was anyone on Earth that I wouldn’t be a threat to, it would be a vampire of your age and power. Yet when I released my hold on my gifts—when I ripped open his psyche like it was nothing and peered into his very soul, I knew that there was very little on this Earth that could survive me. Not you, not a vampire twice your age.” She started to pace, her steps even and quick. “If I were to hurt either of you, it would be more than I could possibly survive. The past two days that I’ve been here, you’ve devoted a great deal of mental energy in erecting shields for me to keep the other humans in the inn from pressing on my mind.”

“Yes.”

“It’s been a relief. Even on my mountain, as isolated as I was I could never really escape the needs and desires of the people in the valley. Their emotions, both painful and pleasurable, flowed over me like water. And often even the pleasure was an agony. The echo of love, happiness...is still an echo, and in the end it would all feel so empty. I would be full to the brim with their emotions and yet remain absolutely barren.” She looked toward Dorien then, her eyes darkened. “You take too many risks, but each time you do it in the future you’ll risk breaking my

heart.”

“Life is a risk and living is the most important thing we do. You’re right, I don’t hide from dangerous situations or people. In the past, I’ll admit to even enjoying the risk of a man like Aimon and others far more amusing and exciting. The past five hundred years, the world has been my playground and I’ve played so hard that oftentimes I was surprised to survive it.” He stood up slowly and offered her his hand. “But, Tessa, I promise you that I’ll do everything within my power to keep from breaking your heart.”

She took in a deep breath and after a few seconds took the hand he offered. “And if your sire breaks my heart?”

“I’ve never beaten him in a fight, but there is a first time for everything.” Dorien pulled her close, folded her into a tight embrace, and met my gaze over her shoulder. She’d unmanned him. “You fill places inside me that I didn’t know were empty; and you have from the moment I set eyes on you, love. I haven’t had months to find out all there is to know about you...”

Tessa pressed two fingers against his lips. “But we’ve got plenty of time.”

“Yes,” he agreed.

She turned then, her eyes bright. “And we can have all the time there is.”

“Tessa.” Dorien released her.

It was obvious he was just as stunned as I was. She’d avoided discussing it since her arrival, and now she’d all but said she wanted to be turned. “This is a big decision, and you’ve been through a traumatic experience tonight.”

I nodded at his words, pleased that he’d voiced what I couldn’t force myself to say. Never once had I turned anyone against their will. It was my cardinal rule, and there had been times when I’d talked people out of choosing the path I walked. Dorien remained one of the few that I had truly enticed, seduced with the power of the vampire. Others in my past had been curious, easily drawn into my world, and often relieved if I made an offer before they had to ask.

She left his arms, walked to stand in front of me, and knelt much the same way Dorien had. "I thought that I would want to wait. That it would be a long time before I was sure."

I straightened and ran my hand along the side of her face. "And?"

Tessa turned her face into my palm and closed her eyes. "I don't know much about what being a vampire would bring to me, but I do know that it would bring me the strength to keep my gifts truly at bay."

"Yes, it is very likely."

"Then it's what must be done. If I am to stay here with you and Dorien, I need to be turned. I can't risk that I might hurt either of you." She fisted her hands on my thighs as she moved closer. "I'm ready."

"No, you aren't," I corrected gently. "You're making a rash and emotional choice. Before we continue, I need to tell you what will be ahead of you."

"Okay." She took a deep breath.

"First, I will drain you nearly completely of the blood in your body, and as you are dying, I will open a vein and feed you. Your mind may resist, because drinking blood is not a natural part of human existence, but I will force you to continue until you pass out. The heart is the first to fail, followed closely by the rest. The transition takes hours, but as your body dies, you will fall unconscious. During the hours that you sleep, the virus that I carry in my own blood will move throughout your body, taking over every single cell. This virus will force your body to constantly regenerate, to build new cells, repair injuries and prevent illness. The tradeoff is that your body will no longer make blood, and you will be forced to feed daily for the rest of your life.

"Human blood is preferred by most, but in a dire situation fresh animal blood would do. Old or tainted blood can make you very ill, so you'll always have to be vigilant about who you accept blood from if you can not hunt for some reason or another. Blood from a dead animal or human will kill you. For the first fifty or so years, the sun will be intolerable, but after a couple hundred years pass you'll be able to enjoy time in indirect light and direct light for very short periods of time. The older you are the more you are able to tolerate the sun. Always, though,

despite this gift of age you will prefer the night.

"You'll be fatally allergic to silver. If silver penetrates a major organ, the damage is beyond any chance of healing and you will die. Silver on the skin might burn or give you a rash, some are far more allergic than others when it comes to skin reaction. I've never encountered a vampire that could tolerate silver being pushed into their body."

"No old blood, no corpses, no sun for a while, no silver," she whispered.

"Your sex drive will increase, dramatically."

"Good thing I got the two of you." She grinned and glanced toward Dorien who was sitting on the edge of the couch. "You look nervous."

He shook his head. "I want this, but I don't look forward to watching you die to see it done."

"I trust you both." Her gaze centered on me. "Anything else?"

"You'll not age another day...not even if you live a thousand years."

"So, I'll always be this fine?" She grinned when I laughed. "For real, I got it going on right now. Looking twenty-seven for the rest of my life is no hardship at all."

I sobered and brushed her hair back from her face. "As you already know, there will be no children."

"Do you ever wonder what happened to yours?"

Dorien sucked in a breath and abruptly stood from the couch. He'd seldom asked me about the family I'd left behind, just as I rarely questioned him about his parents and siblings. He'd visited them once after he was turned, and the pain of their rejection lingered in him even now.

I cleared my throat and focused on her. "I don't allow myself such luxuries. They've been dead for centuries, and while I'm certain that I have descendants, I would never intrude on them."

"As I've said already, I could never risk passing on my abilities to a child."

I accepted that, felt the certainty of it deep inside her. "There will come a time when we will have to leave Savannah, change our names, and

find a new place to call home. You will have to sever any relationships with humans who are unaware that vampires exist. Dorian and I hide our financial assets in a series of corporations, one of which owns this inn. We live well, play hard, and have more money than is reasonable."

She wet her lips. "Hot, powerful, one thousand years of combined sexual experience, *and* you're rich?"

"Yeah, obscenely." Dorian laughed softly. "We find it's much easier to blend in if we don't live extravagantly. The very wealthy in this country have little privacy."

"Physically you'll be stronger, faster, all of your senses will be heightened. Though not quite to the level that you see in movies."

"Garlic?"

"It's great on pizza," I answered and then looked toward Dorian. "Would you get the knife from the bedroom?"

We said nothing as he silently walked from the room. He returned in under a minute, carrying the very same knife I'd used the night I turned him. I'd kept it as a reminder of that night, the night I started my own blood line. "Do you have any questions?"

"No, but I do have a request."

"Okay."

"From you both." She looked toward Dorian. "It's important to me."

He returned to us and slid onto the couch beside me. "Okay."

I watched her, felt her worry increase, and her hands shook a little as she pushed back her hair. "I don't know how I will feel about fidelity once I'm a vampire, but right now my very human heart needs to know that there won't be other women or men. That it will just be the three of us from now on."

Dorian leaned forward and kissed her brow very gently. "Didn't I promise not to break your heart, love?"

"Yes." She closed her eyes, relieved. Then she focused entirely on me. "And you?"

"The two of you here with me is all that I want or need."

She was ready. I could feel the resolution and the calm set in her

mind as if it were my own. But like Dorian, this one part of the process I'd rather not see her go through. The thought of her dying even for a sparse few minutes felt jagged and sharp inside me. I stroked her face with my fingers, trying to calm the tremors that coursed through my body as I considered what I was about to do. The small amount of blood I'd taken from her during sex had been nothing, a tease if anything.

"What's wrong?"

Her softly spoken question jarred me; for a moment I said nothing. "I've loved Dorian longer than I can remember not loving him; but in the moment I turned him, I barely knew him. In the past, I've turned people that I respected, even cared for. I've never done this for someone I loved before. The memory of my killing you will linger in your mind and heart for as long as you exist, Tessa. Dorian barely remembers his last moments as a human being because he was already so very close to death."

"You're not killing me. You're setting me free, and I hope I never forget this. I hope I never reach a moment in my life when I don't respect the gift you are giving me."

Silently, I pulled my shirt over my head and tossed it aside. I could put it off no longer, and we all knew it. Dorian found my hesitation somewhat amusing, but I could practically feel his fear lingering deep in his body. She was concerned but so very trusting of me.

As I reached for her, she turned to Dorian. "If I fight this, if you think for a single instant I'm going to turn on him and do to him what I did to Max, you find a way to kill me."

"Tessa..."

"No, I mean it."

"I will protect him," he finally whispered.

I pulled her close, unwilling to say another word, and sank my fangs into her neck. She shuddered in my arms, and her fingers clutched at my shoulders as I started to draw her blood in gluttonous swallows from her body. Dorian moved close to us, his hand steady on my back and drifting through the beautiful mess of her hair as I fed. Tessa jerked and moaned in my arms as her nails dug into my skin.

Strength and power surged through me with each jerk of her body.

My cock hardened against the seam of my jeans as our minds connected on a different, more profound level. She went slack in my arms, and my heart nearly stopped. It was rare for a human to die during the process, but it certainly happened. I retracted my fangs as I lifted my mouth from her neck and closed my eyes against the image of the wounds I'd left behind.

“Neck?” he asked softly as he unsheathed the knife.

“No, over my heart.”

He pressed the knife to my skin, his hand sure and steady. “With love, Sire.”

“Yes, with love.”

The pain of it was sharp and harsh but fleeting. I pulled her close, pressed her mouth against the wound and reached deep down into her thoughts with my mind to compel her to feed.

Chapter Nine

Tessa's mind was bright and vivid again. During the first hour as I'd lain beside her in bed, she'd faded and slipped away from me. But now her body was gaining strength, and her heart was strong. No matter how sincere her desire had been, a part of me felt that it had happened too quickly, that just by being so intimately connected with me I had influenced her.

Dorien had slipped out to feed for her, once we were both convinced that the transition was going well. He'd also realized that, no matter how powerful she became, feeding on strangers would tax her terribly. I reached out and touched her face. The gifts she'd had as a human hadn't changed, but I could tell already that she'd gained a peace she'd lacked before.

My fingertips brushed over her lips, and they parted for me, revealing her newly developed fangs. No longer human, but certainly as beautiful as the first time I'd seen her. I glanced toward the bedroom door. I'd felt Dorien return some time ago, but he hadn't come into the bedroom.

Since Tessa would sleep at least for another two hours, I slipped from the bed and left the room in search of my wayward lover. I found him in the large bathroom across from the bedroom, clothes piled at his feet, his silky black hair trailing down his back and over his chest. He was braced against the sink, his head bowed.

"What's wrong?"

"Feeding again so soon has me a little raw." He looked toward me, his beautiful black eyes bright with arousal, need.

"It's not surprising, it isn't often that you overindulge in blood." I entered the bathroom and shut the door. "With you, I never worried that you might succumb to blood lust."

"How is she?"

"She'll wake soon. You were right, she'll never be able to hunt for herself without a great deal of emotional pain." I reached out and trailed my hand down his back as I came to stand behind him. "But after she is trained and can be trusted to feed on humans without killing, we will do the majority of her hunting for her."

"Shouldn't we spare her that completely?"

"No, she must learn to hunt. Learn to control her baser instincts, and most certainly to shield herself as much as possible from those that she might feed on. It would be dangerous to leave her with no skills in that arena. If something were to happen to either of us..."

"I just don't want to see her in pain."

"No, neither do I." I slid my arm around his waist, pressed my hand flat against the muscled wall of his stomach and pressed my rapidly hardening cock against his ass. "How can I ease you, Dorien?"

His breath caught in his chest, and his hands tightened on the sink. "I think the question might be, Sire, how can *I* ease you?"

I kissed the back of his neck and again berated myself for the months that had languished between us. "I let myself get too wrapped up in dreams. I would have never been the same if I'd lost you in the process."

"She was worth it," he whispered and hissed when I wrapped my hand around his cock.

"How about I join you in the shower?"

"Will she be all right alone?"

"Yes," I assured as I stroked his cock from base to tip. I rubbed my thumb across the head and held him tight when he shuddered. "Or would you prefer to shower by yourself?"

He cleared his throat. "No, I believe I could use some company."

I stepped away from him and stripped out of my clothes as he turned on the water and slipped into the stall. My cock was heavy and hard as I stepped into the shower with him. Water from two showerheads poured over his sleekly muscled but lean form, and a hundred different images of us together filled my mind as I shut the stall and reached for him. I covered his mouth with my own, pressed him against the wall, and shuddered when he wrapped one hand around me.

I lifted my mouth from his, and he chuckled and started to stroke me, his hand firm, each measured caress perfect. "Do you think I'm going to let you fuck me with this big cock of yours?"

"I know you are." I pushed his hair away from his shoulder as I nuzzled against his neck but made no move to feed.

I sucked at his skin, flicked my tongue over his rushing pulse and groaned as he released me. Seconds later, his hand returned slick with bath oil. The musky-scented oil filled the stall around us, and I pushed back the need to come that surfaced almost immediately. Just being with him this way was such a turn on that I could barely maintain.

I stroked both hands down his chest, over the rigid muscles of his stomach, and sucked in a breath as he trembled slightly. The fact that I could reduce a man as powerful as he to such a state left me shaken and so very grateful. He started to turn in my arms, but I held him tightly and sought his mouth again. With a sigh, he relaxed into the kiss, stroking my tongue with his own, and wrapped his arms around me.

I slid both hands down his hips and then around to cup his ass. He pushed a hand between us and positioned his cock so it rested between our stomachs. The feel of his hard flesh against my skin increased the driving need I had to be inside him. I lifted him and shuddered as he pressed back against the wall and gave me the leverage I needed to press the head of my cock into his ass.

He hissed, and his fangs descended as I pushed deep inside.

"So tight."

"It's been a while." Dorien closed his eyes as I settled in to the hilt.

"How long?" I asked softly.

"You're the only man I've ever allowed inside me, Sire."

How hadn't I known that? I lowered my head to his shoulder and took in a long, deep breath as he pressed his hands against my shoulders, clenched his thighs against my hips, and lifted upward. I met his downward plunge with an upward thrust, and a husky groan slipped from his lips. Lifting away from the wall, I moved to the side and sat down on the bench built into the shower wall.

Our lips met as he settled fully on me, and I held him there. Then he lifted his head and tried to move. "No."

"No?" he demanded softly, his breathing suddenly labored.

"Don't move." I took his cock in hand and started to stroke him. "Your skin is like silk. Are you hard like this for me, Dorien?"

"You know I am." His fingers dug into my shoulders as he struggled to remain still. His ass clenched rhythmically around my cock, making thought extremely difficult. "Please."

"Don't ever beg me for anything." I thrust my fingers into his wet hair, fisted my hand, and jerked him close. "Not ever."

"Yes, Sire."

I kissed his lips gently and then released him completely. Carefully, I pulled him up and off my cock and guided him to his feet. I stood and turned him toward the bench. "On your knees."

He wrapped his hands around the metal bar of the towel rack as he met my demand and shuddered when I raked my nails down his back. "Tessa isn't the only lover in my life who likes a heavy hand."

I tilted his hips slightly and pushed my cock deep into him. His response was a harsh groan as his head fell forward. Dorien pushed back against me with each thrust, his body taut with pleasure. His mind was overrun with lust, love, and intense emotional satisfaction. I started to move faster, our bodies meeting with a soft, wet smacking sound, and then harder when I sensed his need for it.

With one hand on his hip, guiding him in his movements, I slid the other underneath him and grasped his cock. He jerked then groaned at the stimulation. Slowly, I began to jack him off in time with the rhythm I'd already created. He met each thrust with a groan and each upward stroke with a soft sigh.

"Tell me you belong to me."

"I do. I always have." His voice broke on the last word, and he started to shake.

"That's it, love, don't hold back. Come for me." I bit down on his shoulder hard but didn't break the skin, and he shattered with orgasm.

I worked his ass for a few more minutes, loving the feel of him and not ready to for it to end. But the feel of him clenching hard with each penetration finally forced me to come. I held him tight as I did so, fondling his still semi-hard cock. With a groan, I pulled free of him and took a deep breath.

"She'll wake sooner than you thought." He stood from the bench and pressed his hands against the wall. I wondered if his knees were as weak as mine.

"Yes, I feel it." I reached for the soap and turned him. "You first, she'll need to feed." I washed him gently, carefully, and by the end of it he was rock hard again. "She'll need that, too."

Dorien laughed. "Yes." He pressed his lips against mine briefly then left the shower stall.

I finished my shower and dried off with a towel he'd left me on the counter. Crossing the hall, I paused in the entrance of the bedroom to watch. He must have given her a choice of feeding locations, because she was sprawled between his legs, her mouth latched onto his inner thigh. I walked to the bed and slipped onto it, running my hands over her soft, so-very-female curves as I did so. The first feeding after a transition could be violent with some, but I found her mind quiet, her body nearly sated of the need for blood, and a burning sexual desire building.

Then she lifted her head and crawled upward over him, immediately seeking to sit on his cock. I slid up behind her, lifted her slightly and helped her slide right down onto him. "Don't let him come until you're satisfied."

She leaned back against me as she started to move. "Yes, Sire."

I kissed her neck. "I didn't think you could be more beautiful, but you are."

"I love you."

Her words pushed deep inside, and for the first time in more years than I could count, I was content. I had everything I could possibly want. "I love you, too."

Author Bio

Deanna Lee lives in the southern United States with her husband and two very spoiled dogs, Emperor Tiberius and King Solomon. In her "spare" time she likes to read and plot general mayhem. She is published in a variety of genres but particularly enjoys suspense, urban fantasy, and science fiction.

www.deannaleebooks.com