



The Nocturnal Surrender Series

NOCTURNAL BITES

TNSS Anthology Including:
Nothing Lasts Forever
Auburn Lust
Nocturnal Surrender

Corraine Pearl

NOCTURNAL BITES

The Nocturnal Surrender Series
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Published by Dawn L. Wilhelm

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Content Warning

This book contains sexually explicit scenes, adult language, vampire violence, and may be considered offensive to some readers. It is intended for adults only.

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**NOTHING
LASTS
FOREVER**

The Nocturnal Surrender Series

A Prequel Novella

Lorraine Pearl

Nothing Lasts Forever

by Lorraine Pearl

They dream of spending eternity together, but will lies, secrets, and betrayal destroy their relationship and their lives forever?

Two hundred years ago in London, England, after nearly eight centuries of immortal life, Bastian Evanko has finally found the woman he wants to be with forever. Now he is ready to reveal his secret and tell her he is a vampire, but past experience has shown him mortal women may not be able to accept him for what he is.

Elise McNeil loves Bastian with all her heart and can't wait to share her life with him, to have a family with him, until he shows her the monster he hides inside. She is devastated because he lied to her the entire time he courted her, and she believes he may be evil and incapable of loving her as he claims to.

As if their situation isn't complicated enough, Elise has a secret of her own. Her brother Jacob is a vampire Hunter. When the two men come face-to-face after Jacob and Elise's parents go missing, will she keep Bastian's secret or betray him for her family's sake?

Warning: This novella is a romantic tragedy—with a **tragic** ending—but the rest of the books in this series will have happy endings.

ONE

London, England. Two hundred years ago.

Elise McNeil's heart skipped a beat. She could hardly breathe, unable to believe what she'd heard. What she'd *seen*.

The man she loved and hoped to marry, the man she wanted to father her children, stood before her with silver eyes and...fangs?

Had he actually said he was a...*vampire*?

No, that couldn't be. Vampires weren't real. Yes, her brother believed they existed, and she knew others did as well, but they were foolish. Hunting myths.

But proof stared her in the face.

Bastian Evanko's eyes glowed in the candlelight like a wild animal's under the moon.

Is Bastian truly the devil incarnate? My Bastian?

A cold chill crawled up Elise's back. "How...how do you expect me to believe such things?"

He reached for her and took a step forward, but she instinctively drew away.

"Please, Elise, allow me to explain." Pain laced his words.

For a moment, she had an urge to caress his cheek, though with the way he looked... *Should I be frightened?* She lowered her head and backed up a few more steps.

"My love, do not fear me. I would never harm you." His gentle tone was almost convincing.

"I want to believe you, but...how can I?" Elise trembled, tears threatening to fall. Her heartbeat thundered, and the walls seemed to close in.

When she turned to the door, Bastian grabbed her from behind, trapping her arms. It happened so fast. One minute he stood halfway across the room, the next, he had her locked in his iron grasp.

She struggled to break free, but it was futile. Bastian's strength had always been immense, and her slight frame stood no chance against it.

His breath heated her ear when he exhaled. "Be still. I cannot allow you to leave in this state, and not with my secret. You must understand how important it is not to divulge the information I have shared with you." He nuzzled her neck and held her closer, gentler. "I want you to know what I am, to love all of me."

The tenderness in his voice soothed her, slowing her heart rate. What was she thinking? She *did* love Bastian. How could she fear him? They had been together for well over a year, and he'd been nothing but a gentleman.

Standing wrapped in his warm embrace reminded her of the man she fell in love with. The moonlit nights walking hand in hand as they talked, laughed, and stopped for the occasional soft kiss. Horseback rides through the countryside. Dreams of having their own land.

Not to mention how wonderful Bastian treated her parents the few evenings he had visited. He'd made her mother blush when he told her she was too young and beautiful to have an adult daughter. And he had won her father over by helping him chop wood and tend to the horses.

Bastian was a good man. He'd promised to love Elise forever. He would never hurt her.

Relaxing, she leaned her head back against his broad chest and closed her eyes. "I do love you, Bastian, but...I do not understand what is happening. How is this possible?"

His fingers slid up her arm, and her body tingled. He brushed her hair aside then feathered kisses along her neck. She melted into him while their bodies swayed to non-existent music.

He was still *her* Bastian.

Though she wished this was merely a nightmare, she knew better. All the unexplained circumstances of the past year and a half began to add up. His aversion to the sun. His peculiar eating habits. The odd hours he kept. The list went on.

Everything made sense in some strange way. Elise attempted to put the pieces together, but Bastian apparently had other plans.

His roaming hands sensually glided across her stomach before dipping lower. He continued seducing her neck with steamy kisses. For a moment, she could have sworn something sharp grazed her skin, but when his strong hand slid between her legs, nothing else mattered.

The rhythmic seduction of his fingers stroking her through the thin fabric of her dress, along with his hard shaft grinding against her rear, made her moan with need.

She reached back and grabbed a handful of his long sandy hair. "Oh, Bastian...I don't think I can wait...any longer to have you."

The growl that rumbled from him shook her to the core. It was animalistic, raw, and hungry.

A dizzying rush swept over her. She opened her eyes and the room spun. Slight pressure built along her throat, then a quick pinch followed by burning pleasure as he sucked on her flesh.

Bastian pulled up the flowing material of her dress and slipped his hand inside her drawers.

Her aching desire grew, throbbing deep within. She needed to be filled, of this much she was certain.

He continued his ministrations, his other hand sliding upward to cup her breast. Slowly, torturously, his touch moved into the fabric's neckline and found her hardened nipple. He plucked at the sensitive nub and her body tingled in response.

Again he kissed her neck, occasionally licking along the sore spots he'd created. The wet heat of his tongue caused a burst of pain, but it was countered by an unfamiliar, yet pleasant sensation when he plunged his fingers into her slick entrance.

Her breathing hitched at the sudden invasion. God, she'd never been touched in such a way before.

Whatever he'd done to her throat no longer mattered, not when his hands sent waves of pleasure through her.

"I love you, Elise. You believe me, don't you?"

Her words came out in a breathy whisper. "Yes... And I love you."

His thumb did things below she could barely comprehend, moving in maddening circles until she thought she might explode. And the way he played inside her made her eyes nearly roll back. Of their own accord, her hips rocked in time with his motions.

What is he doing to me? Did she even care?

He rolled her pebbled nipple between his thumb and forefinger, and she turned her head to claim his mouth. His hard length, still trapped in his breeches, rubbed against her at an intoxicating pace while his tongue danced with hers.

With his hands making love to her, his kiss devouring her, she teetered on the edge of something wondrous. Her muscles clenched around his fingers as her core burst into rhythmic spasms. She gasped, moaned into his mouth, and felt him shudder against her in a similar fashion.

He groaned and shifted his fingers inside her, hitting a sensitive spot that pushed her into almost convulsive thrusts. Waves of pleasure crashed over her as her body rocked in time with his.

When the ecstasy subsided, he slowed his strokes, and then withdrew his fingers. She nearly fell limp in his arms.

He gently turned her, and upon facing him, she couldn't deny what had happened. The slightest bit of blood lingered at the corner of his lips, nauseating her. His eyes and teeth remained eerie to behold.

How had she not noticed those *things* when they'd kissed? Licking her lips, she realized they were sore. Most likely from being scratched by...

She lowered her head.

Vampires *did* exist. The stories she'd heard must be true. They were not human. They were blood-thirsty killers.

Bastian had actually consumed her blood. She shivered. *How repulsive*. He was a creature from a horror tale.

Can I ever look at him the same again?

TWO

Bastian cringed at the disgust radiating from Elise, and he quickly shut down his ability to feel her emotions.

She wouldn't even look him in the eye. Not that he blamed her. He had just shown her the monster within.

I never should have fed on her.

He absently licked his lips. The remnants of her sweet blood warmed him to the bone. Her innocence, her untainted heart—at least untainted before he walked into her life—came through in those lingering drops.

His arm trembled when he reached for her. “Please, Elise, look at me. Tell me you still want to be with me.”

Instead of meeting his gaze or taking his hand, she shook her head and stepped back.

Bastian's heart sank. Overwhelming emptiness roiled in his gut. This couldn't be happening to him again. Their love should be able to withstand anything.

The urge to grab her, to wrap his arms around her and never let go, swept over him.

Don't be a bloody fool. Give her time. Do not frighten her more.

A deep breath helped to calm him. Another created a different problem.

The scent of her blood and arousal hung heavy in the air. His cock stirred once more as he remembered how wet she had been for him. How wonderful her tight warmth had felt around his fingers when she'd exploded with pleasure. If only he could have buried his shaft deep inside her.

But he would not take her unless she accepted him completely. Her purity meant the world to him. She deserved to make her decision knowing all the facts, no matter the risk.

Yes, losing her was a possibility—experience had taught him this much. Nearly eight hundred years had given him plenty of opportunities to lose his heart to beautiful women. Too many times his mortal lovers had turned their backs on him in repulsion after learning his secret.

Not this time. Not without a fight.

“Damn it, Elise. I love you. I want to spend our lives together. This is still me.” He moved in front of her and cradled her hand. “I am *your* Bastian. I'm the same man you have known and loved.”

She raised her head. Her long auburn tresses cascaded over delicate shoulders. Emerald eyes, full of turmoil and confusion, locked onto his. Her rosy lips, swollen and bruised from passion, parted as if to speak, though no words came out. Soft breaths caused a slight rise and fall in her ample breasts, the milky white flesh of her cleavage enticing him.

Bastian groaned, forcing back desire. Innocent women always weakened him because they looked to him as their knight, their savior—until they realized his true nature.

Is it too much to ask to be loved in spite of what I am?

He had yet to hide his vampiric features, choosing instead to remain in full change, allowing Elise the opportunity to become accustomed to his appearance. “Please...say something.”

Her voice quivered. “What is this *thing* you are? Do you kill people?”

Thing... A stabbing pain tore through his heart.

And the worst question, the one they had all wanted answered. The one he feared most. Why did she have to ask it? He couldn't admit a murderer lived inside him and then endure her reaction. Not yet.

Lowering his gaze, he caressed her slender fingers. "I promise I will tell you what you wish to know, but not now. Let us enjoy each other's company a while longer." *Before you turn away from me forever.* "There will be plenty of time for talking later."

Bastian pulled her into his arms, and her warmth encompassed him. He tried to ignore her rigid posture. Still, he ran his hands up and down her back in an attempt to soothe her, to remind her of who he really was.

After a few moments, she sobbed into his chest. It was easy to see what the shock of his revelation had done to her. Her reactions shifted from one extreme to the other in rapid succession, and they no doubt would continue to do so until she accepted him completely.

He held her closer, kissed the top of her beautiful head, and vowed this time would be different, even if he had to fight to the death to keep the woman he loved. He'd move heaven and hell to convince her of his worth.

Though Elise did not cry for long, her face remained buried in his tear-soaked shirt. Her ragged breaths heated his chest, and his balls tightened in response. Damn, he needed her. Too bad now was not the time for selfishness, but rather for repairing whatever harm had been done.

Bastian had to know where their relationship stood. He delved into her mind. Sifting through her jumbled thoughts, he found what he feared.

I cannot fool myself. He is no longer my Bastian.

The word *monster* echoed in there, as well. Too many gruesome stories about his kind had been told, the damage done. And he had yet to confirm the fact he'd killed for sustenance many times—and would again.

His heart raced and he opened himself to her emotions once more. *Better to get this over with and not prolong the heartache.*

Her anxiety hit him square in the chest like a horse kick. He barely held his ground, Elise his only anchor.

He sensed her quaking inside, yet she held herself stiff in his arms. It left no doubt she feared him.

If he wasn't mistaken, he could have sworn she wanted to expose him for what he was. Somewhere deep down, she questioned his love for her. She thought the devil incapable of such emotions.

This is far worse than I'd imagined. I know what I must do.

THREE

Elise awoke on a plush bed in a strange room with no memory of arriving there. The last thing she recalled was Bastian pleading with her, but she had been too frightened and repulsed for his words to register.

She sat up and surveyed her surroundings. Large stones formed the walls. Small arched windows allowed the sun to stream in, warming the otherwise chilled room. If she needed to flee, the windows would be of no help since they were barricaded by ominous iron bars. Along the far wall was a closed, oversized wooden door. The only one in the room.

Her heart pounded and her breaths were shallow. She wrapped her arms around herself, trying not to tremble.

Should she scream for help? Run for the door? Was Bastian waiting for her?

Oh Bastian, how could you do this to me?

He had lied to her about his nature, pretended to be human. He'd surely lied about loving her, as well, leading her to believe they had a future.

For years she'd thought the Hunters absurd, chasing after fabled creatures. When her older brother, Jacob, left home and joined them in their quest to destroy vampires, she told him he was silly. Now she worried about his safety *and* her own.

If only he were there with her, surely he would be able to save—

A series of thunderous knocks broke into her thoughts. She nearly jumped off the bed, and her heart pounded faster.

Bastian's voice boomed through the barrier. "I am coming in, Elise. Do not be frightened." The door creaked open, he stepped inside, and then slammed it closed with his foot.

The sound echoed off the stone walls. Elise gritted her teeth in irritation, her nerves already on edge.

His vampiric features were in place, accentuated by his long golden hair, and he carried a food tray. "You must eat something to keep up your strength. This has been too much for you. You are not thinking clearly." He walked toward the bed and extended his offering, seemingly unconcerned with the sun's rays.

She inhaled the delicious aroma. Some sort of stew and fresh bread. Her stomach growled. Although she did not want to accept the food, his words rang true. The nourishment would certainly help should she have to escape, but...

What if it is poisoned?

"*Poisoned?* Do you honestly think I could do such a thing to you? I love you. Why can you not see that?" Bastian sat the tray on the table next to the bed. "And as for escaping, the last thing I want is for you to feel like a prisoner here. I'd hoped you would stay with me until we worked this out, and then forever after, as we had planned."

For a moment, she could have sworn he meant what he said. The sincerity in his pained voice caused her heart to ache. Maybe she wouldn't tell Jacob and his fellow Hunters about Bastian.

Forever. The word echoed in her mind. She wanted to reach for him, pretend he was the man she loved, but before she acted on the urge, the look on his face became strained.

His brows furrowed as if he were trying to comprehend something, and he knelt in front of her. "Jacob is a Hunter? Why did you not tell me? This is a dreadful situation, Elise. We must tread lightly on this matter or someone might end up dead."

She shook her head in confusion. *How does he know what I am thinking?* Her fists closed tightly around the bed cover. She should have known better than to believe a word he had said.

“You heard my thoughts. You are not human. I cannot trust you.” Tears threatened to fall, but she would not allow herself to appear weak. Jacob had told her these evil monsters fed on fear just like the blood they devoured.

Then she remembered Bastian feeding on *her* blood. A shiver rolled over her. She rocked back and forth, and the walls closed in again.

He held out a hand and said something, but she could not focus on his words. She had to run.

Her mind spun, and so did the room, yet she summoned the strength to leap from the bed and make a dash for freedom.

In a blur of motion, Bastian crossed in front of her, blocking her progression. Unable to stop in time, she crashed into his chest.

His arms locked around her. She screamed, and his hand clamped over her mouth, muffling her cries.

“Stop this, Elise. What is wrong with you? Have you gone bloody mad?” He dragged her back to the bed.

Though she kicked and struggled to break free, nothing worked. Within seconds, his long and muscular body had her pinned down, his weight making it difficult to breathe.

I am going to die. Silently, she prayed, begging God to either save her from this devil or allow her death to be swift and painless. She also asked for Bastian’s damned soul to find salvation, after the Hunters released it.

When he removed his hand from her mouth, he kissed her. His fangs pierced her lips as his tongue plunged deep inside. It was the same passion he’d shown her before.

Part of her longed to give in and allow him to take her, but when he licked at the drops of blood he had drawn, her stomach churned.

She squirmed beneath him to get away, still he held her firm. She tried to speak, yell, anything, but with her mouth enveloped by his, the sounds died without taking flight.

Before long, his hungry kiss turned gentle. He feathered his lips over hers, barely touching at times—exactly as he used to.

Memories of how loving he had always been filtered through her mind. Her body reacted instinctively to the familiar sensations. Though she tried to fight her longing, she slowly relaxed, occasionally returning his affections.

He slid his hand up her side. His hips moved in a sensual rhythm, pressing his hard shaft into her repeatedly. A tingling sensation swept over her. That familiar rousing stirred in her core, a yearning so deep it begged to be filled. When his fingers skimmed the side of her breast, she gasped and stifled a moan.

Why does he make me feel this way? How can I love him knowing what he is?

This time, she couldn’t stop the tears. Her heart ached, torn between past devotion and fear of the creature he had revealed to her.

He pulled away and pleaded once again. “Please, Elise. Allow me to love you.”

FOUR

Bastian waited patiently for Elise to respond, replaying the events of the last day in his head. He'd hated using his powers on her, but there had been no choice. Planting the suggestion in her mind to sleep for the night had been the best option. She needed rest to come to her senses before she did something reckless. His secret had to be kept, and he could not risk the chance she might, out of fear and ignorance, reveal that vampires existed.

The revelation about her brother Jacob made the situation far more tenuous than he'd thought possible. It never ended well for Hunters when they stumbled upon *real* immortals, rather than the humans they mistakenly slaughtered.

The poor bastards.

The last thing he wanted was to kill Jacob, but if Elise sent him after Bastian, he would have no choice. Survival meant everything. He hadn't lived all these centuries to die at the hands of a mortal.

He needed to convince her she was in no danger, and, more importantly, that he truly loved her. Not only could this give him another chance with her, but it would also keep Jacob alive.

When she caressed his cheek, he closed his eyes and leaned into her gentle touch. Some of her apprehension remained, radiating outward, but she was finally close to giving in to him. The sensations he felt from her were palpable. She wanted to believe he was still the man she'd thought. He intended to give her whatever she required to fulfill her wish.

Her fingers slid down to his mouth, and he opened his eyes to meet her emerald gaze. She shifted her focus lower and delicately probed his lips until he parted them. His cock jumped in response to the sensual exploration. He could feel her rising curiosity and allowed her to inspect his fangs.

It is working. She is making peace with what I am.

After she finished, she looked up and trailed her fingertips along his brow. "So strange the way the light makes the silver in your eyes dance, almost glow." She shook her head as confusion crossed her face. "How can you be out in the daylight? I have seen you in the sun, however briefly. You have eaten food with me on occasion. You wear a cross of silver. I do not understand. What sort of sorcery is this?"

He threaded his fingers through her auburn locks. "My dearest, some tales have been greatly exaggerated." Largely done by his own kind to fool humans. "But make no mistake, other stories are true. We can be dangerous creatures, though that does not mean I am incapable of love." He leaned up, clasped her wrist, and placed her palm on his chest. "My heart beats for you. My breaths quicken at your touch. You are my world."

"How...how are you doing these things? It is unnatural. Vampires are monsters. The undead. Devils without souls. But you...you are still a man. You are still..."

Why did she not speak the words he longed to hear? He would simply say them for her. "I am still *your* Bastian. I am the same man you have loved."

She pulled her hand away but quickly moved to brush back his hair, her fingers sliding behind his head. "I want so much for that to be true."

He shivered at her tender embrace. His heart ached to be one with hers again. The pain would be devastating if she turned her back on him and continued looking at him as an inhuman beast. There was no way he could allow that to happen.

It was time to use her emotions to his advantage. She was vulnerable, close to letting him back in. He had to seize the opportunity before it was too late. As it was, her loving touches, along with her petite body warm beneath him, had him so hard he could scarcely tolerate much more.

He closed the slight space between them and claimed her mouth with his. She returned his hungry kiss and wriggled as she moaned. It was all the encouragement he required to slip into a seductive cadence, pushing his cock against her repeatedly.

To be inside her would be heaven. I must have her.

The scent of her arousal pushed him over the edge. He reached back and grasped her legs, easing them apart until they wrapped around him, securing him exactly where he wanted to be. The fabric of her dress ripped under the pressure.

Her nails raked a hot trail down his back, through his thin shirt, and her tongue danced with his. Drops of blood formed at her lips where his fangs had penetrated. He savored her sweet essence, wanting more, but it was best not to drink from her yet. Not until he was buried deep inside her, pounding into her, making her scream his name. Then he would take her neck.

She pulled away, panting. “Oh, Bastian... Please... I need you.”

“My love, you never have to beg.” He skimmed his fingers down her side until they rested at her hip, pulling her dress up to give him better access.

Within moments, he had her drawers off. She tugged at his breeches, releasing his aching shaft. He slid his pants down until they were no longer an encumbrance, and his engorged cock pressed against her warm entrance. He trailed his hand upward and massaged each of her breasts in turn, then pulled her dress away, exposing her pebbled nipples.

Heart thundering, he feathered kisses along her neckline, her pulse as rapid as his own. He moved lower until he took a hardened nub gently between his teeth. She gasped and arched into him, the movement causing his shaft to slip downward, playing with her slick entrance.

Easy. Slow. Don't be too rough. He had to rein in his vampiric strength. He could easily hurt her—possibly kill her—if he lost control. Not to mention the fact this would be her first time. He needed to be careful regardless.

He released her nipple and kissed her once more, shifting his cock, preparing to take her. Thankful for her love, he eased ever so slightly into her wet heat.

FIVE

Elise's breath caught in her chest when Bastian's hard length dipped into her. She gripped his shoulders, and her body tensed. She had no idea what to expect. Would this feel as good as his fingers had, or would it be painful? There were stories of both extremes—and with no vampires involved.

His kiss was soft and tender, his touch like a feather. He'd never been gentler with her.

Maybe he truly is still my Bastian.

With that, she relaxed, giving herself to him completely. She tightened her legs around him, pulling him in. He groaned and moved deeper inside her, his fangs scraping her lips. Both sensations brought slight pain with them, but there was something else...

Before she could think about it, she tugged at his shirt, wanting to feel his skin next to hers, just as it was below. Her exposed breasts, her sensitive nipples, ached for his broad chest. A throbbing in her core made her arch into him. The pressure of him sliding in farther sent waves of pleasure and pain rolling over her, yet she could tell he hadn't pushed in all the way.

"More," was all she managed to whisper between kisses.

He pulled away, leaned up, and stroked her hair. "I must go slowly, my love, so I don't hurt you. I want you desperately."

She took the opportunity to finish removing his shirt, easing it over his head. Her hands roamed along newly exposed muscles. She pressed her lips to his neck then drifted downward and stopped at a hardened nipple, wanting to give him the same tingling sensation he gave her when he explored her breasts. He moaned her name, and she sucked at the nub, hoping to pleasure him more.

It must have worked. He shifted his hips, and with one smooth motion, he eased fully into her. She released his nipple and gasped. Brief pain gave way to overwhelming warmth.

He remained still for a long moment. In that time, her body adjusted to having him seated so far inside her. The slight pressure and slow burn his presence created only made her need grow. She ran her nails down his back, trying to prod him to action.

Nothing.

Next, she skimmed her fingertips softly up his sides.

Shuddering, he thrust forward and gradually fell into a sensual rhythm. She lifted her hips to meet his. His mouth devoured hers, his tongue sweeping in, exploring. Her body trembled, unaccustomed to the intensity of the emotions and sensations flooding her. The friction of his shaft gliding in and out generated a pulsing heat in her core. She writhed beneath him.

Heart aching with love, body burning with desire, she teetered dangerously close to the edge of an abyss.

I could lose myself in him forever.

She had to pull away from his demanding lips to catch her breath. "Oh, Bastian... I love you."

"I love you, too. And I always will." He lowered his head and trailed his fangs along the curve of her breast.

Arching upward, enjoying the sting of his sharp teeth, she dug her nails into his back, needing...she wasn't sure what. But when his thrusts hastened, and he bit into her flesh, she had what she desired.

She grabbed his hair and held him to her, urging him on, yet unable to believe she could long for such a thing. Fiery yearning spread over her body as Bastian pushed into her harder and sank his fangs in deeper.

“Oh, God...” Instinctively, she clenched the muscles deep in her core.

This was far more intense than his fingers. She bucked against him wildly. Faster. Panting. Clawing. Until her entire body quaked in time with his.

He released her breast, leaned up, and drove into her. Skin slapping. Sweat dripping. They moaned when they came for each other.

The moment went on endlessly as waves of pleasure rolled over her. The need to touch herself overtook her, and she gave in. She plucked at her nipple, massaged the soft mound, while her other hand seized Bastian’s forearm. Her own caresses heightened her ecstasy.

Bastian’s grin, and growl, suggested he liked what she’d done. He licked his lips, slowed his movements, and lowered himself, trapping her hand between their slick flesh.

“You’re so beautiful.” He feathered kisses along her neck as he continued easing in and out of her.

Her body tingled, and he bit down again. She threw her free arm around him and held him tight, wriggling beneath him. Another long moan escaped her lips. She enjoyed the feel of his fangs sliding into her as much as she relished having his hard shaft inside her.

“I love you. You are still *my* Bastian.” She let out a contented sigh and ran her hand over his muscles.

After a quick kiss where he had bitten her neck, Bastian locked gazes with her. She was awed when his fangs receded and his eyes returned to their wondrous sapphire hue.

He stilled, but his length remained buried within her. “You don’t know how much it means to hear you say that.” He kissed her softly then whispered, “I love you, too.”

SIX

After a couple of days passed with no sign of Elise having doubts about him, Bastian was ready to bring her further into his life. Unfortunately, they couldn't stay out of bed long enough to have a proper conversation.

She had just awoken, but still lay snug against him. He eased her out of his arms and sat up, urging her up with him. Placing his fingers under her chin, he tilted her head to meet his gaze. "It is time I explained some very important things to you, my love."

She nodded with a yawn and rubbed her eyes.

Damn, she is beautiful when she wakes.

Quickly, the haze of sleep left her face and she focused on him. "Good. I have so many questions. What is true and what is myth? What is it like? Were you—"

He touched her lips. "Shhh. All in time, I promise. But first, there is something you must know." As he pulled her onto his lap, she tied the cover tight around her. "This secret I have entrusted you with, you cannot tell another soul or it will mean your death, and I couldn't bear to lose you. Do you understand?"

"Yes, but..." She shook her head. "No. I... *Death?*"

"It is the most important rule vampires live by. Keeping our existence a secret is imperative for our survival. You have to promise never to reveal this to anyone, not even your family. Will you swear this to me?"

The confusion building inside her worried him, but after a moment, her emotions shifted. A wave of understanding cascaded off her and rolled over him. Bastian breathed a deep sigh of relief.

She slipped her arms around his neck. "I understand, and I promise to keep this secret for you—for us."

Her soft lips pressed against his, giving him the sweetest kiss he'd ever received. Maybe it had more to do with her acceptance and loyalty, but either way, he was in paradise.

After one last tender kiss, he tore himself away. "I know this will be difficult for you to understand, but we live by a Code—laws if you will—developed by a council of Elders." He paused to run his fingers through her hair. "The Elders have Enforcers to punish those who break the Code. The penalties are severe, as it is with death to any who reveal our existence—especially to a Hunter. Do you see now why this situation is so tenuous?"

Concern etched upon her face. "You must believe me. I will never betray you."

"I do, but it is your life at risk, and I want to be certain you understand the consequences." He pulled her closer. "And I am trying to explain exactly what it means that I have allowed you to know my true nature. The level of trust and love necessary for this is immense."

"I can see that. It means so much to me, and I want to know more. Tell me everything. Please." Her voice sang with innocent curiosity.

Bastian laughed. "I'm afraid we would be here for weeks if I did. I will tell you the important parts first." How would she react to what he had to reveal? He took a deep breath and started at the very beginning. "Nearly eight hundred years ago I was mortally wounded in a fierce battle over our land."

Elise gasped and pulled away slightly. "Did you say *eight hundred?*"

He studied her face, took in her emotions. She truly did not believe him.

I cannot blame her.

“Yes, I am that old. But I was turned into a vampire after twenty-five years of human existence—which is why I still appear that age. How I came to have this immortal life is a long story.

“My brother Donovan had been missing for months, vanished and presumed dead, but had returned home a few days prior to my injuries. He was...different. A vampire, though I did not know this at first. The changes in him worried me, most notably his preference for sleeping through the day and wandering off at night. This new version of my older brother also came with contempt for me.”

Glancing out the window, he attempted to allow the birdsongs to soothe him. “Our parents had been killed in a previous attack, and once Donovan recovered from the fight, he eagerly stepped in to take over. He also took it upon himself to push me to become my own man, to make my own way, but my heart still ached with grief, and I dared not leave. Since Donovan eventually disappeared, it was beneficial that I had remained.”

Bastian looked back to Elise in time to see a tear slide down her face. He brushed it away with his thumb then kissed her damp cheek.

“I am sorry about your parents. I cannot imagine how dreadful it must have been to lose them, especially so violently.” She took a deep breath. “If anything ever happened to my parents, or to Jacob, I do not know how I would survive without them.”

For a moment, he lost himself in her pained expression. “Hopefully you will never have to face such a thing. But my loss occurred far too long ago to need consoling, although I do appreciate your concern.”

“Then what of your brother? You said he treated you different when he came home. How so?” She nestled in closer to his chest, her warm breath caressing his skin.

He stroked her hair. “Apparently the vampire in him required freedom to roam, not to be tied down to the land—or to me. He resented his role, and no longer wanted the burden of worrying about my future. Ever since, he has been judgmental and condescending, but I do not wish to speak about those things yet.

“As for the battle, I had to fight the same five men from the year prior. The ones who killed our parents before we ran them off. They had recovered from the wounds of that fight, just as Donovan and I had, and returned to finish what they started.” Bastian waited as Elise settled herself more comfortably on his lap and laid her head on his shoulder.

Once situated, she said, “Go on. I want to know everything.”

The lavender scent of her skin relaxed him completely. “I know you do, but I will spare you the details of the battle. What is important is the fact they arrived after Donovan had gone on his nightly hunt, though at that point I still had no idea what he was doing or why. By the time he made his way home, they were plundering our belongings while I lay nearly unconscious.

“What I saw through blurred vision was a flurry of activity. Donovan moved too fast for my eyes to keep up. The men begged for their lives, spouting things about the devil in a man’s form. I thought them mad ramblings until I awoke the next day to the mangled bodies of my attackers. Their blood splattered...” Bastian shook his head. “I am sorry. Those are details you should not be subjected to.” He lifted her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to her soft flesh. “Please forgive me.”

She looked up, emerald eyes sparkling with love. “I’m not that delicate. I have heard my share of horrific tales.” Swiftly, she averted his gaze and rested her head against his shoulder again, her body tense in his embrace.

He knew exactly what type of *tales* she referred to. Those about monstrous vampires. “Still, I have no desire to put those sorts of visions in your head. Anyway, I drifted in and out of consciousness over the next few days as my fever raged, my body ravaged by infection. Somewhere in that time, Donovan had revealed himself to me, explained I would die if he didn’t turn me into what he was. On the fourth night, I resigned myself to death, not wanting what he offered. But I was all the family he had.

“It seemed even though he resented my presence, he also held onto the affection he had for me when he was human. Finally he said, ‘You would have me lose you, as well? We are brothers. We have no other family left. You are condemning me to walk alone for eternity.’ What could I say after such a statement? I conceded, and he gave me this new—immortal—life.”

SEVEN

Elise's mind spun with questions, yet her heart ached for Bastian. And this story was only a small part of his long life. She had much to learn about the man she loved. Though she wanted to hear more, she would wait until he was ready to share it.

He breathed deeply, and her head rose and fell with his chest. His skin soft under her cheek. His masculine scent comforting. The way he held her made her feel safe and protected, like nothing could ever hurt her.

After a short silence, Bastian nudged her until she faced him, and then kissed her softly. "Thank you."

She cocked her head to the side. "For what?"

"For giving me time to gather my thoughts and waiting until I am ready to talk. It means a great deal to me that you are holding your questions and allowing me to take this slow, even though you are eager to know more." He tickled her sides.

A giggle slipped out of her, but then, what he'd said triggered more questions in her mind—ones she could not easily ignore. "You have done this before. You've said things almost exactly as I thought them." She clenched her fists, and her heart beat faster. "How are you doing this? I must know."

Bastian cradled her face in his hands. "Please do not be angry with me. It is a habit. I know I should give you more privacy." He eased his hands down her shoulders then glided his fingertips over her bare arms, causing her to shiver. "You see, vampires can hear people's thoughts, feel their emotions, but we can also turn off these abilities when we choose."

Her breathing grew heavy as she fought confusion and anger. *He has violated my mind.* She stared into the deep blue oceans of his eyes. Part of her wanted to throttle him, but the devotion in his gaze, along with his gentle touches, reminded her of his love.

"Tell me more." She would hear him out before casting judgment.

The corner of his lips drew up in a half smile as he regarded her with an appreciative look. "I promise to do better, to stay out of your mind. I have simply lived this way for so long... You see, we have many powers and strengths, and the older we are, the greater and more diverse they become."

Pausing, he furrowed his brows. "But of course, our Elders can do things the rest of us cannot, which I suppose is why they are our leaders. Although, I do not agree with all their rules, or how they enforce them. And their condescension makes Donovan's pale in comparison.

"They are able to communicate telepathically, carry on wordless conversations, along with other abilities the rest of us do not possess. They have made it clear they look upon other vampires as inferior. But all of this is more than we need discuss now."

He slid his hand behind her head and kissed her, his tongue probing, but he pulled away too quickly. "Now, my love. What else would you like to know?"

Elise took a moment to calm her breathing after such a stimulating kiss. When the fog of passion finally cleared, she tried to understand what he had said. "You say these Elders are doing something you cannot when they speak telepathically. But if you can hear each other's thoughts, I do not understand the difference."

This time, he smiled wide. "You are right. I did not explain myself well. We can freely hear human thoughts, but we are able to shield our thoughts and feelings from one another...usually.

Even if we couldn't hide our own thoughts, we still would not be able to project them into someone else's mind as the Elders can. Does this make sense?"

She nodded. "I think so."

"I believe that is enough for now. There is much for you to learn, but there will be plenty of time for it. It is early, and I kept you up most of the night. You need more sleep." His eyes glowed for a second.

She had to know. "Your eyes. What was that?"

A chuckle rumbled out of him. "Sorry. It is just...when I think about you in *that* way, I become a little excited. You probably saw a silver hue cross my eyes."

Easing off his lap, she knelt beside him. She'd asked him to show her the vampire in him twice before, and he had obliged. Each time, her body reacted with a tingling need. That flash of silver reminding her of their passion made her want things she never dreamed possible.



"Show me again." Elise nearly bounced on her knees with giddy enthusiasm.

If only she'd drop that bloody cover so I can see her breasts. Bastian reached to tug the material away, but thought better of it. They had made love many times over the last few days. He should give her more time to rest—not that she appeared exhausted.

Instead of uncovering her, he caressed her cheek. "Whatever you wish, my love."

This was the third time she requested to see his vampiric features. She had truly accepted him as he was, so how could he deny her? He breathed deeply, allowing her distinctly feminine scent to arouse him just enough. His fangs descended, and, though he could already see far better than a mortal, the dimly lit room turned bright as day when his eyes changed.

Scooting in close, she peered at his open mouth and giggled. "I want to lick them."

Damn, he wanted that, too. But if she did, he would pin her beneath him in a heartbeat and slide deep inside her. He groaned as his cock sprang to life.

Of course, he also did not wish to tell her no when she had finally learned to trust him. To not fear him.

He shifted toward her, and the cover slipped off his lap, his shaft standing at attention.

She glanced down, and then slowly dragged her gaze up his naked body. When she discarded her cover, Bastian took the opportunity to suck in a nipple. She arched into him and moaned, grabbing his hair and holding him to her.

After he released her, she skimmed her hands down and rested her palms on his chest. He stared, mesmerized by the rise and fall of her luscious breasts. He'd never seen such perfect, succulent mounds.

As she moved closer, she pushed him backward. He allowed her to take control and lay him down. But when she climbed on top of him, easing her hot, wet opening over his engorged cock, he gasped in shock. His sweet little Elise had learned quickly.

Her loving warmth washed over him, and he cherished every ounce of it. Once she settled in place, her tight heat surrounding him, she lowered her body. Her warm flesh pressed against his.

"This is heaven, my love." He leaned up slightly to kiss her.

Before he could claim her mouth, her tongue darted out and glided sensually over his fangs. She moved her hips slowly at first, then faster as her exploration of his mouth morphed into a passionate kiss.

He clamped his hands on her soft rounded bottom and lifted his hips to meet hers.

A moment later, she pulled away and sat up, her palms once again flat on his chest, her beautiful breasts bouncing with each movement. She tilted her head back and closed her eyes. Keeping one hand firmly on her rear, he trailed the other upward until he reached those wondrous mounds that beckoned him.

His fangs ached. "Damn, Elise. I need you. I need to taste you."

He sat up, and her arms encircled him, yet she held her head back still, as if to offer her neck. She rode him wildly, like a stallion needing breaking. But nothing would ever tame the animal within him. If anything, she brought it out more. He grabbed her hair and pulled her throat to his lips. When he bit down, she cried out his name, proclaiming her love.

The warm sweetness of her blood coursed through him. His cock tingled as her core clamped down on it. He moved one hand behind him and rested it on the bed so he could push into her farther. His thrusts launched their entangled bodies higher each time. Her orgasmic spasms continued assaulting his throbbing cock.

He released her neck, licked over the puncture wounds to heal them, and claimed her mouth as he exploded inside her, slamming into her harder and faster. Somehow she matched his frantic pace as she held onto him tightly.

His body shuddered in rapture, and he broke away from their kiss. "You're so tight...so beautiful..." He couldn't speak any more. Couldn't express his desire, or the depths of his love for her. His climax continued for what seemed like forever.

Then she slowed, rocking gently on his lap. He kissed her softly until they collapsed onto the bed and lay in each other's arms.

He was ready to make this permanent.

"Elise?" He stroked her soft hair and kissed the top of her head.

She looked up and locked gazes with him. "Yes."

His heart stammered. "Will you marry me?"

EIGHT

Bastian and Elise rode in a well-covered carriage on the long journey from his secluded castle to the McNeil cottage. After weeks of making love and intimate talks, it was time to tell her parents of their plans to marry.

Bastian reveled in every second with Elise. She had accepted him for what he truly was, and that meant everything to him. Too many times he had allowed himself to fall in love, only to be shunned for the creature he hid behind his mortal façade.

But not this time.

For once he had hope for the future. Maybe he could convince Elise to let him turn her so they could be together forever, as they both wanted.

There were still many things to explain—including his inability to father a child—but he had every confidence their relationship would survive, even after he revealed these last details.

As the carriage bumped along its way, he leaned toward her, brushed her auburn tresses from her face, and kissed her. Lips soft as rose petals met his, her sweet tongue searching his mouth.

After a moment, she pulled away and fanned herself. “I believe we should calm down. We are almost there, and it will not do to have you overly excited when we arrive.”

Good point, considering it was difficult to hide the vampire within when he became aroused. And heaven knew she could have him hard and full-fanged in seconds. “You are right, my love, as usual.” He captured her hand, raised it to his lips, and then placed a gentle kiss on her lavender-scented skin.

When the carriage came to a halt, he took a deep breath and gritted his teeth. He could do this, especially since he’d pretended to be mortal for nearly eight hundred years. Surely another evening with her family would be simple enough.

The overcast sky was perfect for him, only intermittent slivers of light from the setting sun peeked through the clouds as they walked up the stone path to the cottage. He held her firmly around the waist. She was his now, not theirs.

While courting Elise, he had met her parents on a couple of occasions, but that was before she knew his secret. Everything had changed the minute he showed her his other side. In truth, he had placed his life in her hands, made himself completely vulnerable to win her love for eternity.

Just this one last step, then we can move on with our lives.

A strange man greeted them. Bastian quickly delved into his mind then stiffened. Elise’s brother, Jacob. In all his years, he had never faced a Hunter. Jacob had always been away when he’d visited before. *Off on another one of his adventures* was how Michael, Elise’s father, put it.

The hatred radiating from Jacob hit Bastian squarely in the chest. The Hunter met him with a sweeping glance, as if to determine if he was good enough for Elise, and then turned his attention to his sister. He wrenched her from Bastian’s grasp and hugged her tight, lifting her off her feet momentarily.

After ushering them inside, Jacob grabbed Elise’s hand. “Where have you been? Mother and father were so worried.”

Not giving her time to answer, he led her to a chair in front of the small fire in the open living area, leaving Bastian to follow like a dog. Bastian clenched his fists and fought the anger threatening to make his fangs extend.

His temper had always been his downfall, but this was not the time or place to set it free. And certainly not with a Hunter...in front of Elise and her—

Wait a minute...

He cleared his throat, interrupting the brewing argument between the siblings. “Where are Michael and Rose?”

Elise looked around as if just realizing her parents were nowhere in sight. She stared at Jacob, brows furrowed. “Yes, where are they?”

Jacob softened and knelt before her. “You should have been here, Elise. You should not have gone off with *him*. If someone had told me before that this was the man you were seeing, I would have warned you of his and his brother’s...how shall I say it...propensity for using innocent women to fulfill their needs.” He glared at Bastian then turned back to Elise. “Mother and father would still be here if we’d have known you were coming home.”

She shook her head, a look of confusion on her face. “I do not understand. What are you trying to say?”

Jacob stood, dragged a hand through his long red hair, and fixed his green-eyed glare on Bastian. “After they told me the name of the man courting you, I explained all I knew about his bloody family. At first, they were hesitant to believe *the wonderful man* they knew capable of such things, but in time I convinced them. We feared he had kidnapped you. They went searching for you two weeks ago and begged me to stay here in case you returned.”

Bastian cringed as guilt washed over him. He *had* taken her against her will, but there had been no choice.

Facing Elise once more, Jacob continued. “I know they started at the Evanko Estate, though I am uncertain of where they went after that.”

Damn it all. Then Donovan knows. Bastian’s relationship with his brother was already strained from years of Bastian’s temper and impulsive behavior. Now that a Hunter was involved, and the risk of exposure existed, Donovan would be watching Bastian’s every move, waiting for a mistake.

Elise clasped Jacob’s hand. “Then there has been no word from them?”

Jacob bowed his head. “None, and they should have been home by now.”

Bastian’s mind spun. Had Donovan kept them, fed on them, or worse, killed them? Mortals going around asking questions about a vampire, even if they had no idea of his true nature, were courting trouble. Threats had to be eliminated before things spiraled out of control.

If he left now, with his preternatural speed he could make it to the estate and back before sunrise. Elise and Jacob would have some time to talk until they retired for the night. Leaving her with his secret, in the company of a Hunter, was a risk, but one he needed to take. He would simply put the suggestion in her mind to not reveal anything about him.

“Elise, my love.” Bastian extended his hand and waited for her to come to him. He wrapped her in his arms but couldn’t bring himself to interfere with her thoughts again. *I vowed to stay out of her mind. I must trust her.* “I will go to my brother and see if he knows where else they may have gone. I promise I’ll bring them back to you.”

She sobbed into his chest, trembling. “Please...”

There was no need for her to say more. As much as it pained him, he released her and gave her to Jacob. Her brother held her close, stroking her hair, and stared at Bastian.

Bastian nodded and turned to leave. When he stepped outside, thunder boomed across the countryside, and the sky let loose its fury. Rain poured as he ran.

NINE

By the time Bastian reached the estate, the rain had stopped and the clouds dispersed, leaving the countryside blanketed in moonlight. Without breaking stride, he leaped the tall iron gate. After landing squarely on his feet, he bolted for the castle.

He nearly ripped off the large wooden door. “Donovan! Where are you, brother?” Why he had allowed such anger to take hold, he was unsure, but Donovan would now face the brunt of his wrath.

Casually, Donovan descended the curved staircase. “Well, well. I wondered when you’d return. I have a present for you.” He smiled, his youthful face accentuated by his long blond hair. “Come, little brother.” Something sinister lurked behind his pale blue eyes.

Bastian stiffened, breathed deeply, and gasped in shock at the mortal scent teasing his nostrils. “They are here? Alive?”

“There is only one way you will find out.”

Following his elder sibling, Bastian’s heart pounded. *Maybe I can still salvage my relationship with Elise if I erase their memories of this place and bring them home quickly.*

When Donovan reached for the door to the dungeon, Bastian’s gut tightened. It was where he kept his meals. The ones he returned to repeatedly, at least. Others were not so lucky.

Bastian charged at his brother, knocking him against the stone wall. Donovan’s head hit with a thud, and quickly, his perfect golden locks streaked with blood.

Donovan laughed. “Is that the best you can do? I will heal before you even find them.”

That was all it took for a rush of heat and anger to envelope Bastian. His fangs extended, his vision narrowed as if he were stalking prey, and he grabbed Donovan by the neck. “You are going to regret this, *brother.*”

In an instant, Donovan’s vampiric features emerged, eyes a silvery fire. His voice strained. “Come now...what about...” He coughed a few times. “Michael and Rose... Don’t you wish—”

Bastian tightened his grip, and Donovan clutched his brother’s straining forearm, desperately trying to pull it away. After a moment, Donovan gave up and let his arms hang limp at his sides. He stopped breathing, fully allowing the vampire within him to take over. Air no longer a necessity for their kind.

The corner of Donovan’s lips curved upward. “Oh no, you are choking me.” Another mocking laugh rumbled from him.

Bastian cursed and used his free hand to punch the stone next to Donovan’s head. Pieces of rock exploded outward. He tossed Donovan to the ground, dropped to his knees, and landed blow after blow to his face and torso. Bones cracked under the force of his attack.

At first, Donovan did not fight back, but when Bastian continued his assault, he must have realized he’d better defend himself.

Donovan grabbed Bastian’s long hair and threw him into the wall with preternatural force. Bastian’s side took the full impact, and his ribs snapped. Searing pain ripped through him. He stood, wincing at the effort, and held his aching body.

Before Bastian could move, Donovan stumbled to the door and down the dungeon stairs.

What is he going to do to them?

As his bones healed, Bastian gasped and leaned against the cold rocks, breathing heavily. He needed to give himself a moment to recover or he would be of no help to Elise’s parents—

especially since it appeared as though Donovan's notorious sadistic tendencies had emerged. The fire in his eyes, the condescending laughter, the pure glee of tormenting Bastian were all sure signs the vampire in Donovan had taken over and pushed any compassion to the side.

"Hurry, little brother. You do not want to miss this. It is time you learned your lesson." Donovan's voice echoed off the high ceiling.

Bloody hell. He stood completely, heart racing. "What lesson would that be?"

"Why, keeping our secret better, of course. Oh, and not getting involved with a Hunter's sister."

Bastian slowly made his way to the dungeon. Though no torches were lit, he saw plain as day with his vampire sight. "I didn't know Jacob was a Hunter."

Muffled cries for help came from below. It had to be Elise's parents. If Donovan spoke so freely in front of them, he surely planned to kill them. Hell, they probably already knew he was a vampire since he had most likely drunk from them.

Remembering his promise to Elise, Bastian prepared for the fight of his life to save Michael and Rose. He couldn't lose Elise, especially not over something as horrific as this. She would certainly see him as a monster again. He remembered her pain at hearing of his parents, and how she'd said she could not survive losing hers.

By the time Bastian reached the stone floor, most of his strength had returned. He met near silence in the narrow, musty anteroom. The occasional drip of water seeped through the walls, but beyond that was quiet.

Hunting mode it is, then. He closed his eyes and allowed his heightened senses to do their jobs. The faintest scratching noise emanated from behind the door to the left, and a deep breath let him know it was human. He also smelled his brother's blood mixed with a mortal's.

His pulse quickened. *I cannot be too late.* He moved and tore the door down, wood splintering, rock crumbling.

The sickening crack of bones screamed in his ears as Donovan twisted their necks. Bastian fell to his knees when the lifeless bodies of Elise's parents hit the damp ground, their clothes stained crimson. Part of him wanted to cry out in anger, another part simply wanted to cry. Any hope for a life with Elise shattered with their deaths.

He looked up and locked gazes with Donovan, surprised by the sudden empathy in his eyes.

It was not enough to keep Bastian from taking out his anguish on the other vampire.

Within seconds, he flew at his brother. Donovan stepped to the side, and Bastian crashed into the wall.

"Bastian, stop. It is over." Donovan reached out to rest a hand on his shoulder.

Unfortunately, those words were true. The thought of facing Elise, trying to explain why her parents were murdered, took the fight out of him. He slid to the floor and cradled his aching side.

It is my fault. The secret must be kept.

TEN

After burying Michael and Rose, Bastian returned to Elise and that damn Hunter. More time had passed than he'd planned, and night had given way to a bright day. He had ridden in another well-covered carriage to hide from the sunlight as much as possible. Not that it would kill him, but he was already weak from fighting and healing, and the sun would further decrease his strength. He'd soon need blood as it was. More than he could safely drink from Elise—not that she would allow it when she heard what had happened.

The cottage was eerily quiet as he approached. One long, deep breath told him all he needed to know. The scents of at least five distinct mortal males, aside from Jacob, hung heavy in the air.

He was walking into an ambush.

He had to get Elise alone and learn what had happened in his absence. Time wasn't on his side. With the sun shining, he grew weaker by the minute. Fire tore through his body as his hunger increased.

I should have fed on the way.

Although the cottage was more than likely full of Hunters, Bastian knocked, swung the creaking door open, and walked in.

Jacob glared at him the second he closed the door behind him. No one else was in sight, but there were multiple heartbeats within the house. Worse yet, he sensed Elise's fear and panic.

"Where are my parents?" Jacob stood behind a large wooden chair, gripping the top, his knuckles white.

Bastian probed his mind.

Jacob hoped to use the spindles of the chair's back as makeshift stakes since his vampire-killing weapons lay on the other side of the room. Hunters guarded Elise upstairs. But what he found next had him reeling far more than the hunger.

She had betrayed him, given away his secret.

The blow of this revelation nearly knocked him off his feet. He immediately severed his connection with the Hunter's mind, steadied himself, and clenched his fists. Fighting tears, he eased forward, hoping to lull Jacob into a false sense of security. "I could not find them. I am sorry."

Jacob lowered his head as waves of sadness rolled off him, and Bastian seized the opportunity to lunge at him, knocking him away from the chair.

Bastian straddled him and held him firm, no matter how much he resisted. "I cannot allow you to live knowing my secret, but I cannot harm you because of Elise. You leave me no choice..."

Although it went against the Code because there was no guarantee of permanence, Bastian had to erase Jacob's memories of the past few days. Elise had already lost her parents. He would not have her lose her brother, too. Just as he prepared to manipulate Jacob's mind, the rumble of footsteps announced the others' approach. At least two pistols clicked, cocked and ready, and one sword swished from its sheath.

Instinct took over, and Bastian's senses sparked with new life. What little blood remained in his body burned through his veins. He fought the change, breathing deep to calm the beast within

so his teeth and eyes remained normal. If he released that side of himself, any of the Hunters who saw him would have to die—Jacob included.

As it was, if the Elders discovered Elise had divulged his secret, she'd be sentenced to death, as well. He had warned her about this. She knew the consequences. How could she have put her life in jeopardy?

If I had implanted the suggestion in her mind to hide the truth, this might have been avoided. But he had hoped to trust her completely, and she had let him down just as much.

Three men rushed into the room, weapons drawn, while Jacob struggled beneath him. That meant two were with Elise.

A lanky blond pointed a pistol directly at Bastian's head. "Release him, *vampire!*"

No sudden movements. Bastian raised his hands, stood, and backed into the corner so no one could come at him from behind. "I do not understand. Did you say *vampire?*"

Jacob jumped up and locked gazes with Bastian. "Do not play games with us. We know what you are." He spat at Bastian's feet. "You defiled my sister in the most heinous ways. You will pay with your life."

The two with guns targeted Bastian's head and heart, but unless they were loaded with silver, he had no worries—other than pain. The rotund Hunter held the sword toward Bastian's gut. Jacob retrieved his sword and placed the blade tip at Bastian's throat.

He hadn't noticed the sword when he'd entered the cottage. Apparently the Hunters had learned a new trick. Swords would be their only hope of truly dispatching a vampire, if they had enough strength and could move fast enough to take off his head. *Unlikely.* But in his weakened state, Bastian questioned his own speed and power.

Just as he prepared to disarm his attackers, a clattering ruckus upstairs grabbed everyone's attention. All heads turned briefly, and then the Hunters glared at Bastian again.

Worried for Elise, his concentration wavered and a gunshot echoed in the room. Searing pain ripped through his chest. He instinctively clutched the wound as Jacob attempted to slice into his neck. Luckily, it was nearly impossible to decapitate someone without a clean sword swipe, unless the attacker was a vampire. A mere mortal simply did not have the necessary strength.

The slow aching progression of the blade easing into Bastian's throat afforded him time to push the weapon away. It fell to the ground with a clang. He groaned and fought the urge to double over but could no longer contain the beast within. His vampiric features emerged. He would have to finish the Hunters off since their stares fell upon him. The Hunters gasped and appeared frozen in astonishment, which gave him the opportunity he needed. He snatched the sword and swiftly beheaded all but Jacob before they blinked.

The heads remained in place for a moment, eyes wide in shock. Arms automatically tried to reach up, but before they moved far, the bodies collapsed. They fell like dominoes, thudding as they hit the floor, the heads rolling in a macabre fashion. Pools of crimson spread and merged, the thick copperscent sweetening the air.

Not as weak as I thought. To his surprise, the pistol shot had not slowed him down. *Definitely not silver.* The tingling burn at his neck told him the sword wound was already healing.

He spun and pointed Jacob's own blade at him, backing him into the wall. Bastian held back a wince from the pain in his chest.

A scream grabbed his attention, and he turned to see Elise running down the stairs with two Hunters behind her.

"No, Bastian. Please don't hurt him." The anguish in her voice tugged at his heart.

She stopped at the bottom of the steps, staring at the headless corpses with her mouth dropped open. Slowly, her horrified gaze returned to Bastian. Two more pistols cocked behind her.

With what he had to do next, she would truly know him as a monster.

ELEVEN

Elise's heart raced, her breathing ragged as she struggled to comprehend the ghastly sights before her. Blood everywhere. Men decapitated. Men she had been talking to about their families not long ago. And Bastian, bleeding, perhaps shot, holding a sword to Jacob.

Her body trembled. She gripped the stair's railing in an attempt to steady herself, her knees ready to give way. The room spun around her, and she feared she might pass out.

Someone behind her spoke. "Elise, go back upstairs."

Her legs were heavy and immovable.

A gurgled sound came from Jacob. "Now, Elise... Go."

All she could manage was a slight shake of her head. She wouldn't leave Jacob *or* Bastian.

She glanced at the carnage once more then faced Bastian. Unable to speak, unsure what to say, she tried to plead with her eyes. To beg for her brother's life to be spared. To beg forgiveness...

Guilt tore at her heart, and welling tears blurred her vision. If she hadn't allowed Jacob to drag Bastian's secret from her by using her fears about their parents, those men would still be alive. Their families would not have to mourn.

No one moved until another shot rang out, and Elise's heart nearly jumped out of her chest. When Bastian dropped the sword and grasped his neck, her stomach knotted and her knees buckled. She did her best to follow the commotion that ensued.

Everyone rushed Bastian as he stumbled backward and fell over the small side table. The wood splintered, and Jacob grabbed one of the broken legs.

No, please... "Jacob, no." Her voice cracked, too weak to be heard.

Except by Bastian.

His silvery gaze locked with hers. She reached out to him from across the room. Blood oozed from his wounds. His skin was paler than normal. He looked like he might die. Her heart sank.

When Jacob moved to plunge the stake into him, she squeezed her eyes shut, unable to watch her brother murder the man she loved.

A loud thud made her eyes snap open. Jacob lay sprawled over another broken table. There was a bloody gash on his forehead, but he seemed otherwise unharmed. Elise turned back to Bastian as he scuffled with the Hunters.

Bastian's arms clamped around the Hunter she knew as Dominic. Then her vampire lover kicked the other, Nathaniel, backward until the Hunter crashed into the hard stone of the hearth. Nathaniel's head hit with a sickening thump, and his neck twisted at a strange angle. His body fell limp to the floor.

Jacob stood, wobbly on his feet, and hobbled over to where Bastian lay devouring Dominic's blood. Bastian's stare burned into Elise while he fed. Dominic's body twitched as his life drained away.

Nausea rolled over her, yet she could not look away. Something in Bastian's eyes called to her. Love and...disappointment. She'd never seen him kill, never wanted to believe him capable, no matter what he had told her. But she could no longer deny his true nature.

Just as Jacob made his way to help Dominic, Bastian stopped drinking, pulled back with blood dripping from his lips, and snapped Dominic's neck. The cracking of the bones echoed in Elise's head, and she winced—but she never broke eye contact with Bastian.

The color had returned to his skin, and his wounds healed rapidly. He jumped to his feet and stood face-to-face with Jacob. When she heard the click of a cocking pistol, she glanced to the weapon in Bastian's hand—pointed directly at her brother's heart.

Jacob grunted, looked around at his fallen friends, then focused on Bastian once more. "Go ahead vampire. Kill me in front of Elise. She's already seen you for the monster you are. Why not finish this?"

For a long moment, no one moved. Then Bastian stepped backward and lowered the gun, *and* his head.

He is still my Bastian.

Her heart raced, flooded with love for the two men. She no longer cared what Bastian was or what he had done. At least, she tried to convince herself of this.

Just don't look at the bodies.

She took a deep breath and let it out with a sigh. The worst was over. Surely neither man would harm the other, even if only for her.

But after Bastian dropped the pistol, Jacob yanked a stake from under his shirt and plunged it into Bastian's chest before he could defend himself.

"No!" She scrambled to her feet and ran to his side as he collapsed. "Bastian..."

His hand clutched the stake, but he didn't move otherwise. He wasn't breathing. His eyes were open, and he eventually blinked.

Thank God, he is still alive.

She turned to Jacob, tears streaming down her face. "How could you... I love him."

Jacob spread his arms wide, motioning toward the dreadful scene surrounding them. "Don't you see what he did? How can you love something so evil? He is not human, Elise. You must accept this."

She didn't look. Instead she wiped her eyes and begged. "Please, Jacob. Help him... For me." Returning her attention to Bastian, she brushed the tangled golden locks from his face, his empty stare fixed on the ceiling. "Bastian, look at me. What can we do? I cannot lose you." When he didn't respond, she trembled as she reached for his free hand and lowered her head. "I love you. I am so sorry. I never meant—"

The clang of a sword made her turn to Jacob. Bastian tightened his fingers around hers and groaned. When she looked back to him, he eased the wooden weapon out of his chest, his expression pained.

By the time the stake was removed, Jacob stood over him, sword drawn. "Move, Elise. Let me end this."

Was he mad? Did he honestly think she would allow him to kill Bastian?

She positioned herself between the men, draping her body over Bastian's, shielding his neck with her own.

His ragged breaths fell upon her throat. His arms wrapped around her. His voice a mere whisper. "I forgive you, my love. Please forgive me, as well."

He kissed her neck, rolled her off him, and leapt to his feet. In a blur of movement, he grabbed the sword from Jacob and took off his head.

"No!" She turned away from the gruesome sight as her body quaked in shock.

TWELVE

Elise's cry cut through Bastian's heart, but he had no choice. If he hadn't dispatched all the Hunters, Jacob included, after they had seen his true self, he could face death when the Elders found out. As it was, he had to find a way to save Elise from their wrath.

Maybe if they ran, hid from the Elders' Enforcers, he could protect her. She might hate him, but at least she'd be alive.

With all that had happened, the Enforcers would soon be after Elise. Somehow the Elders always knew of infractions almost immediately.

He stared at the massacre he'd left in his wake. Blood and bodies littered the room. Elise sat with her arms wrapped around herself, rocking back and forth, a blank stare on her face.

His chest ached where the stake had been, but it hurt even more for her.

After kneeling beside her, he took her in his arms. Surprisingly, she did not resist. He calmed the vampire within by breathing in her sweet, lavender perfume. The pressure of his eyes and fangs shifting back was more intense than normal, most likely from the fight—the hole in his chest still healing.

He needed more blood to replenish what he'd lost, but Elise would never understand if he fed on a corpse. And drinking from her was not an option, especially now.

She did not respond to the world around her. In her mind he found a jumbled mess. Her emotions were numb. She continued rocking, making no sounds, not even crying. He kissed the top of her head and stroked her hair. Losing her brother had obviously been more than she could handle.

Arms trembling from concern, he lifted her then carried her to the sofa. He sat, placing her on his lap, and cradled her. "Elise, please say something."

Still no response.

Bastian shuddered. *What if she never comes out of this? What if she is lost inside her mind forever?*

After living for so many years, he'd had plenty of opportunities to see the effects of trauma. The thought of Elise spending the rest of her life catatonic sent a chill through him.

No. If it came down to that, he would turn her and pray it somehow reversed her condition.

But he was letting his imagination run amok. He had to focus to save her.

With another deep breath, he attempted to clear his mind, but the savory scent of blood in the room punched his stomach. He needed to feed more or he wouldn't have the strength to get them to safety.

He eased Elise off his lap and laid her down as he stood, making sure she faced away from the bodies so she didn't see what he was about to do.

The Hunter by the hearth was the only one who hadn't already lost most of his blood. Bastian lifted him into his arms. The man's head lay at an odd angle, but it left a tantalizing spot open to Bastian. His fangs ached as they descended, his chest stinging and burning as it tried to heal. One glance to ensure Elise had not moved and Bastian bit into the Hunter's neck.

The still-warm blood made its way through Bastian's body, easing his nerves and pain. As he drank, the stake wound tingled and finished healing. By the time he released the corpse and it thudded to the floor, he was good as new.

Now to get her out of here.



When a few days passed and Elise hadn't come out of her stupor, Bastian had no choice but to go to Donovan for help. He had done his best to make her drink, but she took no food, and her body appeared to be shutting down. As darkness fell, he loaded her into a carriage and left behind the small village where they had sought shelter.

He rode through the night, guiding the horse over the moonlit countryside, taking care to make the trip as smooth as possible. Elise deserved as much comfort as he could provide. He believed the outside world still impressed itself upon her, though no signs in her mind or body pointed to this.

The risk of going to the estate was grave now that the Elders most likely knew what had happened, but Bastian would protect Elise even if he had to sacrifice his life to do so.

As the mist spread across the landscape, he tried again to pull something tangible from her thoughts. All he found were distant memories flashing in and out. Nothing of the last few days, and nothing of the time he'd spent with her. It was as if she had never met him. Like their love had never existed.

Her mind was a cliff at the end of a long, flowering field. Her life existed blissfully until right before they had met, then came the sheer drop at the edge where their relationship should have been. All they were to each other, all they had shared, erased. Blocked out. Gone.

Guilt washed over him. If he'd never brought her into his world, her perfect life would have remained intact, her parents and brother alive, her illusions in place. Monsters would only exist in nightmares.

Her numbness filled him and relieved his anguish. He rode on in a daze until he reached the castle gates and guided the carriage through. They were wide open and welcoming, summoning him in as if Donovan awaited his return. Odd, though nothing else appeared out of order.

After carrying Elise inside, Bastian called out for Donovan, but his brother did not reply.

Probably out hunting.

He took Elise into the parlor and placed her gently on the sofa. Stroking her hair, he leaned in and kissed her lips. No response. Once more, he allowed himself to feel the full breadth of her existence, her lack of emotions, her dizzying memories, her body's weakness—

A tingling sensation rolled up his spine, alerting him that something was wrong, but by the time he pulled back from her consciousness, it was too late.

He turned to find Donovan and his friend Christof, along with a strange woman, standing just inside the doorway.

Donovan's brows furrowed. "Why did you come here? You should have known they would be looking for you...for *her*."

Christof and the woman approached slowly.

Bastian looked to Donovan. "They who? The Enforcers?"

Donovan merely lowered his head and backed up a few steps. "I am sorry, brother." Then he left the room.

The woman stood behind the sofa, her gaze trailing over Elise.

Christof touched Bastian's arm. "You need to move and let us do our job."

Bastian's mind reeled. *What job?* "What are you talking about?"

"I am an Enforcer now, and this is Lenora. She is an Enforcer, as well." He nodded toward the woman.

Stumbling backward, shocked at this revelation, Bastian reached for the chair to steady him. *No. This cannot be.* When had Christof become one of the Elders' Enforcers? Bastian had not seen him in centuries, nearly forgotten he existed.

What did they plan to do with Elise? "You must not harm her. She is no longer a threat to us. Her mind has slipped into madness. I fear she may never come back to this world."

"Then it is of no consequence that we follow through with her punishment." Christof looked to Lenora. "Take her to the dungeon."

When the woman moved to pick up Elise, Bastian darted toward her. Christof cut him off, grabbing Bastian and slamming him to the ground. Since Christof was much older, he was also stronger and faster.

Bastian's heart thundered. He caught a glimpse of Lenora heading out of the room, Elise lifeless in her arms.

A surge of anger burned through his veins and he jumped up then tossed Christof into the bookshelves. Books rained down upon the Enforcer, and Bastian took the opportunity to bolt out the door.

Donovan blocked the way to the dungeon. "No, brother. You must not interfere or you will pay with your life. You know how this works."

"I do not expect you to step in and risk death, but you are bloody mad if you think I will stand by while they kill Elise." Bastian pushed his brother out of the way and flew down the stairs.

Footsteps followed him, but he kept running until he came to the room where Elise's parents had been murdered. Elise lay on the damp floor, Lenora standing over her with a sword.

An inner strength he'd never known before took over, and he dashed in front of the woman, snatched the sword from her, and knocked her into the wall. Her head crashed into the stone and she lost her footing.

Christof's voice echoed in the small room. "Stop this, Bastian, for your brother's sake. Do not make us kill you."

The bastard grabbed him from behind and wrenched away the sword. Bastian spun around to take Christof down, but something sharp jabbed into his arm. He looked to see a syringe full of silver. Christof emptied it into him before he could react.

The liquid poisoned him immediately, rushing through his body in a trail of white heat. His head and limbs grew heavy. He stumbled to keep his balance and swung blindly at Christof, though in vain. He fell to his knees, reaching for Elise.

Christof moved in, sword in hand, as Lenora rose, a sickening grin on her face. Bastian scrambled along the floor, but he might as well have been crawling through quicksand. His arms gave out and he lay splayed on his stomach, gaze fixed upon Elise.

A glint of torchlight flickered on the blade as it came down. He could no longer make out anything aside from Elise and that damned sword, as if it floated in the air of its own accord. He groaned, trying to move, but his body did not respond.

The blade sliced through her delicate neck as if it were paper. Bastian tried to scream, but his world went black.

EPILOGUE

It only took one week for the Elders to sentence Bastian to death for trying to stop the Enforcers from carrying out Elise's execution. He had been locked up and drugged with silver, but now he sat before them, listening to his fate being sealed. Not that he cared to live without Elise.

His heart ached. Images of her murder had been imprinted upon his brain. Her decapitation, her blood pooling around him before he lost consciousness. She'd been helpless to defend herself, and he had let her down.

He rested his head in his hands, still reeling from the remaining poison in his system. The conversation in the room turned to mumbled background noise. After a deep breath, he looked up and realized Donovan was pleading with the Elders.

"Please, I know it is within your power to grant me the opportunity to take responsibility for my brother. To ensure he will follow the Code from now on." He knelt before the dais on which they sat. "I beseech you."

Akori, the Elders' leader, stood, the black hood of his robe hiding most of his face. "You would take the oath? Put your life on the line to save this traitor?"

Donovan bowed his head. "Yes."

Bastian tried to tell his brother to stop, but his mouth was too dry to form the words. He licked at his lips and swallowed the lump in his throat, then made another attempt. A wheeze was all that escaped his lips. A puff of air ignored by everyone in the room.

The five Elders looked back and forth amongst themselves, nodding, apparently communicating telepathically again.

What in the bloody hell gives them the right to play gods?

Everyone in the room turned and glared at Bastian, including Christof and Lenora. He'd forgotten he could not shield his thoughts from the others with silver in his body.

Akori looked back to Donovan. "Are you certain this is what you wish? I believe it is foolish."

"He is my brother. I must. He has this life because of me. He is my responsibility." Donovan stood, but still bowed his head in reverence.

"So be it, then." Akori lowered his hood and his black eyes shined like onyx in the candlelight, his skin far paler than a normal vampire's. "We hereby decree Bastian Evanko will spend two hundred years in exile, during which time Donovan Evanko will be held guilty for any indiscretion or violation Bastian may commit. Both will be sentenced as one. Both die if Bastian breaks the Code. Do you swear your oath to this, Donovan?"

Donovan did not hesitate, and his conviction came through with his unwavering tone. "Yes. I swear. My life with his."

The room fell silent. Bastian tried to comprehend all he'd heard. What type of exile did they mean? *Two hundred years?* He shivered.

Akori dismissed the other Elders and motioned for Christof and Lenora to come to him. After Akori spoke with the Enforcers, they walked over to Bastian, picked him up under the arms, and dragged him back to his cell. Donovan followed behind.

Once there, they dropped him to the cold floor and slammed the door closed.

Christof leaned against the bars. “Tomorrow you will be put on a ship to the new world—both of you. There, Bastian must live in isolation from our kind, and from mortals, and can feed only upon the blood of animals.”

Turning to Donovan, he continued. “You will be given all the freedoms you have here, but make no mistake; it is a savage and uncivilized place. Your life will not be easy. And, if he breaks the Code, the Elders will know. They have eyes everywhere.” He walked over to Donovan and rested a hand on his shoulder. “Please, my friend. It is not too late to change your mind.”

Donovan returned the gesture. “I cannot. He is here because of me. If only I’d handled things differently...”

Christof grunted then looked to Bastian and spat at the cell. “I hope you are happy. Now Donovan shall die when you fall again. It is only a matter of time.” He faced Lenora. “Come.”

The Enforcers left, and Donovan turned to Bastian. “Forgive me, brother. I had no idea she meant so much to you. You know how I am when it comes to protecting our secret, not that this is an excuse...” He paced as if he were the one in a cage. “We will find a way to make it through the years ahead.”

“That is easy for you to say. You are not the one who will have to live completely alone—with nothing but visions of seeing the woman you love beheaded while you were helpless to do a thing to save her.” Bastian’s voice was weak, just like his aching heart.

Donovan stepped to the cell door, grasped the bars with both hands, and lowered his gaze. “I know I cannot undo what has happened, but you must know I love you. And I am truly sorry.” He raised his head. “I have put my life on the line as way of apology, and to show you I believe you can change—even after all these years. I will be there for you when your sentence is over. Please, Bastian, do not let me down.”

After a few moments of Bastian’s silence, Donovan sighed, moved to put out the torch lamp that hung from the ceiling, and went on his way.

Bastian leaned against the damp wall, unsure if he could honor his brother. Even in his debilitated state all he wanted was to avenge Elise’s death. To kill that bastard of an Enforcer.

Maybe he would simply use the next two hundred years to plan his retribution.

AUBURN LUST

The Nocturnal Surrender Series

An Erotic Novelette

Lorraine Pearl

Auburn Lust

by Lorraine Pearl

They all need to lose themselves in the pleasures of the flesh sometimes, but what happens when the lines between lust and love start to blur?

Twin courtesan vampires Rochelle and Laureline Montague entertain two of their favorite vampire clients for the evening. Christof Rosenbaum and Donovan Evanko.

Rochelle and Christof have been meeting for centuries but lately the intimacy between them has crossed the line and become personal. Will Rochelle be able to keep her professional boundaries in place or will she give in to her emotions?

Laureline and Donovan's rendezvous is much less emotional and far rougher, but that's how they like it. Although, she can't let Donovan leave after just one time around—even when he is summoned by his Enforcer boss.

In the end, both men are consumed by the auburn-haired beauties in one way or another, and there is no doubt both will be back for more.

Warning: This is an erotic novelette—not a romance—with lots of sex. It can stand alone, but it actually takes place right before *Nocturnal Surrender* in the series timeline.

ONE

Christof's limousine pulled up to the Montague sisters' mansion, and his cock stirred at the thought of what awaited him inside. He had been locked in a seductive dance with Rochelle for centuries and was eager to see how this latest tryst would end.

His imagination ran wild as his driver came around to open the door for him. "Thank you, Jeffrey."

"Should I wait, sir?"

"No. I'll call you when I'm ready to leave. This could be an all-nighter." *I hope.*

Jeffrey gave him a knowing glance, surely remembering Christof's tales of past rendezvous at the estate. "You are one lucky vampire, Mr. Rosenbaum."

Christof laughed and smacked his driver on the back then stuffed a roll of hundreds in the younger immortal's pocket. "Why don't you find yourself a good time, too? I shouldn't be the only one having fun." He raised a hand to dismiss Jeffrey and blazed a path to the front door.

Stefan answered the doorbell with his usual veneration and ushered Christof into the great room to wait for Rochelle and Laureline. The Louis XIII Cognac he loved, mixed with AB negative blood, sat on the marble coffee table, calling to him. On their own, each seduced the palate, but together they were sheer liquid bliss.

"Ah Stefan, you spoil me." He sat back on the plush sofa, crystal tumbler in hand, swirled the heady concoction, and took a sip.

"It is my pleasure, Mr. Rosenbaum." Stefan nodded and went on his way.

Christof allowed some of the drink to linger in his mouth for a few seconds. The sweet and spicy liquid teased his tongue then glided down his throat. Comforting warmth spread through his body as the reverie overtook him.

After only a few sips, soft footsteps approached, and the scents of fragrant perfumes drifted his way. The two distinct bouquets entwined into an intoxicating aroma. Within a few moments, the petite beauties stood behind him, though he didn't rise to greet them.

"Christof, dear, how have you been?" Rochelle slid her hand around him, delicate fingers slipping between the buttons of his shirt, stroking his nipple. She nibbled his ear then slowly licked downward until her fangs scraped hungrily along his neck.

His cock stiffened, ready to fuck the auburn-haired courtesan. "Shelly, love. You must stop before I take you right here in front of your sister."

Laureline giggled. "I wouldn't mind watching."

Christof peered over his shoulder as Stefan returned, this time with drinks for the twin vampires. "For you, mistresses. I hope it pleases." He handed the women their glasses and bowed in reverence.

"Dearest Stefan, everything you do pleases us." Rochelle smiled sinfully, but Stefan retreated too quickly to notice.

Christof turned to Laureline. "Lori, you may watch, join in, or whatever strikes your fancy, love."

Her emerald eyes sparkled above a seductive grin. Reaching back, he cradled her hand and placed a gentle kiss on her alabaster skin.

The women sashayed to the front of the sofa where he could admire their bodies, his gaze roaming provocatively over them. For small women they had a plethora of delicious curves, and those tight little dresses accentuated all of them.

Rochelle offered her hand for a kiss. "Given how much you contribute to our grand estate, it is about what strikes your fancy, not ours."

But all the money he'd given them over the years was nothing compared to what he had received in return.

Surrounding him on the sofa, they placed their drinks, and his, on the table, and skimmed their hands over him suggestively. His fangs emerged as his arousal increased, tightening his groin and sending jolts of electricity throughout his body.

Laureline caressed his cheek, and he tilted his head toward her feather-soft palm, while Rochelle rubbed his throbbing erection that already threatened to explode at any moment.

Gratitude for his heightened vampiric senses washed over him, their touches more intense than if he were still human. Every nerve ending hypersensitive.

He threaded his fingers through Laureline's hair and pulled her to him firmly. He kissed her with a force that would have bruised a mortal's lips.

Fangs grazed his neck again—Rochelle apparently doing her best to work him into a frenzy—leaving a warm trail of moisture near the edge of his collar.

Too quickly his neck was left abandoned, and Rochelle moved to stand in front of him. She eased him out of her sister's grasp. "Come, Christof..."

"Hell, I almost did."

Laureline laughed as she rose, urging him up with her. "I guess this is where we go our separate ways." She grabbed his short brown hair and guided him down to her overflowing breasts.

His cock jumped at the invitation as his fangs sank into her porcelain flesh. She moaned when he sucked in her precious life, holding his head to her tightly.

Rochelle continued to slide her hands along his body, stopping at the most important part to work it over thoroughly.

Laureline's blood spread through him, burning to his core and engorging his cock to its fullest. He removed his fangs and licked the remnants of crimson clinging to her breast. Another moan emerged from her lips, and he quickly seized the moment to plunge his tongue into the deepest recesses of her mouth.

Rochelle stroked him with more force. Damn, he needed to be free of his pants. She squeezed firmly, tugging slightly to let him know she wanted his cock inside her. It was a signal he knew well after all these years. She might say this was about what he wanted, but he'd learned long ago these women were in charge.

Damn, I need her.

He might have enjoyed playing with Laureline, but he was there for Rochelle.

Laureline ended their kiss. "It's time for Shelly to take over from here...unless you prefer something different this time."

The mischievous grin on her full lips enticed him. Dared him maybe. Different was always good. But the hand pulling on his cock seemed to insist he refuse. "Ah, Lori darling, such a tempting proposition, but I doubt I could handle the two of you at the same time."

It was a lie, and both women surely knew. He shouldn't have offered for her to join in. Rochelle would never allow it, and he truly preferred it that way. Something about Rochelle drove him wild, made him revel in their time alone together.

No matter how much he enjoyed Laureline's seductive ways, her sister consumed him.

Tonight will be different. I'll break down her professional defenses. I want all of her.

Rochelle turned him toward her, grabbed his tie, and led him to the foyer and up the curving staircase. Her hips swayed in a sensuous display, her tight ass begging for his touch. But he resisted, fearing he would take her on the stairs where any of the servants could happen by.

Once in her room, he took control, knowing it was only because she allowed him to. Clutching her waist, he pulled her to him and ground his cock into her belly, relishing the friction. A groan emerged from deep within him. He had no idea how much more he could take. "Shelly, love—"

She stood up on her toes and devoured his mouth before he could tell her of his need, her tongue sweeping aggressively in and out.

He backed her toward the bed, reached down to slide up her dress just enough, and lifted her until she clamped her legs around him. She writhed in his arms, pressing her warm pussy to his cock repeatedly, sending shudders of pleasure radiating through him.

Fuck, she was good at what she did. He couldn't wait to feel her wetness. To bury himself to the hilt and make her cry out for him.

Stumbling into the foot of the bed, he prepared to lower their entangled bodies, but she pulled away from their kiss. Her legs released him, and he helped her gain her footing. She sat on the edge of the bed and momentarily pressed her lips to the erection beneath his pants. His cock twitched. His balls tightened. She mouthed him for a few seconds as she undid his belt, making him long for her softness against his naked skin.

He rested his hands on her shoulders to steady himself against the waves of pleasure rolling over him.

She freed him from the confines of his pants. His cock sprang out. Her mouth swiftly glided over the head, sucking and teasing, only taking him in slightly. She flicked her tongue, each strike sending shivers racing over his skin. Moving one hand from her shoulder to the back of her head, he urged her forward, but she gave only small samples of what she had to offer.

"Are you trying...to kill— Oh, fuck."

She took him in fully. He clasped a handful of her long curls. The heat of her mouth working him enthusiastically only made him crave her tight pussy more.

One of her hands grabbed his ass, while the other cupped his balls and massaged gently. Her mouth did things to him he couldn't comprehend. Her tongue swept over his cock while she moved with vampire speed. He was on the verge. Another minute of this and—

Oh, hell. What's she doing now?

Before this she had obviously been shielding her desire from him, but her walls had just come down. It hit full force. Slammed into his groin. Multiplied his yearning beyond comprehension.

Damn, he had to touch her. Feel her pussy clench around his fingers. Around his cock. To slide into her. To fuck her relentlessly.

To make her mine.

Her lust combined with his emotions. He came hard. His cock convulsed in her hot mouth. His body trembled. An animalistic groan ripped out of him. She sucked fervently, drawing out his orgasm for precious more seconds as wave after wave of ecstasy tore through him.

When she finally released him, he could barely stand. Still holding onto her for support, his strength slowly returned. A glance down revealed the grin on her full lips.

He cradled her soft cheek. "It's your turn now, love."

TWO

Laureline was grateful Christof hadn't wanted her to join in, not that she thought he would after all these years. And there was somewhat of an unspoken agreement between her and Rochelle. Christof was off limits other than a little foreplay. If he would have agreed to her proposal, she'd have come up with a way out. Laughed it off as a joke.

Truth was, she had someone else on her mind, and she'd called to let him know of her availability the moment Rochelle led Christof away.

Donovan Evanko sat waiting, much like Christof had been earlier, glass in hand. She had no idea what the men preferred to drink. Not her area of expertise. Stefan took care of the whims of their clientele. But she did know what they favored in other areas.

And Donovan always liked the sex with Laureline to be a little rough—and so did she. Being older than him made her stronger, able to take whatever he gave.

As the owner of the sanguinarian nightclub, Nocturnal Surrender, he undoubtedly had an endless supply of willing humans to feed upon and take to his bed if he chose. For some reason, though, he never struck her as the type to use women in such a way. Mind control to obtain sex? No, definitely not him.

He is a good man.

And hot as hell.

She admired his long blond hair as she slinked up behind him. How she loved grabbing it and riding him ruthlessly. Warm desire pulsed through her at the thought of him inside her, filling her completely.

He didn't turn to her when he said, "I'm glad you called." After sitting down his drink, he stood and strode around the couch.

Laureline braced herself. The desire in his eyes let her know foreplay was not in the cards with him.

Donovan's eyes shifted from pale blue to silver and his fangs descended the second he stepped in front of her. She reacted in kind.

He grabbed her waist and pinned her body to his then kissed her with dominance. She moaned into his mouth as his fangs punctured her lip. Her core throbbed when he sucked at the drops of blood.

Holding her firm with one hand, he trailed the other up her back and into her hair, fisting it tightly as he devoured her mouth again. He turned and guided her until he pushed her into the wall. She gasped from the force, *and* from his erection grinding against her. At this rate, they would be lucky to make it upstairs. But with Rochelle otherwise engaged, and the staff's well-trained discretion, it wouldn't matter.

He can take me right here.

Donovan's hands slithered downward until he lifted her dress. Then he grabbed her legs and hoisted her into his arms. She wrapped her legs around him, thankful the new position allowed his cock to press against her clit. Pulses of longing surged through her each time he thrust forward.

At times like these, she hated her job. She'd rather have torn his pants off and forced him inside her. But this was about him. Nothing could happen until he was ready, even if she died from need in the meantime. She hadn't been servicing him long enough to take control—yet.

He feathered kisses along her jaw then her neck. His fangs scraped a trail of white heat down her throat and she ran her nails up his back, trying not to shred his shirt in the process. He groaned into her flesh.

“Please, Lori... Now...” His voice was hoarse as he inched their bodies apart.

She reached between them and undid his pants with preternatural speed. His fingers slipped into her panties and her breathing hitched. He yanked them to the side and shoved his shaft into her. She’d barely had the chance to guide it and get her hand out of the way.

He slammed her repeatedly, clutching her hair in one hand and gripping her ass firmly with the other, squeezing at times. Completely dominating her. She gave herself over to him, enjoying the rhythmic friction of his cock gliding in and out.

Finally he eased his hand toward her throat, encircling her neck and rubbing his thumb up and down the front. She had told him she liked that during their last encounter, hoping he’d remember. Though she didn’t need to breathe, she allowed his firm grip to make her gasp for air slightly.

Her core throbbed harder in response. “Yes, Donovan... That feels...so good.”

Too good...

She would never tell him, but he was the best fuck she’d had in her long life. And she was thankful men *usually* wanted to ensure they pleased the woman, even when they paid for sex— at least the type of men who could afford her and Rochelle.

Donovan kissed her again, moaning into her mouth with each thrust. Her back rammed the wall and the pictures on the adjacent one rattled. He shifted his hand under her ass until his fingers teased her rear entrance. She clenched his shoulders and bit down on his lip, close to climaxing. His blood had her soaring higher until he pulled away with a groan.

He released her throat and fisted her hair once more, turning her head to expose her neck. He swooped in and bit down with such force she screamed out his name as the muscles in her core clamped down around his cock.

His body shook almost convulsively as he drank from her. Her orgasm exploded, too. His shaft pumped relentlessly. He eased his fangs away and sucked for another moment then threw his head back and grunted.

Laureline panted as her body rode the ecstasy for what seemed like eternity. He didn’t stop. If anything, he slammed into her harder. Faster.

She grabbed his long hair and pulled him close with all her strength, and then sunk her fangs into his neck.

“Oh, fuck yes...” He slowed his pace as if to savor the sensation of her drinking him in.

Fire tore through her veins as she sucked in his blood. Though her orgasm had ebbed, it fired back to life the second she had bitten down. She bucked against him, wriggling and jerking to feel every inch of his cock, but the wall behind her didn’t allow much movement.

By the time she released his neck, both of them had stilled. The look of contentment on his handsome face let her know he was as sated as her.

After one more powerful kiss, he lowered her and helped straighten her clothes. She waited while he did up his pants then she led him to the door in silence.

Vampiric features now hidden, his baby-blue eyes pierced her as he raised her hand to his lips. “You will be seeing me soon. I promise.”

When he turned to walk out, she smacked his designer-suit-clad ass. “You had better keep that promise, Evanko.”

He smiled, nodded, and strutted to his Escalade.

She closed the door, ogled him through the window, and sighed. *And you'd better not wait for me to call next time.*

The sight of him walking away, his long, sexy hair, the way he wore that suit—and how it hugged his tight ass perfectly—made her decide to play with him a little longer before allowing him to leave.

THREE

Rochelle gazed up at Christof. The satisfied smile on his face held a hint of mischief. But his eyes held a hint of something else.

Love.

With Christof, she had broken the most important rule for courtesans. She had become emotionally intimate with him.

Over the hundreds of years he had been frequenting her and her sister's establishments, she and Christof had gone from sharing nothing but sex to making small talk afterward. But in recent decades, they always spent hours on end having personal conversations while lying in each other's arms. Their rendezvous were more like dates now—except with the sex first.

The worst part was she had become possessive of him, not wanting Laureline involved at all anymore. She hid her displeasure well—she hoped—but the fact it was there did not bode well for the future of her career. She had managed to remain relatively unattached for over two millennia, delighted in her freedom—and power over her clientele. At this point she would have no idea how to belong to a man, especially one as powerful and possessive as Christof.

I should end this before—

He lunged down, pushed her backward, and glided his hands along her stomach, working his way to her thighs. Her sensitive flesh tingled and her body ached for more.

For him.

Definitely not a good sign.

After easing up her dress, he tugged her panties off. Her legs still dangled from the edge of the bed. She peered up as he dropped to his knees and spread her wide.

His feather-soft touches inched toward her center. She laid her head back, waiting. Yearning.

The heat of his mouth enveloped her, kissing, sucking, and licking her clit until her eyes fluttered closed. His fingers teased at her opening, dipping in slightly only to pull back before giving her what she longed for.

Her hips lifted of their own accord, begging. A moan escaped her. She wanted him badly. Every part of him. She licked her lips at the memory of his hard cock in her mouth. It hadn't been simply her working a client. She had wanted to pleasure him. To give him ecstasy.

Rochelle had never allowed any others to feel her desire while servicing them. That was reserved for Christof. A way to leave him aching for her.

No. I must stop thinking that—

His fingers finally slipped completely inside her and his fangs sank into her swollen flesh as his tongue continued circling her clit. She gasped and her eyes shot open. He drank from her for a few heavenly seconds.

“Oh, Christof... Yes... Please—” She bit back her words before saying too much.

Fisting the bedspread, she attempted to still her hips, but it was no use. He had picked up the pace, moving at vampire speed, his fingers nearly pulsating inside her, his tongue like magic.

Instead of restraining her movements, she arched into him farther, moaning. She was close to the edge. Her core throbbed. She writhed on the bed, tearing at the cover.

Just when she thought she couldn't take anymore, his desires flooded her, creating a dizzying rush that swept through her body.

He had let down his guard. Allowed her to feel his passion just as she had done for him.

Only this time, she felt his love for her, as well.

Tears welled in her eyes from his overwhelming emotions—and from her own. Her body rocked in time with his ministrations. She was falling into an abyss. The room spun, and she squeezed her eyes shut.

She was on fire for him. Body, heart, and soul. The muscles deep inside her core clenched around his fingers. She couldn't stop them if she'd tried. Every inch of her skin tingled.

He suckled her clit, pushing her over the top. Her orgasm rocketed through her and she screamed his name. He worked her like he owned her.

Like she was his.

Waves of pleasure tore through her as she thrust her hips higher, burying his face in her pussy, thankful vampires didn't need to breathe.

After a moment, he slowed the onslaught and her climax subsided. She opened her eyes and lay limp, too exhausted to move.

He pulled his fingers out and kissed her inner thighs then crawled up beside her. His silver eyes shifted back to brown and his fangs receded. She took the hint and allowed her vampiric features to retreat. He cradled her face and leaned in for a kiss. It wasn't dominant or possessive. It was soft and tender. Loving.

She gave in and kissed him with the same affection.

FOUR

Christof reveled in Rochelle's submission. This was the first time he'd completely broken down her walls. The first time she had kissed him lovingly. Being a betting man, he would wager his entire fortune that he would feel love inside her if she allowed him access to her emotions again. But the chances of her doing so were slim.

Instead of waiting for something so unlikely, he slid one hand into her hair and the other around her waist. Surprisingly, she lifted off the bed slightly for him to wrap her in his embrace.

Her soft lips met his repeatedly. Her tongue sweet as it probed his mouth.

He pulled away slightly and feathered kisses downward along her jawline, only to return his attention to her soft lips. Gentle and slow, yet somehow deep and passionate at the same time. The moment seemed to last forever.

Clutching her body firmly against his own, he rolled her on top of him. As much as he wanted to claim her, to hold her down and make love to her all night, he wanted her to make love to him more. To show him the emotions she hid inside.

It was a gamble—and one he could lose his heart over—but he was willing to take the risk.

He lifted his hips as he moved their entangled bodies farther up the bed so his legs no longer hung over the edge. Once his head rested on a pillow, he threaded his fingers through her hair as the leisurely kisses continued.

This time it was Rochelle who broke away from his lips and lightly kissed his chin then neck and back again. Her tongue swept into his mouth and he fought the urge to grip her tighter, kiss her harder, and seize her hips to grind her against his swelling cock.

Part of him wondered if she was merely doing her job of trying to pleasure him. Simply giving the customer what she could tell he wanted. But he pushed that thought aside, hoping this growing intimacy between them was real.

He was too old to be such a fool, but with her, his mind was not in charge. He'd never been so smitten by anyone before. Maybe it was the fact she had always remained just beyond his grasp. He was accustomed to having what—and who—he wanted, when he wanted. But with Rochelle, her independent fire blocked him at every turn.

Maybe no longer.

I must claim her.

In a flash, he had her on her back, held her arms above her head—their fingers entwined—and pressed his cock to her as he devoured her mouth.

She wriggled beneath him and lifted her hips to meet his. She moaned as she clamped her legs around him, pulling him tighter into her pussy. His cock slipped downward, but he didn't let it enter her. He would not allow that until they were fully naked *and* fully vulnerable to each other emotionally.

He leaned up, kicked off his shoes, and stripped his pants and boxers from his ankles then removed his socks. When he turned back to Rochelle, her delicate fingers yanked his tie free and tossed it away. Slowly, she undid the buttons of his shirt, stopping occasionally to kiss his chest.

Electricity shot straight to his groin, his cock jumping each time. He was so close to gliding into her. One wrong move and it would be too late.

Finally, she inched his shirt off and threw it aside like she had the tie.

Now it was his turn to undress her.

The slip-of-a-dress she wore barely covered her alabaster breasts. He started with the thin straps as she lifted enough for him to ease them down and to reach around to unzip the garment. With her panties already off, that dress was the only thing standing in his way. He fought the urge to rip it to pieces. When he reached to pull the bottom upward, she lifted her hips to accommodate him—grinding her wet pussy into his throbbing cock.

He groaned as a dizzying rush swept over him but composed himself enough to work the fabric up her torso and over her head as she once again moved her body to help him with his task. After he removed her dress, her hair was disheveled and sexy, but his attention drifted lower.

First, the heat in her emerald eyes pulled him in. When he tore himself away, he gazed at her luscious lips then continued down, stopping at her supple breasts. Her nipples budded under his stare and he couldn't stop himself from sucking on each of them. She gasped and grabbed his hair, holding his head to her.

The need rolling over him made his fangs extend and his eyes shift. He bit down on her breast, and she moaned his name as he drank. When he released her, he headed straight for her mouth again. Her fangs and now-silver-eyes greeted him. Apparently she wanted him as badly as he did her.

But this time would be different than all the others. *This time, I will make love to her, not just fuck her.*

He only prayed she would make love to him, as well.

He opened himself so she could feel his emotions once more and waited to see if she would return the sentiment.

FIVE

A wave of desire nearly knocked Donovan off his feet as he strutted to his Escalade.

Was Laureline toying with him, trying to get him hot and bothered so he would run back in there and ravage her again? He had business to attend to and couldn't afford a longer visit no matter how much his cock begged for it.

No. He was being ridiculous. She had never opened herself to him before. Why would she now? Surely it went against everything a woman in her position held proper. Not to mention it was something most vampires never did unless they were extremely intimate—emotionally—with each other. That description absolutely did not fit for Donovan and Laureline.

Screw it. He needed to return home and prepare for his brother's arrival. Bastian had been out of his life and in exile for two hundred years, and though they'd had their differences, Donovan wanted to make up for the past.

Still, he was pissed at Bastian for choosing to come to Lansford. The Sin City of the East was no place for a vampire as reckless as him. Not to mention the fact Bastian held a grudge against Christof Rosenbaum for murdering his fiancée two centuries ago.

How the hell did Bastian find me after all these years?

Whatever the answer, their reunion was long overdue.

He yanked his keys from his pocket but was blasted by another punch of desire. The keys clinked to the ground as he stumbled. After regaining his footing, he snatched the keys and turned to see Laureline staring at him through the parlor window. Her eyes were silver and her fangs extended. And she appeared to be giggling.

She acted like she was in heat for him.

Stop thinking so highly of yourself. You're one of far too many to be special.

Not that he wanted anything more with her—or any woman at present. Too much shit was about to go down since the Hunters seemed hell-bent on finding a way to take vampires out for good. He had to focus on his job of helping the Enforcers, *and* he still had a nightclub to run.

Nocturnal Surrender was his baby and nothing—not even first-rate courtesan pussy—could keep him from his responsibilities.

He turned back to his vehicle, hit the unlock button, and reached for the handle only to be bombarded once more by Laureline's seductive yearning.

This time, his cock sprang to life and threatened to guide the way. He trembled as her longing rolled over him, increasing his own to unfathomable heights.

Shit.

He locked the door, looked back to her, and his inner vampire emerged. Night turned to day when his eyes shifted. His fangs ached as they descended.

She will pay for this.

He stormed into the mansion, not ringing the bell or waiting for Stephan. After slamming the door behind him, he burst into the parlor. Laureline now lay on the couch, one leg bent at the knee leaning against the backrest, foot flat on the cushion, and the other leg draped elegantly over the side, leaving her slightly open for him.

She twirled her long auburn curls and giggled. "Did you *need* something, Donovan?"

Red lace panties peeked out as her dress rode up her creamy thighs, enticing him further. He took a deep breath then quietly shut the French doors and locked them.

What kind of game was she playing? It made no sense. But whatever the case, he would play along. For what he had paid, one quick fuck wasn't enough anyway. Although it *was* magnificent—and what he normally preferred—he really could go for more of a stress reliever than that. Maybe another—gentler—round would do the trick.

When he faced Laureline, she skimmed her hand along her thigh, pulling her dress higher and exposing more of the red lace beneath.

Donovan groaned as he stalked toward her. “I don't know what you're up to or why, but don't think I'm above reaping the benefits.”

“Oh, I am counting on it.” Her hand moved upward, gliding over her stomach then breast and finally stopping at her lips. She licked her finger and slid it back down along her throat—her smooth, delicious throat. “What are you waiting for?”

He yanked off his tie, stripped out of his dress shirt, and freed himself from the rest of his clothing in record time. His cock stood at attention, ready for Laureline's command. No matter how much he liked to think he was in charge because he'd bought a service, it was an illusion. The sisters always had the situations under their control. The clients believing their satisfaction came first was the true illusion.

Armed with that knowledge, he kept up his guard and didn't allow her actions to fool him into thinking this was anything more than business.

Her gaze burned into him as she ogled him unashamedly, licking her finger again. His cock throbbed and the urge to tear off her clothes shot through him.

Instead, he knelt beside her and feathered kisses along her luscious thighs, eliciting moans of approval from her. She lifted her hips slightly, invitingly, and he inched toward the lacey barrier.

Just as his mouth neared the Promised Land, his cell phone rang. He wanted to ignore it, tried to ignore it, but the ringtone let him know it was the lead Enforcer in the area, Olivia Fournier. His boss. Scrambling to his pants, he mumbled apologies to Laureline. His gut knotted at her seeing him submit to Olivia.

Hard to play the powerful and confident seducer like this.

He grabbed the phone from his pants and reluctantly touched the screen to accept the call. “Hello, Olivia. I'm sorry, but now is not a good time. Can I call you back in about an hour or so?”

“No. I must meet with you immediately. Are you at your club?” Olivia's sensual accent didn't take the edge off her tone.

Something was definitely wrong.

“I'm not at Surrender. It will take me at least a half hour to get there.” He dressed slowly, his shoulder pressing the phone to his ear as he gave Laureline an apologetic look.

Olivia continued hammering him with orders while he fought to put on his clothes without dropping his cell.

Laureline pouted and sent another wave of desire crashing into him. He nearly tripped as he stepped into his pants, and the phone fell to the floor.

He shot Laureline a glare and bared his fangs then slid his pants on before picking up the phone. “Olivia, I'm sorry to cut you off, but I have to go. I'll meet you at Surrender.” He shoved the cell in his pocket then zipped and buttoned his pants and fastened his belt.

Laureline still lay sprawled on the couch, dress above her hips, but now her delicate fingers brushed over her lace panties. “Don't make me take care of myself.”

His cock stirred again. *Is there time for another quickie?*

Olivia's voice echoed in his head, giving him the unwanted answer.

He strutted back to Laureline, leaned down, and moved her hand aside, replacing it with his own and stroking her firmly through the lace. "I promise to make this up to you."

How the hell did I become responsible for pleasuring her?

Brushing that concern aside, he kissed her and slipped his fingers inside her panties. She gasped into his mouth and moaned, her hips rocking as his fingers slid in and out of her wet pussy repeatedly. After what she'd done to him, she deserved to be left wanting.

When the muscles deep inside her clamped down on his fingers, he pulled them out at vampire speed. She broke away from their kiss and hissed.

For once, Laureline wasn't giggling. She panted and writhed. Using strength far greater than Donovan's, she shoved him to the floor and straddled him. In a flash, she pushed his hair aside, turned his head to expose his neck, and bit down with amazing force. She drank from him as she ground her pussy against his hard cock.

He should have known better than to fuck with a vampire twice his age.

Within seconds she moaned and convulsed. She released his neck, threw her head back, and yelled his name as she continued to rock atop him.

Donovan's body filled with need as he watched her climax. His cock ached to fuck her.

He had to reassert his dominance. "It's my turn now."

When she slowed and quieted, he took the opportunity to roll her over. He freed his cock and pushed her panties to the side then shoved in deep. She clawed at his back and lifted her hips to meet his thrusts.

It didn't take him long after she'd worked him into such a frenzy. He devoured her mouth, his tongue diving in deep, and then shifted his attention to her neck. Just as his orgasm ripped through him he bit down and drank.

The second his fangs glided in, her core clamped down on him, pushing his climax to the limit. It rocketed through his whole body, tingling from head to toe. He sucked in her blood. His cock pulsated with his release.

She yelled his name as her muscles clenched and unclenched around his cock. He drove her into the floor as he fucked her relentlessly until her orgasm subsided.

He loved the fact he'd made her come three times within a half hour.

After releasing her neck, he kissed her once more, helped her up, and did up his pants again.

So much for slow and gentle.

Maybe next time.

"Thank you for taking care of me before leaving." She stood on her toes and pressed a quick kiss to his lips then giggled.

No matter how long he lived he'd probably never understand women "Don't think we are through here. I have every intention of making you pay for that little stunt." He grabbed her and pulled her close, fisting her hair and taking her mouth with dominance.

Afterward, she nipped his throat and grinned. "As I said, I am counting on it."

He left smiling and satisfied. Even Olivia wouldn't be able to ruin his mood.

SIX

Christof's desires and emotions overwhelmed Rochelle. He kissed her more passionately than ever before. His naked body against hers felt too right. Her mind spun as a swell of *feelings* swept over her.

Feelings were not a good thing.

But his tender kiss made it impossible to think. He left himself open to her again and she longed to do the same. It was a physical need every bit as powerful as—or maybe even more so than—her lust for him.

Her entire future rested on this one, seemingly-simple decision; give herself to him completely or slam the boundaries back in place before it was too late.

She could not do this. Not yet. *I haven't made it through all these years by allowing my heart to rule me.*

But she wanted him desperately. Far too desperately. For that reason alone she had to be strong and do the right thing.

She had to merely do her job.

Ignoring the issue between them, and keeping up her walls, she reached down and guided his cock. He eased in, his hard length filling her and increasing her need.

He feels so good.

Christof kept a gentle, steady pace as he pumped in and out of her. He caressed her face then neck, and finally her breast.

A moan escaped her lips and she lifted her hips. No matter how much she tried to remain unaffected, she couldn't. He made love to her, and she wanted to give the same to him.

But that would not do.

Rochelle trembled as she tried to hold back. She should toss him off her. She had five hundred years on him and could easily overpower him if she chose.

Then why didn't she? Why did she hold him tighter? Kiss him harder? And writhe beneath him?

She ran her hands along his back, over his ass, and up again, skimming his sides until he jerked and moaned. The hot friction of his cock moving inside her sent shivers through her. Her heart ached with—

She dug her nails into his back and shoved aside that thought, but she only shook harder trying to deny it. Her control slipped and her walls crashed down.

Christof groaned loudly when her emotions hit him. He wrapped her in his firm embrace while he continued his loving cadence.

Too late to turn back, she returned his affections. She matched his leisurely pace and stroked his skin tenderly. She pulled away from his lips and trailed kisses along his chin and throat.

"Shelly, I need you so," was all he said before she bit down and sipped at his tangy blood.

His thrusts sped and deepened. She released his neck and moaned, enjoying the intimacy she had rarely permitted herself to share with another.

Maybe for the moment she would allow this. She could replace the boundaries later, when they finished making love.

Just this once...

She writhed up beneath him until each thrust had him filling her completely and built a tingling in her core. His arousal heightened hers, as hers surely did his, creating a never-ending circle of desire.

If it didn't make them so vulnerable, vampires would certainly do this more often. The shared pleasure was immeasurable.

Emotions swirled and combined with that pleasure until Rochelle finally succumbed and her orgasm ripped through her. Shockwaves went off in her core, her muscles clenching around his hard shaft.

He kissed her quickly then moved to her neck. His fangs glided in sensually and he drank gently. He groaned into her throat as his body quaked. His soft sucking morphed into desperation and his mouth clamped onto her neck tighter while he drank deeper.

After a moment, he eased his fangs out and she relaxed as her orgasm receded. His mouth locked onto hers again. He still felt so good, so right. She would allow this for a while longer. Maybe for the entire night.

Boundaries could wait until morning.

NOCTURNAL SURRENDER

The Nocturnal Surrender Series

Book 1

Lorraine Pearl

Nocturnal Surrender

by Lorraine Pearl

In one vampire's struggle for redemption, can a mortal woman's love conquer all or will his recklessness condemn her to death as it did another two centuries before?

After two hundred years in exile, vampire Bastian Evanko has come back to earn his brother's respect and to plot revenge against the vampire who murdered his fiancée, Elise. In The Sin City of the East, Bastian must fight his rebellious nature and learn to control his impulsiveness. When he asks for a private dance, and a bite, from stripper Darling Nikki, he gets far more than he bargains for—including another chance at love. But is the love of a beautiful woman enough to sate his need for retribution?

Nicole French simply wants to learn how to live in her new town without having a breakdown over the painful memories she hides. Having a man in her life is the last thing she needs. When Bastian asks for a private dance, and to drink her blood, things heat up quickly in the private room with the sexy stranger. The only problem is he likes to pretend he's a vampire and suck down human blood.

After losing Elise because of his secrets, can Bastian risk bringing Nicole into his life? But, on the other hand, can he pass up another chance at love?

Important Notice: *Nocturnal Surrender* was originally published in 2012 as a novella. This **new novel version** combines *Nocturnal Surrender* with the previously published novella, *Midnight Confessions*, and adds **new chapters** to expand on the story. *Midnight Confessions* will no longer be available as its own book but can be read here in its entirety. The two have been seamlessly blended with the added chapters to create one cohesive novel that pulls together the love story of Bastian Evanko and Nicole French.

ONE

This wasn't the homecoming Bastian Evanko had hoped for after two hundred years in exile. Getting berated by his brother only served as a reminder of how strained their relationship had always been. Apparently, the time apart had done nothing to mend old wounds.

So much for a starting over.

Donovan paced behind his mahogany desk, blond hair falling perfectly down the back of his expensive suit. "You shouldn't be here. You know better. This city is no good for you, not with your past."

Bastian gripped the wooden armrests of the pretentious-looking chair where Donovan had commanded him to sit. "My sentence is over. I will come and go as I please now. Spending the last two centuries in isolation was almost more than I could take." He loosened his hold when the wood cracked. If he turned the chair into kindling, he'd never hear the end of it.

A point Donovan confirmed when he stopped and glared. "You'd better not destroy my office, little brother. The last thing we need is a repeat of what happened—"

"Oh, please. How long are you going to keep bringing *that* up?" Bastian clenched his fists and stood, nearly knocking the fucking chair backward. So what if he'd turned much of their home into rubble after one of their many arguments centuries ago? "And stop calling me *little brother*. The fact that you're two years older than me makes no difference after nearly a millennia."

In an instant, Donovan moved to face Bastian. His eyes turned silver and his fangs extended. "Do not think to challenge me, *little brother*. As long as I have to keep cleaning up your messes I'll call you whatever I damn well please." He waved a dismissive hand and returned to his desk, eyes reverting to their usual pale blue as his fangs receded. The monster within was hidden behind his baby face once more. No one would ever suspect a murderous creature lurked beneath that innocent façade.

With a deep breath, Bastian sucked in the amped-up vampiric testosterone saturating the air. The tension between them was suffocating, and the next move rested on his shoulders. He could take the all-too-familiar road of trying to prove himself with a physical display and allow the powder keg to once again explode, or...

"You're right. I have made many mistakes, but you also know I've done nothing wrong since you stood up for me with the Elders and convinced them to spare my life." Not entirely true, but as long as no one knew how Bastian had disobeyed the Elders from time to time during his exile he wasn't about to admit anything. Hand extended, he crossed the room and stopped a respectable distance away from his brother. "Please, Donovan, let's put the past behind us and move forward. How can I make amends if you won't give me the opportunity?"

There was silence except for the ticking of the large antique clock on the bookcase. Soundproof walls allowed in nothing from the nightclub beyond the office door, or from the bustling city outside.

Donovan glanced at Bastian's proffered hand then locked gazes with him. His brother's expression was unreadable.

For a moment, Bastian wished vampires weren't able to shield their thoughts from each other. His shoulders stiffened. A few more seconds of being ignored and he would lose the tenuous grasp he had on his temper.

In the past, he would have blown by now—verbally and physically—without regard for the consequences. His poor impulse control had created a rift between him and Donovan long ago. He never did anything right in his brother’s eyes, resulting in far too many years of Donovan’s condescending attitude. But Bastian wanted his brother to see he was different now, and the only way for that to happen was to fight the anger.

Pressure built under his gums. His fangs ached to descend. Swallowing hard, he licked his teeth.

Still normal, but not for long.

With a nod, Donovan finally accepted his hand. “Okay, I concede. Looks like you might have really changed this time.” He immediately stood and pulled Bastian in for a hug, landing a hard smack on his back. “It’s good to have you here, little brother.”

Jaw clenched at *those words*, Bastian returned the show of affection with an equally powerful blow.

A few blood-infused drinks and half an hour later, Donovan gave Bastian a tour of his club.

Nocturnal Surrender sat in the middle of the Lansford Strip, flanked by a casino and a hotel. The Sin City of the East truly lived up to its name, and just as they had in Las Vegas, vampires capitalized on the *sin* aspect.

Bastian surveyed the club and its patrons. Every vamp in the room had silver eyes and extended fangs—no need to hide since it was supposed to be fake. Unsuspecting humans, including timid tourists who looked out of place, became meals for immortals. He held in a chuckle when he noticed a few mortals wearing various shades of vampiric contacts. Some even had artificial fangs.

Hard rock music blared from hidden speakers. Candles flickered on tables and shelves, adding a contrasting old-world ambiance. Gothic arches framed the doorways.

He inhaled deeply, drawing in the wondrous scent that permeated the open room.

Blood.

Dizziness swept over him. The urge to feed punching him hard, leaving him winded. Thankfully, he was already vamped out, enjoying the ability to be himself in his brother’s club.

But it had been two centuries since he’d been allowed to feed from humans. Living on the blood of animals had created a meager, disgusting life he wanted to bury in the past.

Yes, on his way to Lansford he had gorged himself on human blood whenever possible, knowing full well it was the only way he’d be able to adjust and fit back in with this new society.

He hadn’t been able to feed without killing since coming out of exile. No self-control at all in that area after all this time. He hadn’t faulted himself, though. What vampire could come back from such torture and not drain people dry at first?

He would get it under control soon enough. He shut down his breathing to keep the temptation at bay, but the hunger raged on, refusing to die just as Bastian had over the last two hundred years.

Donovan’s voice droned on about his business. Bastian’s ears rang. Between his brother, the music, and the patron’s talking he felt he might go mad.

He hadn’t been around so many people, so much stimuli...ever. Even before his exile there simply wasn’t this much noise and life in one confined space anywhere, at least not that he had been exposed to.

He needed more blood to take the edge off before he did something to land him back in front of the Elders, his life once more on the line. “Another drink, Donovan?” He tried to keep the hunger from coming through in his voice. “I’m afraid all this activity has my brain buzzing.”

His brother turned to him, concern etched on his features. He took Bastian's face in his hands, examined him for a few long seconds, and finally released him. "This is exactly what I was afraid of. This city is not the place for you so soon. Come." Donovan led the way to the bar and ordered them a few more drinks, Surrender style, which apparently meant they were infused with blood. "Make it a double shot this time."

The bartender nodded, adding extra blood to the mix.

Bastian grabbed the glass and gulped it down. He set the glass down with a thud, motioned for another, and chugged it too. His head slowly cleared, and the hunger subsided. For now.

Donovan gave him another once-over. "Feeling better?"

Bastian couldn't tell if his brother actually cared or just didn't want a massacre in his club. "I'm good, thanks. I have it under control, obviously, or else I would have slaughtered all the humans in here by now."

His brother didn't look convinced. "Still, I think I'll be keeping my eye on you. Come...there is more to see." He really did seem to like telling Bastian what to do.

When Donovan finished showing him around, they sat in one of the many crimson-colored booths.

The Nightclub with a Bite. Bastian had to laugh at the sign behind the bar, its dramatic lettering exaggerated by fang-like projections. He looked to Donovan and raised his glass. "I've got to commend you. Opening a sanguinarian nightclub was a stroke of genius."

"Amazing, isn't it? Just like the blood houses of old but with all the modern conveniences." Donovan rested a hand on his brother's back.

Warmth spread through Bastian at the loving touch. It had been many centuries since Donovan yielded any real compassion. Could this be the new beginning Bastian had hoped for all these years? Would he finally be deemed worthy, good enough, and not a screw up? Would he no longer be considered a scourge on the Evanko name?

When Donovan pulled away, a cold and empty spot remained where his palm had been, not unlike the one that had been left in Bastian's heart long ago. The first time, after Donovan turned his back on him when it became clear Bastian would live by his own rules and not the Elders' Code. The second, when that bastard of an Enforcer, Christof Rosenbaum, murdered the woman he loved.

Bastian had tried to save Elise after she'd been sentenced to death for revealing the fact vampires existed. That had made him a traitor to his kind, and the Elders' wrath had landed squarely on his shoulders.

Two hundred years.

If he hadn't released his glass, he would have pulverized it. His body tensed. With his focus on the anger, the ability to conceal his thoughts slipped.

Concern came through in Donovan's voice. "What's wrong now? Are you all right?"

No, he wasn't. He hadn't been all right for too many years, but he needed to regain his composure if he wanted Donovan's trust. He closed his eyes and took an extended breath, pulling in the comforting mortal scents that dragged away the anger. Even if it kicked and screamed to stay, and even if the hunger surged again.

Now was not the time for reopening old wounds. Revenge on the asshole who had denied him a life with Elise could come later.

It *would* come later.

"What are you thinking? You cannot go after him. He owns half this city, *and* he is one of my friends." Donovan's words were a stake to the heart.

Bastian's eyes snapped open. He glared at the vampire beside him. "How could you, after what he did to Elise? I watched him behead her. I was too weak from the silver he'd pumped into me to save her." His gut knotted and a wave of nausea rolled over him at the image that had been burned into his memory for eternity.

He leaned forward, placed his elbows on the table, and cradled his aching head in his hands, fighting the tears he swore he wouldn't shed until Rosenbaum paid for her death.

Donovan's gentle touch returned. Bastian flinched, unable to allow himself to be soothed when he'd been betrayed by his own flesh and blood.

"Bastian, I know you were devastated, but it wasn't Christof's fault. He had to follow orders. And as much as it pains you, the blame lies with Elise. If she wouldn't have broken the Code, she might still be with you today." Donovan moved his hand away and sighed. "Besides, Christof retired from the Enforcers long ago. He passed his post on to his friend, Alexander Mitchell. If you're planning on staying in town for any length of time you will run into them. They are both regulars here."

A cold chill swept over Bastian. How could his brother be so cavalier about Elise's death? Vampire or not, he had to have some emotion left.

The urge to get up, toss the table across the room, knock Donovan to the floor, and pound his face overtook Bastian. Bones crushing under the onslaught would be a relief, just as it had in the past, no matter how temporary the injuries.

Donovan may have been the older brother, but Bastian was larger and stronger. The only reason Donovan ever prevailed was his ability to control his temper. Bastian had always been a loose cannon, which had been his downfall many times. But no longer. He'd vowed to take back his life, and if that meant playing civil with the Enforcers then so be it. For now.

He sat up and took one last deep breath in an attempt to release his anger and shield his emotions. It only half worked as another round of hunger racked his body. He shut down his breathing once more. "You're right. I meant it when I said I wanted to leave the past behind and move forward." *At least partially.* "I can't hold onto this forever. It's been eating me alive for far too long. But I will never be friendly with Rosenbaum, or any Enforcer."

"I'm not asking for friendly, only a truce, even if it is an uneasy one. The Elders won't hesitate to reinstate your original punishment if you break their laws again, and I don't want to lose you." Donovan took a long drink of bourbon before looking back to his brother. "I have an idea of how we can blow off some steam and lighten the mood, assuming you can keep your hunger—and attitude—in check. You up for it?"

"Depends on what it is." Bastian finished his beer in one swig. "And yes, I can control myself. So what's the plan?"

A huge grin played along Donovan's baby face. "You just have to trust me, little brother. I promise it will be worth it."

TWO

Club Delacroix couldn't have been more different than Nocturnal Surrender. Dance music blasted while bright lights illuminated scantily clad waiters and waitresses. Instead of a dark and brooding atmosphere, the room exuded cheer, accented with shouts from the patrons watching strippers glide provocatively across the stage.

Bastian's head bobbed in time with the nearest dancer's breasts. "This was a great idea. I think I'm in love." So long as he didn't breathe, the hunger retreated, replaced by another desire that had gone too long unattended.

Donovan's voice tensed. "Not with that one. She belongs to Kade. One wrong move and you'll be on the chopping block again."

"Telling me she belonged to Kade was warning enough."

Kade Delacroix was not a vampire to cross. Even in isolated exile Bastian had heard of the club owner's reputation. Kade would surely turn him over to the Elders for even the slightest infraction.

Bastian's focus quickly shifted back to the women, and their lack of wardrobe. "I'm not crazy about redheads anyway." He tried forgetting that Elise had been a fiery redhead. "Maybe I'll go for a brunette instead."

He scanned the stage, targeting a coy little thing at the far end with his preternatural vision. Long dark curls cascaded down to caress her ample cleavage, her breasts clad in black lace. He inspected lower to find the same delicate treatment covering her delicious pussy. When she turned to make love to one of the poles, her tight ass flexed around the floss of the G-string. His cock stirred instantly.

She spun and raised her arms over her head, grasping the metal between her slender hands, stroking it, her back tight against the pole. Her nerves didn't show, but he sensed her fear. He couldn't help delving into her mind to find out more.

Though she worked the stage like a pro, she was actually new to the job and the city. To Bastian's surprise, she believed she wasn't attractive enough to make a living this way. She radiated pain, but he couldn't put his finger on its source.

Always a sucker for a damsel in distress, he had to learn more about her. "Do you think you can get Kade to introduce me to that one?" He pointed just as she released her sumptuous tits from the restriction of the lacey bra. If he'd been sitting in front of her, the garment might have landed on him instead of the geek with the glasses.

Donovan shook his head. "I don't think you're ready for that, little brother. A lap dance in a private room... Are you certain you won't tear into her throat?"

Bastian had no choice but to prove he could do this. He wanted his brother's trust, needed his admiration for once in his miserable life. If he could pull this off, Donovan would have no choice but to admit Bastian was a changed man now. His brother didn't need to know how far from the truth that really was, though.

He breathed in slowly, allowing the delicious human aroma to stir the hunger just enough until he tamped it down by focusing on his arousal for that one beautiful mortal. "See, completely in control." He only hoped Donovan didn't notice his clenched fists at his sides and the tension in his body from fighting his vampiric impulses and the bloodlust.

“If you screw this up, it will be the last time I put my neck on the line for you. Do you understand? Kade takes his employees’ safety seriously. They may not be marked, but it is a well-known fact that they are under his protection. Meaning—”

“I understand what it means. If I harm the woman, I will be back in front of the Elders by morning, and my original death sentence will be enforced.” He could do this. He had to do this. Maybe more to prove it to himself than to Donovan.

His brother’s fingers clamped onto his shoulder. “As will mine, little brother. Do not forget my life is tied to yours because of the deal I made with the Elders to save your sorry ass.” Donovan would surely hold that over him for eternity.

Bastian gritted his teeth. “I will ensure both our sorry asses survive.” He rested his hand on Donovan’s shoulder. “I need this, brother. Do you have any idea how long it has been since I’ve had the pleasure of a woman?” Granted, some of his indiscretions over the years of his sentence had been in the arms of women, but nobody needed to know those details.

It had still been far too long. The tightness in his jeans served as a painful reminder.

“Just so you know, that’s not how Kade runs things. These girls can get frisky with you, but they are not expected to perform or get paid for sexual favors. It is entirely up to her if she chooses to do so.” Donovan eyed the petite brunette as she exited the stage. “I wouldn’t have picked her to be your type. She seems too tame for you. I guess you *are* different now.” He knocked back his bourbon. “Give me a minute and I’ll see what I can do.”



Nicole French sat in front of the long mirror in the dressing room of Club Delacroix, trying to summon the courage for her next routine. Many of the dancers carried on conversations as they primped and changed, but their words didn’t register. The whole thing was surreal and—

Kade’s voice echoed in the expansive room, cutting through the din. “Nikki, darling, I have a customer who would like a private dance. He asked for you specifically. You must have made quite an impression.”

Nicole jumped back in her seat. Her heart stammered, her breath catching in her chest. Hesitantly, she turned to face her boss.

Tall and fit, but not overly muscular, he emanated power. He was an alpha male if she’d ever seen one. People normally cowered when he came near, and now she had the urge to do so herself.

His Gothic appearance had freaked her out from day one, which was only last week. With that long black hair and goatee, not to mention those glowing amber eyes and freakishly-white skin, he could pass for one of those crazies over at Nocturnal Surrender who thinks he’s a vampire.

She trembled but somehow held it together. “Yes, Mr. Delacroix. Is there anything in particular he asked for?”

“Do you remember what I told you during training, that sometimes customers from Nocturnal Surrender may come here and want *special* services?”

Swallowing hard, she forced herself to speak. “Yes, but—” She bit back the hesitation. This was her job. If she refused, if she had to find another place to work, she might end up in the seedier side of town, doing even worse things to make ends meet. For what she was paid she could let someone bite her and drink her blood, couldn’t she? A shudder tore through her, still she smiled. “Okay, I’d love to meet him and...entertain him.”

“Good. His name is Bastian Evanko, and he’ll be waiting for you in room three. If you have any questions beforehand, just ask one of the more experienced girls. Oh, and don’t forget to take a break afterward if you feel lightheaded at all.” Kade smiled wide then walked away.

She was dizzy already, and she faced a pale version of herself in the mirror—almost as light as her boss. No way could she follow through with this. Worst case scenario, she’d be fired and have to beg her parents to let her move back home. She winced at the thought, especially at her age, but it was better than the alternative of selling her body to make money.

Ginger sauntered over as she pulled on her robe, face flushed slightly from coming off stage. “The first time’s always the hardest. Don’t worry, you’ll get used to it soon enough. You might even enjoy it a little. Those sanguinarians are pretty damn hot most of the time, and they usually tip well.”

Nicole took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I..I don’t think I can do this. A lap dance is one thing, but to...” She shuddered. “Isn’t it creepy that these guys do this?”

“Guys *and* girls.” Ginger ran her slender fingers through her long red locks and winked as if she liked the idea. “Sure, I thought it was weird at first, too, but you’ll see. They’re just like the rest of us, only with the kink of getting off by drinking blood.”

Nicole would have laughed if that statement hadn’t scared the hell out of her. Maybe she should have stayed home on the farm, went to nursing school, and settled down with Lucas Simmons—and had lots of babies—like her parents had wanted. But no, she had to move to the opposite side of Pennsylvania so she could go to the best law school in the state.

Worse yet, she’d found out quickly the only way to make ends meet in such an expensive city was to work in a place like this. She had almost lost her small apartment from working at a local grocery store and only making minimum wage. It was either Club Delacroix or worse if she wanted to prove to her parents she could survive out here and finish college.

Yeah, as if she’d ever make it as a lawyer when she hated arguing any point, no matter how important. Better get used to letting strange men—and women—drink her blood.

She forced a smile and thanked Ginger for the advice then went to meet her first bloodsucking customer. Unfortunately, it was a short walk to the private room where the hulking man waited for her.

At least he was good looking, but his size terrified her. Bulging biceps threatened to rip the sleeves of his blue T-shirt. Judging by those massive thighs, his jeans might split apart at any moment. The guy was all muscle, the body-builder type, and he looked to be nearly a foot taller than her. A man like that could easily force himself on her.

Thank goodness they monitor these rooms.

But it was his silver contacts and prosthetic fangs that made her heart race. What kind of weirdo did this sort of thing? Did he really believe he was a vampire? Did he need psychiatric help?

Remember what Ginger said. It’s only a fetish.

There was nothing to worry about. She’d heard stories of all sorts of strange sexual behaviors. In truth, this happened to be a tame one.

She put on her performance smile, and with her best sex-kitten voice, she cooed, “What would you like, Mr. Evanko?” She skimmed her fingers up and down his shirt, momentarily enthralled by the rippling abs underneath. “I’m all yours.”

He seized her wrist in a vice-like grip. “For starters, you can call me Bastian. Only my brother, Donovan, goes by Mr. Evanko.” Slowly, he moved her hand lower, stopping at his waistline. “Why don’t you tease me a little?”

Crap, he's related to Donovan. That revelation hit her like a blow to the chest. Although his name had sounded familiar, she hadn't put the pieces together before. This customer was the sibling of her boss's best friend. Just what she needed. More pressure. Why did he have to pick her out of all the girls? She was the least experienced, and *way* out of her league with a guy like him.

Bastian cleared his throat, and she snapped her head up to meet his silvery gaze. When he spoke, the tenderness in his voice surprised her. "Don't worry. I know you're new here. I'm a patient man, and my looks can be deceiving. Think of me as a big teddy bear."

Grizzly was more like it.

He loosened his hold, and she dipped her fingers into his pants, wiggling them against the soft patch of hair. She'd done this part a few times before, with normal customers, so she could do it again. Sadly, she had already become accustomed to this part of the job.

She pulled up his shirt with her other hand and played along the washboard she'd revealed. *Like a rock.* The thought piqued her curiosity. She glanced down and noticed something else was hard. *Has to be painful in those tight jeans.*

"Ah, that's it. A little lower." A groan rumbled out of him. His body tensed, as if fighting his own reaction to her touch. Still, his voice was velvety smooth. "Do you like what you see?"

"Mhmm." Yes, she had to play along to make the customer happy, but something about him did appeal to her. Licking her lips, she reached farther until her fingertips brushed his erection. "You really turn me on. I love a muscular man."

At least that much was true. And his cologne smelled good, woody and clean. Long sandy hair framed his chiseled face, accentuating the strong angles.

I can do this. Play around with him a little and nothing else.

Even though the don't-touch-unless-invited policy didn't apply in the private rooms, at least sex wasn't part of the services offered. Although a few of the girls admitted to doing more in these rooms, she didn't have to if she didn't want to. No matter how much larger the tips were she wouldn't subject herself to that.

Could've been worse. She might have ended up with some dirty old man reeking of cigar smoke. Sure, Bastian Evanko liked to pretend he was a vampire and drink human blood—she nearly cringed—but he was decent to look at as long as she ignored the eyes and teeth. If she were completely honest with herself, he was quite sexy.

Another quick touch inside his pants, and he shuddered.

"Do you like that, Bastian?" She slid her other hand down to play with his belt.

He clamped onto her shoulders with his thick fingers, clearly needing to steady himself. "You have no idea how much. It helps to know you're attracted to me, too."

Yeah, if she'd only met him under different circumstances, and if he wasn't paying her for a lap dance, among other things. But she didn't want to think about the blood or she'd never follow through.

"I can tell you're nervous. It's okay. I promise I'll make this as good for you as it is for me." He caressed her cheek and tilted her head up to meet his gaze. "Why don't you let me have a little taste to break the ice, and then you can dance for me before I drink more?"

A shiver rolled over her. There was no holding it back. *This is too crazy.*

She yanked her hand out of his jeans and stumbled backward. The room spun, the walls seemed to close in, and heat spread through her body. For a minute, she feared she might pass out. The seductive background music suddenly thundered in her ears and the low lighting dimmed further.

She leaned against the dance pole and reached behind for support. Her heart threatened to jump out of her chest, and her rapid breaths were shallow.

This hadn't happened to her in a long time. She'd gotten over her panic attacks years ago. But this one slammed into her full force. A few more seconds and she would hyperventilate.

Muscular arms encompassed her. "It's all right, Nikki. I've got you." Bastian lifted her, and she released the pole then latched onto his neck. "That's it, you're fine. Everything will be okay."

She squeezed her eyes closed to keep the room from spinning and gave herself over to him. Under any other circumstance she'd never allow a stranger to do this, but something about him comforted her. Maybe it was the soothing quality of his deep voice, or his protective and powerful embrace. Whatever the case, she didn't open her eyes until she was on the couch, sitting sideways on his lap.

Her anxiety had lessened in those few seconds, but some dizziness remained until her breathing steadied and she regained her composure. Now she wished there weren't cameras in these rooms. She'd surely be fired for this. No matter how understanding Bastian was, Kade ran the place with an iron fist. He would never put up with a stripper having a meltdown on a customer—and with an Evanko, no less.

Bastian rubbed circles on her back as she clung to him, shaking slightly. Maybe he *was* just a big teddy bear.

"Why are you here? It's obvious this isn't the right career for you." Bastian's compassionate tone and gentle caresses made Nicole believe he actually cared.

"I...I can do this, but I need a minute."

He looked into her eyes. "I know you *can*. The problem is you don't *want* to. Why take a job like this?"

"There's no other way to afford living here *and* paying for college, at least not without compromising *all* my values." She hated how cliché that sounded, but she'd truly had no choice. Working at a grocery store obviously hadn't cut it, and she wasn't qualified to do anything else. The circumstances of the past had put her farther behind in the career department than most twenty-four year olds.

Finally, her heart rate returned to normal. "I'm sorry. I understand if you want to stop. I'll find you another dancer."

"That won't be necessary." This time, his voice had a sinister undertone. "It has to be you. I can't explain why."

She tried to get up, but he wouldn't release her. One arm clamped around her waist held her immobile while the other hand pushed her hair off her shoulder, leaving it exposed except for the thin strap of her bra. Smooth fingers glided along her skin, sending a chill through her. When they came to rest on her neck, she noticed his gaze had focused there, as well.

The panic stirred again, but she held it back. If anything went wrong, the bouncers would rush in. Safety always came first at Delacroix. It had been drilled into all the employees' heads.

Then why didn't she believe it now? And why had her opinion of Bastian changed so fast? The look in his eyes, however much she could tell with those contacts, went from caring to lethal in an instant.

Her body tensed. She wanted to scream, but what if her inexperience made the situation seem worse than it really was?

Maybe she could salvage her job if she played her cards right.

One bite might not be so bad.

THREE

Nicole relaxed, and to her surprise, tilted her head to offer herself.

Bastian's stare never wavered from the spot on her neck, though the fierce intensity softened. His gentle demeanor returned. Maybe it had been there all along.

She'd read him wrong, imagined the whole thing. It had simply been her anxiety and her imagination getting the best of her. She had no idea why he'd said it had to be her that he did this with, but some of the other girls had told her of customers fixating on one dancer at times. It wasn't out of the ordinary and was normally harmless.

There's nothing to be afraid of.

He leaned closer, threaded his fingers through her curls, and pulled her to him.

The fine hairs on her skin stood at attention, and her pulse quickened once more. Warm lips feathered over her sensitive flesh, his tongue licking a hot trail along her throat.

She didn't know what to make of the zing of excitement it caused within her. That hadn't happened before, although he was only the fourth person she'd serviced in a private room.

He unfastened her bra and tossed it to the floor then moved his large hand to massage her breast. A few seconds later, he gently tugged at her nipple.

Moisture pooled between her legs, creating an aching need that threw her off balance further. If only he would touch her there...

But why was she letting him get to her? Although some of the other dancers enjoyed themselves in these rooms, took as much pleasure as they gave, she wasn't like that. Something about him drew her in, made her feel things she wasn't quite comfortable with.

She reminded herself of what Ginger had told her before. *There's no shame in a woman enjoying a man, or another woman for that matter. And there's nothing wrong with being sexual and fulfilling our own needs.*

She certainly had needs. The pressure of his lips on her neck, and when they dipped lower to the upper curve of her breast, elicited a moan from deep within her, attesting to that very fact.

Suddenly, she remembered *she* should be doing something. It was her job to satisfy him, not the other way around. She slid her hands under his shirt. *God, those abs.*

She teased him, slipping her fingers inside the top of his jeans again. He grunted and shifted beneath her, pressing his erection into her rear.

A primal urge took over. Without thinking, she straddled his lap. She could definitely get into this part of the job, at least with certain customers. Grinding on him to the rhythm of the music, she made certain the bulge in his jeans hit the perfect spot.

A small sting at her breast grabbed her attention.

He'd grazed her skin with his fangs but thankfully hadn't drawn blood. "I can do this. I can remain in control." He whispered against her skin, sucking in a breath and trembling as if he were actually on the verge of *losing* control.

Not wanting to let on she'd heard him, she continued moving, pushing down against him.

Was he unstable? Should she be afraid?

No. Kade wouldn't have allowed him in here with her if that were the case. Bastian was an Evanko, after all. With such a respectable brother as Donovan, he had to be a good person, as well. She had to trust her boss' judgement as the others did.

She was safe.

Focusing on the feel of him, his hands, his impressive body beneath her, the hardness in his jeans, she gave in once more to the pleasure of the situation.

Why not when she'd lived so much of her life holding back, doing what everyone else expected? She was tired of being the good girl.

Just once, she longed to let go and see what happened. She vowed at that moment to see where this little erotic escapade with Bastian Evanko would take her. She was in control in this room.

She was in control of her life.

He clutched her hips and helped her keep time with the music—and their moans. His teeth scraped along her throat. Their bodies molded together, and he bit down with a groan.

He stiffened again, riding that edge of his own control she now believed she understood. He'd most likely have been told Nicole only played and didn't go all the way. He fought his obvious desire so as not to push the situation too far.

He slowly pulled in a mouthful of her blood. She gasped. Slight pain gave way to intense pleasure as he sucked. The strangest sensations flooded her body. The long draw tugging at her flesh. The tingling ache between her legs. She swore she could even feel a surge of power emanating from him.

His fingers slithered up her side, sending a shudder through her. The combination of sensations made her feel more alive, more aroused than ever before.

She'd never been with anyone who compared to him physically. Just the thought of all that brute force taking her, driving into her, had her so wet she barely controlled herself. She just wanted to lose herself in something taboo.

Would it be so awful to give in?

Rocking on his lap, she wondered how much longer she could hold off her orgasm. Another minute of this and she would surely—

He pulled back abruptly. "I have to stop before you pass out." The rasp in his voice surprised her. Apparently he was close to the edge, too.

Between panting breaths, she managed to speak. "I'm lightheaded, but...I don't think it's...from loss of blood."

A mischievous grin lit up his face. "That's good to hear." He shifted under her. "Uh...can you stand up yet? I need to adjust. These jeans are uncomfortable."

Nicole nodded and stood, a little wobbly on her feet. Before she moved away, Bastian seized her hips, leaned forward, and took her panties between his teeth with a growl. Her core throbbed, begging for more. She remembered the sensual heat when his mouth had played over her neck, and now she wanted it somewhere else.

No, don't go there. I have a job to do. He doesn't have to take care of me. "I owe you a dance— Oh!" Her eyes almost rolled back as his tongue swept down under the lace, nearly touching her clit.

In one fluid motion, he pulled the fabric to the floor, and she stood naked before him. The gleam in his eyes was predatory, the kind of look she'd been taught to identify in self-defense class. This time, there was no denying it. Goosebumps rose along her skin, and the gut feeling she should run took over.

She fought to stay in the room. Leaving wasn't an option. He'd done nothing wrong. It was her job to strip for him. He had simply moved the process along at his own pace. The lick was easy to overlook.

“The things I could do to you would make your head spin.” Bastian’s smile showed off his fangs.

“I’m pretty sure you already did that.” *Or was it the anxiety? I can’t even think straight anymore.*

Heat enveloped her. Under his intense stare, she felt overexposed. She moved her hands to cover herself, but he clasped her wrists.

“You are far too beautiful to be shy. And like you said, you still have to dance for me. Unless you’re dizzy.” He paused until she shook her head. “I must say, your blood is sweeter than any I’ve tasted in a long time.” He stood and touched her cheek. “It has to be your innocence.”

“I’m not innocent.” She stroked the bulge in his pants to prove her point. “I’m woman enough to please you.”

He licked his fangs, his tongue gliding sensuously from one to the other. “Mm, I have no doubt. But unless I’m mistaken, sex isn’t part of the services here.”

Why had she said that? What was she thinking? She was completely nude, fondling a customer, and offering far more than she should have.

Can I screw this up any worse?

How could he unnerve her so badly? It wasn’t only her inexperience as a stripper. Something about him screamed danger, but he’d done nothing overt enough to warrant accusations. At the same time, he felt safe in some strange way. Plus, she was inexplicably attracted to him, wanted him even though she hardly knew him. Hell, she had no idea what might have happened if he hadn’t reminded her where they were.

When she realized her hand remained on his crotch, she jerked it away. “I’ll give you that dance and let you go before you’re charged for extra time.”

“I’m just afraid if we’re alone in here much longer I might take you up on that other offer.” He caressed her breast then leaned down and sucked on her nipple for a long, sensual moment. “It’s been a while since I’ve had the pleasure of a woman’s body.”

He flicked his tongue over the hardened nub, and she grabbed his hair, holding him to her. She should stop this before it went too far, but her body pulsated with desire. Arching into him, a moan escaped her lips. As if in response, his other hand slid from her hip, trailing lightly down her overly-stimulated flesh until it reached the sweet spot.

His fingers moved in a dizzying circle over her clit while his mouth continued working its magic on her breast, the occasional fang scrape adding to her pleasure. Electricity shot through her. She reached down, rubbing his jeans firmly and wishing he was inside her.

A second later, his fingers dipped into her. She gasped then eased her legs farther apart to give him full access. A tingling sensation built deep within and rolled over her body.

She ripped thoughtlessly at his T-shirt and pulled it over his head as they paused their ministrations long enough to get the unwanted material out of the way.

She was actually going to go through with this. She was going to allow this stranger to have his way with her.

Correction. She would have her way with him.

She felt empowered for the first time in her life.

His fingers quickly found her core again. For a moment, she could have sworn he’d moved with unnatural speed, but it had to be the lighting, and the passion fogging her brain.

She reached back to his waistline and undid the belt, the button, and finally the zipper. A second later she followed the light trail of hair down and slipped her hand inside the confined space.

She closed her fingers around his hard length. His breathing hitched in response.

Holy hell, he's huge.

Stroking his thickness, she tipped her head back, and he claimed her mouth with a fiery kiss. His tongue mimicked the motions of his fingers, in and out, as waves of pleasure washed over her. Her bottom lip burned slightly from his sharp fangs so she opened her mouth wider to ease the pressure.

He pulled out of her and left her with a sudden emptiness. She prayed he wouldn't stop this time, but when he slid his pants down, she feared she might get her wish.

With full access to his shaft, her strokes elongated, and he groaned in response. After stepping out of his shoes, then his jeans and boxer briefs, he turned her to the couch. He guided her until her legs met the cushions and she sat. Faced with his girth, she swallowed the lump in her throat. Before she attempted to suck him in, he laid her back and lowered his massive frame onto her, his erection pressing against her wet entrance.

FOUR

Bastian hardly believed an angel like Nikki wanted him. The bastard, the rogue who shouldn't have been allowed to live. The killer. But then, she didn't know about the atrocities he'd committed in the past. For that matter, she had no idea *what* he truly was.

Yes, there had been moments when she'd seen through his mortal charade and recognized the predator within. He'd heard her thoughts, scented and felt her fear. Sad thing was it only fueled his desire. She had to be so strong to fight the instinct to flee when faced with the devil.

Her innocence and strength somehow made it possible for him to control the monster within, to rein in the hunger and not tear out her throat. He'd worried when he watched her enter the room if he would be able to remain in control, but it hadn't taken him long to realize the damsel in distress would be his savior. Her inner turmoil gave him something to focus on outside himself.

He needed her to sooth him.

He had to have her, to claim her for his own.

Looking into her sapphire eyes, he ached for more than just sex. He needed love, but a woman like her wouldn't accept his life. He'd heard as much in her thoughts.

Besides, would he even be able to trust again after what happened with Elise?

His body tensed and he clenched his fists, overwhelmed with the urge to find that son of a bitch, Rosenbaum. His vision narrowed for hunting mode, threatening to black out everything except his prey.

But his target wasn't there. He couldn't allow the rage to take over, not with Nikki in the line of fire.

A deep breath of her intoxicating scent soothed him rather than making the hunger take over, and the room slowly opened up. The soft contours of her body under his, her warmth and wetness, were all he needed to quiet his inner beast.

She reached up and brushed the hair out of his face then cradled his cheek. "As much as I want this, we have to stop. There are cameras recording. I can't handle the thought of someone seeing this. Besides, we need protection."

He listened as her mind raced with conflict between wanting him and wondering if it was a sin to give in.

How could he tell her the story about the cameras probably wasn't true? No way would a vamp have video evidence in case anything went wrong. The Elders wouldn't allow it. More than likely, it was merely something Kade told his strippers to make them feel secure.

And how could he explain why they didn't need a condom? Most of his bodily functions—including the production of semen—had been left behind almost a thousand years ago.

But with his cock poised to slide into her wet pussy, could he stop even if he wanted to?

Fuck, he was a vampire, after all. Since when did he worry about mortals? So what if she lost her job for this, or feared she'd become pregnant? He only needed to move slightly to slide deep inside her. To feel her warmth clamp down on him would be—

Her soft fingers skimmed down his shoulder, and her eyes darkened with obvious concern. "What's wrong? Are you angry with me for not wanting to follow through? I hadn't thought about the cameras at first. I didn't mean to lead you on. If we weren't here, and I wasn't working, then maybe..."

Damn, her angelic voice melted his cold heart. “Why don’t we go somewhere else? What time do you get off?”

She laughed. “Well, actually, I almost did a few minutes ago.”

“Yeah, me too.” And he was still rock hard and close to the edge with her lithe body beneath him, her slickness against his cock.

Just another inch.

Why didn’t he take her? It would be easy to bend her will, control her mind, and make her think she’d agreed from the beginning. Or afterward, have her forget it ever happened. If the room *was* monitored, he’d surely be able to convince Kade he had taken over and not given her a choice.

Then why did he move off her and help her up?

When she stood and looked into his eyes, he had his answer. Just once he wanted someone to look at him as something more than a fuck up and see the man he used to be. The man he wished he could be again.

To consider him worth loving.

Stupid son of a bitch. That would last about a second after she realized vampires *did* exist and he was one of them. She’d run screaming in terror after that wonderful revelation.

Oh, and by the way, I’m a murderer. Yep, I suck the fucking life right out of people—literally. Not funny? Why?

If he told her, the look in her eyes would morph from innocent affection to disgust and fear. There would be no chance of a real connection between them, and he’d have to go back to his lonely, miserable existence.

A warm hand, a feather-soft touch, trailed along his chest. He shuddered as the throbbing in his cock returned with a vengeance. His heartbeat pounded in his ears, drowning out the music in the background.

Angel.

No other word sufficed. And nothing could stop him from claiming her.

He would have her surrender to him, to give herself over completely, and freely, to his demands. She’d be his by sunrise.

Lifting her delicate hand to his mouth, he nipped and kissed her skin as she giggled.

“Sorry. It tickled— Oh!” When he pulled her close, Nikki let out a feral moan then breathily murmured, “You said something about...going somewhere else?”

The warmth of her belly against his erection made his body quake with animal lust. The scent of her arousal filled his nostrils, overpowering the scent of her blood. She was his for the taking.

He devoured her mouth, his tongue plunging into steamy wetness. His fangs pierced her plump lip—how he’d love to feel her suck in his hard length—and her precious blood oozed. Only a few drops emerged, but it was enough to push his desire over the edge. Instead of spiking his hunger, it spiked his yearning for her.

He pulled back from their kiss with a growl. “I need you now. Don’t worry, I can’t get you pregnant, and Kade will turn a blind eye to whatever happens in here. I promise it’ll be all right.”

Her dizziness, most likely from the blood fleeing her head to gather lower, swept over him as if it were his own. Hell, maybe part of it was.

She bit her lip and her body stiffened. Her nails dug into his back. He couldn’t help but give her a little nudge of encouragement by grinding into her, reminding her of what she could have.

After another moan, her gaze locked with his. A slight nod of agreement was all he needed to back her down onto the couch again.

“Nikki, tell me you want me.” He pressed his cock against the moist heat between her thighs and groaned as his shaft slipped downward, toying with her slick opening. If she hesitated another second, he would explode.

Grasping his hair, she pulled him closer. “Call me Nicole. I don’t want you using my performance name.”

He had grown to like her stage persona, Darling Nikki, *and* the Prince reference, but the fact she wanted him to know her so intimately made him tremble inside. “Nicole, do you want me to make love to you?”

This time, she licked her lips and ran her nails down his back with such a light touch it sent shivers through his body. Accidentally, maybe, he moved slightly and the head of his cock dipped into her. She gasped and leaned up to kiss him, giving him her answer as she wriggled beneath him.



A fleeting lucid thought rolled through Nicole’s mind. *How can I do this here, with a total stranger?*

But when Bastian shifted his weight, his muscles flexing under her fingers, and he inched inside her a little more, the thought fled.

As his tongue swept into her mouth, she lost all sense of reason. His hungry kiss fueled the fire within her. Another small shift of his hips and his shaft slid in a bit farther. He teased her, gently pushing down and deepening the empty ache she needed him to fill.

For too long he simply remained there, torturing her. The warmth of his hardness stretching her made her writhe beneath him. Maybe if she wiggled enough she’d drive him crazy so he would put an end to her agony. Her core pulsed and tingled with his slight movements, and she almost broke away from their kiss to yell at him to fuck her already.

It was the most liberating feeling she’d ever known.

She wrapped her legs around him, attempting to pull him closer, to force him in completely and ease her longing, but he was an immovable mountain.

He continued the relentless onslaught with his tongue. She whimpered. If she could have spoken, she would have begged.

Without warning, he plunged fully into her, filling her more than any man before. She squeezed his shoulders and tensed in response to the pressure. When he began keeping rhythm with the suggestive music pumping in the background, she let out a deep moan.

God, he feels so good.

Within seconds, she adjusted to his size and relaxed, joining in the sensual cadence. He took her slowly at first, drawing out each thrust, sending waves of pleasure through her body. But soon, he growled and pushed into her harder, faster.

She needed oxygen so she pulled away from his demanding lips, sucked in a few rapid breaths, and let out her own primal sounds as he slammed into her repeatedly. “Oh, Bastian...”

A wicked grin lit up his face. “You’re so wet and tight. Damn, you feel like heaven.”

He groaned, drove into her farther, and leaned down, taking her nipple into his mouth. He licked and flicked it with his tongue, and then bit down around it, drinking from her for precious seconds.

Somehow the slight burn of her blood being taken heightened her pleasure to an immeasurable level. She dug her nails into his shoulders, knuckles sore from the effort. Arching

into him, she whispered his name. Fangs scored the upper curve of her breast as he slowed his pace, making the blissful moments last longer.

He feathered kisses along her chest and upward toward her neck. The soft touches almost tickled. Wriggling under him, she tilted her head to the side, needing his bite.

How can I want something so animalistic?

His fangs glided into her flesh, and he drank in a mouthful of her blood. Warmth encompassed her from having him so close, his hard length deep inside her, and his mouth locked onto her.

She clawed at his back. "Harder, Bastian... Yes..."

Once more, he quickened his thrusts, deepened them, giving her what she begged for. Time after time, the head of his shaft hit the sensitive spot deep within, sending shockwaves to her toes.

Unable to hold out any longer, she gave herself over to him. Muscles clenching in her core, she quaked in ecstasy, yelling his name. Rhythmic spasms rolled over her, and she lifted her hips even higher to meet his, attempting to wring out every second of her climax.

His body shook with hers, and he growled against her skin as his own orgasm took hold. He released her neck and pushed himself upward, slamming into her repeatedly.

A few moments later, he slowed his pace, easing in and out, sating the leftover aching desire.

Her body had never experienced anything so intense.

Finally he stilled, and after a couple of seconds of heavy breathing, moved to the side, resting some of his weight on the couch. He gently brushed a stray hair out of her face. "I don't want this to end here. Can I see you again?"

She let out a contented sigh and nodded. "I'd like that." It made her feel less sleazy to know this wasn't just a one night stand.

Ginger had warned her not to get too close to the customers, reminding her this was just a job. She'd thought she would never have such an issue, but with Bastian, she did. She wanted to see him outside of work, to get to know him properly.

After all, he wasn't some lecherous pig off the street who only wanted to jack off to the dancers. He was an Evanko.

He cradled her cheek and leaned in for a kiss. His tongue lingered inside her mouth, his fangs teasing her tender lip.

Trailing her fingertips over his bicep, she melted into his embrace.

She needed a man like Bastian. Someone to take charge, be forceful, protect her in this crazy city, but still treat her with respect and give her a loving touch.

Am I fooling myself? She didn't want to know right now. She'd rather enjoy her exhausted bliss and the feel of his cushion-soft lips.

FIVE

Bastian had just finished tucking in his T-shirt when someone knocked. He inhaled, recognizing Kade's overbearing cologne. Only a small whiff earlier had been enough to burn the pungent odor into his memory. Something about Kade's Prince-of-Darkness attitude rubbed him the wrong way.

Still, he remained civil when he opened the door for the club's owner. "Any sooner and you would have spoiled my fun."

Kade glanced at the couch where Nicole lay recovering, and then shifted his gaze back to Bastian, crinkling his nose. "You smell of sex. That is not part of our services. I run a respectable business." His brows furrowed. "You should be ashamed of yourself for taking advantage of poor little Nikki."

The unspoken implication that Nicole would never offer herself to him freely—although understandable from the little Bastian knew of her—pissed him off.

Fists clenched, he bit back anger. "What makes you think I took advantage of her?"

Releasing a mocking laugh, Kade dragged his condescending glare up and down Bastian's body. "Look at you. You're not exactly the kind of man who makes women swoon. And don't forget, I know about your past exploits. You can't expect me to think you've started playing by the rules all of the sudden. Donovan may believe your sorry ass, but men like you never change. Why don't you do everyone a favor and go back to whatever hole you crawled out of?"

If it weren't for the sexual euphoria pumping through his veins, Bastian would have torn Kade's head off. Well, that and the fact Nicole slept only feet away. He couldn't bear the thought of her seeing that side of him.

Maybe her blood had calmed him somehow because he'd never held his temper so easily in the past. Although visions of beating the fuck out of the arrogant bastard flitted across his mind, there was no urge to act.

He truly was in control, after all.

Nothing could spoil this night for him, not even Kade. He curled the corners of his lips upward and grunted.

Kade raised a dark brow. "What in the hell are you grinning about?"

Without any thought, Bastian smacked him on the arm. "Nothing you need to worry your black, shriveled heart over." He glanced at the angel on the couch before leaving the room.

As he made his way to his brother's table, he couldn't help but marvel at his new-found restraint. What kind of magic had Darling Nikki worked on him?

He'd barely had a chance to sit before Kade strode over.

Kade scowled at Bastian, and then turned to Donovan. "I think it would be best if you didn't bring him here anymore, and if he left. *Now.*"

Donovan shot Bastian a scrutinizing glance. "What did he do this time?" No fear shone through the casual demeanor he showed his friend, but Bastian could tell his brother wondered if poor Darling Nikki still had a pulse.

Though ready to defend himself, Bastian paused, his mind drifting to Nicole. He leaned back, waiting to see how this would play out.

Kade took a seat next to Donovan. "Look at the conceited prick. I should wipe that smugness off his face. He comes in here and defiles one of my dancers then has the audacity to pretend he

didn't force her to have sex with him. Huh. As if a woman pure as Nikki would want anything to do with a fuck up like him."

Donovan sat quietly for a moment, his baby face impossible to read.

Bastian peeked at the stage but was too sated—in every way—to enjoy the view. *Hell, I'd never thought that possible.* The jiggling boobs, most of which were obviously fake, and tight asses so close he could almost reach out and touch them, barely registered. His cock lay lifeless, and he quickly refocused on his brother.

Donovan's huge smile surprised him, but his words shocked him. "You know what, Kade, I believe him for once. Come on, you've got to admit he would have torn into your throat by now if he hadn't changed. Look at him. That's not smugness, that's serenity. I might finally have my little brother back."

The chair almost fell backward as Kade stood. "Fine. Believe whatever you want, but don't come to me for consolation when you have to incinerate his drained carcass after he gets in trouble again."

As Kade strutted away, Donovan stared at Bastian. "If he's right, if you're still up to no good, this will be the last chance I ever give you."

Though he understood his brother's distrust, Bastian's gut tightened and his heart ached, but only for a moment. He had other concerns now. Nicole would be through with her shift soon, and he didn't want anything to stop him from seeing her. Maybe he could take her to Nocturnal Surrender, buy her a drink, and get to know her better...before he fucked her again. Revealing his secret to her would have to wait. Give her a chance to see him as a man first, maybe even love him, and then he would tell her he was a vampire.

I hope to hell she doesn't turn her back on me like—

Donovan's voice snapped him out of his daydream. "Hey, I mean it. For this to work, you've got a lot to prove. I'm still responsible for you. It's my neck on the line here, too. If you want to stay in Lansford, you're going to do it on my terms."

Without much effort, Bastian kept his voice level. "What *terms* did you have in mind?"

Donovan spelled them out, palm thudding against the table. "First, you will work for me so I can keep an eye on you. I need another bartender anyway. Second, after we leave here, don't come back, not even for her. If you must meet her, do it at my nightclub or somewhere else."

"Agreed...on both." Bastian liked the idea of being close to Donovan on a regular basis, and he had no intention of frequenting Club Delacroix any time soon.

He reached out to seal the deal, but Donovan shook his head. "That's not all, little brother. Third, and most important, remember, Christof is one of my best friends—and a loyal customer—so you will let go of this petty grudge of yours and treat him with respect when he comes into Surrender. Understood?"

Bastian's skin crawled. *Petty grudge?* Christof Rosenbaum had killed Elise.

No. He wouldn't let it go, but he could play the part until the right opportunity presented itself.

One day Rosenbaum will care about someone like I did Elise. Then I'll have my vengeance, even if it takes centuries.

When a splintering sound echoed over the music, he realized he held the end of the table in a death grip. Releasing it, he nodded, and through gritted teeth, conceded. "Agreed."

Another hour and a few drinks later, Club Delacroix closed and Bastian waited at the back door for Nicole. Luckily, Nocturnal Surrender would be open for a few more hours, skirting dawn by mere minutes.



Nicole almost jumped out of her skin when someone grabbed her arm as she stepped out of the back door to the employee parking lot. Heartbeat pounding, she looked up at Bastian's vampiric features and slapped his broad chest. "You scared the life out of me."

He caressed her cheek then slid his hand around her head and moved in for a kiss, nearly bruising her already-sore lips. She melted in his arms. Something about him made her stomach quiver like she was a teenager staring at the star of the wrestling team.

With all the will she could muster, she pulled away, mostly to catch her breath. He'd said he wanted to see her again, and he had asked when she finished work, but she never expected him to wait for her.

Her body tensed with the same inexplicable apprehension she'd had in the private room. She clenched her jaw and eased backward, hoping he would let her go, which he thankfully did.

Was he stalking her? Should she run? Scream for help? The logical part of her wanted to get the hell out of there while she could, but an irresistible longing tugged at her heart. For some reason she ached for him. Not from her own desires, though. More like she was staring at a puppy who'd been beaten one too many times and needed someone to show him love.

Grizzly or teddy bear? God, she hoped he was a teddy bear.

If eyes covered by silver contacts were capable of projecting warmth, his did. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to frighten you. I only wanted to surprise you and invite you to my brother's nightclub so we can get to know each other properly."

She needed to find a way out of this without hurting him, or making him angry. "Isn't it closed by now?"

His grin showed off the square line of his jaw, shadowed with stubble. "It's a *vampire* club, it doesn't close until dawn."

Great, that didn't work. "I thought you guys preferred to be called sanguinarians."

"Depends on who you ask." Running his fingers through his golden hair, he could have passed for a Greek god as his muscles flexed and the light above the door cast an ethereal glow around him.

The last of the girls exited Delacroix, and of course, Ginger was the one to speak. "Hey, Nikki, come on. Let's get going. We all leave together, remember. I can't believe you came out here alone." Her gaze swept over Bastian, appearing to size him up.

Instinctively, Nicole jumped to his defense. "It's okay. This is Donovan Evanko's brother, Bastian. He's safe." *I think.*

The four other women swarmed Bastian, ogling him. There were giggles and soft touches, hair tossed back or twirled around long slender fingers, and eyelashes batted.

She tightened her fists and bit her lip. *How pitiful. They practically threw themselves at him just because of his name.* If they didn't stop, she might lose her supper.

Most of the girls made no secret that they frequented Nocturnal Surrender, and a chance to have Donovan Evanko drink their blood was the ultimate prize. Apparently they were willing to settle for any Evanko.

Nicole suspected her own boss drank from some of the strippers, too. There were hints and innuendos, but nobody came right out and admitted to anything—probably because of the possibility of a sexual harassment claim. No matter the reason, she'd wanted nothing to do with any of that.

Freaks pretending to be vampires. Sanguinarians. Whatever they call themselves.

But...with Bastian, she did want it. She hadn't realized it until jealousy sprang from nowhere, and now those tramps needed to get their paws off him.

She pushed her way through the women and seized Bastian's hand. "Sorry girls, we have to head over to Nocturnal Surrender. I'll see you later."

A wide smile lit up Bastian's face. "She's right ladies. We're late for our date."

Oversized breasts seemed to immediately deflate, and the dancers said their goodbyes. Unintelligible whispers filled the air as they sulked to their cars, most likely wondering how the new and inexperienced girl got the man.

Nicole held her head high. She'd received the prize the others had coveted. Bastian wanted her. Maybe she was crazy to do this, but if he came from such a respected family, he had to be safe.

Still, her gut tightened when he walked her to her car, though she did her best to ignore it. After all, what harm would there be in going with him to a public place?

She situated herself in the seat of her silver Focus.

"I'll see you at Surrender." He winked and closed the door for her.

She stared at his muscular back and thighs as he strutted to the side lot where Donovan waited by a black Escalade.

Nocturnal Surrender was only a few neon and bright-light-laden blocks away on the Lansford Strip, and the decreased traffic at this time of night made the drive seem even shorter.

She pulled into a parking spot in front of the Gothic club but barely had a chance to turn off the engine before Bastian stood at her door, offering an arm to escort her in.

Chivalry isn't dead, it just likes to think it's undead. She held in a giggle.

Inside, Nicole tried not to stare at the *vampires* drinking blood from the necks and wrists of enthusiastic donors. Since moving to town she had heard stories of what happened at the club but never dreamt they were true.

Raising her hand to the sore spots on her throat, she cringed at the thought of all she'd done tonight.

This really was another Sin City. Her parents had warned her, begged her not to move to Lansford. Her father's words repeated in her head. "*Places like that have a way of infecting you with their filth.*"

But she'd thought she knew better and had sworn that wouldn't happen to her. Now she sat in a crimson booth, next to a black pleather-covered wall, in a large room illuminated only by low wattage sconces and flickering candles—in *The Nightclub with a Bite*.

She didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

The waitress came to take their orders. Nicole looked up into her silvery gaze and another wave of apprehension hit, that strange self-preservation instinct kicking in again. She tensed. Even the hairs on her neck stood up.

Why the hell did she feel so vulnerable? If she were in a dark alley she would have understood, but in a semi-full nightclub it made no sense. This wasn't some dive bar. It happened to be one of the most hyped establishments in Lansford. The must see place, even if only to check out the freak show.

Bastian's deep voice pulled her from her thoughts. "Nicole, are you okay?"

She turned to him and realized he'd moved closer, his arm resting behind her on the seatback. "I'm fine. I've just never been here before."

After ordering, she focused on the gaudy sign behind the bar. “This place is very...um...unique.”

“Yeah, I have to hand it to Donovan. He really did well for himself.” The waitress came back with their drinks, and Bastian took a quick swig of his beer. “And now, I’m going to be working here. I guess this place needs another bartender. You’ll be seeing a lot more of me, if you want to.”

That statement sounded more like a question. *But how should I answer?* She wiped her sweaty palms on her jeans as the blasting rock music grated on her nerves.

He cocked his head to the side. “You do want to, don’t you? I know we were caught up in the moment, but we both said we didn’t want things to end in that room.”

Had she changed her mind? For that matter, had she meant it when she’d said it? She was reeling from an incredible orgasm—and blood loss—at the time. The last thing she wanted was a relationship. She needed to focus on college. Her future came first.

But when Bastian slipped his arm around her waist, every inch of her body tingled with desire. She licked her lips at the hunger in his eyes and allowed him to pull her closer.

Maybe, just maybe, she could find time for him.

Hell, who was she kidding? She definitely would.

Pushing her fears aside, she smiled. “Yes, I do want to.”

With that, his mouth enveloped hers. His tongue plunged in deep. He held her tight, and heat flooded her core. Her fingers slid into his thick hair, and she surrendered to him completely.

She looked forward to getting to know him better, but for now, all she wanted was to find another private room.

SIX

Bastian kissed Nicole with all the passion he'd kept locked inside for the last two hundred years. He held her tighter, and she moaned. Their tongues plundered each other's mouths, battling for dominance as if the intimacy were necessary to survive.

When he finally released her lips, he realized why he'd truly allowed himself to have sex with her so quickly. It wasn't that he hadn't been with a woman since receiving his sentence, but part of the terms of his exile had required he have no contact with people. He'd only taken the chance to rebel a handful of times, and had been lucky he wasn't caught.

But it *had* been over fifty years since the last time he'd known a woman well enough to have sex. Hiding his activities from the Elders and their Enforcers had grown difficult with increasing technology so he'd played it safe. What man could hold back after all those years? Donovan must not have thought it through before taking Bastian to a strip club, especially one that offered vampires special services.

He watched the soft rise and fall of Nicole's breasts as her breathing calmed. She reached for her iced tea with a trembling hand and took a long drink.

The minute he had noticed her on stage he felt the good in her. Sleeping with him so fast was definitely out of character. So why had she? Vampires didn't have any powers of attraction like some books and movies portrayed. Not unless they intentionally manipulated someone's mind.

When he ran his fingers through her long dark hair, she quickly put down her glass and looked up at him.

Was that longing in her eyes? No, longing wasn't exactly the feeling he got from her. But what was it? Temptation gnawed at his brain. Listening to her thoughts would be so easy. For some reason, though, he fought the urge.

Huh, that's not like me. What is she doing to me? He sat quiet for a moment. *Say something, idiot.*

He cleared his throat. "So what made you decide to go to law school?"

"It's a long story, and painful to talk about, but..." She frowned and furrowed her brows. "Wait a minute. I don't remember telling you what I was going to college for."

Fuck. That's what I get for invading her thoughts earlier.

What the hell could he say? His pulse raced. He needed to come up with something quick. Then, from the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of Kade swaggering in.

Perfect. Never thought I'd be glad to see that asshole.

Luckily, another thing Bastian had picked from Nicole's mind was the fact she'd told her boss what she studied at Lansford University.

"Uh, I think Kade must have mentioned something about it. And speak of the devil." Bastian nodded toward Kade as he rounded the bar, obviously headed for Donovan's office.

Nicole glanced at Kade, seemingly shaken from seeing him. "You know...I have to admit I'm not comfortable here yet. Heck, I grew up in the country. I've never even been to Philadelphia, and it's a lot closer to home than this." She looked down at her glass and thumbed it nervously. "Everything here freaks me out. Probably sounds crazy to you."

Not crazy, but different from his experience. Bastian had travelled extensively in Europe before his exile, and he'd been all over the United States in the last two centuries. Immortality

had many advantages. Time to see the world was one of them. Those years would have been even more torturous if not for his exploration of this new land where he'd been banished.

The country was harsh in the beginning but offered stunning scenery. And since he had only been allowed to feed on animals, he bonded with nature's brutality and reveled in its savage beauty. Although he hadn't fed on people often, only breaking the rules of his sentence when he was certain he could hide it, he'd felt more in touch with his inner vampire over those years.

As the population grew and large cities sprang up, he had been driven farther into the wilderness like the animals he depended on for nourishment. He'd isolated himself more, unsure how to hide his true nature if he came in contact with a large source of the sustenance he truly craved. It had been a long road back to civilization over the last few months, and he hadn't shown up in Lansford until he could control the bloodlust—or so he had thought.

Nicole's soft voice pulled him back to the present. "Bastian, are you okay?"

He took a drink of beer and stroked her hair. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just lost in thought for a minute."

If she knew what he was thinking, she'd run screaming bloody murder.

A brewing argument at the next booth caught his attention before one of the bouncers swooped in and took control of the situation. Nicole apparently hadn't noticed due to the loud music, but since the spat was so close, Bastian picked it up with his heightened hearing.

He shifted his focus back to her. "And it isn't crazy to have not had the opportunity to travel. But I can see how a city like this would be hard to get used to if you've lived in the country all your life." In truth, it wasn't easy for Bastian, either. "The way I see it, you're lucky."

She stared at him, looking puzzled. "How so?"

"You haven't been exposed to the atrocities of the world, other than on TV, of course. Hopefully your town was quiet and peaceful, with great neighbors and cookouts and pool parties." He'd seen towns like that on his way from his last haven in the wilds of Montana. Nothing bad ever happened in those places.

Her eyes sparkled before welling with tears. "It was, for the most part."

Pain radiated from her once more, and Bastian remembered what she'd said when he asked why she wanted to be a lawyer.

Might be best not to ask what went wrong. "Tell me about the good parts...if you want to."

She sipped her drink then breathed deep. "Well, what can I say? It was all those things you mentioned. I loved to go for walks and see the wildlife. The deer were my favorite. I could get pretty close to them if I went out on a regular basis so they knew I wasn't a threat. Sometimes, I would lay on the ground by the neighbor's pond and watch the clouds roll by while the ducks swam. I loved the feel of the earth under me, the soft grass under my fingers."

Joy radiated from her. She paused for a moment, took another drink, and then looked back to Bastian. Her smile was enchanting.

"My family was close so we did have big pool parties, especially for the Fourth of July. All the neighbors were involved, and everyone pitched in to buy fireworks. They even had lookouts sitting at the ends of the roads to call over if the police showed up. The displays were huge, but there was always enough warning to cover everything so the police couldn't see who'd been setting them off."

Bastian chuckled. It sounded like she'd had a good childhood. Damn, he really wanted to know where it went bad, but he would wait. "See, there's already something we have in common. I love being out in nature, too." She didn't need to know the part about him feeding on animal blood.

“Really? I just pegged you for a city guy. I can’t picture you out in the woods.”

She rested her hand on his atop the table.

Her soft touch sent shockwaves straight to his groin. *It has been far too long. Once sure as hell wasn’t enough.*

Focus. Don’t screw this up.

“Oh, trust me,” he said. “I’ve spent more time in the woods than in the city. I just moved here from Montana.”

She gently stroked his forearm. “You know, they say it only takes one major thing in common for people to make a connection and friendship. I guess we just found ours.”

“Where did you hear that?”

Nicole giggled. “On a talk show. But a licensed psychologist said it. I think.”

Bastian caught a whiff of fresh blood and snapped his gaze back to the booth with the arguing couple. Apparently they had worked out their differences. A female vamp now fed on the male tourist while his girlfriend sat mute and dazed. The mortals were clearly under the vampire’s control to keep the situation from getting out of hand. The man’s thoughts moved in slow motion, but that didn’t stop his arousal. If his girlfriend only knew what he wanted to do to the *sanguinarian*, she’d never speak to him again.

Hunger spiking, Bastian turned his attention back to Nicole and her delicious neck.

What in the hell were the Elders thinking by depriving a vampire of human blood? Did they even stop to think what kind of hunger he’d experience when thrown back into humanity? And there was no rhyme or reason for when his appetite hit. He’d had no problem controlling himself with Nicole earlier, but suddenly the need for blood punched him in the gut.

“Are you okay?” Nicole’s voice cracked with obvious, and understandable, concern.

Bastian was certain he had a predatory look in his eyes. He blinked a few times and chugged the rest of his beer just as the waitress came by with refills. Nodding his thanks, he drank, wishing alcohol affected immortals like it did humans.

No such luck. A quick buzz was all he’d end up with. His body processed the alcohol too fast. To get drunk, he would need a truckload of booze.

And he didn’t want to have a drink Surrender style in front of her yet. It would surely spook her more.

He smiled at her, hoping he didn’t look as if he wanted to tear into her throat. “I’m fine. Like I said, this is all new to me, too, and sometimes I feel out of sorts.” It was mostly true.

Nicole must have bought his excuse. “Okay, so now that’s two major things we have in common. We’re on a roll here.”

Her enthusiasm was infectious, and he took it in to ease his hunger. She still soothed him like nobody else ever had, but he had no idea why. Maybe it was her inner strength pushing her through whatever pain she kept hidden. Normally, the women he fell for depended on him, but Nicole would make her way through life fine without him. Her ability to adapt to Lansford proved that.

Yes, part of her wanted someone to lean on, but she didn’t need it to survive.

She didn’t need him, even if she thought she did.

With her, there was no pressure. He could relax and be himself—partially.

Hopefully the rest will come in time.

SEVEN

A few days had passed since Nicole met Bastian, and apparently Ginger couldn't wait any longer to hear the details. Nicole sat in the employee lounge, rubbing her feet while her new friend bombarded her with questions.

"So, tell me about him. What's he like? Is he rich like his brother? Did you like it when he bit you?" Ginger winked then sipped her blue cocktail. "Are you two dating?"

Nicole nearly cringed. She had no interest in sharing any information about Bastian. After taking a quick drink of her iced tea, she rested her aching feet on the coffee table and sank into the oversized leather sectional. Unfortunately, the soft cushions weren't enough to take the edge off her nerves.

Why on earth did Ginger have to be so nosy?

"What's with the inquisition? He's just a guy." Was she trying to convince herself, or was she trying to keep Ginger from salivating over Bastian?

Ginger pulled her thick red locks into a ponytail. "Come on. Don't hold out on me. I want details—all of them."

No way would Nicole tell her *all* the details. How could she admit to sleeping with the man the first time she'd met him, and while at work? Hell, she had no idea how she'd allowed that herself. In some ways she felt cheap and slutty, but in others she felt strangely free.

She hoped it wasn't just some one-night-stand-type hookup. If it turned out to be, she couldn't face herself in the mirror.

Surely their tryst meant something. Bastian had been so tender and compassionate. He'd waited for her after work and wanted to get to know her better. Why would he make the effort if it was only about sex for him?

She sighed and turned to Ginger, hoping to satisfy her curiosity with some minor details. "Honestly, he's...sweet. Like a big teddy bear. And I wouldn't say we're dating. We talked for a while at Surrender, then on the phone a few times, and we're planning on seeing each other again. I don't know what else to tell you."

"What about the bite? Your first bite was from an Evanko, so spill it. I've got to know." Ginger stared with wide-eyed anticipation.

Nicole clenched her jaw for a moment. The bite—well, *bites*—were intimate, not anything she wanted to share. Unfortunately, knowing Ginger's tenacity, she had no choice but to give her *something*. At times, the redhead acted like an annoying little dog, biting Nicole's pant leg and not letting go until she played fetch.

Just get this over with. "If you must know—"

"Oh, trust me. I must." Ginger's smile stretched from ear to ear.

Maybe I should start drinking to relax around these people. "The bite wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. I freaked out over nothing. You were right. And it didn't hurt much at all. He was gentle."

Ginger furrowed her brows, pressed her lips together, and shook her foot. "You know that's not what I'm talking about. Did you like it? Did it feel good?" Those bright red brows rose on the last word.

I should have known this wouldn't be easy.

But if she didn't give up any more information, Ginger might get suspicious.

“Yes, after I got over the anxiety of it, and the weird sucking sensation, it actually felt kind of...” *Amazing. Arousing.* “...nice.”

“*Nice?* Do you really expect me to believe that? Remember, I’ve been on the receiving end of many sets of fangs, and I know what it can do to a woman when a sexy *vampire* is sucking on her neck.”

Annoying little dog. Change the subject. “Why do some people call them vampires? Isn’t that feeding into their odd behaviors?”

Ginger laughed so hard she held her stomach.

Nicole apparently missed the joke. “What’s so funny?”

The other dancer took a deep breath and wiped her eyes. “Feeding. Don’t you get it? Vampires. Biting. Feeding.” She smacked Nicole’s arm. “Anyway, I don’t like referring to them as sanguinarians. I’d rather make believe it’s real. Vampires are hot right now, and they kind of turn me on.”

Obviously, Ginger didn’t have any answers. She was just happy to have someone sucking on her neck.

How had Nicole overlooked Bastian’s eccentricities of pretending to be a vampire and drinking human blood? She wanted to call her friend, Sarah, back home, but she really didn’t want anyone to know what she’d done. At least Ginger understood the strange fascination with sanguinarians.

Maybe one more try at getting information might have better results. “So you don’t think it’s strange for us to be attracted to them? I mean, you wouldn’t mind dating someone who drinks blood?”

“I am dating one of them, sort of.” Ginger leaned in and lowered her voice to a whisper. “Don’t tell anyone, but I’ve been seeing Kade for a while.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I won’t say anything.” Nicole wasn’t shocked. She’d seen the two cozying up a few times. “You don’t feel uncomfortable being with your boss?”

“Nope. I’ve got him by the balls. If he steps out of line, I’ll threaten him with a sexual harassment suit and poof—” She snapped her fingers. “—he’ll be groveling on the floor.”

Nicole shook her head, hoping her friend was joking. After another sip of iced tea, she slipped her feet off the table and turned sideways, facing Ginger head-on. She needed someone to talk to about the issues eating at her, and this was the best she could get for now.

“Can I ask you something a little more personal?” Nicole’s heart sped. *Maybe this isn’t such a good idea.*

Ginger eyed her curiously. “Sure, honey. Go for it.”

With a deep breath, Nicole pushed her anxiety aside. “Would you... No. Do you think it’s ever acceptable to sleep with a guy you just met?”

“Oh my god.” Ginger’s hand flew up to cover her gaping mouth for a few seconds. “You slept with Bastian. Hell, girl, I didn’t think you had it in you. More power to you.” She grabbed her cocktail, saluted Nicole with it, and gulped it down. “Trust me, if any of us had a chance to latch onto that hunk of a man, we’d have ridden him like there’s no tomorrow. Well, I only would have if I were single.”

Nicole’s cheeks burned. She hadn’t meant to admit to having sex with Bastian. No way to back out now, though. “But it’s not like me. I’ve never done anything like that before, and I can’t figure out why I did it now.”

Ginger scooted closer and rested her hand on Nicole’s. “Don’t be so hard on yourself. Maybe that’s exactly why you did it, because it *is* something you’d never do. Sometimes we need to let

loose and go a little crazy. Break out of our comfort zones, even if it means doing things we might regret. It's called living."

In some strange way what Ginger said made sense. Nicole had always played it safe, did what her parents wanted, what everyone expected a good girl to do. Then she suddenly went against them all and drove across the state to the biggest city in Pennsylvania. Follow that up with taking a job as a stripper and anything was possible.

Who was she outside of what others expected? Had she ever really lived life for herself? And was she now?

Law school wasn't even about her. It was about what had happened to her younger sister, Jessica. She wanted other sexual offenders to pay since Jessica's had beat the charges against him by lying through his slime-ball teeth. He said, she said...with no proof. Nicole's heart ached at the thought of all her sister had gone through.

Jessica had been dating her boyfriend for nearly three years when he turned on her and—

Thankfully, Ginger yanked her from her thoughts. "Really, Nikki. Don't be so uptight about it. It's not like you're going around sleeping with every stud that walks through the door. You're a good person."

Even though her choices and actions over the past few months made a little more sense now, she couldn't forgive herself so easily for jumping on Bastian like she had. She needed to get her life under control before Lansford ate her alive and tore out her soul.

"Thanks, Ginger. I really appreciate you saying that." She glanced at the clock. "Guess we'd better get back to work."

EIGHT

It had only taken a few weeks for Bastian to settle into his new life as a free man, allowed to be part of society and feed on humans once more. The constant supply of fresh blood in Lansford helped take off much of the hunger's edge, but even with the unrestricted feedings, Nicole's blood burned through him and was all he yearned for.

Scratch that. There was something else he lusted after. Retribution. Sweet revenge. And the gig as bartender at Nocturnal Surrender gave him far more opportunity to find out what made that bastard Rosenbaum tick than he ever dreamed possible.

When Donovan had first told him the ex-Enforcer frequented the club—and was still a good friend—Bastian cringed at the betrayal, but now he appreciated his good luck. He would simply watch and learn. Take his time and attack when least expected. Patience. He'd waited two hundred years already. A while longer would be nothing.

In the meantime, he moved into one of the houses Donovan owned in the suburbs of Lansford. His brother expected rent since he normally used his various homes as a source of extra income. No matter. Bastian had to live somewhere and pay someone, so why not Donovan? Besides, bartending in one of the most successful nightclubs in town appeared lucrative, especially when he flirted with the tourists and even some of the regulars.

He also regained control of his share of the Evanko fortune, although his portion hadn't grown in the last two hundred years as Donovan's had. What amounted to a fortune back then didn't seem like much now. Still, he had enough to purchase a beast of a Hummer H2 to cruise the Lansford Strip.

Truth was, he could have bought his own home but preferred to wait before settling down. He'd lived as a nomad far too long and had no idea what normal life was like anymore.

As he wiped down the bar for the hundredth time tonight, he noticed Donovan and two other men in a heated discussion at one of the booths. There was no way to make out what they were saying over the music from so far across the room, even with his preternatural hearing. Probably why Donovan played it so loud. It offered his immortal customers some semblance of privacy.

His brother and the other men didn't look angry with each other, but whatever had them so flustered seemed serious. Donovan's furrowed brows and tight lips distorted his otherwise perfect features and made him appear sinister.

A chill swept over Bastian. The last time he'd seen his brother in such a state, he had murdered Elise's parents to teach Bastian a lesson and protect the secret of vampires' existence.

Something major had to be going—

"Excuse me. Could I get a Bloody Mary, Surrender style?" A gorgeous blonde vampire had sidled up to the bar and winked after ordering, her old-world accent hard to place.

Bastian grinned. "Of course."

He glanced back to Donovan and the others, who were still deep in discussion, then put together the myriad of ingredients that went into the cocktail, including the most important one. Blood.

"One *truly* Bloody Mary for the beautiful *sanguinarian*." He cocked his eyebrow on the last word and sat the drink on a napkin.

She took a sip and smiled. "Perfect." She nearly purred the word, but it was most likely the accent that made it seem so. "You're Donovan's brother, aren't you?"

“Yeah.” *Great. Probably another of his friends ready to put me down.*

“Looks like the boys started without me.” She peered at Donovan’s booth then turned back to Bastian. “I’m Olivia Fournier, Alex’s partner.”

Was he supposed to know what in the hell she was talking about?

And what kind of partner? He’d never heard of a heterosexual couple referring to each other as partners. Then again, he hadn’t been back in society long.

Maybe Alex was a woman.

“Sorry, Alex who?”

Olivia batted her long eyelashes and touched his hand lightly. “No, I’m sorry. I thought Donovan already introduced you. The vampire next to your brother is Alexander Mitchell, and the other is his offspring, Johnathan McCombs. Alex and I are Enforcers. Johnathan and a few others work with us.”

Bastian tensed. *Fucking Enforcers.*

For a moment, Olivia’s silver stare focused on Bastian’s chest. His heart thundered and his breaths grew heavy. Probably best to go into full vamp mode so he didn’t give away his unease. He quickly stopped breathing and made his heartbeat cease.

Unfortunately, that probably looked odder since she’d most likely heard his body’s reaction.

Bastian cleared his throat. “Well, it was nice meeting you. I better get back to work.”

She opened her mouth, but he moved to the opposite end of the bar to wait on another customer before she had a chance to speak. He was glad it was nearly break time.

When he calmed, he remembered Donovan saying something about Alex, although the female Enforcer and Alex’s offspring hadn’t been mentioned.

Offspring. Bastian hated the term. He was technically his brother’s offspring since Donovan had turned him, but the word made it sound like Donovan was his parent. In truth, he acted as if he *was* Bastian’s father most of the time.

Bastian stole a glance at the leggy blonde Enforcer as she sauntered to Donovan’s booth. Tight black jeans and an even tighter red shirt hugged every luscious curve. If she weren’t an Enforcer, she’d have been hot as hell.

His focus then came to rest on the other Enforcer. Alex didn’t compare to Bastian in the muscle department, but then neither had Christof. Looks were deceiving in the vampire world. Age mattered more. Christof’s superior strength came from being far older than Bastian.

Although, he had no idea how old these new Enforcers were. He didn’t plan on having any trouble with them, but just in case...

When his break came, he headed over to Donovan’s booth to introduce himself. Their conversation came to an abrupt halt at his approach.

Before he got a word out, Donovan glowered at him. “Did you need something?”

Well, love you too, bro. “No. I thought I’d introduce myself to the others since I already had the pleasure of meeting Ms. Fournier.” Bastian gritted his teeth at having to be civil with Enforcers.

“Please, call me Olivia.” That blasted seductive accent of hers soothed his anger.

He hated the fact he enjoyed the sight of her, and the sound of her melodic voice, since she was one of *them*. Not that he would be interested even if she weren’t an Enforcer. He had a shot at something great with Nicole. But no matter what, he was still a man—a vampire—and appreciated a beautiful view when he saw one. Especially when it was wrapped up tight and—

Donovan interrupted his thoughts. “Well, introduce yourself, and then leave us be. We have important business to discuss.”

Bastian turned away from Olivia and locked gazes with his condescending brother. “Anything I can help with? I know I haven’t been here long, but I want to get back into vampire business.” He tightened his fists, hoping his irritation at Donovan hadn’t come through in his voice.

He had no idea what kind of *business* they were talking about, but it seemed advantageous to get closer to the enemy. Maybe he could learn more about Rosenbaum, as well.

An arrogant laugh rumbled out of Donovan. “Really, little brother. You have a long way to go before I trust you *that* much.”

Clenching his jaw, Bastian’s glare lingered on Donovan. Quickly, he took a deep breath, hoping the scent of blood in the air would help him regain his composure but not spark the bloodlust.

He then turned to Alex and Johnathan. “Please excuse my brother’s rude behavior. I’m Bastian. Nice to meet you.”

Olivia giggled quietly. He extended his hand to each of the men as they introduced themselves, looking puzzled. Johnathan’s accent was easier to place than Olivia’s. He was definitely Australian or had at least spent a great deal of time there at some point in his immortal life. And Alex had a slight British cadence to his speech.

Just as Bastian turned to walk away, Olivia spoke up. “Please, Bastian. Do join us. Your brother is not the one in charge here.” When she glanced to Donovan, her face tensed and her voice became stern. “We are.” She then looked to Alex. “You don’t mind, do you?”

Alex ran a hand through his shaggy brown hair and sighed. “Of course not.”



A sensual moan emanated from Kade’s office. Though she tried to slip past unnoticed, Nicole couldn’t help but look inside as she walked by the open door. Kade’s glowing eyes locked onto her as he drank from Ginger’s neck. But something was different. Instead of the normal amber, a bright silver hue glinted in his eyes—just like the contacts Bastian normally wore when he pretended to be a vampire.

She shivered and that strange sense of dread washed over her again, causing her to freeze. She was momentarily caught in his stare. Its intense predatory nature freaked her out. This time, when the urge to flee took over, she gladly obliged, grateful her shift had ended. She speed-walked out, not waiting for any other dancers to leave with her.

Once safely in her car, she left immediately, still slightly shaken. Her heart raced. What was it about the sanguinarians that caused her so much anxiety?

It was probably just catching Kade and Ginger like that. I need to calm down.

After a few deep breaths, she relaxed and turned on the radio. She had every intention of stopping by Nocturnal Surrender to see Bastian and didn’t want anything to change her mind, especially not some irrational fear.

Again, the nearly-empty neon-lined streets made the early morning drive a short one. As she pulled into the parking lot at Donovan’s nightclub, she peered around the side of the building to make sure Bastian was still there. His huge Hummer sat beside Donovan’s Escalade. Apparently the Evanko boys liked their big toys. Of course, she knew Bastian didn’t need the vehicle for a penis extension the way some men seemed to.

She laughed, parked her car, and made her way into the club. The music's thumping base nearly kept time with her heartbeat. She glanced over to the bar and was surprised to not see Bastian there. A quick sweep of the room didn't help. He was nowhere in sight.

She looked around once more—slower—to be sure she hadn't missed him. Still no Bastian. But this time, she focused a little longer on the silver-eyed sanguinarians scattered about. Sure there were people with contacts of other colors, but none of them glowed in the candlelight like the silver ones.

A cold chill crawled up her spine and goose bumps rose on her skin. It was happening again. That same creepy feeling. She shook her head and breathed deeply, trying to calm herself, and then she returned to the task at hand.

Luckily, she'd already gotten to know a few of Surrender's employees so she headed straight for the bar to talk to Selena—the waitress who had made her feel uneasy the first night Bastian brought her to the club. Selena clicked her long black nails on the counter while waiting for the bartender to fill her order.

Nicole eased in between her and a well-dressed man on a barstool. "Hey Selena, have you seen Bastian?"

The slender brunette turned to Nicole and smiled. "Sure, I've seen him. Hulking blond guy who only has eyes for you, right?"

"Very funny." Nicole forced a laugh. "But seriously, is he around? His Hummer was out there when I pulled in."

Selena picked up her tray full of drinks. "I think he's back in Donovan's office. Not sure what's going on, but if you give me a minute, I'll tell him you're here after I serve these."

Nicole nodded. "That would be great. Thanks."

As Selena sauntered away, Nicole couldn't help but be awed by the confidence she exuded as she worked the customers. The waitress took charge, flirted, and joked—however badly—all with a casual grace that made everyone around eat up her act.

Now that's how I need to do it.

She walked away from the bar but didn't get far before a blonde woman stepped in front of her, extending her hand. "Hello, I'm Olivia, a friend of Donovan's. I take it you're Bastian's girlfriend."

Although Nicole was a bit taken aback, she accepted the woman's hand and met her silver stare. Another rush of insecurity swept over her but she took a few calming breaths. Something that quickly was becoming a habit. "Yes, I'm Nicole, but how did you know?"

Olivia shook her hand firmly. "I...overheard you talking to Selena and...put two and two together." She released Nicole's hand and shifted her feet, appearing suddenly uncomfortable, then she peered over Nicole's shoulder. "Ah, speak of the devil." Olivia looked back to Nicole and winked. "I'll leave you two love birds alone."

Nicole glanced back to see Bastian striding toward her, but by the time she turned to talk to Olivia again, the blonde had disappeared—literally. She was nowhere to be found.

What the hell is going on with these people? All of them made her uncomfortable, like she wanted to jump out of her skin. They acted strange in ways she couldn't quite put her finger on. And as much as she hated to admit it, at times, Bastian still made her feel uneasy. Maybe it had more to do with Jessica's rape than anything. That situation was enough to shake anyone's faith.

Bastian slid his arms around Nicole from behind, and she shuddered as her breathing hitched. Her heart thundered from being startled. If he hadn't held her so tightly, she would have spun around and smacked his chest.

He ushered her to the small dance floor. "I'm glad you made it. It's been a rough night, and I need to unwind," he said, remaining behind her as he swayed to the heavy beat of the music.

Only a few couples were dancing so Nicole and Bastian had room to move freely.

She leaned her head back against him and reveled in his powerful embrace. Her body tingled in all the right places. "Shouldn't you still be working?"

"It's a slow night, and Donovan had some other business I sat in on. But I want to forget about all that for now and just enjoy your company." He eased one hand up and moved her hair aside then pressed his lips to her neck.

She closed her eyes. In seconds, his sharp teeth grazed her skin as his hand slipped back around her waist. Claspng his arms, she prepared for his fangs to sink in. But instead of biting her, he kissed and sucked her flesh. Her breaths grew ragged as his hands roamed a little north and south, her own hands on top of his.

The music's rhythm was corporal, and he moved their bodies in time with the seductive beat. His erection pressed against her rear, her heels bringing her closer to his height. He teased at the top of her skirt, dipping his fingers under the material slightly, the same as she'd done to him in the private room the night they met.

Payback was a bitch.

She opened her eyes but desire made her dizzy. Her body ached for him to slide his hand downward, to touch her intimately. Unfortunately, there weren't enough people dancing to hide their activity. Everyone would see.

His other hand came to rest under her breast, pushing against it with demanding force. Occasionally, his fingers slid over her hardened nipples, adding fuel to the fire burning in her veins.

He definitely had a way of driving her mad.

When the song ended, he whispered in her ear, "I think we should get out of here."

Throat dry, she fought to get her words out. "I think...you're right."

NINE

Bastian hopped into his Hummer and followed Nicole's car as they headed toward her apartment, but no matter how much he tried to focus on the thought of making love to her, he couldn't. His mind drifted back to the tense meeting with the Enforcers and all he'd learned.

Granted, the information they'd given him obviously hadn't been the entire story, but it sure as hell was more than he'd expected. The fact Donovan joined up with the Enforcers as leader of one of their Sweeper Teams had thrown Bastian for a loop.

Such teams hadn't existed before his exile, so Bastian had to be brought up to speed. Donovan's team, as well as any others around the world, aided the Enforcers in gathering information, carrying out raids, and doing general grunt work.

Hell, it almost seemed as though Donovan had aspirations of becoming an Enforcer. Bastian cringed.

As if it wasn't bad enough that his brother was sleeping with the enemy, apparently the Hunters were gathering their forces, preparing for some sort of massive strike, but the details were sketchy at best, and—

He snapped out of his thoughts when Nicole's car came to a stop at a red light at the end of the Strip. She waved at him in her rearview, and he returned the gesture, smiling, though his heart wasn't in it.

Maybe some music will help.

The light turned green and they each pulled out. He hit the radio's power button and rock music blared from the speakers, thumping so hard the mirrors vibrated.

He sighed. *That's better.*

Relaxing, he pushed the irritation for Donovan aside and thought about dancing with Nicole. Her body had responded to him immediately. Sure it was only lust at this point, but maybe it would grow into much more. His heart ached for love and acceptance, and it seemed women in this day and age were a lot more open than they were two hundred years ago.

His body tensed and he gripped the steering wheel tight. He'd lived a long time, seen many things in nearly a millennia, but his exile had caused him to miss some of the best times in history. The advances made over those years had been monumental, and he'd had to watch from afar, living on humanity's fringes and feeding on animal blood.

Fucking Enforcers.

When his mind drifted back to Elise's murder, he fought tears. Replaying the events of those last few weeks of her life made him wonder if Donovan was right. If she hadn't betrayed Bastian, would she still be with him today? She had promised to keep his secret, sworn her love and loyalty to him, and then destroyed his world. How the hell could he trust anyone with his secret again?

He stared at Nicole, practically dancing in her seat, obviously happy as she could be. If he continued on with her, would he be condemning her to Elise's fate? Or was he correct in thinking women today could handle what he was? After all, vampires were huge right now—at least in books, TV shows, and movies. The women, and men, at Surrender gladly offered themselves to the vampire fantasy.

But reality would surely be a different animal entirely. Killers were killers, plain and simple. Although, Elise had overlooked that for the most part. Maybe Nicole would, as well.

What the fuck is wrong with me? His head spun in too many directions, and the Enforcer meeting had started it all. He had every intention of doing things right this time, with Nicole *and* Donovan. Think before acting. No more impulsiveness. And sure as hell no letting fear stand in his way.

Focus on Nicole.

He licked his lips. She'd be wet, tight, and ready for him when they arrived at her apartment. He'd better be ready, too.

As they made their way into the streetlight-laden and picket-fence-lined roads just off the Strip, he lost a little ground on Nicole, with her sporty little coupe taking the corners faster than his beast. A few blocks later, they arrived at her apartment complex. Unfortunately, earlier in the day when he'd told Donovan where Nicole lived, his brother let it slip that Christof Rosenbaum owned the damn building. Bastian had grown agitated from the news, and Donovan then said he should have kept that bit of information to himself.

It infuriated Bastian to know the ex-Enforcer had a connection, however small, to his girlfriend.

Girlfriend?

Had it come to that already? He climbed out of his vehicle and rushed to help Nicole out of hers.

Guess so.

Damn, he was smitten.

He closed her car door and immediately backed her into the vehicle's side. He placed his hands on the roof, trapping her, then leaned down to devour her mouth while pressing his body to hers. His cock sprang to life instantly.

She slid her arms around him, her purse dangling behind him. He tried to ignore the annoyance and threaded his fingers through her hair as she fisted his shirt, pulling him closer—if that were possible. She moaned into his mouth, and he rubbed his cock against her.

Luckily, it was the middle of the night so hopefully no one would see their display. Not that it mattered. She was his now, and he would claim her when and where he chose. But he didn't want Nicole worrying about her neighbors.

A groan rumbled out of him. He released her mouth, seized her hand, and led her inside.

"Wow..." She panted. "Slow down, boy..."

She drove him crazy. She was out of breath and flushed, the scent of arousal clinging to her. Still, he slowed his pace, having nearly forgotten her mortal limitations in the heat of passion.

After hitting the button for the elevator, he raised her delicate hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to her soft skin. "I'm sorry. I didn't even ask how your evening was. I hope work went well, but not too well."

Why did I say that?

The words had left his mouth without thought, and sure as hell without his permission. This situation was getting out of control. All of the sudden, he'd become territorial with her, just like he had with Elise. But this was far too soon.

Nicole grinned. "Did I hear a hint of jealousy?"

Bastian averted her gaze. What was taking the fucking elevator so long? When she cleared her throat, he snapped his attention back to her. "I uh... *Jealousy?* No. Why would I be jealous? I am perfectly secure in our relationship no matter what you do for a living."

Shifting, he punched the button a few more times, just to be sure the thing was working properly.

She caressed his cheek, silently urging him to look at her. When he did, her smile grew wide and her eyes sparkled.

She lowered her hands. "So we're in a relationship?"

Bastian scrubbed his face, searching for something to say.

How the hell did I get myself into this?

It wasn't that he didn't want a relationship with her, but his life, his entire existence made the situation volatile. His time with Elise had proven—

"It's okay. I'm not ready for anything that serious yet either." She giggled. "I just wanted to see your reaction."

He breathed deep in relief, but opened himself to feel her emotions to ensure she wasn't saying what she thought he wanted to hear. Sure enough, she radiated lighthearted joy, which stirred his desires for his angel even more.

The elevator finally opened, and once inside, he gave her a little payback for her joke.

Bastian backed her into the wall, grabbed her hands, and put them over her head, clasping both in one of his.

He enveloped her mouth with his. He explored her receptive body with his free hand, pulling up her leg and sliding his fingers under her skirt. He teased her by tugging at her panties. Slowly, he slipped a finger inside them, but only lightly brushed over her clit.

She moaned and tried to press against his finger, but he withdrew and broke away from their kiss.

"Nope. You can't have it." He cocked an eyebrow and smirked, hoping his intense gaze burned into her. "You're going to pay for messing with me. I may not give you anything tonight. Just work you into a frenzy and leave you wet and needy. Begging."

Nicole laughed so hard she gasped for breath. He released her hands, and she fanned herself as her eyes watered.

What the fuck is so funny? "You know, that's not the reaction I was hoping for."

Heat washed over him, creeping up his neck and into his face. The startling sensation took him a minute to identify. Embarrassment. An emotion he hadn't known in centuries.

He had tried to be sexy and drive her crazy, and she had laughed in his face.

The elevator stopped and the doors opened, thankfully to an empty hallway. She led him to her apartment. The hall seemed too narrow. And sweltering. Hell, the walls almost closed in on him. When she slammed the door shut, he blinked a few times and snapped out of his shock, only then realizing they had made it to her apartment.

She immediately dropped her purse and slipped her arms around his neck. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to laugh. It's just...I've been reading this book Ginger gave me and... Well, you reminded me of the guy in it. He wanted to punish the woman for behaving badly and..." Laughter erupted from her lips again.

Should I be flattered or humiliated? "If you can calm yourself long enough, can you at least tell me if that's a good thing or bad?" He reached to remove himself from her embrace, but when she stopped laughing abruptly, he rested his arms at his sides.

Had his tone been too harsh? He hadn't meant to be so upset, but her laughter was a kick in the balls to his ego. Did she think his attempts at seduction so comical, or worse, lackluster? Granted, he'd been out of the game for a long time, and the game had undoubtedly changed over those many years. Still, he hoped he hadn't acted like a buffoon.

She frowned and her brows furrowed. If he wasn't mistaken, her lip might have quivered. Now, embarrassment far worse than his own rolled off her in waves.

Her palms slid down to rest on his chest. “It’s just...I’ve never read anything like that before and...I liked it. *A lot*. The whole way, if you know what I mean.” She lowered her head.

He had no idea what she meant, and although it went against his better judgment, he delved into her mind...and then bit back laughter of his own. “So you uh...pleasured yourself without me? Hmph. You *have* been a very naughty girl. What are we going to do about this?”

Nicole peered up at him and whispered, “Maybe you should punish me.”

TEN

Nicole's cheeks heated, though Bastian's devilish grin and the glint in his silver-covered eyes let her know he liked what she had said. She was certain after he flashed a little fang and growled.

What did I get myself into?

She probably wouldn't be comfortable with that type of sex and had no idea why she'd said such a thing.

Before she could think about it, he picked her up, threw her over his shoulder, and swatted her ass. He chuckled as he carried her to the bedroom. "I think you're right."

Once inside, he tossed her on the bed and stood at the side, dragging his intense gaze up and down her body. She was surprised she didn't spontaneously combust from the fire in his eyes. The corners of his lips curved upward, and he sat beside her then rested a hand on her thigh.

No matter how gentle or innocent his touch, it always sent electricity shooting through her. This time was no different.

For a moment, his smile faded, and she grew concerned.

He eased closer and lay beside her, still caressing her. "I hope it doesn't disappoint you, but I don't think I can bring myself to hurt you, even if it is for sexual play. It's just not me." Swiftly, he positioned his muscular body atop hers and pinned her hands above her head. "That's not to say I don't want to hold you down and drive you crazy." He pushed his erection into her, emphasizing his point.

She moaned and arched toward him. Her thin skirt and panties didn't create much of a barrier between her aching flesh and the hardness beneath his jeans.

"I kind of wished I could have taken that back right after I said it. I don't like pain in the least. I just got carried away." She wanted to touch his face and run her hands over his muscles, but he had her locked down.

"Good. We're in agreement then. Nothing too rough."

Glad he added the last part, she nodded. "Right, just a little rough. You know, holding me down, grabbing my hair, biting my neck or...wherever."

He raised an eyebrow. "*Wherever?* Hmm. Exactly where do you want me to bite you?"

"I don't know. You can surprise me."

He released her hands and skimmed his fingers along her arms, making her shiver. "But I thought you didn't like pain."

She ran her fingers through his hair. "I don't understand that part either, but it's different when you bite me. Sure it hurts a little for a few seconds, but it feels *so* good after that."

As much as she wanted to lose herself in him, to have him slide deep inside her, certain questions had been nagging her since they met. She had to ask. "What's it like? I mean, why do you do it? I can't imagine it tastes good."

He sighed and rolled off her, pulling her with him so they lay on their sides, face-to-face. She draped her leg over his and scooted closer, getting comfortable.

Brushing her hair aside, he stared at her neck for a moment. "I wish I knew how to explain it to you. The best I can say is that my body craves blood, and it tastes delicious and sweet to me. Yours especially."

Nicole grimaced. "You haven't been drinking from anyone else since me, have you?"

The thought of him sinking his fangs into another woman had her seething. Not to mention the disgusting factor of having someone else's blood in his mouth—the mouth she kissed. She shuddered.

He smiled. "Yours is the only neck I want to bite."

It wasn't a complete answer, and she understood the unspoken implication that he had bitten others. Of course he had since he worked at a sanguinarian nightclub, and since they weren't officially a couple.

She couldn't ask for more if she wasn't even ready to commit to a relationship. For now, she would do her best to ignore that aspect of his life.

Heck, she couldn't even ask him not to see other people if the two of them were merely friends with benefits. But it felt like they were already so much more than that. Maybe he was afraid of commitment, too.

She snuggled against him, breathing in his masculine scent. He *was* a big teddy bear. But was she naïve to believe in him? He seemed too good to be true. Noble and kind but with a bad-boy edge. That kind of guy didn't actually exist. The kind who would sweep a woman off her feet, hold her down and never let her go, but still give her the freedom to be who she was.

Not that Bastian didn't have his faults. Pretending to be a vampire and drinking human blood was a huge one.

"So what's with the whole vampire thing? Can't you just drink from someone without all that?" Since they had met, she'd only once seen him without the contacts and fangs. His deep blue eyes were so mesmerizing she wished he wouldn't cover them.

He shifted and breathed deep, appearing uncomfortable. Still, if she could let him drink her blood, he'd damn well better give her an explanation.

"I suppose it's because of the setup Donovan has going on at Surrender. And people seem to be into the vamp thing now, so everyone has a good time. Plus, the fangs *are* necessary."

The awkwardness of the conversation finally hit her. *Only in this town*. In truth, she realized how weird the entire situation was. How had she excused those behaviors? Before she'd met Bastian, when Kade had explained about the customers from Nocturnal Surrender possibly coming in and requesting *special services*, she thought anyone who wanted to bite another human being, not to mention drink blood, had to be psychotic.

After Bastian, she had somehow learned to accept the sanguinarians and their abnormal behaviors. But now it freaked her out all over again. Part of her wanted to pull away and tell him to leave. Only problem was she knew him well enough to like him in spite of everything.

And being so close to him was warm and comforting, especially if she didn't look at the contacts and fangs.

She needed more time to wrap her mind around his lifestyle, to become comfortable with it instead of pretending it wasn't a big deal. "I can't lie to you and say I understand any of this. You have to get how weird it is, don't you? You have to know it's going to take a while for me to be okay with the way you live."

He nodded. "Take as long as you need. I'm not going anywhere."

His full lips met hers, brushing softly at first, and then pressing harder. He slipped his tongue into her mouth and pulled her body tight against his. She moaned and clamped her leg snug around him. She would find a way to come to terms with who he was and what he did. There was no choice. She wanted him in her life—permanently.



Relief washed over Bastian when Nicole surrendered to him once more. For a minute, he had feared she would pull away, possibly turn her back on him, even without knowing the whole truth. He obviously needed to wait longer before telling her his secret. Not that he'd considered doing it yet, anyway.

In the meantime, he could enjoy their budding relationship—or whatever it was—and handle the issues with Rosenbaum.

When Nicole's tongue swept into his mouth, all thoughts of revenge fled. With her leg holding him tightly, her soft body pressed to his, he was instantly hard again.

As much as he had wanted her to pay for making him squirm outside the elevator, he couldn't bring himself to torture his angel, not even to play with her. He would much rather make love to her. To satisfy her completely until she fell asleep, exhausted in his arms.

He eased her onto her back, his body remaining locked to hers, while continuing their passionate kiss. Her hands slid under his shirt and her nails dug into his back. Slowly, he moved away from her lips, trailing kisses down her delicate chin, and then lower along her neck. He scraped his fangs gently against her skin. Not enough pressure to draw blood, but enough to stimulate her desire.

She wrapped her legs around him and moaned, arching into him. "God, I love it when you do that."

Bastian rose slightly so she could see his grin. "I know," was all he said before returning his attention to her receptive body.

His fangs ached to sink in deep. He longed to taste her sweet essence, her lifeblood, her soul, but he held back. He wanted her to know he desired *her*, not her blood.

My beautiful angel.

He trailed his lips lower, down her collarbone, sweeping along her cleavage and eventually stopping to mouth her nipple through her thin shirt. She moaned and grabbed his hair, pressing his head to her breast. He sucked harder through the fabric as her nipple budded erect under his ministrations.

"Oh god, Bastian. You're driving me crazy." She writhed beneath him.

She hadn't needed to tell him. He felt her longing as if it were coursing through *his* veins, sending a throbbing need straight to *his* groin. It took all his strength to keep from biting her breast through her clothing. If he tasted even a drop of her blood, he'd come immediately. She drove him crazy, too.

Before he gave in to temptation, he moved farther downward, easing her shirt up to expose her stomach. He feathered kisses over her flesh, gliding his tongue along the skin at the waistband of her skirt. She shuddered, and he moved lower still. Her fingers slipped away from his head, and she arched her hips up as if begging him to kiss her delicious pussy.

He pushed up her skirt, giving him complete access to her lace panties. Claspng her legs, he dipped his head and mouthed her through the material. She writhed again, grinding her clit against his mouth.

One of his fangs snagged the lace as she moved and it slipped inside, grazing her swollen flesh. She moaned and arched into him until his fangs pressed hard against her.

His cock ached in his jeans. *I can't bear any more.*

He bit through the lace, and her body jerked in response. She pulled in a quick breath and let it out on a sensual moan. He groaned as he sucked in her blood, but he stopped drinking before he pushed himself over the edge. He'd rather wait until he was buried inside her before he came.

Bastian released her from his fangs, slipped his fingers inside her panties, and eased the lacey material down far enough for his tongue to play over her clit.

Her body quaked, and her breathing hitched. "Please, Bastian. Come up here. I can't take this. I need you inside me."

Quickly, he licked lower as he pulled her panties farther down then he glided his tongue upward until he stopped to suck at her clit. He repeated the motion a few more times as she shouted his name.

Hell, at this rate, they would both explode the minute he slid into her.

He crawled back up her body, and she grabbed his shirt then yanked it over his head. Following her lead, he unbuttoned her shirt and exposed her luscious breasts. He loved it when she didn't wear a bra. Just as he swooped down to suck in a nipple, she tugged at his hair, urging him to her mouth.

He kissed her deep, his fangs piercing her plump lip ever so slightly. She moaned into his mouth, and slipped her hand between their bodies, rubbing his erection through his jeans. Before long, she undid his button and zipper. Her delicate fingers squeezed into the confined space and took hold of his engorged cock. He shuddered, groaned, and moved to free himself from his pants.

Nicole stroked him gently at first, then with more force and speed, her soft hand making his cock jump with each pump. He braced himself on the mattress, palms flat at her sides. She leaned up and licked his lips until he parted them for her. Her tongue darted inside his mouth, gliding over his fangs and sending a shiver through him. His balls tightened. He had to stop her or he would come any second.

He shifted, moving out of her reach. His shaft fell free of her grasp just in time. He urgently removed her panties the rest of the way, followed by her skirt, and then eased his body back atop hers. Reaching down, he adjusted his cock, positioning to glide into her.

Instead of plunging in, he rubbed the head up and down along her slit, her warmth so enticing. She found his mouth again and their tongues fought for supremacy as mounting desire pulsed between them, her yearning as tangible to him as his own. It only served to heighten his.

I wish she could feel mine.

Unable to hold out any longer, he inched his cock in at first, and then drove into her fully. She gasped into his mouth as the muscles in her core clamped tight around him. He had no idea how long he could wait, but he would pleasure her before giving in to his own release.

He took his time, drawing out his movements so he could last longer, but then he thrust faster. His cock ached from holding back, and the way her body trembled and her pussy pulsed around him let him know she was near the edge.

Her hips rose and fell at a blistering pace, matching his, letting him know the lovemaking was over and it was time to get a little rough. He obliged, pounding into her repeatedly as their skin slapped and they devoured each other's mouths.

Hoping to push her farther into oblivion, he grabbed a fistful of her hair and held it firm. She had asked for it earlier, and he would damn sure give it to her. Her response was almost immediate as she grew wetter by the second. He moaned in response to her slick heat.

When her muscles tightened around his cock, he pushed in deeper and faster, until she dug her nails into his back and broke away from their kiss, screaming his name as she came.

He dipped his head to her neck, bit down, and his own orgasm ripped through him as he drank in her sweet essence.

After a moment, he released her neck and slowed his thrusts, easing in and out until their climaxes subsided.

Even though it had mostly been hot sex, in his heart it felt as though he had made love to her the entire time.

He had claimed her.

She truly was his now.

ELEVEN

Nicole awoke to the comforting weight of Bastian's arm draped over her. It was the first time they'd fallen asleep together. She took a few minutes to enjoy the feel of him nestled behind her, his large frame cradling every inch of her body, her back to his front.

A big teddy bear soothing her and enveloping her in... What exactly? Safety? Compassion? Too soon for love. Heck, they weren't even officially dating yet.

Best not to think about it much.

A glance at the clock let her know it was a little after noon. She wiggled free as gently as she could, hoping not to wake him, sauntered to the bathroom to freshen up, and then eased herself back in place next to him, facing him.

He seemed to still be sleeping, but something told her he was faking.

"Bastian, are you awake?"

He wrapped his arm around her and tugged her flush against him, his erection teasing her. His eyes fluttered open, those stupid silver contacts the first thing she noticed.

Of course, he'd had them in when they made love—no, had sex. Whatever it was. And he'd had the fangs in still. He must have dozed off without removing them. Couldn't be good for his eyes or his teeth.

He shoved his hips forward, reminding her of his desire, but no matter how she tried to focus on her own, all she thought about were those damn prosthetics.

She ignored his persistence, and instead of picking up where they left off she touched his lips, probing to find those fake fangs.

He opened his mouth, allowing her entrance, probably assuming it was a sexual act. When he didn't try sucking on her finger and instead gave her the time to explore, she realized he knew what she was doing.

They had to be sharp in order to break the skin when he bit, so she barely skimmed the tips at first. He shuddered and moaned. Maybe he did still think it sexual.

Either way, she needed to understand. She continued her investigation, pressing the pad of her index finger tightly against one of the points.

The fang broke through easily, and nearly painlessly.

He clutched her wrist and sucked on the tiny droplets of blood as he pressed against her once more.

This time, she couldn't help but react to the multiple sensual stimuli. She instinctively adjusted her hips so that the head of his cock wedged between her thighs, right at the perfect spot. She fought the urge to throw her leg over his and offer herself to him.

He placed her fingertip back at the sharp point of one of his fangs and pierced her deeper, all the while moving his hips ever so slightly. It was just enough for his erection to rub her clit, to send jolts of electricity shooting through her entire body.

Her head spun, and she was glad to be lying down. But being face-to-face with him, in her bed, after spending the night together... It was all too intimate.

She had to be crazy to allow a man who liked to play vampire into her life and home, let alone her bed.

Through the cloud of lust settling over her, she tried to focus more on the fangs. They felt so real. But in an over-the-top town like Lansford, money could buy just about anything—and usually did from what she'd seen so far.

The Evanko brothers apparently had plenty of money.

Although her throat was dry she forced out a question. "What are they made of?"

He sucked on her finger one last time and settled his gaze on her. "I'm not sure. I never asked."

He released her arm, and she took one of his fangs between her fingers, attempting to wiggle it. That sucker was on there tight. It didn't budge.

"What holds them on?"

His body stiffened and his hips stilled as he realized she wasn't letting this go. She had to understand him if she had any hope of continuing whatever it was they had going on. And he needed to accept that was how she felt.

He rolled onto his back, sighing heavily. "I knew you would eventually have a hard time with this part of me." He shook his head. "Why can't anyone ever accept me for who I am and stop expecting me to be something else?" He huffed and sat up then turned to get out of bed.

Should she stop him? She didn't beg men to stay if they didn't want to, but that wounded puppy in him had just shown its sad little head.

She breathed deeply and grabbed his arm before he attempted to stand. "Wait. That's not what I meant. I just want to know who you really are, what makes you want to do this, so I *can* accept you. All of you." She crawled up on her knees behind him and slid her hands over his shoulders and down his chest, hoping he'd feel her sincerity. "I'm not asking you to be something else, only to help me understand so we can continue to get closer. I can't explain it, but I have to know you better."

No, that wasn't entirely true. "Actually, I can explain it." She let go of him and slipped off the bed to stand in front of him, naked as the night they'd met. "I am completely exposed to you. Ask me anything and I'll answer. I only expect the same in return."

He opened his mouth to speak, but she wasn't through yet.

She placed her fingers over his lips, and then she held the one he'd bitten in front of his eyes. With her other hand, she pushed her hair aside to expose the bite marks he'd left on her neck. "This all may be normal for you, but it's the craziest thing I've ever done in my life—and that includes sleeping with you the first night we met. At work."

Nicole stood there, slapped her hands to her hips, and glared down at him. "I think it isn't much to ask, especially if you want to continue this little..." She waved her hands around searching for the right words. "...whatever it is we're doing. I'd like to think we have potential. I'm not the kind of woman who sleeps around. I wouldn't be doing this if I didn't hope more will come of it when we're both ready, but if that's not what you're here for you need to let me know right now. Before my heart gets any more involved than it already is."

Holy crap. Did I just say that?

Yes she did, and she was sticking to it. She deserved as much.

He grabbed her by the waist and pulled her closer. Then he bowed his head and rested it against her stomach, trembling.

Was he trying not to cry? Had she pushed him too far? He couldn't be angry. There wasn't a single sign of tension in his body.

In that very moment she realized she truly didn't know a thing about the man she'd been spending her time with. The man she'd so easily handed her body to. The man she'd allowed into her life and home with barely any hesitation.

She had no idea if simply because he was an Evanko that he wasn't also a psychopath. For all she knew he could have hundreds of dead bodies buried in his past. Granted, she was probably being melodramatic, but still...

Bastian Evanko was a stranger.

There was no more denying the situation. She'd put herself in grave danger because he had made her feel good both emotionally and physically, and based on the opinions others held of his family name.

What had she been thinking? And what should she do about it now?



Nicole's fear and shame slammed into Bastian. Her fears spun around in his mind. He hadn't been able to stop himself from listening to her thoughts. He needed to know what she was thinking, to know where he stood with her.

To figure out what to do next.

Should he push her away or try finding a way to let her in without telling her the secret that had cost Elise her life so long ago?

He certainly didn't want to repeat history, and it didn't seem Nicole would handle the truth as well as Elise had, as well as he thought she would.

Plus, he hadn't told Elise until they had been together for a long while and were in love. She'd had much more invested in keeping his secret, still she'd fallen short in that, and it had ultimately cost her life.

No, he absolutely could not tell Nicole the truth yet.

But pushing her away wasn't an option either, not if he were completely honest with himself. He needed to be wanted. Accepted. Loved.

He held in a chuckle at that. She was supposed to be the one who needed him. He had wanted to be her savior but had realized quickly she could save herself. He was useless to her.

The real truth was that out of the two of them he was the one who needed saving.

The thought of not having her in his life made his gut ache. He'd only known her a short time, but the sweetness she had shown him, the way she had let him in—just like she said—had made him connect with her in ways he'd never thought possible.

Especially not after losing Elise.

Had his time in exile made him too needy? Would he have latched onto anyone who came along, or was Nicole that special?

He thought of her as an angel. *His* angel. Sent to pull him through and make him forget the mistakes of his past.

To make him a better man.

I sure as hell need that.

He didn't want to be a fuck up anymore. He wanted to gain his brother's respect. To keep Nicole's.

And, in truth, to regain his own respect.

He breathed in deeply, trying to ignore the sweet smell of her pussy. Hell, he hated thinking vulgar thoughts about her. She was his pure angel, even though he knew otherwise, and she'd told him so herself.

Yes, she was human, but she was now *his* human.

Her fingers slithered into his hair, her soft voice tugging at his attention. "Bastian, talk to me." The strain in her tone from her uncertainty was impossible for her to hide. She dropped her arms to her sides.

He forced himself to look up, to hold her gaze and make her understand. "I want to explain it all to you, believe me." He sighed and shook his head. "I just don't know how else to put it than what I've already told you. If it would help you give us time to get to know each other better, I promise not to drink from any other women. Hell, I don't even want to." He reached for her hand then raised it to his lips and placed a soft kiss there.

She didn't pull away, which was a good sign. And those awful thoughts about him no longer ran through her mind. She wanted to give him a chance. He felt it in her, heard it in her mind. She wanted to believe in him, wanted the fairytale to be real.

Damn it if he didn't want to give her that. To sweep her off her feet and whisk her away to his castle—well, his and Donovan's.

He squeezed his eyes shut and gritted his teeth at that thought. Their castle in England was where Elise had been murdered.

Nicole's soft voice yanked him from his morbid memories. "Maybe we could slow down a little. Start over even."

Starting over. That was what he'd planned on doing when he came to Lansford.

Maybe she was right. The way things had gone between them was off from the very beginning. He never should have taken her the way he did, and he had to let her know.

He opened his eyes and locked gazes with her again. "You're absolutely right. We should start over. I never should have pressed the issue with you the night we met. I hadn't assumed sex would be on the table, but when I met you I had to have you. Just like I've had to since then." He stood and wrapped her naked body in his arms, holding her to him tightly yet lovingly, not sexually. "Please, my angel, let me make it up to you. Let's get to know each other, no more sex until you feel comfortable with what is happening between us, and with me."

She ran her fingers through his hair. "I'd like that very much. But you can't blame yourself for the night we met. I'm a grown woman and am responsible for my own decisions. I didn't feel coerced, I felt liberated. I don't regret it, only that we've spent more time having sex than just being together."

"Well that stops right now." He shook his head again. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but...go get dressed."

He released her, but before moving away from him, she stood on her toes and placed a chaste kiss on his cheek.

"Thank you."

The relief rolling off her let him know he'd made the right decision. He had to treat her better. She did deserve more.

He grabbed his clothes and dressed while she rummaged through her closet. She came out fully clothed, unfortunately.

Fuck. I just agreed to be celibate. Shit. And I promised not to drink from other women.

That didn't leave him many options for sating any of his desires.

She strutted toward him in her tight jeans and T-shirt.

This woman would be the death of him, but she was worth all the torture in the world.

He'd live off bottled blood. It was readily available in this city. He didn't need to feed fresh. Human blood was human blood. And he could live without sex for a while. He'd sure as hell done it for long periods of time before.

She stopped a short distance away from him and slipped her hands inside her pockets. "So...where do we go from here?"

Good question. It wasn't like he'd been in the dating game recently. What did couple's do in this day and age? All he knew was Surrender and Club Delacroix. He was so out of touch still, more than he'd realized.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I guess we go on a real date. If you would do me the honor?" He'd simply have to figure out what that actually entailed.

Her beautiful smile grew wide. "That sounds like a wonderful idea. I would love to go on a date with you."

Taking a cue from her, he stepped closer and kissed her cheek. "I'll call you when I get the plans together. I want to do this right. What nights are you off this week?"

"Thursday and Sunday."

"What do you say we try for Thursday then?"

The rush of excitement flowing through her made him even more eager, too.

She nodded. "Perfect. I'll be waiting for your call." She gestured for him to go, ushering him to the door. "Get to planning, and don't make me wait too long to hear from you."

"I won't." He liked this bossy streak of hers.

She was sassy, fiery. Too bad it was such a turn on when he had no way of enjoying her body again for some time. As long as he didn't screw this up like he did everything else in his life.

He placed another kiss on the back of her hand and made his way out to his beast, trying not to focus on memories of the building's owner and what he had stolen from Bastian so long ago.

TWELVE

Bastian had shown up early for his shift so he could get some dating advice from his brother. Donovan filled him in on how things went nowadays and what women expected.

So many wonderful ideas ran through his mind of how he could treat Nicole like the angel she was.

As he turned to leave Donovan's office, his brother added, "I recommend only bringing her here at first, though. Don't go gallivanting all over the place with her yet. You're not ready for it."

Bastian gritted his teeth and clenched his fists. *This could get ugly.* "Stop telling me what I am and am not ready for." He slammed his fist on his brother's desk. "You have no idea what hell I've been through and what I'm capable of handling."

Donovan flew around his desk and grabbed Bastian by the throat. "This is my town, little brother. I will not have you coming in here thinking you're the big, bad vampire who can handle anything." He tossed Bastian against the wall. "Tell me this, Mr. I-can-handle-it. What will you do when you're dancing close with Nicole and you can't keep the vampire inside you under control?"

Bastian rubbed at his throat, his pride stinging more than his neck. He should have fought back, but he wanted to show he *could* control himself. Still, he leveled a heated glare at his brother. "I've tested myself around her enough to know I won't lose control to the bloodlust."

"I'm not only talking about the bloodlust." Donovan scrubbed a hand over his face and sighed. "The fact that you're not completely thinking this through proves I'm right. What are you going to do when the two of you are rubbing against each other on the dance floor in some other club and you vamp out from getting too damn horny? How will you explain that the fake fangs and contacts suddenly appeared out of nowhere?"

Bastian shook his head out of frustration. "I'm not an animal that can't control itself. You give me so little credit—"

"Look at your track record. Did you honestly expect to waltz into town and slip right into a normal life? Yes, I can tell you're trying, but you've tried before. This isn't our first time with the new-and-improved Bastian Evanko." Donovan grabbed his glass and took a long drink. "Look what happened after your last attempt at a normal life. Elise ended up dead because you had to bring her into our world prematurely. Do you want Nicole's blood on your hands, as well?"

"On *my* hands? How dare you." Bastian fought to maintain the control he'd proclaimed to have. His gut knotted at the reminder of his miserable failure, but Elise had died at Rosenbaum's hands, no one else's. "We were to be married. Of course I would let her know the truth. The only one responsible for her death is that son of a bitch ex-Enforcer."

"You see, even after all these years you can't admit your part in it, or Elise's for that matter. Your judgment isn't any better now than it was two hundred years ago." Donovan paced in front of his desk. "It is still my neck on the line with yours so you will do things my way or I will have the current Enforcers make sure you leave this town and never come back. I will not have you destroy all I've built here. I won't be run out of my home again because of your actions."

Bastian trembled, trying not to explode on his brother. How dare he treat him like a child? Maybe it wasn't worth trying to mend their relationship. Maybe Bastian should just leave now and start a new life somewhere else.

But what about Nicole? The thought of leaving her nearly broke his heart. Maybe he *was* too needy. The only thing he knew for sure was he would never put her life in danger. He would never allow her to face the same fate as Elise.

He had a lot to prove. If he could make Nicole happy then maybe in some small way it could make up for Elise's life being destroyed. Times were different now. Everyone loved vampires, at least in fiction.

He would find a way to make Nicole understand his life, take the time to properly woo her, and eventually, tell her the truth. When she was ready. Even if it took years. And if it didn't work out between them, he would move on with his new life.

For some fucked-up reason, despite his brother's condescending attitude, Bastian still ached for his love and approval. With a deep breath, he met Donovan's stare. "I will agree to your terms, brother, but not because you are right. Because I want to show you how wrong you are about me. Now, if you'll excuse me, it is time I start my shift."

With that, Bastian turned and strode out of his brother's office, not waiting for a response. Surely, if Donovan had one he would have stopped Bastian before he made it to the door.

At the bar, he gulped down a few Surrender-style beers to take the edge off. He tried his best not to look over at the booth the bastard ex-Enforcer normally sat at, hoping to remain calm as possible so he could do his job. Unfortunately, curiosity got the best of him.

Rosenbaum usually showed up twice a week, and always with a new mortal woman. But tonight, something was different. The blonde beauty the bastard fed upon appeared to be special.

Bastian waited on customers, though his attention didn't stray far from the ex-Enforcer's booth. He hoped this might be the break he'd been waiting for. Had he already found the woman Rosenbaum cared about?

Whatever feelings the other vampire had for her could never compare to the love Bastian had showered upon his Elise, but he doubted the cocksucker was capable of emotions that ran so deep—unless they were for himself.

Occasional glances at the couple confirmed Bastian's suspicions. Rosenbaum stroked her hand, played with her hair, and caressed her cheek. He'd never done those things with the women he drank from before. The compassion in his eyes tonight didn't exist for the others. His laughter and smiles were genuine with this one, not the normal pretentious act. His underlying arrogance never reared its disgusting head.

Bastian took it all in, and then delved into the woman's mind to find her name was Stephanie Taylor. To his surprise, Miss Taylor made her living as a psychologist, unlike the trash Rosenbaum typically dined on. A feed and a fuck all in one, but not with her. Stephanie had allowed him to drink from her sporadically for years, and they hadn't even slept together. Odd, although this revelation did prove her importance to the ex-Enforcer.

Echoes of her therapy sessions played through her mind. Kind words of reassurance she'd spoken, along with the grateful responses of her patients. She was a good person at heart. Empathy radiated from her. No wonder she had captured Rosenbaum's attention.

Such a shame she'll have to die.

Bastian ached to exact his revenge but vowed to do this smart. He'd find a way to justify his actions so he didn't break the Elders' Code. No more reacting without thinking. His rash decisions had cost him too much in the past. He had finally started to rebuild his life, and he had

a chance at gaining Donovan's trust. Besides, he couldn't go back into exile now that he was seeing Nicole. Although they had only been together for a short time, he'd already felt her emerging love for him. Nothing was worth jeopardizing their relationship.

Slow and steady, that's the way he'd do this. Methodically, just like stalking prey. Only this victim was meant for vengeance.

He would tear out Rosenbaum's heart by letting him know how it feels to have someone he loves killed before his eyes. To watch helplessly.

Until the day he could retaliate, Bastian had come up with a way to get his point across without rousing suspicion.

A few hours later, the pair still sat chatting and drinking. When it was finally time for Bastian's break, he nodded to the band on the small stage at the front of the room. They'd finished their set only seconds earlier, right on schedule.

Nate, the lead singer, pointed to Bastian, smiled, and then addressed the patrons. "Okay everyone, we've got a special treat for you tonight. I'm gonna sit this one out—" The room erupted in boos, but Nate continued. "Calm down. I promise you'll love this. It's my pleasure to welcome a good friend of mine, and your bartender, to the stage. Give it up for Bastian Evanko!"

If it hadn't been for keeping his mind busy on Rosenbaum and the woman, he might have been anxious about having earlier agreed to sing one song tonight. He truly was trying to lead a normal life, and befriending the house band had been a great stride for him.

Bastian's heart raced as he walked up to Nate and took the microphone. He'd rehearsed with the group twice but hadn't performed in front of an audience for decades. Back in the '80s, actually, on one of the rare occasions he had dared to venture out into humanity, rebelling against his sentence from the Elders. Thankfully, no one had ever found out.

He cringed at the thought of all the makeup, hairspray, and spandex. And that was the men. The memory of himself primped like the boys from Poison made him chuckle, and calmed his nerves a little.

The spotlight burned his sensitive eyes, but after a moment he adjusted to its intensity and turned to give the band a grin. The amplifiers hummed in the background. People cheered and clapped, some even yelled his name. Live entertainment brought the typically sedate crowd to life once a week.

Bastian did his best to keep his voice steady when he spoke. "Thank you. I want to sing you this little ditty I wrote called *Devil Inside*. It's all about love, hate, and...*retribution!*"

Shouts filled the air, electric guitars roared to life, and the double bass drum fired like a machine gun, drowning out the erratic beating of Bastian's heart.

Don't forget the lyrics. Don't forget the lyrics.

He had a message to deliver, so screwing this up was not an option.

Glowing at Rosenbaum, he took a deep breath, and sang,

*You put me through a lifetime of hell
Kept me locked up inside your torture cell
Isolation and desperation from love denied
There was no safe place left for me to hide*

*You used me, abused me, twisted the knife
I don't know how I escaped with my life
Years of agony, years of pain...pain...pain
I won't stop until you feel the same...same*

Pain turned to anger then to venom for me to spew

*Now don't be surprised when my devil inside comes for you
Yeah don't be surprised when my devil inside guns for you
What you see in my eyes, that you despise, is because of you
What I am inside, full of hatred and lies, it's all from you
So don't be surprised when my devil inside
Guns for you...guns for you...guns for you*

Fuck you too

Quickly, before the next verse, Bastian glanced over to see Rosenbaum's rigid posture and look of apparent disgust.

Good, it's working.

His break only lasted a few seconds before he jumped back into the song.

*Now it's my turn to put you through hell
And lock you up for life inside my torture cell
Your happiness and freedom will be denied
There'll be no safe place left for you to hide*

*I'll use you, abuse you, and twist the knife
No way in hell will you escape with your life
Years of agony, years of pain...pain...pain
I won't stop and I'll feel no shame...shame*

Pain turned to anger then to venom for me to spew...

Bastian growled his way through the chorus two more times, all the while feeding off the energy of the rowdy crowd. He chose to ignore his target now, hoping it would eat at the son of a bitch. Head banging and hair flying, he launched into the final lines with as much rasp and sinister tone as inhumanly possible.

*Now I'm comin' for you
Yeah I'm gunnin' for you
Now I'm comin' for you
Yeah I'm gunnin' for you*

FUCK YOU TOO!

By the time he'd finished, Bastian had the people in the club worked into a frenzy. They'd been fist pumping throughout the entire song and now begged for more, chanting his name like he was a rock god. Sure, there were only about a hundred of them, but they still held a Bastian Evanko love fest, and he let the positive energy in the room encompass him.

Every hair on his body stood at attention and warmth flooded him. "Thank you. I'd like to do some of my other songs for you, but unfortunately, that was the only one we've rehearsed and...I do have to work. Maybe another time."

Pats on his back came from his new friends in the band, and before he exited the stage area, Nate rushed in and did the same.

“You fuckin’ rocked, Baz. They loved you, man. I told you it’d be awesome.” Nate’s smile stretched like the Joker’s.

Bastian waved to the crowd then turned to Nate. “Yeah, this is definitely something I could get used to.” *If only the Elders weren’t watching my every move.*

As he walked to the bar, he couldn’t help but grin when he noticed Rosenbaum glaring at him. He’d obviously gotten under the other vampire’s skin, possibly rattled his nerves a bit. He might even have the bastard watching over his shoulder.

Message successfully delivered.

Round one went to Bastian. Now he had to prepare for round two.

THIRTEEN

When Bastian had called, Nicole reluctantly agreed to accompany him to Nocturnal Surrender for their first official date. It wasn't exactly what she'd had in mind, but she did want to understand him better so she decided to meet him on his terms, where he felt most comfortable.

Maybe spending more time at the sanguinarian nightclub would help her learn more about why these people did this. About why *Bastian* did this.

Yes, she enjoyed the fantasy a little. Heck, she read vampire novels, watched the latest TV shows and movies. She liked them as much as the next person. So what if a lot of that was because of the hot actors playing those vampires or the way they were portrayed to be so sexy and dangerous in the books? But at what point did the reality of it go from harmless play to needing psychiatric help?

She sure as heck didn't want to find out.

After one last check in the mirror to ensure her hair and makeup were perfect, she went to the living room and waited for her *date* to arrive.

She had a few more minutes until Bastian was supposed to pick her up, and for some reason her stomach decided to do somersaults. She fussed with her dress, checked her purse for her house keys one more time, and tapped her foot while she stared out the window looking for his Hummer.

Why was she so nervous? She wasn't afraid of him or of going to Surrender.

What will we talk about? What will we do that doesn't involve making out and having sex?

God, she hoped she didn't throw up.

Her palms grew sweaty and her head spun slightly.

This is no time for a panic attack. Pull yourself together. You can do this.

She breathed slowly, deeply, trying to calm her nerves.

Maybe she should start seeing a therapist again. Get back on some meds. The hectic lifestyle of this city was reason enough, not to mention the craziness of her personal life now.

She stared out the window, and after a few seconds, Bastian pulled in. Her heart pounded so hard she heard it and felt it inside her ears.

A wave of heat rushed over her as the panic tried taking control. She started hyperventilating, couldn't catch her breath.

She was losing the fight. She wanted to cry as the anxiety gripped her tightly. She'd learned long ago it didn't need a good reason. It would just come on out of nowhere. It was getting worse. She'd have to get help for it soon.

She could take an antihistamine in hopes it would subdue this bout, but then she'd be loopy or sleeping by the time they got to Surrender. She wobbled a little and braced herself against the wall.

What was that noise? Something pounding?

Just her heartbeat again.

Yep, she might throw up. She tried making her way to the bathroom but felt too lightheaded to move far.

"Nicole, are you okay." Someone wrapped strong arms around her, lifted her off her feet, and sat her on the couch.

She rested her head on his shoulder. “Bastian, is that you?” *Please tell me I didn’t let him see me like this. On our first date.*

“It’s me.” He pulled her close, cocooned her in his warm embrace, gently rubbing her back. “You’re okay. You’re safe. We’ll get through this together. Just tell me what’s wrong. What do you need me to do?”

She just needed quiet, and for him to hold her until the room stopped spinning. She tried to speak, to tell him what to do, but her throat was too dry, her breathing too ragged.

Why did this have to happen tonight of all nights?

She clutched him tightly, hoping it would ground her so the dizziness would stop.

What was she supposed to do to help calm the anxiety? It had been so long that she was out of practice.

“Just breathe, angel. Slow, deep breaths. Listen to the sound of my voice. Feel me holding you.” His tone did soothe her some.

Though she’d wanted quiet, listening to him, feeling him did help calm her. That big teddy bear whispering sweetly in her ear, touching her tenderly.

Her breathing leveled out, as did her heart rate, but her head remained numb and woozy.

She had to be crazy to think Bastian would ever hurt anyone. His compassion came through in everything he did.

She’d heard that sometimes the big, burly guys were the ones with the largest hearts. Bastian proved that time and again. She could be patient with him and his eccentricities.

If he still wants me after this fiasco.

With a deep breath, she pulled away from him and attempted to regain her composure. Although, if past experience told her anything, she would be exhausted for a good while after a panic attack this severe. She was lucky it had eased up so quickly.

But she still had to explain it all to him.

When she looked up, he caressed her cheek and brushed her hair back from her face, resting his palm there. She instinctively leaned into his touch and closed her eyes so she could focus on the feel of his hand, so gentle and loving.

Unfortunately, when she opened her eyes, she realized he had the silver contacts in, and most likely the fangs, too. She had so rarely seen him without them that she was already starting to forget what his eyes really looked like.

But she’d made up her mind to give him a chance, to overlook those things. She hoped he would overlook her anxiety problems, as well.

All the strange issues with him aside, she wanted this to work. There was something about him that drew her in and captivated her. After the horrendous dating life she’d had, and after what her sister had gone through, she doubted she could ever let someone in and learn to trust completely. But something about Bastian made her feel safe and warm.

Maybe it was his impressive size, knowing he could protect her from any of the real craziness in this city. Maybe it was the sincerity in his voice and actions.

Maybe she was just fooling herself because she wanted so badly to have the kind of love her parents did. She wanted something good to grab onto in this negative world.

She prayed Bastian was everything he appeared to be and she wouldn’t end up being another statistic. Small-town girl found raped and dead in a back alley in The Sin City of the East.

Her parents had warned her.

Looking into Bastian's silver eyes, she had no idea if she'd made the right choice by giving him a chance to prove he wasn't a bad guy just because he pretended to be a vampire—and drank human blood.

She cringed, swallowed hard, and fought another wave of dizziness.
Maybe she couldn't do this after all.



The lump stuck in Bastian's throat as Nicole's thoughts threatened to choke him, to deprive him of the unnecessary air he breathed. His heart lurched to a stop when she once again questioned her ability to continue on with him.

He was growing tired of this back and forth, push and pull between them. She either wanted him or she didn't.

Who was he kidding? An angel like Nicole could never overlook the things he'd done in the past or the things he planned to do in the future. When she found out he was a cold blooded murderer, a true immortal vampire, a killing machine...

He shook his head.

Even he had to admit he didn't deserve true love. Hell, if he were honest with himself, he knew he didn't deserve Donovan's respect either.

Bastian's actions had caused his brother to put his own life on the line to save him. He had to admit he was the total fuck up everyone believed him to be.

And yes, he would take out Christof Rosenbaum one way or another. If he had no hope of love and redemption, then why not? He owed Elise that much. To avenge her murder somehow. He just needed to find out more about the woman that son of a bitch seemed to care about. An eye for an eye. Retribution was natural to vampires, after all.

"...and so I sometimes get these panic attacks. I mean, I haven't had one this bad for a while, but there's no rhyme or reason to them. They can hit out of nowhere, with no apparent triggers." Nicole's soft voice tugged him out of his ugly ruminations.

He breathed deeply, inhaling her intoxicating scent. Damn if she didn't calm his anger so easily. That in and of itself told him she was meant to be in his life. He sure as hell wouldn't let her go. One day, maybe, he'd tell her everything and make her understand. Maybe she could love him in spite of the things he'd done and would do in the future.

If it was a lie, he had to let himself believe it. He'd go totally off the deep end without it. As much as he didn't want to admit it, he really was barely in control still.

Hell, I've never been in control.

He refocused on his angel. Right now, she did need him, and he would damn sure be there for her, not let his own screwed-up head get in the way.

He stroked her hair, ran his thumb over her cheek. He reveled in how she leaned into his touch, taking the comfort he offered and holding on to it tightly.

With so much at stake, he had to take things slowly and do right by her. They were both lost and floundering, no matter how well they both hid it. Her strong will hid deep pain, as did his. Maybe together they could heal each other.

"Has the worst of it subsided?" He didn't need to ask. He felt the relief in her, but he also felt how much the attack had depleted her energy.

"Yes, I think so." She scooted closer, allowing him to hold her. She snuggled into his chest. "Thank you for being here for me and not thinking I'm crazy."

He listened as her mind filled with thoughts of others who hadn't been so caring, who had even went so far as to make fun of her. Bastards who had said cruel things and left her alone when she'd been most vulnerable.

I won't turn my back on you, angel. I promise.

She did truly need him. His heart nearly burst with pride from being able to comfort her and take away a small piece of her hell.

He was falling for her, plain and simple, and somewhere deep down, he felt the same inside her. She had grabbed onto him as tightly as he had her. It was almost as if they didn't need words to communicate or understand this.

Yes, she still had to wrap her mind around his *sanguinarian* lifestyle, but she was strong and could do so in time. He would no longer allow himself to have any doubt in the matter.

"I'm sorry I ruined our first date." She released a long slow breath into his chest, the warmth heating him through to his heart. "I want to go out still, but I'm too tired to move."

He ran his hands over her back and kissed the top of her head. "You didn't ruin anything. I am perfectly content sitting here holding you, even if we do nothing else the rest of the night."

In truth, he could hold her like this forever.

He nearly cringed at that though.

He'd planned forever with Elise at one time, but he couldn't let himself dwell on that anymore. The same thing would not happen to Nicole.

"I'm fine with this, too." She let out a contented sigh that sent a jolt straight to his groin. "I think I just need a few minutes, though. Maybe we could use this time for you to explain more to me." She looked up at him. "I get the fangs and contacts, but drinking blood." She bit her lip and her brows furrowed. "I still don't understand how it can taste good."

It was clear she wouldn't stop until she got the answers she thought she needed.

He just didn't have any that he could give her. "I know it seems strange, but I honestly do like the taste. I can't explain why, I just do." Not that he didn't know why, he simply was not allowed to explain the truth of it until he knew for sure she would keep his secret. "And you have to admit the whole thing is pretty fun."

"Fun? Yes. Kinky? Definitely. But don't you worry if it's normal or..." She trailed off, shaking her head. "Okay, *normal* isn't the right word."

"I think the word you're looking for is *crazy*."

She stiffened in his arms. "No. I mean... I... I don't think—"

"Yes, you do. Most people do, so why wouldn't you?" He had to think fast to make it seem less crazy. "Everyone gets off on different things. Some people like to be tied up and whipped or spanked, and some of us like to bite beautiful women's necks and drink their blood." There, maybe that would help. After all, there were actually humans who lived the *sanguinarian* lifestyle so it wasn't much of a stretch.

She laid her head on his chest, turning over in her mind what he'd said. He tried not to listen too long, to give her some privacy. He hated invading her thoughts and had to quit doing so.

After a long period of silence, she spoke into his chest. "I guess I see what you're saying. I doubt I'll ever really understand. I just have to accept this is what you like to do, and that I enjoy you doing it to me." She sat up and scooted away. "Let me freshen up and we can go. You still owe me a date."

He stood with her then lifted her hand to his mouth and placed a kiss on her soft skin. "Yes, I do."

She smiled and sauntered away, dragging his heart along with her.

My angel.

The date may have started off a little rocky, but he had every intention of making the rest of it perfect for her.

FOURTEEN

Music thundered as Nicole stepped through the door of Nocturnal Surrender, Bastian guiding her with his hand on the small of her back. His strong touch reassured her, made her feel safe in the strange world inside the club.

She was still a little weak from her panic attack, but nothing would stop her from spending more time with her big teddy bear, especially not after how wonderfully he'd just helped her through that hell.

He led her to a booth toward the back, past the small dance floor and smaller stage. Various employees greeted them along the way, telling Bastian how lucky he was to have the night off as they had been bombarded with customers all evening.

Before they reached the corner he led her to, he stopped cold and glared at a man in a nearby booth. Nicole did a double take to realize the man with the silver contacts and fangs was actually her landlord, Christof Rosenbaum.

Christof stood and strode toward her and Bastian, whose arm snaked around her waist, pulling her tightly against him in a possessive gesture.

Unsure if she liked being claimed in such a way, she attempted to wiggle free, but she couldn't budge in Bastian's iron hold.

When Christof stopped in front of them, the two men scowled at each other. That inexplicable fear crept up her spine again, as if she were in the middle of the woods staring down a grizzly.

The last thing she needed was another bout of anxiety.

Christof finally broke away from Bastian's glower and turned to Nicole. He extended his hand to her. "How have you been, love? I hope the apartment is to your liking."

She reached for his hand, but Bastian nudged her away and clasped her wrist before she could make contact.

"Now, now, Bastian. Aren't you supposed to be polite with me?" The grin that spread over Christof's face was the most sinister thing Nicole had ever seen.

She looked up at Bastian to face the hatred and rage marring his expression. It was as if the two men might start brawling right there in the middle of Surrender, never mind the fact Christof wore one of his usual expensive suits.

The men didn't seem to notice, but Donovan strutted toward them, a determined grimace on his face. He stepped between the two, shoving Christof back, and then clamping his hand on Bastian's shoulder. "Don't do this. Not here. Not now. Hell, not ever."

The tension in Bastian's body, the murderous look in his eyes, sent shivers rolling over Nicole.

What had Christof done to make Bastian so angry with him? And why did Christof appear to delight in egging him on?

Nicole's mind went straight back to questioning what on earth she was doing with these strange people.

Bastian released her and knocked Donovan's arm away. "I didn't do anything, brother. I haven't even spoken to the son of a bitch. *He* approached us." He spat the words out through gritted teeth.

His anger looked barely contained, like he might rip Christof's head off at any second. Like he might unleash all that physical power his massive muscles possessed on his smaller opponent to destroy him. To literally kill him.

Donovan's gaze darted back and forth over all of them, assessing the situation. He lingered on Nicole a moment longer than she was comfortable with, an almost disgusted look cast her way.

Heat crept into her cheeks. She had to do something before the anxiety returned. "That's it, I'm leaving." She turned to walk away, but Bastian grabbed her arm.

The rage left his expression when he looked at her. "Wait a minute. Everything is fine. We aren't going to let *him* ruin our date."

Christof let out a mocking chuckle. "Oh, Nicole, love. You can do much better than this..." He swept his condescending gaze up and down Bastian's body. "...than this worthless—"

This time, Donovan grabbed Christof by the shoulders. "Stop, please. Can't you see he's trying to stay calm? Don't antagonize him."

What, did Bastian have some kind of anger problem? Was he prone to exploding without warning or provocation? Although, Christof did seem to be provoking him intentionally. Thank goodness Donovan had come over when he did. There was no doubt in Nicole's mind this situation would have spiraled out of control if Christof wasn't stopped.

Christof threw his arms in the air, pushing Donovan's away. His features morphed from that sinister glower to innocent playfulness in seconds. "Fine, but don't say I didn't warn you. Your brother will be the death of you some day. Mark my words." He turned and strode across the club toward the front door.

The looks passing between the Evanko brothers should have turned the air to ice. But why, when Donovan's words seemed to support Bastian?

Donovan released a disgusted sigh, shook his head, and walked away.

Bastian gestured to a nearby booth. Nicole looked from the booth to him, unsure if she wanted to do this anymore.

"Please, angel. Don't let him ruin our night." Damn it if he didn't melt her heart every time she saw the emotions in his silver-covered eyes and heard the compassion in his strained voice.

She nodded and slid into the booth. Once he sat beside her, she pinned him with her own glare. "What in the hell was that about?"

He scrubbed a hand over his face and took a deep breath. "You saw what an arrogant bastard he is. Let's just say he's been fucking with me for a long time and is due a little payback—well, actually, a lot—but I promised Donovan I'd be on my best behavior with the son of a bitch, especially in here."

There was more to it. She saw it in his expression and body language. The tension still hidden beneath the surface. More questions she needed answers to before she decided how far to take things with him.

Maybe it was too soon to try prying all his secrets from him. After all, dating was about getting to know someone and slowly learning the good and the bad. Everyone had bad, and from what she could tell, Christof was the aggressor in this situation. He must have a death wish, though, considering Bastian's strength and size advantage over him.

She would drop it. For the moment. She needed to get to know Bastian better, plain and simple. That was what this night was about.

She rested her hand atop his on the table. "Well, I'd say you did a good job controlling yourself with the way he tried pushing your buttons."

His full lips curved into the most breathtaking smile, and even those silly fangs were sexy when he looked at her like that. His eyes brimmed with pride, like a puppy that had done something his owner praised him for. No longer beaten and sad. Head held high. Happy.

“Thank you for saying so.” He placed his other hand on top of hers, rubbing it softly. “But you have no idea how hard it was.” For a fraction of a second, rage clouded his features once more. “Enough about him. This night is for us.” His smile widened.

Why on earth did those fangs make her want to offer up her neck? Because she remembered how good it felt to give herself to him completely. To surrender to her darkest desires. Everything about him made her want to let go of her inhibitions, just like she had the night they met.

She wished she could see his beautiful blue eyes so she could enjoy him fully. She tried biting her tongue, but she had to say it. “I wish you wouldn’t have worn the contacts and fangs. Even though we came here, you don’t need them. I just want to be with you. The real you.” She didn’t want to say things that would ruin their date, especially after what had happened with Christof, but she also had to be true to herself.

She wanted to lose herself in him again, but like she’d said, she wanted it to be the real him, not this want-to-be vampire or sanguinarian or whatever the heck.



Bastian nearly laughed when Nicole said she wanted to be with the real him. If she only knew this was the real him and that he wanted to tear out Christof’s cold fucking heart with his bare hands. Still, he was proud of himself for reining in his temper with the pompous bastard and showing Donovan he could remain in control.

Not to mention how much it warmed his blood to have Nicole compliment him on managing not to throttle the fucker.

If she could only let the whole vampire thing drop...

He had no way of explaining the fact he needed to be vamped out around her because if he caught a whiff of blood at the wrong time or got too angry or excited—or horny—he might not be able to control the change. He’d gotten much better at it since he had come to Lansford, but if she rubbed against him and he thought about her naked body beneath his, the vampire in him would surely emerge no matter how hard he tried to repress it.

He hated admitting Donovan was right on that part, even to himself.

And that little run in with Rosenbaum would certainly have brought out the predator in him.

No. It wasn’t safe to be around her without already being vamped out. But how could he explain why he needed to have what she thought were prosthetic fangs and contacts every time they were together. He’d hoped using Surrender as a reason would be enough, but he should have known better.

She had no intention of letting this issue drop anytime soon. At least she hadn’t pushed him further where Rosenbaum was concerned. If he’d thought much more about that situation, of what the son of a bitch had done...

He shook his head, trying not to relive the morbid past. He looked into Nicole’s eyes, sparkling in the candlelight, his nerves calming instantly. “All I can say is, this *is* the real me. I know it seems crazy to you, but if you’ll just give it some time, maybe you can see past this part of my life and accept me in spite of it.”

She ran her hand through his hair, her gaze locked on his. “I...I’m not sure I can do that. It’s almost like you’re hiding behind all this.” She gestured around the room. “I get that we haven’t known each other long enough to share everything, but...” Now, she shook her head.

A feeling of dread washed over him. Her apprehension and fear punched him in the gut. She was pulling away right in front of his eyes. Not physically, but emotionally. Her emotions were locking down as she stared at him, and the situation with Rosenbaum had been the cause of this latest round of doubt.

Another reason to hate the bastard.

Nicole needed more from Bastian than he could give her. Now his own fear took hold. He couldn’t lose her. She was the best thing he’d had in his life in the last two hundred years.

Hell, the tenuous grip he had on his sanity was completely dependent on her. She gave him something to fight for.

Wanting Donovan’s love and respect wasn’t enough. He knew that dream might never come to fruition.

But Nicole... If she only gave him a chance, he knew she would truly be his salvation.

Maybe that wasn’t fair to put on her, but he had no choice.

He had to do something before he lost his chance with her forever.

Ha, forever. I learned the hard way two centuries ago that nothing lasts forever.

He was fooling himself. He had no future with Nicole or anyone else. Happy endings didn’t happen for him. They never had and they never would.

Visions of Elise’s murder flashed through his mind. It was all that fucking ex-Enforcer’s fault. He just had to approach them tonight.

Bastian’s head spun with confusion and rage. Control slipped away by the second. His vision narrowed for hunting mode. Everything in the periphery faded away. All he saw was the throbbing pulse in Nicole’s neck.

His fangs ached. The thirst and hunger built to excruciating levels. He needed to feed from her. Not to drink her in for pure enjoyment but to tear into her throat and allow her blood to gush into his mouth.

The pounding of her heart echoed in his head. Her voice flittered in, but he couldn’t make out what she said.

He had to get away from her before he hurt her. He hadn’t lost control with her before and couldn’t allow it to happen now.

Better she hated him than he accidentally killed her.

With every ounce of strength he could muster, he pulled away from her. “I have to go. I’m not feeling well. Ask Donovan to make sure you get home. I’m sorry, angel.” The sinister rasp of the predator came through in his voice, but he hoped she believed it to be whatever ailed him.

He bolted out of the booth and tore out of Surrender, moving faster than he should have in front of mortals, but if he hadn’t, he would have stayed.

He would have killed her.

He jumped into his Hummer and raced to the other side of town. The place where the drugs were cheap and the women cheaper. He’d heard stories while bartending.

That is where I belong.

Who was he kidding thinking he could fit in with respectable society?

He needed to kill. It was allowed. Vampires ate humans, plain and simple. It was the natural order of things. He’d tried to play it straight, but that wasn’t him. The others could pretend to be sanguinarians if they wanted and sip on blood without killing. Let them fit in with humanity.

He hadn't been part of it for too long. The animal in him had ruled all this time, and it needed to be unleashed now.

The Hummer peeled into a parking spot. He hopped out and took to the filthy streets. His vision remained narrowed for hunting his prey. With a deep breath and his heightened hearing, he followed the trail of some unsuspecting human.

Filtering out the nasty smells and sounds, he targeted one heartbeat, the sweet aroma of innocent blood.

In a flash, he rounded the corner of the nearest building and entered the side alley where a pretty little thing took out the trash. He snatched her, clamping his hand on her mouth before she had a chance to scream.

Fear darkened her sad eyes. She struggled, punched at him, kicked. Soon, she realized it was useless.

He could take over her mind, calm her fears, and make her feel no pain. That may have been how things were done nowadays, but he preferred the old ways. The fear made the blood so much sweeter and the kill more satisfying.

Besides, why shouldn't others feel pain when his heart ached and his soul had shattered years ago? He couldn't even muster an apology for what he was putting her through or what he was about to do to her.

Someone inside yelled a name, searching for her, and she squirmed and moaned in his arms. Before anyone had the chance to look for her outside, he held her tight and jumped to the roof with her.

"Quiet." He reinforced his verbal command with a mental one, ensuring her silence then released her mouth.

Holding her tightly as she fought against him, he searched her mind. She had no knowledge of vampires. Thought him a customer from Surrender, and, of course, a crazy man.

And she knew she was about to die.

He searched her neck to see if a vampire had marked her his property with or without her knowledge. It would be the only thing to make a kill illegal and go against the Elders' Code.

Nothing. She had no such mark. She was his for the taking.

He leaned down and sank his fangs deep into her flesh. Her body stiffened at the pain, and she scratched and punched at his back.

The memory of promising Nicole he wouldn't drink from another woman flashed through his mind, but he shoved it aside and focused on his prey.

Her blood gushed into his mouth much as he'd imagined Nicole's doing. The euphoric taste soothed his pain and gave the animal within what it craved.

A loud thud to his left pulled him from his reverie.

Donovan strode toward him with that damned disapproving and disappointed look on his face that Bastian had caused too many times to count over the centuries. "Go ahead. Don't stop on my account. Kill her if it will make you feel better, but I left a crying, devastated Nicole back in my office with the promise I'd come find you."

How *had* he found him?

"I saw you storm out, and after I took care of Nicole, I followed you." Donovan inspected the wounds on the woman's neck. "She'll bleed out soon. You'd better hurry if you're going to get your fill."

Bastian realized his brother had read his mind while he had been too upset to shield his thoughts. He rectified that immediately.

“I took Nicole straight to my office and told her to stay there until I brought you back.”

The rage crawled up Bastian’s spine, and he shoved the woman down, mentally commanding her not to leave. She clutched her neck and sobbed.

He stepped up into his brother’s face. “You better not have manipulated her mind.”

Donovan shoved him backward. “What choice did I have? Would you rather she cried hysterically and went home like that, wondering what she did wrong to make you abandon her?”

Bastian released a long growl as he lunged at his brother, knocking him down.

Donovan jumped to his feet and grabbed Bastian, spinning him so that his back was to Donovan’s front. He clamped an arm around Bastian’s neck. “Stop fighting me because you’re not in control like you pretend to be. Admit that you need my help before this whole thing blows up in our faces and we’re in front of the Elders fighting for our lives again.” He turned Bastian and tossed him down on his ass. “Feed if you need to, kill if you must, but get it over with and pull yourself together if you want to help your girlfriend through this.”

Bastian sat sprawled on the concrete roof and looked at his prey. It was the first time he’d noticed her long dark hair and bright blue eyes, just like Nicole’s. Or was it? Had he taken her in Nicole’s place?

Why do I have to be such a fuck up?

He crawled over to the woman, unsure of what to do with her. Yes, he still needed the kill. His blood burned for it. If he didn’t sate the urge now, it would only build until he lost control, and maybe with Nicole.

“Just do it and get it over with, and I’ll help you dispose of the body.” Donovan almost sounded like he cared.

His brother had to know it was necessary to sooth the vampire within and keep the animal under control.

Bastian eased the woman into his arms, far more gentle than he’d been with her before. “I’m sorry.” He meant it.

His fangs drove into her neck once more, and he allowed her pain to radiate through him, her fear to claw at his gut. As the life drained from her and her body fell limp in his arms, he took in the peace of death that flowed over her so it could sooth his pain. He licked the wounds on her throat to seal them. He brushed his hand over her eyes to close them.

With a few deep breaths, he released all the hurt and anger. The vampire was sated. The animal calmed.

But the man...

The man still needed his angel.

FIFTEEN

A few weeks had gone by since Bastian had lost control to the bloodlust. He'd hated having to manipulate Nicole's mind and make her believe he had never left her alone in Surrender that awful night, but there had been no choice.

Donovan had convinced him it was the right thing to do. It was either that or put her out of his life completely.

Although he knew the latter would have been best for her, he'd been too selfish to let her go. Unfortunately, he'd done the same with Elise all those years ago. He tried convincing himself the same fate didn't await Nicole, but somehow he couldn't quite believe it.

And it was too late anyway. They had become too close and were already officially a couple. It had happened so gradually, sneaking up on them until they had no choice but to admit it was what they both wanted.

Even now, as they swayed to the seductive music on Surrender's dance floor, her body tucked into his, her hips moving against his, there was no denying the emotions circling between them.

But she deserved so much more than he could give her. She deserved a man who had no secrets, especially ones as monumental and horrific as his.

She looked up at him, her blue eyes filled with loving warmth, and maybe a hint of lust. "Can we go somewhere we can be alone? I just want to have you all to myself."

He ran his fingers through her dark hair. "Do you honestly think being alone is a good idea, with the way we've been dancing? I'm not sure I can be a gentleman if we're not in public."

He had to be truthful with her. He wanted to jump her right there in the middle of Donovan's nightclub.

Her sweet smile and giggle, along with the way she stroked his cheek, sent a jolt of electricity straight to his cock.

He wanted to take his time with her, give her the space she needed, but considering the times they had previously shared, combined with his isolated past, his body and soul longed for her.

"We aren't hormone-driven teenagers. We're adults. I think we can control ourselves." She stretched upward and placed a chaste kiss on his lips. "Let's go for a walk by the lake in the moonlight. Wouldn't that be romantic?"

No harm could come from that. It wasn't like he would take her on a picnic table or up against a tree.

He furrowed his brows. *Or would I?* He shook his head to clear away those delicious thoughts. "Yes, I think that's a great idea."

He twirled her once, pulled her flush against him, and kissed her softly. Then he led her toward the bar, his hand on her back, and paid the bill.

When he helped her into his beast, her soft hand in his as she climbed in, another shock of desire coursed through him. Such a simple touch, but the sensual glide of her skin against his was almost more than he could take.

She would be the death of him. He held in a groan as her hand slid out of his. After closing her door, he sucked in a few deep breaths to calm his libido.

I will do right by her. He repeated the mantra in his mind. *I can do this.*

The drive out of the city and into the country flew by in a blur of neon signs and congested streets and sidewalks. His angel wanted alone time with him. She wanted a romantic stroll. He could give her both. She deserved it for putting up with always going to Nocturnal Surrender, for not pushing the issue of his eyes and fangs as often. For accepting him for who he was.

It was the least he could give her.

He parked then helped her out of the Hummer and held her hand as they walked around the lake. "I guess we aren't exactly alone here." He spotted at least five other couples enjoying the warm night air and the moonlight reflecting off the water.

She leaned her head against his shoulder. "It's better than Surrender, though. At least I can hear you talk without the loud music, and there isn't anyone too close." She breathed deeply and released a contented sigh.

He would give her the world if he could. Part of him wanted to start talking about their future together, to make plans for the life he wanted to share with her. Another part reminded him he had no idea how she would react when she learned the truth.

If he could only tell her and get it over with, bring her into his world completely. But if she wasn't fully committed to him she could end up dead if she divulged his secret and the Elders found out.

And the Elders always found out.

Why did he play with her life like this? Hadn't he learned his lesson?

But her loving touch, the way she looked at him like he was her knight, her hero, even though he'd never done anything to warrant such things... His heart ached at the thought of losing her and being alone again.

He'd been alone for so long.

No. He couldn't part with his angel. Not now. Not ever. He would simply be more careful this time and use what he'd learned from the tragedies of the past to keep her safe. She was a strong woman, and if she truly fell in love with him she would be able to withstand learning his secrets.

He had to stop worrying about the future with her. After everything they had both been through they deserved happiness and forever.

Hopefully, once she came to terms with the fact he was a *real* vampire and not just pretending, she might allow him to turn her so forever would be a possibility.

He tried picturing his angel with silver eyes and fangs. The vision of her vamped out in his mind, her dark hair accentuated by those vampiric features, had his libido raging again. Not that she wasn't the most beautiful creature in the world just as she was, but the preternatural blood would only serve to enhance her beauty.

It hadn't taken long to make their way to a more secluded area, tucked away behind some bushes and trees. Large, sturdy trees. He pressed her to keep walking, but she stopped, surveying their surroundings, taking in the wondrous nighttime scene.

"This is everything I hoped it would be." Happiness radiated off her.

He drew it in, hoping to calm his desires, but her joy only added to his need for her.

Damn, he had to stop thinking that way.

She turned to face him and touched his brow. "There is something strange about those contacts some of you wear. Every once in a while, depending on how the light hits them, they seem to glow." She shivered. "It gives me the chills." The thought in her mind wasn't as benign as what she'd said. *It freaks me out and makes me want to run for my life for some reason.*

But he knew the reason. The prey always recognized the predator when it took the time to really look.

He didn't want to make up some silly lie to explain the glow or her feelings so he changed the subject in hopes she would let it go. "Are we on for your next night off? Friday, right?" He brushed her hair back, needing to touch his angel, and tried not to focus on her luscious lips.

"I was thinking of going out with the girls. A bunch of us were maybe going to Christof's casino..." She stiffened slightly. "...if you don't mind. I know you hate him, and I can see why with the way he acts, but Ginger loves to go there. She seems to take charge of the group sometimes. I don't think anyone minds. She's nice."

Her nervous rambling made him take a moment to control the jealousy that sprang to life and tore at his gut when she'd mentioned that son of a bitch. He hated her living in Rosenbaum's building. The last thing he wanted was her going to the casino and running into the other vampire without him there to run interference. No telling what the pompous bastard would try with Nicole simply because she was seeing Bastian.

He hadn't realized he'd tensed and gritted his teeth until she spoke again.

"Bastian, are you okay? If you don't want me to go, I understand, but I hope you can see past whatever differences you have with Christof so I can have fun with my friends."

That was basically her way of telling him to get over himself because she wasn't going to let a man tell her what she could and couldn't do. He hadn't missed the slight edge to her tone, no matter that her words made it seem as though she would take his opinion into account.

If she only knew Rosenbaum was the vampire who murdered Bastian's fiancé two centuries ago, then she would understand why he didn't want her anywhere near the ex-Enforcer bastard. Unless Bastian claimed her, marked her, she was up for grabs with any vampire.

He should have done it before now. His bites healed quickly because of his saliva left behind, but if he took the time to mark her, to sink his fangs in deep and hold them there until those healing properties shifted so the wounds remained long after the bite... Then no other vampire could touch her in any way.

Except, he couldn't explain any of this to her, couldn't tell her why he needed to lock onto her neck for so long, and had no way to tell her why those bite marks in particular would be there for such an extended period of time.

He had no idea exactly how it worked, only that it did. Yes, Rosenbaum had been able to execute Elise even though Bastian had marked her, but that was because she had been deemed to have broken the Elders' Code by telling his secret—to her Hunter brother, no less.

The worst part was, if he did mark Nicole, he would most likely have to manipulate her mind to get rid of all those questions he had no way of answering.

But he couldn't control her life or tell her what to do. She wouldn't let him even if he tried, and she'd be in more danger that way.

Unfortunately, he had no choice but to mark her and manipulate her mind. He mentally commanded her to enjoy his bite and not think of any questions about it. His gut tightened as he pulled her into his arms, the blank expression on her face fueling the hatred he had for the ex-Enforcer.

He didn't take his time. There was no savoring this moment, no enjoyment for him. He moved in swiftly and bit down on her throat, his fangs sinking in deep as she released a pleasure-filled moan.

He loathed himself for what he was doing to her. For violating her mind and her body. He didn't even drink her blood, not wanting to allow himself anything good from this invasion.

The minutes dragged by until she flinched when the wounds began to burn, letting him know the transition had fully taken over. The bite marks wouldn't bleed and wouldn't heal. Bastian's scent would remain embedded in her flesh for any vampire to smell.

A visual and olfactory warning to stay the fuck away because she belonged to him. And if anyone didn't heed that warning, he would have the right to take that vampire's life.

Oh, how he hoped Rosenbaum would try something now.

As he released her neck, he added the mental image of them having finished their wonderful date and romantic walk. He left her in that mindset, unable to bring himself to face her after what he'd done. He just wanted to take her home, and then go drown his misery in a few cases of beer.

Head hung low, he walked her back to the vehicle. The knot in his gut grew, as did his burning desire for vengeance. It took a lot for a vampire to feel nauseated, but with what he'd just done to his angel, Bastian felt like he might lose his supper.

That bastard will pay for this. No matter how long it takes, I will get my retribution.

SIXTEEN

When her plans with Ginger and the other girls fell through, Nicole intentionally showed up at Bastian's house unannounced, and it had paid off. He opened the door, and she licked her lips at the site of him. He must have just finished showering and not had enough time to dress properly—or to dry off completely.

It was her lucky night.

Most of the time he preferred to meet her at his brother's nightclub, and therefore had those damn vampiric contacts and fangs in. There had only been a handful of times in the few months they'd dated when she had seen him without them. But tonight, although his mesmerizing sapphire gaze drew her in, the lack of vampire prosthetics took a backseat to something else.

His body-builder frame filled the doorway, covered only by low-riding jogging shorts that deliciously clung to his hips. The defined cuts of his abdomen accentuated the patch of hair teasing at the edge of the material. Lower, the perfectly outlined bulge begged to be touched.

Maybe she was ready to take their relationship back to the next level again.

Somehow, she wrenched her attention away from what hid beneath his shorts and examined him further.

His broad chest glistened, his muscles flexed, his golden hair was slung wet and sexy against his stubble-covered face, and he held a damp towel. "Nicole!" His eyes grew wide. "I thought you were going out with your friends. Why didn't you tell me you were coming? I'd have—"

She held her fingers to his lips as she stepped forward, giving him no choice but to back up. After making her way inside, she closed the door behind her. "Oh no. If I'd have warned you, you would've wanted to go to Surrender. I barely ever get to see you outside of that place." *To see the real Bastian.* "And besides, I definitely like how you look when I catch you by surprise. When our plans fell through I thought it was the perfect opportunity to do just that."

A flash of heat spread through her as her eyes roamed over him once more. She ran her hands along his warm arms then slid them inward to caress his hard pecs. She wanted to bury her head in his chest and breathe him in. To have him wrap his arms around her and hold her so tight there would be no space between them. To feel him hard against her.

Yep, definitely ready to feel him inside me again.

As if in response, he dropped the towel, grunted, and pinned her to the door before she could blink. His long body pressed into her exactly how she'd wanted. He grabbed her arms and raised them over her head, holding them together with one hand. The longing in his eyes—the fire—burned her to the core.

With his free hand, he feathered his fingers down the sensitive flesh on the underside of her arm, the touch so soft it almost tickled. When his hand came to rest at her side, right at her breast, he slipped his thumb between their bodies and played with her nipple.

Her heart sped. He touched her chin softly, tilted her head upward, and brushed his full lips over hers. Slipping his hand behind her head, he fisted her hair and pushed his hard shaft against her.

He groaned, only it wasn't his normal pleased sound. More like he was in pain. He pulled away even faster than he'd closed in.

Nicole dropped her arms, let out the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding, and panted for a few seconds. Bastian bolted out of the foyer and into the living room before she steadied herself enough to walk.

By the time she entered the room, he stood at the brick fireplace with his back to her, one arm outstretched, hand on the mantle. He leaned on it, breathing heavily. She stopped, unsure if she should give him a minute or go to him and see if he needed help.

"Bastian, are you okay?" Her voice cracked from concern.

He cleared his throat and held up his hand as if to tell her to stay back. "Just give me a minute. I'll be fine."

The rasp in his voice made her heart sink. He didn't sound fine at all. Both of his hands were planted on the mantel now. He coughed a few times.

She ran to his side and rubbed his back. "What is it? What's wrong?"

After a few deep breaths, he lowered his arms and stood up straight. "Nothing. Give me a little space, will you?" He strode away without turning to her.

She followed as he retrieved the towel, but when he ignored her and charged up the stairs, she looked around dumbfounded. He'd *never* been short with her like that. She clenched her fists and gritted her teeth, fighting back tears.

What did I do wrong?

Maybe *he* wasn't ready to resume their sexual relationship. Although, from the way he took her at the door she'd have a hard time believing that.

Not wanting to be the pushy girlfriend, she gave him the *space* he'd asked for and waited in the living room.

Her single visit to his house before this had lasted only five minutes—and that had been near the beginning of their relationship. They had left Nocturnal Surrender after someone accidentally bumped into him, spilling a drink on his shirt. He had stopped at home to change before they went to a late movie. He hadn't taken the time to show her around because they were having such a good time and wanted to get on with their date.

A quick glance around the room didn't offer much new information about him. There were no pictures, no decorations or knickknacks—not that she thought someone like Bastian would have those. The only sign of the man who lived there was an empty beer bottle on the dark coffee table.

She hadn't noticed the first time, but the theme of the entire room was dark. Brown leather couch and chairs, mocha walls, wood floor. Even the curtains looked more like they were meant to keep the sun out rather than make the place feel homey.

The room almost gave her the creeps. She sat on the edge of the couch, bouncing her leg. *Maybe it's because he hasn't lived here long enough to spruce up the place.* After all, he'd only been in Lansford a few months, and she had known him for most of that time.

That had to be it.

Still, she needed to get out of the living room. Nearly fifteen minutes had gone by and Bastian hadn't come back down. She went out to the hall and called for him but received no response. In fact, she hadn't heard any sounds at all since he'd run up there.

Could something have happened to him? What if he needed help?

She bit her lip and paced, contemplating if she should invade his privacy and go find out.

What the hell am I doing? He could be lying up there having a heart attack or something. Sure, it was unlikely for someone so young and healthy, but what if?

She took a deep breath and let it out with a sigh then headed upstairs to take care of her man.



Light footsteps pattered outside Bastian's bedroom door.

"Shit."

Why hadn't he closed it? He'd barely been able to calm himself from the lust-filled stupor Nicole had elicited. If he wouldn't have gotten away from her when he did, she'd have seen his fangs come out and his eyes change to silver. No way could he explain that.

He hated hiding his true nature from her, but it was still too soon to tell her, and he didn't want to manipulate her mind again. One day she would find out about all of that and the less he'd done it, the less she'd hate him for it.

He hadn't intended to take so long, but he had been racking his brain trying to come up with a way out of this. She'd made her intentions perfectly clear—that she was ready to resume their sexual relationship—and he had given in momentarily, forgetting to hide his secret. Every time they'd had sex before he was already vamped out and didn't have to worry about arousal bringing on the change.

Nicole was quiet, but even from his en-suite bathroom he could tell she waited just inside the bedroom door. Her heartbeat pounded in his ears. Her sweet perfume mixed with her distinctly feminine scent made him want—

No. Don't get worked up again.

If he didn't stop he'd be vamped out in no time.

"Bastian?" Her angelic voice drifted along the air, merely a whisper.

"I'll be out in a minute." He checked in the mirror to ensure no hint of silver clouded his eyes, braced himself to resist her, and strode into his bedroom. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be so abrupt before—"

"Are you hurt? You had me worried sick." The concern in her voice contrasted with the anger etched upon her face. Both emotions rolled off her in a swirl of confusion.

He shut down his ability to feel what she did and fought the urge to listen to her thoughts. Both were habits he wanted to break.

After turning to his dresser, he rifled through a drawer to grab a T-shirt and attempted to act nonchalant. "Don't be. There's nothing to worry about." He then blurted out the only thing he could think of. "It was just a little asthma attack."

What was the alternative? *Oh, did I forget to mention I'm really a vampire? Sorry about that. But yep, bloodsucking murderer, at your service.*

Why couldn't he find a nice female vamp instead of always falling for mortals?

Well, not that he *loved* Nicole yet or anything like that. After all, it had only been a few months. He was far too old to fall in love so quickly—again.

But he knew that wasn't true. It was just his defenses on high alert with the current situation. He'd already admitted to himself how he truly felt.

His arms shook as he yanked out a black shirt and slammed the drawer closed. *Fuck. What's wrong with me?* She caressed his back with soothing strokes, just as she had in the living room. Unfortunately, his body had the same damn reaction as before.

Electricity shot through his veins, his cock jumped, and his fangs ached to descend. He fumbled with his shirt as images of grabbing Nicole, tossing her onto his bed, and ravaging her played across his mind. He trembled as he attempted to rein in his inner vampire.

Allowing the shirt to fall to the floor, he leaned down, put both hands on the dresser, and closed his eyes. Thanks to his ragged breaths, he didn't have to fake anything to make it appear as though he was having another asthma attack.

In all his years, he never understood why these mortal afflictions still plagued vampires when they had no need to breathe or for their hearts to beat, but now he thanked whatever higher powers there might be for giving him a body that could easily pass as human—especially with Nicole so close.

“Do you have an inhaler? What...what can I do to help?” Her voice quivered.

Huh? What the... It took him a minute to realize what she meant. “Yeah, in the bathroom. I'll be fine, though.”

She had been rubbing his back the entire time, not helping matters, and he couldn't hold the monster inside at bay much longer. He wanted her so badly, and not only physically. As much as he didn't want to let it, her tenderness once again made him ache for what he'd lost so long ago. The one thing immortals needed as much as humans.

Love.

That one thought pushed his arousal over the edge.

His fangs extended. Pressure built in his eyes as they shifted. He stood up straight and, meaning to rush to the bathroom and calm himself, opened his eyes as he gasped for breath...

Facing Nicole's gaze in the mirror.

Shit.

His feet wouldn't budge. He blinked a few times, immobilized by the fear and confusion in her eyes.

SEVENTEEN

Nicole yanked her hand away. Her heart raced and her breath caught in her chest. She shook her head in shock, unable to comprehend what stared at her in the mirror. Only seconds before, Bastian's eyes and teeth had been normal. She would have seen him putting the contacts and fangs in.

He absolutely hadn't done that.

Breathe. Breathe.

She forced herself to suck in air. It didn't take long for her anxiety to build to a breaking point. Her body quaked, the room spun, and her legs wobbled. She closed her eyes and tried to compose herself, breathing slowly and deeply. *I can do this. I'm okay.*

When she found her equilibrium, she opened her eyes, and Bastian was gone. She hadn't heard him move, but then she'd been focusing on calming her nerves. A door slammed, and she jumped, her head automatically turning in the direction of the noise. At least she knew he was in the bathroom now.

But what the hell had she just seen? It had to have been her imagination. She was simply too used to him wearing those vampire prosthetics.

After a few more minutes of deep breathing, she realized how foolish she'd been, thinking he had somehow—

The bathroom door swung open, banging against the wall. Bastian crossed to her, his facial features normal—except for a concerned expression. “Are you okay?”

“I should be asking you that.” Heat crawled up her neck and spread into her cheeks. “I'm sorry. I just... Oh, never mind. Did you use your inhaler? You seem better now.”

“I, ah...” His brows furrowed. “Yeah...” He cleared his throat. “Yes. I feel fine.”

“I guess I really screwed this up. Heck, I come here to surprise you, then I try to seduce you, and instead, I end up making you have an asthma attack.” She picked up his shirt and handed it to him. “Well, two attacks, actually. And to top it all off, I get all freaked out and anxious over it.”

Good save. Let him think that's why I panicked.

His muscles rippled as he slid the T-shirt over his head. Too quickly, those hard abs she had loved to touch in the beginning of their relationship were covered by the fabric.

He reached for her hand and kissed it softly. “Don't apologize for letting me know how much you want me, and that you're ready for us to go there again. I'm sorry I ruined it for you.”

Why didn't he pull her close? Kiss her? He stood stiff—and not in a good way. Maybe he was worried about getting worked up and having another attack. Although, for the life of her, she couldn't figure out why this had never happened before.

How could she have known him all this time and never known he had asthma? Was it all a lie? Did he simply not want her anymore?

She reminded herself how he had shown his desire already, but none of it made sense.

All she wanted was for these stupid issues that never seemed to add up to be over with. She just wanted his arms around her, his lips and hands on her. To feel his hard body against hers. Damn, he looked so good, and she remembered how amazing he felt inside her.

But how selfish could she be, wanting him to take her, to throw her on the bed and ravish her, when he was probably exhausted and could possibly have another attack, maybe even end up in the hospital?

As if in response to her thoughts, he groaned and pulled away from her. For some reason, everything seemed even more bizarre than usual. The tension in the room, his odd behavior, her...hallucinations—for lack of a better word.

“Bastian, what is it? Did I do something wrong? I’m sorry I didn’t call first, but I wanted to surprise—”

He closed the distance between them in a flash and pressed his fingers to her lips. “Stop that. Why do question yourself all the time? You’re strong, intelligent, and beautiful.”

Finally, he pulled her into his embrace and kissed her with the passion she’d come to know. His tongue plunged into her mouth and her body tingled. She slipped her hands around his back and grabbed fistfuls of his shirt. When he cupped her rear and pressed his erection to her, she moaned.

Another groan rumbled out of him, and—

She pulled back. “Ouch. What the...”

Licking her bottom lip, she tasted blood and felt the sore spots that normally went along with kissing him when he had his fangs in. Hesitantly, she looked up, but his eyes and mouth were closed and his breathing was labored. He appeared to be trying to calm himself as she had earlier.

When his eyes snapped open, nothing but ocean blue stared back at her. She couldn’t help but reach up and probe his mouth. With slight pressure, her fingers eased his lips apart. He didn’t fight her. His teeth were normal, but the slightest bit of blood lay in the corner of his mouth.

Am I losing my mind? I felt fangs. I know I did. “What the hell is going on here?”

He licked the crimson away. “I’m sorry. I got caught up in the moment. Hopefully it didn’t hurt too much without the fangs.”

“That’s just it. It felt exactly the same. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear...” She shook her head.

“It’s obvious this isn’t going well. Maybe it would be best if you left.” The sharp tone of his words cut through her heart.

Since moving to Lansford, she had gained some confidence and learned she was capable of taking control of her life. But tonight, she messed things up as much as she had the first night they met, when she’d had a meltdown giving him a private dance, and then ended up sleeping with him no more than ten minutes later.

She lowered her head and fought back tears. No. She was stronger now. Hell, if she could strip for strangers and make nearly perfect grades in college, then she could handle a little rejection from her boyfriend. And besides, she still wanted a better answer than *I got caught up in the moment*.

After a deep breath, she raised her head and glared at him. “It would be better if you told me what is going on here. I thought it was my imagination at first, but now I’m not so sure. I’m sick of barely ever seeing you outside of Nocturnal Surrender. Are we together or aren’t we? I’m either in your life completely or I’m not in it at all.”

Whoa, where did that come from?

She’d never been so forward. Maybe she would make a good lawyer after all. Get all those lowlife rapists off the streets so no one else would have to go through what her younger sister had.

She cringed at the image of Jessica lying on the hospital bed after she'd been raped, waiting to be bombarded with questions and examined intimately, which inevitably only made her feel violated again. And just because her ex-boyfriend had been able to afford a better attorney than Jessica and Nicole's family, he beat all the charges.

Bastian grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her gently. "Nicole? Hey, snap out of it."

She hadn't realized she'd zoned out. Fists clenched, she wrenched herself from his hold. "You know what. You made it clear you don't want me here so I'll leave, *after* you give me answers."

Scrubbing his hand over his face, he let out a deep sigh. "Not like this...at least, not yet. It's far too soon. We haven't known each other anywhere near long enough for me to..."

Nicole crossed her arms and tapped her foot. "To what? Spit it out already. If this isn't going to work, I think we need to know sooner rather than later."

Bastian's face contorted into a pained expression. "What do you mean? I have every intention of this working. It's just..."

"*Just?* What? There you go again. I know we haven't been together long, and maybe I'm pushing too fast, but if there's something going on here I should know about, then you'd better tell me what it is." A newfound fire tore through her veins. She really *was* taking control of her life now. And if Bastian didn't like it, well too damn bad.

She'd let this go on for too long, given him time and space in the hopes he would open up to her by now. She hadn't even mentioned it for weeks, but it had obviously been eating at her more than she'd realized.

Maybe this wasn't the best time to confront him, after whatever kind of attacks he'd just had, but she was starting to feel as if she were losing it. Too many strange and unexplainable things had been happening ever since she moved to this God-forsaken city, and she had every reason to believe Bastian Evanko knew all the answers.

When he remained silent, almost looking stunned, she'd had enough. "Maybe I will leave. You can call me when you remember how to speak."

She stormed out of the room and down the stairs.



Bastian was shocked. Part of him wanted to tell Nicole to fuck off for talking to him like that, but the other—more dominant—part wanted to grab her and tell her how much he needed her. That temper of hers did things to his libido he'd never experienced before. Normally he liked his women timid, with a wild streak only in bed, but her strength turned him on in ways he hadn't known possible.

He had to have her now—no matter what.

As he strutted out of his room, his brother's voice echoed in his head, spouting things about Bastian's impulsiveness always getting him into trouble and how he was doing the same damn reckless behaviors as usual.

He stopped in his tracks, knowing exactly what would happen if he followed through.

This wasn't like it had been with Elise. He'd known her much longer, loved her deeply. She was worth the risk. Although, the risk *had* led to her death. Even if he did love Nicole already, he couldn't put her life in danger because he was horny.

But he didn't want her to leave thinking the worst of him. He was a better man than that—or at least he was trying to be. She needed to hear him out. Unfortunately, he had no idea what he wanted to say.

He flew down the stairs at vamp speed and slammed the door closed just as she opened it. “Wait, please. Don't leave like this.”

She gasped and dropped her purse then turned around. “You scared the hell out of me. I didn't even hear you coming.”

When she smacked him on the chest, he grabbed her wrist. The thought of backing her up against the door and taking her right there crossed his mind, but he pushed it aside before he lost control once more. “We need to talk this out. I didn't mean what I said. I'm just...”

“There you go again. What do you expect me to think when it's obvious you're hiding something?” She tugged her arm free. “What, do you have another girlfriend? Or a wife?”

How can she think that about me? “No. I most certainly do not.”

“Then what is it? Tell me I didn't see what I thought I did up there in that mirror. Tell me that I didn't feel *fangs* when we kissed.” She stomped forward, backing him down the hall, stopping at the living room. After an awkward silence, she spun on her heel and tromped over to the couch then flopped down and propped her feet up on the coffee table. “I'm waiting.”

What the hell could he do? He was in deep shit. As much as he didn't want to, he listened to her thoughts in hopes of figuring a way out of this.

She wanted him to have some kind of believable story because the alternative frightened her.

As it should.

He needed to convince her it really was her imagination, but he had to do it without manipulating her mind. In truth, though, he didn't want to lie any longer.

With a deep breath and racing heartbeat, he crossed into the room and sat on the edge of the coffee table. She moved her legs so he could scoot directly in front of her then she leaned up and stared at him intently.

Taking her hands in his, he made a decision he hoped not to regret. “What do you think you saw?”

She licked her lips and swallowed, her breaths shallow and rapid. “I...I don't know. I want you to tell me what I saw.”

“I could easily say I don't know what you're talking about, or that if you *think* you saw something out of the ordinary, you must have imagined it.” He stroked the backs of her hands with his thumbs. “I could, but I won't. If we do this, I hope you're prepared to spend the night because we will have a lot to work through, a lot to—”

The wall clock chimed as it struck midnight, and Nicole shuddered. Her heartbeat pounded deliciously.

Bastian did his best not to focus on it *or* her body—at least, not yet. “Anyway, if you want to know what I'm hiding, you must be willing to stay up all night talking.”

Her hands trembled. “I've noticed things before, things I tried to pretend I didn't see. Some at work, some at Surrender, and some with you.”

“I know you have. And you've done what most people do. You passed it off as an overactive imagination, tricks of light, and whatever other excuses made you feel better. It's human nature.” He moved closer and lowered his voice. “Do you believe you're ready to know the truth?”

“No, but I need to know. Especially if it's going to come between us the way it did tonight.”

He released one of her hands and caressed her face. “So strong and brave, my angel. I only hope you still want to be with me after I confess all to you.”

She leaned into his palm. "So do I."

"Can I have one more kiss first?"

When she nodded, he threaded his fingers into her long dark hair and drew her in for a passionate kiss. Her soft lips and sweet tongue teased his heightened senses. His body tingled with desire, and he didn't fight the natural reactions sweeping over him. His cock stiffened, his fangs descended, and his eyes built with slight pressure as they shifted. Then he pulled away slowly, parted his lips, and waited for Nicole's reaction.

EIGHTEEN

It happened again. Fangs had scraped her bottom lip. Nicole knew what she would see even before the kiss had ended. Her heart thundered erratically. She was silly for thinking her boyfriend could be a vampire.

Stop it. There are no such things as vampires.

With a deep breath, she steeled herself and snapped open her eyes to see...Bastian's vampiric features.

She gasped, and the room spun. "This can't be. It's insanity." She pulled away from him, jumped up, and paced in front of the fireplace. "Please tell me this is some kind of joke."

"I wish I could." He moved in front of her in a blur. "But this is who I truly am. I'm a vampire."

Her breath caught in her chest, and she attempted to swallow the lump in her throat. The panic attack built within, but she did her best to hold it off.

She had to remain calm and keep her mind clear. If the myths were right, vampires were killers. Bloodsucking murderers.

Is my life in danger?

She fought the urge to cover her throat. This was still Bastian, after all. Surely he wouldn't hurt her. He'd already had plenty of opportunities.

She shook her head. "How on earth do you expect me to believe something so...so crazy?"

"But it was okay to believe there are clubs where a bunch of humans sit around drinking people's blood? Masquerading as vampires?"

Well, when he puts it like that... "Fine. Let's say I think this whole vampire thing is real. Then what? Is this where you tell me you're hundreds of years old? That you kill people by sucking out their blood?" She slapped her hands to her hips and tapped her foot nervously.

Bastian rubbed the back of his neck. "Yes." He locked gazes with her. "And I suppose this is the part where you tell me I'm a monster, and you want nothing to do with me." He lowered his head.

She wanted to reach out and comfort him, but when she replayed their conversation in her mind, she froze instead.

Had he actually admitted to being a murderer?

No. I must have heard him wrong.

Still, she eased back a few steps, trying to decide what to say. What to do. Her anxiety threatened to come to the surface with a vengeance so she slowed her breathing and closed her eyes.

Be calm. Be calm.

When she looked back to Bastian, the disappointment on his face broke her heart. If she wasn't mistaken, his eyes glistened as if tears welled in them.

This time, she gave in. She moved closer and cradled his cheek. He smiled when she touched him.

"You're warm and soft. I thought vampires were supposed to be cold and hard." She stroked his face.

He laughed, a gleam in his silver eyes. "And I don't burst into flames and turn to ash—or sparkle—in the sun."

Nicole grinned, holding in a giggle. “Touché.” She thought about it for a moment and remembered seeing him in the sun a few times, however briefly. “So the sun doesn’t hurt you then?” She had also seen him eat normal food, although in small amounts, so there was another myth busted.

“Sunlight does weaken us, and prolonged exposure is definitely not good, but we can be out in the daylight if we feed enough.”

“And that brings us back around to the blood. Is it wrong that I’m relieved to know that’s why you drink it? That it’s not because you’re crazy?” She felt guilty thinking that way, but there it was.

He smiled. “It’s not wrong at all, angel.” He took her free hand in his. “I’m amazed at how well you’re taking this.”

A shiver rolled over her. “Yeah, me too. You’d think I would have had a total meltdown by now.”

Threading his fingers through her hair, he inched forward. “You are far stronger than you give yourself credit for.”

Another awkward silence fell between them, as if they had just met and didn’t know what to say. After a few moments, Bastian led her back to the couch.

Then her mind fired back to life. “Was it my imagination, or did you say *yes* when I asked about...” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “...killing people?”

“You have to understand, I am very old. I don’t make a habit of it, usually, but I have killed to survive—even recently. I’m not proud of it, but it is the nature of vampires. We are killers, but we don’t have to kill for sustenance anymore. There are ways of getting the blood we need to live without killing, as you’ve seen in *Surrender*.”

She opened her mouth to speak, sucked in a breath, and smacked her lips closed, unsure of what to say. When he took her hands in his, she flinched but didn’t pull away. For some reason she still felt safe around him. She wanted him to take her in his arms and pretend this was all a nightmare. Still, some part of her was fascinated with the idea that vampires actually existed.

And she had to admit she’d seen this coming. It all added up. She had known deep down this was the only possible answer to everything she’d seen, no matter how ludicrous it sounded.

She had to hear him out. Maybe he had killed people, but somehow she knew he was a good man.

That makes absolutely no sense. How can I be okay with him doing that? God, this city has corrupted me.

No, it wasn’t that. If he could be so loving and gentle with her he had to be the man she believed him to be. Or was she merely trying to convince herself of this? What was the alternative, though? To fear for her life? Somehow that didn’t feel right. Not with him. But then, maybe her heart had overridden her head.

Unable to wrap her mind around all she’d heard and seen, she simply stared at Bastian, speechless.

He pulled her into his arms, and she rested her head on his shoulder. Her body and mind numb, she took in the comforting scent of his cologne. Slowly, the warmth of his embrace registered, and she allowed him to soothe her.

Nicole snuggled into his chest and held him tightly, needing security. “Please tell me everything will be okay.”

He kissed the top of her head. “That is up to you. I want it to be, but can you deal with this? Can you keep this secret for me?”

She couldn't help but laugh. "Yeah, as if I'm going to say something that could get me locked up in a mental hospital. Trust me, your secret is safe. Who would ever tell anyone when they'd only end up looking psychotic?"

A grunt rumbled out of him. "You'd be surprised."

"Besides, I'm sure crossing vampires isn't very good for my health." She jerked away and met his gaze. "Not that I think you'd hurt me or anything. I mean—"

"I know. You'd never have allowed me to hold you otherwise. It's okay, we'll get through this. I have so much to tell you. Are you ready to pull an all-nighter?"

She smiled. "I suppose you're not talking about going upstairs, are you?"

He merely shook his head, and she faked a pout.



Just as Bastian prepared to explain his past—and all Nicole needed to know about vampires and their laws—his cell phone rang. The recording of his song, *Devil Inside*, blared from the tiny speaker.

It was his brother's ringtone.

"I'd better get that. It's Donovan." He eased her out of his embrace, pulled the phone from his pocket, and took the call. "Hey, what's up, bro—"

"I need you at the compound, now. How soon can you get here?" Donovan sounded more agitated than ever.

Bastian looked to Nicole. He couldn't leave her until he was certain she would keep quiet, and he absolutely didn't want to mess with her mind to make her do so. She'd never forgive—

"Bastian, did you hear me?" Now Donovan was pissed.

Fuck. "Yeah. I heard you, but—"

"Never mind. Just get here ASAP."

The call ended before Bastian could explain his predicament. Not that he looked forward to telling Donovan what he and Nicole were discussing with his brother in such a foul mood.

After stuffing the phone back in his pocket, he turned to her. "Apparently there's some crisis going on, and I've been summoned. Guess I'll have to give you a crash course on vampires while we drive up to his precious compound." He stood and extended his hand to her.

She slipped her soft fingers into his palm, and he helped her rise.

"I don't have to go with you. We can finish when you're done. I'll either go home or wait here for you." The tension in her voice let him know the last thing she wanted was to get mixed up in whatever craziness Donovan had called about.

Not that he did either, but since Donovan saved his life—twice—he owed him. Besides, if it had to do with Enforcer business, he needed to be there to learn all he could. "Actually, you do have to come with me. Now that you know about vampires, I can't leave you alone until you know what's at risk."

Her brows furrowed. "*Risk?* What kind of risk?"

"Like I said, I'll explain on the way. Can't keep big brother waiting." He grinned, leaned closer, and lowered his voice. "He gets cranky when he doesn't get his way."

"Okay. I'll wait here while you change."

Bastian glanced down. He still had on his jogging shorts. No telling what the night might have in store so he'd better dress more appropriately. "Thanks for reminding me." He reluctantly released her hand. "I'll be quick, so get ready to go."

With that, he flew up the stairs at vamp speed, changed just as swiftly, and charged back down as Nicole sauntered to the front door.

She giggled. “Wow, that *was* fast.” Her gaze roamed longingly over his body, and she licked her lips. “I love it when you wear those tight jeans.”

Biting back his desire, he rushed her outside. “How the hell do you expect me to control myself when you look at me like that?”

“Hmph. Apparently you can or we’d be in bed by now.” The disappointment in her voice tugged at his cock.

Damn, what she did to him.

He helped her into his Hummer. After he climbed inside, he made certain she had her seatbelt on, did up his own, and then started his beast. During the long drive to the Evanko Compound, he explained all about the ruling Elder vampires, their Code of laws, and the Enforcers who lethally punished those who violated the Code. He also told her about the new Sweeper Teams that helped the Enforcers, like the one he had recently learned Donovan was involved with.

Nicole gasped. “Seriously? They kill them without a trial?”

Having left the bright lights of Lansford behind, Bastian turned onto an isolated road high in the Allegheny Mountains. “The only time there is a hearing, so to speak, is when the infraction isn’t cut and dry. When there’s a gray area. Even then, the Elders decide on their own what to do, and they have the Enforcers carry out their orders immediately.” He knew this much from experience.

“But how do they know for sure if someone is guilty without a fair trial? Isn’t it everyone’s right to have one?”

Bastian sighed and braced himself to explain the rest as he carefully navigated the narrow, winding roads. He quickly went over vampires’ abilities, especially when it came to hearing people’s thoughts and experiencing their feelings. He told her how vampires could shield these from each other unless liquid silver was pumped into them. Then their defenses came down and they were open books.

“Of course, every Enforcer is equipped with syringes full of silver so they can be judge, jury, and executioner when needed.” He eased off the throttle when the road changed from asphalt to dirt.

It didn’t take long to notice her apparent unease. His heightened hearing picked up her rapid heartbeat. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed her opening her mouth. At first, he expected her to say something, but then she tilted her head to the side, placed her hand to her ear, and opened and closed her mouth in rapid succession. He had no idea what was going on.

Instead of reading her mind, he asked, “No offense, but what are you doing?”

“Hm?” She shook her head slightly and continued. “What do you mean? I’m just trying to get my ears to pop.”

“Huh?” *What the hell is she talking about?*

Was the shock of all she’d learned too much for her? Was she losing touch with reality?

Nicole laughed. “I suppose the altitude change doesn’t affect you since you’re a—wow, I can’t believe I’m actually saying this—*vampire*.” The last word came out breathy and extremely sexy.

Relief washed over him. Apparently his Darling Nikki had no trouble handling all he’d thrust upon her. Damn, he still loved that stage name of hers. It always made him think of the song, *and* her grinding on his lap the night they met.

Mmm. Yep, love to have that right about now. His cock swelled slightly, but the ache of his fangs trying to descend brought his focus back to the conversation.

“Sorry. I wasn’t thinking.” He’d forgotten the problems humans had adjusting to traveling up a mountain. “You’re right. Those types of things don’t bother us.”

After a sharp bend in the road, the lights of the compound came into view. As the Hummer rumbled along, dirt gave way to the long, paved drive and the gates opened. Donovan had obviously been watching for him.

Great. Now to figure out how to break the news to him about Nicole.

Donovan would not be happy, especially if he had called Bastian there to talk about vampire business.

He was startled by all the extra vehicles in the driveway. Only two belonged to his brother.

He cringed. *Even better. I have to explain what happened when Donovan has a houseful of Enforcers and their teams.*

NINETEEN

Nicole gaped at the massive log home as the Hummer rolled in. There were at least eight vehicles, in addition to Donovan's Escalade and one motorcycle, parked in front of an oversized, six-car garage. Various other buildings were situated on the expansive property. The dusk-to-dawn lights brightened the area well enough to take in the impressive trees on either side. Though at a distance, it was easy to tell the height of the pines would be intimidating if she stood next to them.

"Wow. You're brother has an amazing place. I can't believe he drives all the way down to Lansford for work every day." She'd definitely stepped into another world tonight.

Her mind worked feverishly to process all Bastian had told her. Heck, she'd found out vampires existed, her boyfriend happened to be one, and they could be every bit as brutal as the movies and books portrayed.

Yep, definitely not how I pictured tonight.

Still, she amazed herself with how well she handled all of it. Maybe Bastian was right about her strength and the fact she hadn't given herself enough credit all these years.

Bastian threw the Hummer into park and cut the engine then turned to her. "I have a feeling this might not go well. Donovan will be angry that I've told you everything so soon, and I think there is some serious vamp business going on so he'll be in a ruthless mood." He reached out and caressed her cheek. "I should never have brought you here, but I didn't have a choice. Just...don't be frightened no matter what you hear or see. No one here will hurt you. I promise."

He leaned closer and kissed her softly, but it wasn't enough to calm her nerves after what he'd said. She trembled inside. Her heart pounded. *What did I get myself into?*

She nodded, unsure what to say. Bastian came around to help her down from the Hummer. She slid into his embrace and wished she could stay there.

He held her hand as they walked onto the enormous front porch. The door opened before they could knock. Donovan's pale blue eyes immediately locked onto Nicole, practically burning a hole through her. She squeezed Bastian's hand.

Donovan let out a disgusted-sounding grunt then turned and walked away. Bastian released her hand and slipped his arm around her waist in a reassuring hug.

Once inside, she tried to focus on the splendor of Donovan's home rather than the fact she was walking into a mansion full of vampires. She briefly marveled at the two-story foyer, the curving staircase, and the expansive great room at the back of the building—where all the talking came from. With the quick glimpse she had of the room, she noticed Kade and a few other familiar faces she couldn't quite place.

That explained a lot about her boss. She wondered if Ginger knew the truth about her lover or was clueless like Nicole had been before tonight.

Bastian led her to the right, through a set of French doors and into a formal living room. Well, formal in a rustic, yet majestic, log cabin sense. Not really where she pictured Donovan would live, but then the night had already been chock full of crazy revelations.

Hastily, Bastian urged her to sit on the leather couch. "It's probably best if you stay here." He handed her a remote control. "Watch a little TV and try to relax. I have a lot to explain to Donovan. I'll try to make this quick as possible, but if you need anything, just text me."

Nicole frowned. "Text you? When you'll only be in the next room? Why can't—"

“Trust me, you don’t want to accidentally overhear anything if you come looking for me.” He bent down and kissed her. “Like I said, I’ll try to hurry, but I have no idea what’s going on.”

After Bastian walked away, she sat back, looked around at all the antiques, and sighed. Her gut tightened, and she clenched her fists. The entire situation was eerie beyond belief. And there she sat, easy food if any of the vampires got hungry.

Not that she thought Bastian would let them harm her, but what if he couldn’t stop them? She set the remote down, stood, and paced the room.

What if they decided it wasn’t a good idea for her to know their secret? Could they simply kill her on the spot? No questions asked? No ramifications?

She hadn’t known Bastian long. His allegiance surely rested with his own kind.

As she peered out the window, she wrung her hands and her heart raced. The compound was out in the middle of nowhere. If she tried to run, she’d most likely be attacked by a wild animal. Or at the very least, she would end up lost and die slowly from lack of food and water.

“Ah huh.” Why hadn’t she thought of her cell phone before?

She dashed to the couch and snatched her phone from her purse. “Damn it.”

No service at all. She walked around the room, spinning and holding up the phone. Nothing helped, not even a blip of a bar showed. She stopped in front of the large window again, waited a few seconds, and...

Nothing.

Of course there was no service in such a remote location. Bastian must not have thought of that when he’d told her to text him. Or maybe it was just her crappy provider. Either way, she was on her own.

Even if she had been able to call someone, who would she have chosen and what would she have said?

Please help me. I’m in a grand log home in the mountains. Did I mention it’s full of vampires?

Face it. I’m screwed.

She took a few deep breaths and skulked back to the couch. What choice did she have? She tossed her phone on the table and turned on the TV. Her hand shook as she flipped through the channels, hoping to find something to lose herself in. After a few minutes, she stopped on an interesting-looking movie but couldn’t focus on it to save her life.

She winced at that thought.

Bastian will keep me safe.

I hope.



Light from the office where Donovan waited flooded into the foyer. Bastian hesitated for a few minutes to ensure Nicole was okay, but her anxiety and fear overwhelmed him. As much as he didn’t want to, he had no choice but to plant the suggestion in her mind that she was tired and should sleep. He couldn’t bear the thought of her sitting in there for hours fearing for her life.

I pray she will forgive me.

When he was certain she had calmed, he crossed the foyer and entered the office.

Donovan sat at his desk. “Close the doors.” He didn’t even look up from the computer until the doors clicked shut. “What were you thinking? Do you want a repeat of what happened to Elise?” He had obviously read Nicole’s mind.

Bastian had no interest in attempting to justify his actions, but he still wanted to prove himself to his brother. He gritted his teeth as he sat in one of the pretentious chairs in front of the desk. Then he scrubbed a hand over his face and explained himself in detail.

“And you think that just because you were too damned horny to control the change it gave you a reason to tell her?” Donovan pounded the desk and stood. “Why can’t you be more responsible? Think things through? You should have made her believe she was seeing things.” He stomped toward the door. “Now I have to go do it for you.”

Bastian raced to block his brother. “You will do no such thing.” He clenched his fists and his fangs extended, eyes shifting, causing the room to brighten further.

“We are not going to do this again. There is important business to attend to, and Olivia insists on your involvement, although I have no idea why. We cannot afford to have a human here. Not unless she is under our mental control.”

Donovan tried to push him out of the way, but Bastian planted his feet firmly, refusing to budge. On some level, this wasn’t about Nicole anymore. He wouldn’t even waste his breath to let Donovan know he had already taken control of her mind. There was something far more important to tell him.

“It is time you start trusting me. What happened with Elise and her family was tragic, and it is something I will have to live with for eternity, but that doesn’t mean it will happen again.” Bastian placed a hand on his brother’s shoulder. “Leave Nicole out of this and let’s deal with the business at hand.” He lowered his arm, breathed deep, and allowed his vampiric features to go back into hiding.

Donovan stared, speechless for a moment, then finally sighed and said, “As much as I hate to admit it, I made many mistakes before your exile.” He eased back a few steps and lowered his head briefly before locking gazes with Bastian. “I have a confession to make, little brother. It took some time, but I realized none of that would have happened if I hadn’t taken Elise’s parents and killed them. You wouldn’t have been ambushed by the Hunters. You wouldn’t have had to slaughter them and her brother.” He lowered his head once more. “And Elise might still be with you because she never would have betrayed you were it not for my actions.”

Now Bastian was speechless. He had never thought of it like that. He’d always blamed himself. If he would have never brought Elise into his world, told her his secret, she and her family would not have been murdered. Hell, he had almost decided not to allow Nicole into his life for that very reason.

But what Donovan said made sense, or maybe Bastian simply wanted to end his guilt. In truth, though, his actions weren’t the only ones to set the chain of events in motion that took so many lives, including his fiancée’s. They all held part of the blame—including Elise.

Numbness overtook him, and he steadied himself against the wall. He’d lost two hundred years of his life for nothing. All this time he had believed it was worth it. Those years were given in sacrifice for trying to save Elise. But now he had to admit it was a lie he’d told himself to survive his exile.

Two hundred years in isolation, feeding on animals...

His mind spun.

A series of egotistical decisions by everyone involved had caused so much heartache. And for what? All to protect their precious secret.

No. Bastian had been right to live by his own rules all along. And he would damn well do so now. “We were all to blame. Let us learn from it and move on, and not make the same mistakes again. I will ensure Nicole doesn’t expose us, and you will trust me to do so.”

Donovan finally raised his head, his pale blue eyes and baby face more serene than Bastian had ever seen them.

Just as Donovan opened his mouth to respond, Bastian continued. “And you will no longer take responsibility for me or my actions. I know you blame yourself for giving me this immortal life when I hadn’t wanted it, but you have paid your debt to me. It is time you let me live my own life, even if I make mistakes. You are not our father, and I am not your son.”

“But when Mother and Father were murdered, you *did* become my responsibility. I promised—” Donovan stopped abruptly and looked away.

“What is it, brother?” Bastian had a feeling he knew where this was going, and he would tear it out of Donovan if he had to.

Donovan turned back to him. “I promised them as they lay dying that I would protect and guide you throughout your life, just as they would have.” A tear slid down his cheek. “I cannot go back on my word. They died trying to save us. They didn’t care what happened to our land in the attack, only what happened to their sons. I promised.”

His last words were a mere whisper, but they made Bastian shudder.

He swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat. “But they never meant for you to take care of me for nearly a thousand years, or to continue for thousands more. You must let go—”

“You are all I have. How can I risk losing you?”

Bastian could tell his brother held onto guilt about something else. Even though he couldn’t feel the other vampire’s emotions, the pain etched upon Donovan’s face was impossible to miss. Donovan’s words had cut straight through Bastian, some of the same words he’d used to convince Bastian to become a vampire.

Donovan apparently still mourned, still longed for—

“You do not blame yourself for our parents’ deaths, do you?” It was the only thing that made sense. “Our attackers are to blame. They wanted our land and were willing to kill for it. We were lucky to run them off and escape with our lives.”

Bastian thought back. He had been attacked by the same men the following year, when they returned to make another attempt on the land—after Donovan had been turned into a vampire.

At the time, he thought Donovan killed the men to save him, but now it seemed his brother had committed the deed over his own pain and guilt.

And out of vengeance.

Donovan sat on the edge of his desk, staring vacantly at the wall. “It was my job to protect them as eldest son, and to protect you. I failed them. They died because of my lack of fighting skills.” He finally looked at Bastian. “When I left home after their deaths, it was to learn to become a warrior, but I never should have left you alone and vulnerable. To think what might have happened to you if I hadn’t come home before they attacked again. You would have died, too. All because of me.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing.

All these years he had assumed Donovan’s condescension toward him was because he thought Bastian incompetent. In reality, it was Donovan’s own self-hatred.

Bastian’s heart ached for his brother. He wanted to reach out and hug him, but they hadn’t been that close in centuries. And he couldn’t tolerate it if Donovan shunned him, even if it was from his own insecurities.

I have hated him for the wrong reasons.

Donovan had never told him how he became a vampire. Why it had happened. Honestly, Bastian had never cared to know before. Now he did. Although, with the state his brother was in, he would wait to ask.

“You must forgive yourself, the same as I. We must forgive each other. Like you said, we are all the family we have.” Bastian stepped closer still.

With a deep sigh, Donovan rose and grabbed him into a tight hug. “Why don’t you take Nicole home?” He pulled away too quickly. “You two have much to discuss. I will tell Olivia what happened and that she will have to make do without your help tonight. I’m sorry you drove all the way up here for nothing, but I’ll fill you in on everything tomorrow.”

Again, Bastian was stunned. This was not the brother he had known for nearly a millennia. *This* was the man Donovan had been before he became a vampire. When he finally wrapped his mind around what his brother had said, Bastian smiled as unfamiliar warmth encompassed him.

Happiness, maybe.

“Thank you, brother. Trust me though, coming here wasn’t for nothing. You have no idea how much this means to me. I’ll be looking forward to your call.” Bastian smiled then ran to Nicole’s side.

She slept peacefully on the couch, and he stared at his angel. This time would be different. It would be nothing like what happened with Elise. Although they hadn’t been together long, he had faith in Nicole. She possessed an inner strength Elise never had. She wouldn’t reveal his secret and betray him. Not like Elise.

His heart sped as he watched her sleep. He was on top of the world.

Not even Christof Rosenbaum could stand in his way. None of the Enforcers or the Elders, either. Bastian would take control of his life now. He still wanted retribution. No matter what had been healed between him and Donovan, no matter how wonderful his relationship with Nicole, Bastian couldn’t let this go. Rosenbaum would pay for Elise’s murder, even though it *had* been decreed by the Elders.

But that could wait. Nicole couldn’t.

TWENTY

When someone touched Nicole's thigh she jumped up. Her breathing hitched and her heartbeat thundered until she realized it was Bastian.

The last thing she remembered was sitting on the couch, attempting to watch a movie, and then suddenly being unable to keep her eyes open. She must have dozed off. Staving off the anxiety, along with the shocking revelations of the night must have taken more out of her than she'd realized.

Bastian sat beside her. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you. And sorry I took so long. You ready to get out of here?"

She nodded, grabbed her phone and purse, and stood. Her skin crawled, and she nearly cringed at the thought of staying there with all those vampires another minute.

How on earth was I able to fall asleep?

Bastian slipped his arm around her, and she shivered, though she was unsure if it was out of fear or her body's normal response to his touch. He rushed her outside and helped her climb into the Hummer.

After he started the engine, he stared at her, frowning. "What's wrong? I can tell you're tense, maybe even frightened. Please tell me you aren't afraid of me."

She clicked her seatbelt in place, trying to act casual. "I'm fine. I just want to go home and get some sleep."

He caressed her cheek, and she fought the urge to jerk away. Then she fought the urge to lean into his palm.

"I'm sorry, but you can't go home yet. At least, not unless I stay with you." He turned to fasten his own seatbelt. "We're both off tomorrow—well, I guess it would be today, actually—so it gives us time to talk about everything." He backed up the Hummer then slipped it into drive and headed out.

"Don't you trust me?" Her dry throat made her voice sound hoarse.

"It's not that. But you have to understand, I have trusted before and have been betrayed severely. I don't think you will do anything like that, but you're probably not thinking straight after what happened tonight, the stress of it all, and—"

"Don't you dare treat me like I'm some poor little traumatized girl." *Wow. Where did that come from? Twice in one night.* "I'm not going to lose it and go blabbing to anyone who'll listen that vampires exist. Do you think I want to end up in a straitjacket?"

"I'm not saying that, it's just..." He shook his head.

"You know very well you were saying exactly that. Make up your mind. One minute you're telling me how I'm so much stronger than I give myself credit for and the next you're treating me like I'm made of glass and might break from the stress. Jesus, Bastian. You have no clue what I've been through or what I can take." She crossed her arms over her chest and huffed.

"Do you have any idea what it's like to hold your baby sister's hand while she cries uncontrollably in the emergency room waiting for them to get a rape kit and violate her even more than she's already been? Or to watch her go through a trial that makes her out to be some kind of slut who asked for that to happen to her?" She punched the dash. "Hell, they violated her in court, too."

Heat rose in her neck and tears streamed down her face. “And you want to talk about not thinking straight and not being able to handle things. She’ll probably be in therapy for the rest of her life. I’ve never seen anyone so broken before.”

Guilt washed over her for leaving her sister behind. But she’d done it *for* Jessica, hadn’t she? If not, then at least to help others like her.

Or had she run away because she couldn’t stand to see her sister in so much pain?

She squeezed her eyes closed and attempted to hold back the tears. A whimper escaped her lips.

Bastian pulled off the road abruptly, and her eyes snapped open as she lurched forward. He threw the vehicle in park, undid his seatbelt and hers, and leaned over the center console to cradle her in his arms. His movements had nearly been too fast to see with only the moonlight.

Though she’d been freaked out by it earlier, his warm embrace now made her break down and weep uncontrollably into his chest. He stroked her hair and kissed the top of her head. He rubbed her back and held her tighter.

And she only cried harder.

All this time she had been holding it in, trying to be strong for Jessica and their parents, but she couldn’t do it any longer. The whole thing had turned her into someone she wasn’t. Her life made no sense. None of it was what she wanted.

Well, except for Bastian.

But everything she had done, the decisions she’d made since Jessica’s rape were all for the wrong reasons. It was time she admitted she didn’t want to be a lawyer. She sure as hell didn’t want to be a stripper. And she didn’t want to go to nursing school like her parents had hoped.

She didn’t want to go back home either.

Truth was she had no idea what she wanted, only what she didn’t.

Her crying eased, but her breaths were shallow and fast. Almost gasping for air. It had been one of *those* kinds of sobbing fits. The ones where everything that had been held in for too long spills out from all the pressure.

Damn psychotherapy. She hated knowing that much about her own psyche. The information made it impossible to be in denial.

“I’m glad you finally told me what’s been hurting you so much.” His voice was tender. “And I’m glad you let me be here for you.”

It wasn’t like she had done it intentionally. Her mind basically exploded without her permission, and her mouth spewed it all out before she could censor it. She certainly wouldn’t have chosen to tell him, or anyone for that matter. It wasn’t her secret to share. Maybe she needed therapy again, and this time not just for her anxiety.

To be honest, she absolutely *did* need it.

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe everything has been too much for me.” The console pushed into her side, causing a dull pain. She pulled away somewhat to get more comfortable but remained in his arms. “I’m really messed up. I have major issues. I’m not someone you should be seeing. You don’t need to deal with my stuff on top of whatever you guys have going on. And I need time alone to figure out my life.”

Bastian placed his fingers under her chin and tilted her head up, the moonlight streaming in illuminating his beautiful blue eyes. “What are you saying? You don’t want to be with me?”

The pain in his voice stabbed her heart, but she had to stick to her guns. She had to get her life on track and deal with her problems.

Besides, could she really handle being with him? It was one thing to overlook a person drinking blood for whatever crazy reason, but it was another thing to know vampires were real. To date one... Well that was just absurd.



When Nicole didn't answer him, Bastian continued. "I think you're afraid of getting hurt. I know I am."

"Why would you say that? I'm not afraid of— Wait, did you say *you're* afraid?" She looked astonished.

He stroked her hair, needing to feel connected to her and praying she wouldn't decide to stop seeing him. "Yes, I did. And if it takes me admitting it and explaining why for you to admit it too, then so be it."

She stiffened, but didn't pull away any farther. "First off, why would you think I'm afraid of getting hurt? And second, why on earth are you? You're a vampire, for heaven's sake."

"What does that have to do with it?" Why did humans think vampires had no feelings?

"I don't know. Aren't you guys like superhuman or something? You know, extra strong and fast, *and* immortal. Obviously you have powers if you can read minds and—" She scowled. "You haven't messed around in my head, have you?"

Fuck. Here we go again. Just like with Elise.

Nicole must have taken his silence for the admission of guilt it was. "Oh no, buster. You'd better not have. How could you? Don't you have any sense of decency?" She squinted and her brows furrowed. "You can't glamour people, can you? Is that why I slept with you so quickly? I knew it wasn't something I would—"

Bastian pressed his fingers to her mouth. "I'll answer all of your questions, I promise, but you have to tell me what you mean by *glamour people*."

"You know, like on *True Blood*." She stared at him as if he should know what she was talking about. When he shook his head, she added, "Manipulating people's thoughts, making them do what you want, wiping out their memories. Geez, don't you watch TV?"

"Of course I do, but I must have missed that show." He ran a hand through his hair. "Yes, we can do those things, but we don't call it—"

"Huh. I knew it." She jerked out his grasp and scooted away until her back hit the passenger door. "How could you do that to me? That's...that's rape."

He clenched his fists. How could she think him capable of something so horrific? He might be a murderer, but he was sure as hell not a rapist. "Let me tell you something. I could have easily done just that. I could have taken control of your mind and made you have sex with me, even made you think it was your idea, but I would never do such a thing.

"Sure I may have slipped into your head to find out a few things when we first met, and maybe here and there after that, but I've been working hard to give you privacy and respect and stay out of your thoughts." His jaw tightened. He leaned back against his door, pushed out his chest, and crossed his arms.

He intentionally left out the parts about controlling her thoughts. He had no desire to be accused of molesting her mind, as well.

I don't need this bullshit.

"And as for why I think you're afraid." He stabbed his finger toward her a few times. "You just proved my fucking point. After what happened to your sister you don't think men can be

trusted. You think someone is going to do the same thing to you so you use the excuse of needing to focus on college to keep men at a distance. And now you're taking it further by saying you need to get your life in order and pushing me away." He took a deep breath and relaxed slightly. "I can't blame you for that. But I *can* blame you for believing I would ever do something like that to you—or to any woman. Do you truly think so little of me?"

Nicole peered out the windshield momentarily then looked back to him. "How do I know you're telling the truth? On one hand you make it sound like vampires are normal people who never do bad things. Then you talk about killing people and each other like it's nothing. I have no idea what's real and what just came out of some writer's imagination."

Bastian sighed. This entire conversation reminded him of the one he'd had with Elise two centuries ago. That didn't bode well for Nicole's wellbeing, especially if history really did tend to repeat itself.

Maybe Donovan was right all along.

Should he push Nicole out of his life before it was too late? He would have to bury her memories of this night and their conversations. At least the laws were different now because of clubs like Nocturnal Surrender. He didn't have to kill her since she had seen him vamped out like he'd had to do with the Hunters two hundred years ago. If she somehow regained memories of seeing his silver eyes and fangs, they could be passed off as having been at Surrender, or even at Club Delacroix where she worked.

But that was the fear talking.

Might as well go all the way with this before making a decision.

He breathed deep. "I know it must be confusing, but we are capable of human decency and love even though we have different rules and ideas of right and wrong." Glancing out the windshield, his preternatural vision targeted a deer several yards up the road. When he turned back, he averted Nicole's gaze. "But yes, we are killers..." He had to be completely honest with her. "...and I will most likely kill again. Like I said, it is our true nature. We are predators."

She remained still and silent. Bastian focused on her rapidly-ticking heart and shallow breathing. At least he felt no fear within her, no anxiety either. More importantly, she wasn't repulsed by him as Elise had been at first. A strange numbness filled Nicole, and he took it in, allowing it to calm his nerves.

His mind raced, though. Would she accept him? Or would she turn away in disgust? His heart ached at the thought. She was his angel. He'd never looked upon another woman in such a way before. Something within her stirred him like no other had—not even Elise. It was as if Nicole had somehow crawled inside him and had become a part of him. And without her next to him, he wasn't truly living. None of it made sense, but one thing was certain.

He didn't want to let her go.

I will not let her go. "Please, say something."

She stared vacantly out the window. "How old are you?"

Not what he'd expected, but at least it was better than nothing. "Almost a thousand years old."

Once more, she didn't speak. *What is she thinking?* He fought the urge to dip into her mind. Jaw tightened, he waited.

Finally, she faced him. "You never told me why you were afraid."

Her tone made it seem as if she needed to know before *she* could make any decisions about their future.

He'd never told a single soul about Elise before, never spoken about her to anyone other than his brother, and then only because Donovan had been involved in the entire incident.

"Will you come sit closer while I explain?" He reached for her, hand shaking. "It is an extremely painful tale I have to tell you."

Nicole hesitated, gazing at his hand for what seemed like hours, and then she eased away from the door but didn't touch him. She only moved to sit normally in her seat, though she did lean his way, resting her arm on the center console.

TWENTY~ONE

Nicole attempted to relax, but that damn self-preservation instinct that almost always kicked in when she was around, well, vampires did its thing. Her skin crawled the minute she'd moved closer to the *predator* in the driver's seat, and she had the overwhelming urge to flee. But they were still out in the middle of nowhere, and with Bastian's supernatural abilities, she had no chance of outrunning him.

Processing all he'd told her tonight, along with her breakdown, had left her reeling. And her curiosity had already gotten the best of her. She needed to know what a powerful vampire feared, especially one who was nearly a millennia old.

She still hadn't quite wrapped her mind around that fact.

Common sense eventually took over. Vampires absolutely couldn't be going around killing indiscriminately and remain hidden, not with today's technology. Someone would have uploaded a video on the internet, put up a website, sent information to the news stations. No, vampires had to be more careful than that. People didn't just end up dead with their blood drained and no one take notice.

She was safe...for now. Besides, the Bastian she knew would never hurt her. How had she thought him capable of forcing himself on her? Hell, he wasn't even willing to get too rough during sex.

Yep, definitely safe. "Okay, I'm ready whenever you are."

Something tickled her shoulder. She twitched in response then looked behind her. She hadn't realized his arm rested on the seatback. His fingertips teased her, stroking lightly from her neck to her upper arm then back again. He repeated the sensual motion as he stared down at his other hand, which clenched and unclenched on his lap.

Might not be a good sign.

"It was two hundred years ago." His voice tensed. "I was deeply in love with a mortal woman named Elise McNeil, and she loved me, as well. And then I told her my secret..."

He fell silent and laid his hand flat on his thigh. The other one continued its absent rhythm back and forth along her skin, sending a familiar tingling sensation through her body. Every time he touched her, the response was the same. She had no control over it. The urge to run away left as fast as it had come.

Slowly, he raised his head to meet her gaze. Were those tears welling in his eyes? She couldn't help but caress his face. He leaned into her palm, closing his eyes for a moment. Then he raised his free hand to cover hers and slid it down to his mouth. He pressed gentle kisses to her palm and fingers. His other hand slipped into her hair. He lowered their entwined hands, fiery desire burning in his eyes.

Was he about to kiss her?

He breathed deeply, moved his hand from her hair to her shoulder, and...went on with his story.

When he described the happy times he'd had with Elise, his face lit up and his voice filled with enthusiasm. His love for her was unmistakable. It warmed Nicole's heart, and she smiled. But when he talked about how Donovan had killed Elise's parents and set in motion the chain of events that eventually led to her death, everything changed.

The joy in his eyes disappeared and was replaced with pain. His voice cracked. His body trembled. The despair he'd felt back then, the devastation rolled out of him though it was clear from his shaking he attempted to restrain it. Nicole couldn't hold back her own tears as her heart ached for him, for what he'd endured.

Yes, Bastian had done some unspeakable things to protect the secret of vampires' existence, but he had also watched in horror—helpless—as an Enforcer beheaded his fiancée. Not just any Enforcer. Now she fully understood Bastian's hatred of Christof.

And she couldn't blame Bastian one bit.

His eyes filled with tears again, and he shuddered. She couldn't bear to see him hurting any longer so she climbed over the console and situated herself sideways on his lap. Wrapping her arms around him, she pressed a kiss to his soft lips.

At first, he didn't respond, his mind apparently still in the past, but soon his arms slid around her and he kissed her back. He held her so tightly, kissed her so passionately, she could barely breathe. The desperation in his actions made her understand the depths of his fear.

He didn't want to love again if it meant he might suffer another devastating loss.

When he finally broke away from their kiss, Nicole laid her head on his chest. Sometime during his story, or maybe even before it, she had changed her mind.

She had no intention of letting go of Bastian, but it was time to come clean.

Although her stomach knotted, she mustered the strength to confess something she had never told another person. "You know what? You were right. I am afraid of being hurt. I'm afraid of making the wrong decisions. And I'm afraid of not being good enough."

"What do you mean by *not being good enough*?" He ran his fingers through her hair.

What *did* she mean? *I'm not even sure. I just don't feel...* "I don't feel like I ever measure up. I didn't get the grades my parents expected when I was in school. Then I didn't follow the career path they thought I should. I suck at my job, and I sure as hell don't fit in with the other girls at the club, or in Lansford in general. And to top it all off, I don't even think I want to be a lawyer. I don't like to argue. Why would I think I could make a living at it?" She breathed deeply. "I did it all for the wrong reasons. None of this is me."

Bastian chuckled.

She sat up and glared at him. "What's so funny?"

He brushed her hair from her shoulder. "I remember saying the same thing to you in the private room at Club Delacroix. That stripping wasn't right for you." He cupped her face and kissed her softly. "And if you don't want to be a lawyer, then change your major. Don't try to measure up to anyone's expectations except your own. How do you think I ended up so miserable over all these years? I was trying to be what my parents—and then Donovan—wanted me to be instead of living life for myself."

Holding her close, he asked, "So what do *you* want for a career?"

That was the million dollar question. "I have no idea. At my age, I should have had it figured out by now. What twenty-four year old still doesn't know what she wants to be?" As it was, she had started college years later than she should have because she'd waited until things had settled down with Jessica.

"One who's had a lot to deal with and never been able to live her own life." He kissed the top of her head, and she snuggled into his chest.

It had quickly become her favorite place. "So now what?"

"What do you mean?" He rubbed circles on her back.

"With us? The fact that I know your secret?" *Please say we'll be okay.*



Bastian wanted to tell Nicole the rest of his story, but if she knew, any vampire who came in contact with her would be able to read her mind. He hated hiding his plans for retribution against Rosenbaum, *and* that he had every intention of killing Stephanie Taylor—the only woman the bastard seemed to have any feelings for—in order to get it. If Nicole knew, it would certainly affect her decision to stay with him.

But what could he do? Telling her simply wasn't an option. And at this point, neither was letting her go. When she'd sat on his lap in an attempt to comfort him, his heart had leapt into her hands.

He'd told her he intended to kill again. That would have to suffice. "Now, we get on with our life together, if you still want me."

Please say you do.

When she moved this time, it was to straddle him rather than back away. Her delicate hands rested on his chest, and she licked her lips. "Oh, trust me. I still want you."

Not exactly what I meant, but I'll definitely take it.

He smiled and allowed his fangs to elongate, his eyes shifting to turn night into day. "You know what it does to me when you—"

Her hands slid under his shirt, teasing the sensitive flesh at the top of his jeans, and she ground her pussy against his swelling cock. "Yes, I do. And I didn't get to enjoy it back at your place. I want to enjoy it now. It's been too long."

Who was he to argue? If his angel wanted him, she would damn well have him. At this time of night, or early morning—whatever it was by now—the roads were empty. No one would happen along and interrupt. Everyone at Donovan's compound would be there for hours. The only living creatures that might catch a glimpse were of the four legged and winged varieties.

And she was right, it had been far too long since he'd buried himself deep inside her.

She had his belt, button, and zipper undone in record time, and he lifted his hips to pull his jeans and boxer briefs below his knees. She tore off his shirt, and he returned the favor. Her breasts bounced free as she once again had no bra on. He loved that she rarely wore one.

She reached down and grabbed his cock, stroking it and making it throb with need. He skimmed his hands along her thighs, pushing up her skirt, and then slipped his fingers inside her panties. She continued pumping him and leaned in for a kiss.

Her tongue teased his fangs, and he groaned into her mouth. He kissed her deeply, his own tongue plunging in to explore and battle with hers.

Instead of immediately stripping off her panties, he played with her soft folds, dipping his fingers in then drawing them upward until she shuddered. He repeated this motion as she moved her hips in time with his ministrations.

In between fiery kisses, she moaned and panted. She was wet and tight, and he needed her pussy to swallow his cock before it exploded in her hand.

He broke away from her sweet lips. "I need to be inside you. Now. You're going to make me come like this."

Her hips and hand stilled. She grinned, her other hand resting on his shoulder. "I was almost there, too."

As he pulled his fingers away, he elicited another shudder from her. He tugged her panties down, and she moved her body in amazing positions to free herself from their confines. She

removed her skirt, as well, and then shimmied down between his legs. He shifted the seat backward to give her room. He knew what she was about to do and had no intention of letting anything get in the way.

He'd managed to avoid having her go down on him before this. There would have been no way to explain why he had no ejaculate. When he came deep within her, this fact had been hidden, though she'd suspected something wasn't right. He had played it off as the reason he couldn't get her pregnant and told her he had minor medical issues causing a decrease in the amount he released during orgasm. But now she knew what he truly was, understood that since he was a vampire he lacked many bodily functions.

And he was ready to enjoy the benefits of his confession.

Her hot mouth sunk down over his engorged cock, and his breathing hitched. He grasped a handful of her hair in one hand and caressed one of her breasts with the other. Her nipple budded under his touch so he rolled and plucked it until she gasped.

She sucked him feverishly, lovingly even. His body stiffened as he tried to hold back his orgasm. He was already close to the edge from her touch, but with her mouth working him perfectly...

Silky fingers slithered over the inside of his thigh then played with his balls. It was his turn to gasp. He fisted her hair tighter, kneaded her breast harder, and thrust his hips upward, urging her to take him in farther.

Damn, she was amazing, making love to him with her mouth. Her other hand glided up and down his abs, sending shivers through his body. His balls grew tighter, his cock throbbed for release. Her tongue teased him, and she took him in deeper.

His head fell back, pushing against the headrest as she sucked faster. She massaged his balls and moaned as she took him in repeatedly.

He couldn't hold out any longer. His body convulsed in pleasure, and he yelled her name. His cock pulsated in her mouth as he climaxed. She worked his shaft relentlessly for what seemed like a blissful eternity.

Eventually, the last twitches of his orgasm ceased, leaving a tingling sensation racing through his veins.

Fuck, I love her.

Bastian tensed as that thought—no, as that emotion—took hold. It wasn't the mind-blowing, well, blow job she'd just given him. It was everything they had shared before they'd gotten naked, and since they had met.

Still, he couldn't wrap his mind around his...*feelings*. Although he'd known they existed for a while, he wasn't ready to admit them yet.

Nicole crawled up onto his lap, kissing his thighs, abs, and chest along the way. Her wet heat centered on his half-erect cock, shocking it back to life. She licked her way from his chest up to his neck, and then feathered kisses along his jaw before finally stopping at his lips.

He devoured her mouth, held her tight, grabbed her hair once more, and pushed his cock upward but didn't let it slide inside her.

She writhed on him, apparently attempting to work his erection into her, but he wouldn't allow it. He wanted to pleasure her as she had him.



Nicole tried her damndest to position herself so Bastian's hard shaft slipped into her, but it almost seemed as though he was fighting her. She pulled away from his demanding kiss, her mouth already sore from working him over. "Please, Bastian... I need you inside me."

A wicked grin stretched across his face, and the intenseness of his silver stare sent a shiver through her. There was nothing predatory about it. More like pure animal desire or...

Love?

No. It definitely wasn't love. Sure it looked like it, but it couldn't be.

He kissed her, soft and gentle, his lips barely touching hers at times. His tongue dipped into her mouth slightly but retreated too quickly. He teased her, not giving her more no matter how much she pressed. Rather than fight, she surrendered to his slow, sensual pace and kissed him. She stopped trying to manipulate his cock into her, too.

His fingers skimmed her back, tickling her, and she shifted in response. The hardness of his erection pressed against her clit, sending a jolt of desire surging through her.

When he released her lips and slid down in his seat, she had no idea what he was doing. Then he seized her hips and guided her upward. She rose at the knees, bending over enough to keep her head from hitting the roof. Looking down at him, she then knew exactly what he planned to do. He licked his lips and thrust her hips forward until his mouth nestled against her clit.

She braced herself on the seatback just in time. He licked at the sensitive nub, and she shuddered. One of his hands remained at her hip while the other found her core. He slid one then two fingers into her as he kissed, licked, and sucked on her. His warm breath added to her arousal, caressing her skin sensually.

He pumped his fingers in and out, slowly at first, and then with more speed and force. His mouth manipulated her perfectly, his tongue dipping lower, joining his fingers at times.

Feels...so good.

His other hand slithered over her stomach and upward, until it stopped at her breast. He massaged her firmly. She closed her eyes and pushed her body toward him, her hips involuntarily moving in time with his fingers.

He ran his tongue up and down her center, allowing his fangs to graze her swollen flesh. Each time he reached the top he sucked momentarily and circled his tongue over her clit. His fingers wiggled inside her as he pushed in deep. The two sensations combined, tingling from one spot to the other then shooting electrically through her entire body.

She quaked as he drove her closer to the edge. She squeezed the seat, holding it tighter, arms trembling. Her hips rocked, and she panted with need. Short moans leapt from her parched throat.

Bastian groaned as he licked and sucked at her relentlessly, his speed surpassing what a human man could manage. He still worked her breasts, one then the other, plucking at her nipples. Each tweak somehow sent pulses straight to her aching core, pushing her longing to new heights.

He worked her body like he owned it.

"Oh, God, Bastian..." She sucked in breaths and her heart raced.

Legs shaking, the muscles in her core clamped down on his fingers. She bucked against him wildly, burying his face. The scruff around his lips tickled her, increasing her pleasure in some odd way. Her orgasm blasted through her. He pumped his fingers inside her with unfathomable speed, bringing on wave after wave of ecstasy.

More sounds escaped her lips, though she had no comprehension of what they were. Her climax continued longer than ever before, his vampiric speed stimulating her in ways she'd never known possible.

She screamed his name as her entire body convulsed in rapture.

Finally, he slowed his pace and her orgasm ebbed, small aftershocks going off in her core. She went limp and rested herself against the seatback. He eased his fingers out then pushed her hips away from his face. If he hadn't moved her, she wouldn't have been able to do so on her own.

As he shifted back up in the seat, she slid down and rested her head on his chest. His hard shaft pressed against her wet entrance, but she was too exhausted for it to rouse her. She let out a contented sigh. He wrapped his arms around her, and she sunk into him, completely spent.

She'd never even been so tired after normal sex, let alone oral. And she had never felt so close to another person. Sure, she had been in other relationships and been in love, but this was entirely different. She had opened herself completely to him, her heart and soul, and he had done the same with her.

He stroked her hair and back. Kissed her head. Held her tighter.

Safe...

That's what it was. She had never felt so safe. It made no sense in the arms of a predator, but somehow she knew he would protect her at all costs.

An overwhelming yearning radiated from her heart. A swelling of emotion more intense than any before.

Am I in love with him?

They had been together in one way or another for months now, and yes, she'd only just learned his secrets. But instead of driving them apart, all the confessions they had made brought them closer together. The experience had been freeing. To be totally vulnerable with him in every way empowered her. If she wasn't so drained, she would have been elated.

"Nicole?" His chest rumbled when he spoke her name.

She used every ounce of energy she had left to drag her head away from him and look up. "Yes."

He caressed her cheek, his eyes full of emotion. "I love you."

Her body and mind suddenly came back to life, tingling and shaking, at least on the inside. "I love you, too."

After another passionate kiss, they dressed, and he drove her to his home. On the way, she snuggled into the cushy leather seat and dozed off.

She stirred when Bastian carried her from the Hummer to his house, and straight to his bed. He made love to her for well over an hour, slow and tender, taking the time to attend to every part of her. Gentle caresses and kisses. Intimate bites. Their bodies entangled. His hard length gliding in and out with a heavenly friction.

He brought her to multiple climaxes, as she did him. Then she fell asleep in his loving embrace.

EPILOGUE

Bastian had convinced Nicole to stay with him for a few weeks, just to be sure she adjusted well to keeping his secret. Thankfully she had, and now life was back to normal—almost.

Donovan had filled him in on what he'd missed the night of the emergency meeting. New information had come to light, and Donovan's Sweeper Team would now focus on infiltrating Lansford Biotech. Apparently the lab was run by Hunters trying to manufacture a biochemical weapon to take vampires out once and for all.

Olivia still insisted on Bastian's help, though Donovan said he had no idea why. The fact Donovan and Olivia didn't get along surely hadn't helped matters.

Just as well. Bastian despised the idea of his brother cozying up to the Enforcers any more than he already had. After what had happened two hundred years ago, he couldn't take it if Donovan betrayed him, especially not after they had made amends.

Images of that bastard, Rosenbaum, flashed through his mind as Bastian drove to work. Then he saw the sword coming down on Elise's neck. He cringed and swerved, nearly running off the road. A horn blared from behind him. He jerked the wheel and his tires squealed until the beast rumbled down the road in a straight line. His fists held the steering wheel in a death grip, and he wished it was Rosenbaum's throat.

His love for Nicole had not sated his desire for revenge. The ex-Enforcer needed to pay for what he'd done to Elise. Bastian would be smart about it, though, and not break the Elder's Code or put his own life, or Donovan's, on the line again. He had his target. Stephanie Taylor. Now all he had to do was ensure she wasn't under Rosenbaum's protection. If she was, she would be off limits, and he'd have to find another way to attack the prick. Death would be too easy. The bastard needed to suffer the same as Bastian had.

He had already ensured other vamps would know Nicole was under his protection by keeping her marked as his at all times. He'd explained to her why this was necessary and made sure to bite her toward the back of her neck so her hair would cover the wounds.

At first, Nicole thought the idea barbaric—to basically be branded as the property of a vampire—but she relented when he told her it was how all vampires were trained because of the Elders' Code.

The system had always worked well. He hated to admit it, but he actually agreed with the Elders on this part of the Code since it would keep Nicole safe. Unfortunately, it could hinder his plans for retribution if Rosenbaum had marked Stephanie. But Bastian would deal with that possibility if it arose.

He took the turn wide as he pulled into the employee parking lot at Nocturnal Surrender. He'd arrived early to spend some time with Donovan before his shift started. Bastian finally had his brother back and relished every minute of their time together, and the newfound respect Donovan showed him.

The club was already packed with customers. The sweet and coppery scent of blood filled the air, some of it fresh from the vein and some added to drinks. It seemed his bloodlust had finally calmed, too, his body now adjusted to life among humanity.

Music blasted, thumping hard. Candles glowed. He breathed in deep, enjoying the comfort of the now-familiar stimuli that teased his heightened senses.

Feels like home.

He sighed and strutted to Donovan's office. As usual, the hallway was empty since the room was nestled in a secluded corner of the building. The door was cracked open an inch or so, and the sounds of an argument brewing inside filtered into the hall. Only two voices. One Donovan's, of course, and the other Bastian recognized as Olivia's seductively-accented drawl.

He leaned against the wall and listened. Maybe he should have been ashamed for eavesdropping, but this wasn't about betraying Donovan. It was about gathering information.

Praying they hadn't heard his approach or caught a whiff of his cologne, he stopped his breathing and heartbeat in hopes of hiding his presence.

"Tell me the truth, damn it. Why is it so important for you to have my brother involved in Enforcer business?" Donovan seemed genuinely concerned.

"You work under me. You are in no position to ask me to justify my actions, and you would do well not to forget that. I owe you nothing. If you do not wish to continue as leader of your team, then tell me now so I can find a replacement." Olivia's tone was harsh, but still sexy with that accent.

A loud smack echoed in Bastian's ears.

Donovan must have hit his desk like he always did when he was pissed. "He is my brother. I have a right to know. I brought him into this life. I've protected him all these years. He hasn't been trained to work with us, and I won't have you putting his life in danger."

Bastian couldn't believe what he'd heard. *He truly cares about me.*

The distinct sound of stiletto heels clicked across the floor.

"The only reason I am telling you this is because you have sworn an oath of allegiance to us. It would be treason for you to reveal this to Bastian, and you know the penalty for such infractions of the Code." Olivia spoke lower. "Your brother's sentence is over, but he is... What is the term they use today? He is...on probation. What better way to keep an eye on him than to have him working with us?" She clucked out a sharp laugh.

Something crashed against the wall, and Bastian nearly jumped.

A second later, Donovan grunted. "You think it's funny to fuck with people's lives? He deserves to know if he's on probation. He sure as hell doesn't need to be dragged into a war he isn't prepared to fight."

"Let me go, Evanko."

Apparently the crash had been Donovan pinning her to the wall.

"Not until you agree to leave Bastian out of this. I don't care if you are older and stronger. And I don't care that you are an Enforcer."

What was Donovan thinking? He could be charged with some ridiculous violation of the Code for standing against an Enforcer.

Bastian had to stop this before his brother did something to end up on the receiving end of the Elders' wrath.

Before Bastian moved, another scuffling sound emanated from the office, followed by grunts, and then ending with...*moans?*

Oh, fuck no.

There was no mistaking what came next. More movement, more moans, and heavy breathing.

Bastian clenched his fists in an attempt to not punch the wall. He should go in there and break up their little love fest, but...

He lowered his head.

His heart had been ripped from his chest once more. Donovan knew how he felt about Enforcers since one of them had killed Elise. They were the enemy. Now Donovan chose an Enforcer over Bastian, even after Olivia admitted to putting Bastian's safety last.

Was a piece of ass worth more to Donovan than loyalty to his brother?

As the noises in the room intensified, it became clear Donovan was now sleeping with the enemy. Literally.

How can he do this to me?

Donovan had betrayed him completely.

Bastian flew out of Surrender, pushing past customers and knocking a few of their drinks to the floor. No way could he work his shift. He climbed into the Hummer and did his best not to take his anger out on his beast. He leaned back, took a few deep breaths, and calmed himself enough to text the club's manager to let her know he wouldn't be in for work. An actual phone call would have been more appropriate, but he couldn't speak to anyone right now.

After he hit send, he tossed the phone onto the passenger seat. He shoved his keys in the ignition, threw the Hummer into drive, and peeled out of there, nearly taking out a group of pedestrians in the process.

"Fucking tourists." He slammed his palm on the horn.

Although he wanted to drive around and blow off some steam, it didn't seem safe in the state he was in. Instead, he headed straight home to ramp up his plans for retribution.

It was time to research Stephanie Taylor.

A quick note from Lorraine

Thank you for reading *Nocturnal Bites*. I Hope you enjoyed it. If so, please consider leaving a review for the individual books included within this bundle at Amazon and/or Goodreads, etc. If you want to find out what happens next for Bastian, Nicole, and the other series characters...

Don't miss The Nocturnal Surrender Series

<http://www.lorrainepearl.com/tnss.html>

Keep reading for an excerpt from the next book in the series,
Night Therapy

Ride a vampire!

Night Therapy

ONE

Nervous agitation shot through Johnathan McCombs as he paced his living room, cell phone in hand, while his sire told him about the emergency Enforcer meeting that had just been called at the Evanko Compound.

The urgency of the situation puzzled Johnathan. “What’s happen—”

Alex cut him off. “Just get up there now.”

“I’m on my—” The call ended before he could finish.

He shoved the phone in his pocket, grabbed his keys, and bolted out the door. As he tore up the mountain on his V Star, he realized he’d forgotten his helmet in the rush.

The Lansford Strip and the sprawling city surrounding it grew distant in his mirrors until trees engulfed the view. When he came to the winding back roads, he slowed down so he didn’t scrape metal when he leaned his motorcycle into the turns.

The ride took ages even though he twisted the throttle tight on the straightaways. Hopefully an animal didn’t run out in front of him and cause him to wipe out. Sure he’d survive without the helmet, even heal quickly, but he’d rather avoid road rash on his face and a cracked skull.

His heartbeat quickened but his breathing remained calm as he navigated in the afternoon sun. By the time he reached the dirt roads that led to the Evanko Compound, his heart sped faster. He hated these meetings, hated being around people, but he had committed himself to helping Alex by joining his Enforcer team a few years ago. He couldn’t back out now.

Johnathan eased off the throttle further to keep from losing control on the unforgiving terrain, though his vampiric strength and reflexes made it far easier for him than it would have been for a mortal. Before long, the roar of a car’s engine thundered behind him. As the vehicle bore down on him, the rumbling mingled with that of his motorcycle. It was a familiar sound.

Alex’s Challenger filled his mirrors with black and chrome. The poor son of a bitch probably hated reining in his Hemi to a crawl behind Johnathan.

The gates to the compound hung wide open, and the log mansion grew out of the ground as if it had always been there. The green metal roof enhanced the illusion, making the home blend in with the surrounding trees.

Everyone else had beaten them there. The usual vehicles already sat empty in front of the oversized garage. Johnathan parked beside Donovan Evanko’s Escalade, and Alex pulled in next to him. Before Johnathan cut the engine, the gates closed.

By the time Alex exited his car, Johnathan stood at his door. “What the hell is going on?”

Alex slammed the door and strode toward the house. “I have no idea. Donovan called and said Olivia wanted us to *get our asses up here immediately.*”

“Nice of her to call you herself.”

Alex shrugged, and when he rang the doorbell, Donovan yelled for them to come in.

Johnathan followed his sire to the great room at the back of the home. It was the normal routine. The Enforcers and their team along with Donovan’s Sweeper Team gathered there for

every meeting, at least the ones that didn't take place at Donovan's nightclub, Nocturnal Surrender.

Although, something was different this time.

The other vampires in the room sat silent as the Evanko brothers stared each other down. Ever since Bastian Evanko had returned from exile, everyone was on edge. Mixing him in Enforcer business when he obviously held a grudge against them made no sense. Still, the lead Enforcer, Olivia Fournier, had insisted on it. As the junior Enforcer, Alex had no say in the matter.

Johnathan and Alex took seats between Donovan and Olivia. And waited.

Donovan eventually turned to Alex. "Thanks for getting here so fast." He nodded at Johnathan before focusing on Olivia. "Would you like to fill them in or should I?"

The blonde Enforcer avoided Donovan's stare. "It was your mission. You can explain." Her old-world accent almost eased the harshness of her tone, but not quite.

Can't anyone get along?

If they kept fighting amongst themselves, there would be no way of defeating the Hunters. Sad thing was the ruling Elders had determined Lansford to be ground zero for whatever the Hunters were planning. And this band of misfits held the fate of vampires' survival in their hands.

Shit, the fact that I'm involved proves the standards are lax.

Donovan cleared his throat and sat up straight in his leather armchair. "My Sweeper Team gained access to Lansford Biotech and uncovered some disturbing information." He glanced around the room. "Apparently the Elders were right. The company is a front for the Hunters' base of operations. Worse yet, they're working on some sort of biochemical weapon to take us out. All of us around the globe. At the same time."

Alex coughed. "How could they manage an attack of that magnitude without exposing us to humans?"

The conversation hummed around him, but Johnathan tuned it out, barely believing what he'd heard. Surely something like that was impossible. He hadn't lived for over six hundred years to die at the hands of the Hunters. Hell, he was still a baby as far as vamps went. It had taken him this long to start dealing with his *issues* from all those centuries ago. Really, he hadn't begun to live yet. Staring down eternity he'd never felt rushed.

"Maybe they *want* to expose us," Johnathan blurted, interrupting his sire mid-sentence.

Silent tension filled the room until Olivia spoke. "Johnathan may be right. If they expose us, they will have far more help to destroy us." She finally met Donovan's eyes. "Are you certain there were no specifics on what type of biochemical weapon they have planned?"

"Oh, I think there are specs, but we need someone to break the government-grade encryption on their computers to find them." Donovan rubbed the back of his neck. "We have to accept the fact we are in a different age. They've evolved and we haven't. There has to be somebody on one of the teams who can hack into their system."

Kade Delacroix, Donovan's second-in-command, let out a disgusted grunt. "You know most vampires are technologically impaired. It's not like we adapt fast, and computers are relatively new when compared to our lifespans. Maybe there's a newly-turned somewhere with skills, but how would we know?"

Bastian jumped up and glared at his brother. "Tell them, Donovan."

The elder Evanko shook his head. "Not now, Bastian. We're not wasting time with—"

"Tell us what?" Olivia glowered at Donovan then turned to his brother. "Go on, Bastian."

“Put it this way, I had a lot of time on my hands while I was in exile. When you’re not allowed human contact, you need something to occupy you.” Bastian paced in front of the oversized window. “I doubt there’s a better hacker than me anywhere.”

Great, now we need him.

Donovan shot to his feet and stared down at Olivia. “Don’t even think about using my brother—”

“No, Donovan.” Olivia rose, holding up a hand to silence him. “You should not think to question me.”

Within seconds, an explosion of shouting echoed off the high ceiling. Donovan and Bastian argued with Olivia, referencing seemingly personal problems that made no sense. Whatever had gone on between them was affecting work. If they didn’t get their shit together, it could cost the lives of everyone in the room, as well as their entire species.

Before an all-out vampire brawl broke out, Alex stood and stepped between the Evanko brothers and Olivia. “We have to focus on what’s important. Our survival. We must work together. This fighting will not do.” His soothing drawl defused the tension in the room.

Strange thing was Olivia hadn’t pulled rank on either of the brothers to end the fireworks. The looks passing between her and Donovan spoke volumes—hatred and desire mixed. And if a vampire could kill someone with a glower, Bastian would have taken Olivia out.

Johnathan might have enjoyed the show if the situation wasn’t so dire.

We are screwed.

Olivia gestured for the others to take their seats. “I want Bastian on this as of yesterday. We need all the help we can get.” She turned to Donovan. “You can supervise your brother and begin his training since you are so concerned for his safety.”

More glares shot between the two while everyone else in the room stared, dumbfounded, as if they had missed something.

I sure as hell did.

Donovan conceded with a nod, and Bastian folded his arms over his chest, grinning. The younger Evanko had made no secret of the fact he wanted more involvement in the missions, and he was obviously satisfied he’d gotten his way.

The meeting continued without any further interruptions, and a few hours later, the details of each team member’s role in the new plans were hammered out. But with everything riding on Bastian Evanko, the Hunters might end up prevailing, even though they were only human.

When the meeting wrapped up, Johnathan said a hasty goodbye to Alex and the others, avoiding any uncomfortable personal interaction. Although he loved his sire, Johnathan enjoyed the self-imposed isolation he lived in lately. Besides, ever since his past had slammed into him with a vengeance, he was lousy company.

While everyone meandered to their vehicles, he tore off down the paved drive, slowed for the dirt road until it gave way to asphalt, and gunned it home, cornering faster than he should have. He had an appointment to get ready for, and he had decided earlier in the day to reveal his secrets tonight to his mortal psychotherapist, Stephanie Taylor. Yes, it terrified him, but the damn meeting had only strengthened his resolve. If his species—his life—was about to end, he at least wanted a clear conscience beforehand.

Not that he’d resigned himself to death. If they were going down, they’d sure as hell go down fighting.

In some strange way he was actually relieved to know he would be opening up to Stephanie. He could deal with the issues from his past *and* the new threat to his future.

Glad she's bound by confidentiality.

Stephanie had been overwhelmingly compassionate over the few months he'd been seeing her for weekly therapy sessions. In that time, he'd explored her mind, took in her emotions, and used every last vampiric power he possessed to ensure she could be trusted.

The problem was she kept secrets that danced just beyond his grasp. They felt personal and painful, things he understood all too well.

Still, he had no doubt she was a good person. One he'd like to know on a more personal level if not for the professional boundaries she clung to.

It had been a long time since he'd truly allowed anyone in, and every time he had tried in the past, the asshole inside him came out to ruin the party. Not just with women, but with the men he had tried to befriend, as well. Hell, Alex probably only tolerated him because he was Johnathan's sire. If Alex hadn't turned him, the other vampire would surely want nothing to do with him.

Just like everyone else.

He'd been on autopilot the entire ride home, and when he pulled into his driveway, he breathed a deep sigh of relief. The safe haven of his house always eased his tension. He could hide from the world in there.

He could hide from the past.

TWO

Stephanie looked over the file for her next client, a stripper named Nicole French. She'd seen the woman a few times but still needed a refresher on the problems. After reading over her notes, she walked out to the waiting room. "Nicole, how are you tonight?"

Nicole stood, smiled, though it seemed forced, and brushed her long dark hair off her shoulders. "I'm good, Miss Taylor. How are you?" She wasn't convincing, her tone far more somber than her words.

Stephanie led the way to her office. "I'm fine, and please, call me Stephanie. Remember, there are no formalities here." As a matter of fact, she couldn't stand psychologists, or any professionals, who thought they were above their clients. To her, the people sitting on the opposite side of her desk were no different from herself. Everyone could benefit from therapy, and she was no exception.

She may have dealt with her past and healed the pain, at least as much as possible, but something told her it could come back to haunt her if she wasn't careful. She held in a shudder and refocused on the present.

Her client took a seat and looked around the office. "I still can't get over how homey it is in here. And the aquarium is so relaxing. It almost makes me look forward to coming."

She had intentionally decorated her office in soothing colors and normal furnishings so her clients would feel comfortable. "*Almost?* You seem a little down tonight. Is something wrong?"

Nicole sat back and sighed. "I'm just confused about something with my boyfriend, Bastian." Her gaze lingered on the fish tank.

"What is it? You know you can speak freely in here. Everything is confidential." Stephanie worried for the woman's safety.

Each time Nicole had spoken about Bastian in her previous sessions, she tensed and acted as if she was hiding something. There had been no signs of physical abuse, but emotional abuse could be just as traumatizing.

Nicole turned to Stephanie. "He knows I've started coming for therapy, and he knows why. We've been very open with each other about *everything* in our lives. But when I told him your name he... I don't know. He got real quiet and acted like he was trying not to be angry."

"Did you ask him what was wrong?"

"Yeah, and he kind of blew it off. Said he remembered something his brother had told him that made him upset." Again, the woman's attention drifted around the room.

She's definitely hiding something.

It wasn't unusual for clients to take a while to open up about all their troubles. Nicole probably wouldn't yet, either.

Still, Stephanie had to try. "But you didn't believe him?"

"I'm not sure."

As the session went on, Stephanie did her best to coax information out of Nicole, but she didn't want to push the woman too hard and make her not want to return. By the time fifty minutes were up, she was no closer to learning the truth than when Nicole had arrived.

Stephanie stood and walked the woman out. The closer she got to the waiting room, the faster Stephanie's heart raced.

I wonder if he's here yet.

Nicole's words barely registered until Stephanie opened the door to the waiting room. It was empty. Relief washed over her.

"Well, thank you for all your help. I really appreciate it." Nicole smiled, more convincingly than before, and then glanced at her watch. "We timed this perfect for me to get to work. Thanks for the late appointment."

Stephanie shook her hand. "You're welcome. And be sure to call if you need anything."

Just as Nicole headed out the door, a motorcycle roared into the parking lot. Stephanie slammed closed the door to the waiting room and speed walked to her office. Her heart pounded again.

She was acting a fool. Johnathan McCombs had been her client for a few months, and she had come to know him well in that time.

Maybe a little too well.

Damn it, why does he have to be so sexy? His accent does me in. I have to stop thinking about him that way. It's not right. He's a client... He's a client...

A couple of minutes later, Stephanie took a deep breath and headed back down the hall. Donning her professional façade, she opened the door to the waiting room. "Johnathan."

He stood, bright blue eyes hidden behind sunglasses, even though the sun was already setting. His thick raven hair was slightly disheveled from the helmet he carried. The grey Henley shirt fit his form to accentuate clearly defined muscles. Tight black jeans left nothing to the imagination. Had she not been his psychologist, she would have licked her lips at the sight of the distracting bulge.

She tried to ignore the yearning he stirred deep within her. A flush of heat coursed through her body then crept up her neck and into her cheeks. She had to be blushing.

What was she doing? How could she look at him this way?

It had been too long since she'd had a man—

"Hi, Stephanie." His voice was deep and smooth, with that lilting Australian accent, but something in his mannerisms seemed different than normal. An odd stiffness replaced his usual swagger. The change was subtle. Without her years of training, she might have missed it.

Of course my last two appointments would be stressful. Is it too much to ask for an easy night?

She led him to her office and gestured for him to sit. "Is everything okay? You seem like something is bothering you."

After resting his helmet on the chair beside him, he removed his sunglasses and placed them on her desk—a first for this early in a session.

The coldness in his eyes sent chills through her. They were like glass, no emotion whatsoever. Even so, they drew her in, mesmerized her as though some mystical power lurked just beneath the surface of their haunting depths.

"I've been thinking about this since our last session. I want to tell you why I'm really here, but I'm afraid you won't believe me, or that it'll freak you out and you won't want to see me anymore."

She pushed against the anxiety that crawled over her at his words. "It's okay. I'm here for you, and I won't judge you. Believe me, I've heard many things in the past and have never turned my back on a client."

"But you've never had a client like me before. I can guarantee nobody has ever told you what I'm about to."

His stare intensified, no longer emotionless. Though she couldn't put her finger on what she saw, there was no denying the effect it had on her. A shiver rolled over her, and she wondered if he'd noticed since he appeared to be studying her in the same manner she analyzed her clients.

She tried to hide her unease. "Go ahead, it's okay. You should know by now that you can talk about anything you need to here."

Johnathan closed his eyes, and when they flicked open, his softened gaze locked with hers. "I've never told anyone this before so I have no idea how to go about it. I've been rehearsing what I wanted to say all week, and now I can't decide where to start."

"Sometimes it's best to begin with the first thing that comes to mind. The rest will flow from there. We can figure it out together."

"You have to hear me out. You won't believe me. You'll think I'm delusional. But everything I'm going to tell you is true." His speech was rapid, as if he was trying to get the words out before losing his nerve.

When he paused and looked away, she gently prodded him. "Remember, I'm not here to judge, only to listen and offer help."

No reaction. He merely stared at the aquarium. Hoping he found tranquility there, she waited.

The cool blues mixed with the warm yellows and creams of the fish and coral matched the color scheme of her office. She wanted Johnathan to find comfort in them as much as she did.

For a moment, she thought he hadn't heard her.

Finally, he turned to her and sat up straight. "The only thing I can do is just say it. I'm a vampire. Have been for centuries. And I need to talk to someone about all the things I've seen and done. I know you won't believe me without some kind of proof. Don't be afraid..."

Before she could digest his words, his irises changed from their wondrous shade of blue to...*silver?*

What was that?

Not giving her time to wrap her mind around what she'd seen, he opened his mouth, and—*fangs!* Did she actually see *fangs?*

Stephanie recoiled in her chair, heart racing, breath catching in her chest. Though her mouth opened, no sounds came out.

"You don't have to be afraid. I won't hurt you." A deep rasp, almost a low growl, filled his voice.

She tore her focus away from him and fixed it on the aquarium, clutching the arms of her chair as her stomach knotted and her head spun. *Is this some kind of trick? It happened so fast. But there's no such things as...as...vampires?* Her mind flashed back to a place where she'd seen eyes like his before. But none of that could have been—

"Look at me." It was a whispered growl.

Her head shot up, and she gaped at his *vampiric* features, unable to fully comprehend the situation.

After a few seconds, his irises morphed from icy silver to their natural blue, and his fangs receded to their normal length, which she now noted was slightly longer than that of most...*humans.*

What just happened?

Barely able to make eye contact, Stephanie shook her head. "I...I don't know what to say. I want to say...that was a great trick, but...I don't believe it was."

"I'm sorry I had to do it like that. There was no other way to convince you. I needed you to know." His voice was smooth again, no traces of the rasp.

Her own tone surprised her, soft and timid, the way people spoke when shaken from a trauma. “I still can’t say I truly believe what I saw.”

Johnathan leaned forward and scrubbed his hands over his face. “What can I do to prove it to you?” He looked up abruptly. “I know. There’s only one thing I can think of. Please, don’t be frightened.”

With inhuman speed, he pulled a knife from his jeans’ pocket and flicked it open. Too quickly for her to react, he sliced a long, deep gash into his forearm and laid it on her desk. Blood oozed from the cut and trickled down the side of his arm, creating a small crimson pool on the dark wood. With the way he’d gouged his flesh open, the blood should have been gushing.

Instinct demanded she reach for the phone to call for help.

Arm quaking uncontrollably, breaths shallow, her actions were halted by his command. “Wait. Look. It’s already healing.”

It was. She gaped as the wound knitted itself together as if invisible stitches were being sewn into his skin. He grabbed a handful of tissues and wiped the blood from his arm and her desk. Within seconds, the cut had healed perfectly. No sign of what he’d done remained.

Stephanie swallowed the lump in her throat. “Okay...I...I’m convinced... I...” *Am I hallucinating? Am I delusional?*

How could she deny what she’d seen?

Lightheaded, she simply stared as he cleaned the blood from his knife with fluid movements. The stiffness had disappeared, surely from releasing his burden. A burden she now carried, as well.

But she had no idea what to do from this point on. All of her training meant nothing. She was never taught how to deal with a vampire slashing open his arm right in front of her. What she should do if a vampire *changed* right in front of her.

Or what to do if she believed she was talking to a vampire.

Yes, she’d met sanguinarians in the vampire-themed nightclub, Nocturnal Surrender, but now she questioned what they truly were. Humans pretending to be creatures of the night, as they led everyone to believe, or the real thing?

For a moment, she heard the loud rock music pumping, tasted the vodka and soda she usually drank, and saw those silver eyes glowing here and there around the club.

No matter how much she wanted to convince herself this was simply a nightmare, she couldn’t. She allowed the reality of the situation to sink in.

Vampires did exist, and one was sitting right across from her. Worse yet, she had met others before but had been oblivious to it, even when—

“It feels good to have finally said those words out loud...to a mortal.” Johnathan placed the knife in his pocket, threw away the scarlet-stained tissues, and looked into her eyes. “I’ve had to keep this secret for too long. I finally feel free.”

Although she couldn’t empathize, the relief in Johnathan’s voice was evident, and so was the glint in his eyes. Hope, maybe. Somehow, his newfound optimism soothed her rattled nerves.

He sat straighter and held her gaze. “I came to you because I’ve read your books. I know you not only write psychology books, but you write vampire novels under a different name, too. From the way you write about us I thought you’d be open minded and understanding. You seem to get the issues we have to deal with.”

“That’s just my fantasies in those books. I don’t know for sure if I can help you, but...there obviously isn’t anyone I could consult with or refer you to who could help you any better.”

“You’re willing to continue working with me then?”

“Yes. I told you, I don’t turn my back on clients for any reason. Besides, you already know about my affinity for vampires. Of course, I never dreamed they were real.”

Years of experience in crisis situations had helped her mind fire to life, but her body had some catching up to do. Her limbs remained numb and heavy, her fingers still gripped the chair’s arms, and her head swam with dizziness. On top of what she had just witnessed, memories flashed in her head of what she’d done at Nocturnal Surrender with—

“You don’t know how relieved I am to hear you say that. There are so many things I want to talk about, but I think I need some time to... I don’t know. I thought I was ready. Now I’m not so sure.”

“That’s understandable. I can’t imagine what you’re going through right now, or what you’ve had to go through over the years.” She wondered how many years.

A multitude of questions flooded her mind. Were vampires actually immortal? Did they have powers? Were the myths true? Did he know about the sanguinarian club? Were they really vampires, too?

But it wouldn’t be appropriate to ask them when he had just bared his soul to her. His walls would be down. This was not the time to be nosy or selfish.

Better to gather her composure and do her job, or at least attempt to. “Is there anything you do feel like talking about? We don’t have to focus on any problems if you don’t want to. We can discuss whatever you’d like, even normal everyday things.”

That sounded stupid. What’s normal to a vampire?

His gaze fell to the aquarium then he shifted in the chair and looked back to her. “I know it might not be allowed, but I was wondering... Could I ask you something personal?”

“I, uh...I suppose so. I can’t promise to answer. These sessions are for you, not me. But if it helps you to have me disclose something about myself, it will be fine.”

Johnathan chewed at his lip for a second. “Okay, that makes sense. What I want to know is...why do you write vampire novels?”

Well, there was no way to say *that* wasn’t relevant to him, but the answer was very improper to tell a client who happened to be a vampire.

A vampire? Really? This is so surreal. Maybe that’s why I have an uncontrollable attraction to him. Is he purposely doing this to me?

No. She was a good judge of character. Even if he did have vampiric powers, he didn’t seem the type of person to abuse them.

Stephanie pulled herself from her thoughts. “I really want to answer you, especially since I can see how this information could be beneficial to your treatment, if...” *If it wasn’t so wrong. There’s no way I can tell him the truth of why I write those novels.*

She tried to turn away from his stare, but those crystal-blue whirlpools tugged at her soul. What secrets lay inside? Torment? Danger?

Passion?

She picked up her pen and clicked it open and shut.

It had been far too long...

THREE

Johnathan sensed something strange within Stephanie, something he once again couldn't quite grasp even with his ability to feel others' emotions. She numbed herself so effectively it would require much effort on his part to read her clearly. Her physical reactions were easier to detect, her fatigue and anxiety, but her deeper feelings were elusive.

It took all his strength to fight the urge to listen to her thoughts. He refused to give in and invade her privacy any more than he already had. "Stephanie?"

Her head whipped up and her eyes locked with his. They were beautiful eyes, filled with compassion and...*desire*? Warm brown with golden flecks, and a fire in them when she looked at him. Long amber hair, accentuated with blonde highlights, complimented her eyes perfectly.

Stephanie's heartbeat drummed in his ears. Her breaths came soft and shallow.

She set the pen down. "You know, I think we've run over our time a little. I should let you go. We can pick this up next week if you're okay with that."

He glanced at his watch. They had plenty of time left. He opened his mouth to say...what? Something completely out of line, most likely. A habit he was trying to break. Instead he said, "Yeah, that's fine. I'm sure you want to get out of the office after a long day. You're probably tired."

Actually, he had picked up on her exhaustion easily, and what he'd put her through hadn't helped. But he had to take care of one more thing before leaving. "There's something else I need to say first, though. I know you can't talk about what happens in a session, but I still have to be sure you won't tell anyone about our existence. It has to remain a secret. Do you understand?"

"Yes...yes, of course. I understand. Besides, I wouldn't want anyone to think I'm crazy if I try telling them vampires really exist."

A slight smile parted her lips. When she cleared her throat, he realized he had been staring at those luscious lips a little too long. He dragged his focus away from her mouth and met her soft stare. At least he could sense she wasn't lying.

I can trust her with my secrets.

But he had to explain the ramifications to her should she change her mind. "I have to tell you one more thing...for your safety." Guilt washed over him at the possible danger he had put her in. "Vampires have a Code, which is essentially a set of laws we must follow, as does everyone who knows of us. Anyone who exposes us will be punished severely."

She sat back in her seat, concern darkening her beautiful features. "What kind of punishment?"

He wanted to lower his head but forced himself to maintain eye contact. "Death... But that's why I waited so long to tell you, until I was sure you honored the confidentiality of your patients so I wasn't putting your life at risk."

Her brows furrowed. "What makes you so sure I do?"

Johnathan hadn't intended to have this conversation yet, but she had him cornered. "Because vampires can feel the nature of a person. We know if a mortal is telling the truth or lying. It's why I've asked you so many questions."

"Oh. Okay. I understand... I think."

Better get out of here before I let it slip that I've read her mind, too. "Thanks for listening to me ramble." He stood to leave. "I'll see you next time."

Smiling, she rose, as well. “You’re welcome. But before you go, are you okay? I mean, you know, after what you told me and what you had to do to convince me. Are you all right to ride?”

Warmth spread through him from her concern. He couldn’t help but grin. “Yeah, I’m all right. Changing into our vamped-out state isn’t hard on us, and I didn’t lose enough blood to make much of a difference. Nothing a quick drink won’t fix when I get home.” *Why, are you offering?*

Don’t say it.

Deep hunger hit him like a punch in the gut. He licked his lips. Just in case the hunger took over and his eyes shifted, he put his sunglasses on. It would be easy enough to hide his fangs if he had to.

He picked up his helmet, and when he turned back to Stephanie, a strange expression crossed her face. *Disgust?*

Then he realized what he’d said. “I’m sorry. The blood-drinking thing probably turned your stomach. I just thought with you writing about it that it wouldn’t bother you.”

“No, it’s fine. I suppose it’s the reality of what all this means.” She nervously eyed her pen.

He wanted to reach out to her, to hold her hand and comfort her. She’d obviously been more traumatized than he had initially thought. Anxiety radiated off her and pulsated around him, prickling along his skin.

Since her reaction distracted him from the hunger, he removed his sunglasses. “Are you sure *you’re* okay?”

Thankfully, the disgust was gone when she looked up at him. “Yes. I’ll be all right. And that’s my line.”

“I don’t think this qualifies as your usual therapy session. And I am worried about how this will affect you. It can’t be easy. You know, I can hear your heartbeat. I can feel when you’re nervous or upset or...anything else.” He inadvertently raised an eyebrow but was able to hold back a grin.



Great, that would’ve been nice to know sooner. Wait, does that mean he can feel when I want him? Shit, that’s not good.

Stephanie tried her best to calm down, but staring into his eyes made it difficult. “Really, Johnathan, I’m okay. I guess this *wasn’t* a normal session, or a normal anything for that matter. I’m sorry I cut things off so abruptly when you asked me about my writing... I just—”

“I understand. That was probably a little too personal.” An uncomfortable silence fell between them until Johnathan stepped toward the door. “I’d better get going.”

He strutted out to the waiting room, and Stephanie followed, admiring his tight jeans.

Stop it. Vampire or not, he’s still a client. And he can feel it if I get—

“Should be a good night for a ride.” He peered out the window. “Too bad I can’t take you for one.”

She pictured herself sitting behind him on his bike, wrapping her arms around him, and a shiver crawled up her spine. “Uh...yeah. It’s been a long time since I’ve known anyone I could ride with, but that would definitely be inappropriate.”

“I know...I just... I better go before I stick my foot in my mouth again.” He fumbled with his helmet and sunglasses.

Not ready for him to leave, she changed the subject. “You know, it always surprises me how Americanized you speak. How long have you been here, anyway?”

“Oh, only since 1889.” He grinned and his eyes seemed to glow for a second.

“What?” *What were you expecting? He’s a vampire, dummy.* “Wait a minute. Are you serious or joking?”

“I’m serious, but I still couldn’t wait to see your reaction. I think the only reason I have any remnants of Aussie in me is because I go back occasionally. I’m not from Australia originally. That’s just the last place I lived before here, but my life is a *long* story.” Johnathan glanced out the window again.

“I’m sorry. I should let you go. You said you needed to...you know...drink.” *Should I be afraid? There’s a thirsty vampire in front of me, and we’re completely alone. But then again, I might have already been bitten by a hungry—real—vampire, more than once.*

Christof.

Let it go.

Besides, if Johnathan was going to try anything, he’s had plenty of opportunities.

“Yeah, I need to get going. And you need some rest.” He eased on his sunglasses.

“You know, it is getting dark out.”

“What can I say? Old habits.” He strode to the door, glanced back, and smiled. “I’ll see you next week.”

After he flashed her that mind-melting smile, reality ran off just as quickly as it hit. “Yep, see you then.” Stephanie waved, surely beaming with what she feared was a schoolgirl-crush look on her face.

Stupid. Why did I act like that? Too personal. How the hell am I going to get out of this?

That was it. She would have to refer him to another therapist. Some hot guy, vampire or not, wasn’t worth risking her career.

What was she thinking? Did she actually believe this whole *vampire* thing? She had to be dreaming.

Huh. Wishful thinking.

Pulling herself together once more, she brought her focus back to her client’s wellbeing. She had already promised to help him. What if he thought she’d lied to him or turned her back on him? He might give up on therapy altogether.

There was no choice but to get her emotions under control. She wouldn’t allow herself to break a client’s trust.

But then, a worse thought crossed her mind.

What if he became angry with her? With no idea what he was capable of, no idea what his kind did and didn’t do to get their blood, she had to think of her own safety.

Best not to piss off a vampire.

Only one thing would help the situation. The reason for her vampire novels. What she couldn’t bring herself to tell Johnathan.

She had to see Christof and find out the truth.

FOUR

Stephanie walked into Nocturnal Surrender, looking at it differently than ever before. The sign behind the bar had always amused her, but tonight, it took on a whole new meaning. *The Nightclub with a Bite* was written in a dramatic Gothic font, complete with fang-like projections at the bottom.

Loud, heavy music pumped in time with her heartbeat, or maybe it made her heart beat in time with it. The candles and low lighting, the Gothic arches, and the crimson and black booths gave her the creeps for the first time. Not to mention the patrons.

Are those actually real vampires drinking blood from their... victims? She shuddered.

After five years of sporadic visits to the club, and to Christof, she studied the *sanguinarians* closer. What she'd presumed in the past to be different preferences for vampiric contact lenses now held deeper meaning. Some were pale blue-gray, blood red, black, and even an odd mustard color, but the glowing silver here and there stood out more than ever.

Are they all vampires, or only the ones with eyes like Johnathan's?

A flash of Christof's liquid-silver gaze flitted through her mind.

Was he truly a vampire?

Yes, she'd let him bite her and drink her blood, but this was a club for sanguinarians. A place where she could live out her vampire fantasies.

Sounds crazy now that I think about it.

She had once asked Christof about his realistic-looking fangs, as well as those of a few of the other *vampires* in the club. He had told her some of them liked to play the role to the fullest, and that she'd be surprised what a good dentist could do.

Fake fangs my ass.

Truth was she'd been deceived. For years. Used and tossed aside. Fast food for a vampire. Thank goodness she had never left with Christof. At least she hadn't been his sex toy. If she would have even survived with her life. She didn't really know him at all.

Part of her wanted to go up to the closest silver-eyed creature and call him or her out, but she had no idea how dangerous they really were. Sure, Johnathan seemed docile enough, and so did Christof, but how much of that was for show, to lure in their meals?

And what about Johnathan? Did he go home to drink bottled blood like she'd seen on TV, like some of the characters in her books, or did he have a way of getting it fresh? For all she knew he could be a regular at Nocturnal Surrender.

A glance at Christof's usual booth let her know he wasn't there. Still early, the large room held more empty seats than full. Only a few couples gyrated on the dance floor.

How on earth can anyone dance to a heavy metal song?

She took a seat at the bar and focused on the poor, ignorant fools being used for food, just like she had been. Nausea bubbled in her stomach. Unsure if she was angry with Christof for using her or with herself for letting him, she clenched her fists and gritted her teeth. The intimate display of a couple in a nearby booth hit a little too close to home.

Dark curls were carelessly brushed aside to allow the *sanguinarian* access to the petite woman's neck. After encircling her with his arm—moving much faster than a human being should be able to—he leaned in to her throat and bit down.

Stephanie winced. How could she have allowed herself to be taken advantage of like that after all she'd gone through in the past? How could she have been so stupid to think this was acceptable? She was a psychologist, after all.

Damn it. I should have known better.

What kind of world had she stumbled—

“What can I get you?”

She jumped, nearly falling off the stool when the bartender interrupted her thoughts. She turned and stared at the...vampire. With his silver eyes and fangs, he had to be one of them.

Fear gripped her as her body numbed and all sounds and thoughts faded to a low hum. A wave of dizziness overtook her, but it was as if someone, or something, held her upright. An invisible force pressed gently against her all around.

Unable to move, she was on the verge of panicking when the mountain of a vampire laughed with the same deep tone he'd spoken in. He gave her a sadistic grin, and she snapped out of it as if nothing had happened.

Did he do that to me?

Resting his enormous hands on the bar, he smiled wide. “So, you know about us now, do you? I'm going on break in a minute, and I could go for a little snack.”

“Uh...I don't know what you're talking about.” Her voice cracked and was far too quiet for anyone to hear over the music.

“Don't play with me. I can feel it in you, and I can smell his scent on you. You know what we are. But he didn't bite you so that means you're up for grabs, and I wouldn't mind doing some biting and grabbing.” The fierceness in his silvery glare made it clear he wasn't joking.

She tried to swallow as she trembled inside, but a lump stuck in her throat. She had to get out of there. Fast.

“I don't think you'll be doing either of those with her any time soon, Bastian.” There was no mistaking the voice of the man—no, the vampire—behind her.

Christof Rosenbaum eased up beside her, pushed her hair aside, and clamped his arm around her waist as if he owned her. The musky scent of his cologne normally stirred a sensual heat within her, but not this time. This time she shivered as a chill of dread spread over her.

Warm breath caressed her neck, just like it did every time he'd drunk from her. How easily could he have killed her? And would he now that she knew his secret?

The hulking bartender, Bastian, backed up, scowling. “Sorry, Rosenbaum. I didn't realize the lovely lady was under your protection. She isn't marked.”

The two vampires glared at each other, and an unmistakable hatred flared in Bastian's eyes. Then those eyes snapped back to Stephanie, and she leaned into Christof's embrace.

Bastian slowly shook his head. “It would be a pity if she met the same fate as Elise, wouldn't it?” His stare burned through her.

“Elise was to blame, no one else.” Christof released Stephanie's waist and grabbed her hand. “Come. We need to talk.”

He dragged her out of the club and around the side of the building to a deserted alley, lit only by the nearly-full moon. Backing her into the rough brick, he placed his hands on the wall on either side of her head. Her heart raced as Christof's eyes changed from silver to deep brown and his fangs receded.

That had to be a good sign. At least he wasn't going to drink her to death, if that was really how it worked.

The tension on his face eased and his voice was surprisingly gentle. “Calm down. I won’t hurt you. You know me.”

A few deep breaths and she was able to speak. “No. No, I...I don’t think so. I thought I did...”

“You’re an intelligent woman. You’ve always known somewhere deep inside, but you couldn’t bring yourself to believe it.” He pushed her hair behind her shoulder, exposing her neck.

His gaze dropped to the spot he always bit, and she automatically tilted her head to the side, opening wider for him.

What was she doing? This was the last thing she wanted, but she couldn’t stop herself.

No! It took her a moment to realize she wasn’t in control of her actions. Immobile. Frozen in such a vulnerable position. How could he do this to her after all these years? Though there was never any love between them, or even a true friendship, there was always a level of respect. Or so she’d believed.

“What’s wrong? What are you doing?” Christof appeared genuinely confused.

If he didn’t have control of her, then who—

“Damn it.” Christof spun around quicker than imaginable. “Where are you, Bastian? Still hiding in the shadows? Come out so we can finish this once and for all. Let Stephanie go and I might allow you to live.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” The response seemed to come from all around. “It would be so much more satisfying for you to watch her die, just as I had to with Elise. I could do it from here. Control her mind and make her bash her head off the wall until she falls dead. But then again, we are vampires. Fang on flesh is how it should be. Such a pity I don’t have a sword or I could decapitate her like you did with Elise.”

Stephanie was desperate to scream, but only a choked gurgle escaped with Bastian controlling her body. Beads of perspiration slid down her face. She was obviously caught in the middle of a vampire feud.

Could he really do it? Make her kill herself? And would Christof care enough to stop him, if he even could?

Christof’s harsh words ripped away any hope she’d had. “She’s nothing to me. Food. That is all. There are more where she—”

“I might have believed you if I hadn’t already heard you comforting her. And I’ve seen how you treat her when you feed from her, so tender and loving. You remember that night, don’t you? When I sang my song about retribution? I’ve found your weak spot. Payback’s going to be a bitch.” The disembodied voice was deep and sinister.

“Of course I coddled her. How else could I keep such a reliable—”

Christof was cut off by a swift, dark shadow. A cracking sound echoed in Stephanie’s ears when Christof hit the pavement.

Able to turn her head slightly, she saw them wrestling on the ground, exchanging bone-shattering punches. Bastian’s massive frame dwarfed Christof’s. There was no way Christof stood a chance.

Two more figures appeared at the end of the alley, eyes shining silver. The moonlight behind them cast an ethereal glow around their silhouettes as they strode toward the brawl. It looked like a scene from a movie. But were these good guys or bad?

Sickness built in the pit of her stomach, worse than the nausea she’d had earlier. She watched helplessly as the tall vampire with flowing blond hair snatched Bastian off Christof. The other vampire had long dark hair and what looked like a goatee, though she couldn’t be sure with the

flurry of activity. When Christof stood and lunged at Bastian, the brunet grabbed him, but Christof broke free.

It took a moment, but as she focused better on the other two men, she recognized them. One was Donovan Evanko, the owner of Nocturnal Surrender. The other was his friend, Kade Delacroix.

“This has to end now. If he wants this fight, then he needs to take it out on me, not an innocent woman.” Christof clamped Bastian’s shirt in his fists, though Donovan hadn’t released the bartender.

Kade turned to Donovan. “I told you this would happen long before you allowed him back into your life. It is foolish to trust someone like Bastian, no matter that he is your brother. Let Christof have him.” He placed a hand on Donovan’s shoulder. “He has to learn his lesson. You can’t always protect him from the consequences of his actions.”

Bastian struggled in Donovan’s grip. “Stay the fuck out of this, Delacroix.”

Kade threw his hands up and walked away. “He’s your problem, D, not mine.”

Great. Some rescue this is.

Donovan released Bastian and shoved him at Christof.

Stephanie couldn’t believe it when Christof slammed Bastian to the pavement with a loud thud, yanked his head to the side, and...drank from him.

Bastian thrashed, but Donovan held his legs while Christof restrained his arms.

As the seconds drew on, Bastian’s hold on Stephanie faltered, and she regained control of her body. She wanted to run, but weakness bound her to the building. There was no way her rubbery legs would carry her to the parking lot. Even if they could, she wouldn’t be able to drive home with her nerves so rattled.

She leaned her head back against the brick and closed her eyes.

Donovan’s voice echoed through the alley. “Stop drinking. Please, my friend. You cannot kill him. I know he needs to be controlled, but he’s my brother, damn it. Let him go and tend to the woman.”

Afraid to look when she heard movement and the approach of footsteps, she prayed she wouldn’t be killed for what she knew. For what she’d seen.

“Stephanie, look at me. Are you all right?” Christof clasped her hands.

She flinched and tried to pull away from his strong grasp, but only ended up losing her balance and falling into his arms.

The last thing she heard before darkness engulfed her was Christof’s soft voice. “Sleep.”

FIVE

Bastian trudged back into Nocturnal Surrender ahead of his brother, stumbling at times from the blood loss. He bypassed the bar and headed straight for Donovan's office. His body ached and so did his neck.

Once inside the office, Donovan slammed the door shut to the soundproof room, and the blaring rock music from the club died.

Lightheaded and weak, Bastian waited for the usual tongue lashing his brother gave any time he did something stupid and impulsive like he'd just done with Stephanie.

Hell, he wanted to give one to himself. What the fuck was he thinking to go after her at Surrender? The minute the opportunity had presented itself, he'd jumped on it. No thought, only instinct.

If Nicole finds out, she'll look at me like the monster I am.

He shoved his hands in his pockets and lowered his head. He couldn't even fault his brother for holding him down for that bastard, Rosenbaum.

"I thought you were through with all this revenge nonsense. What were you thinking?" Surprisingly, Donovan's tone was nowhere near as harsh as it used to be. Maybe the fact they had finally made amends for what happened between them over the centuries had given his brother a little more compassion.

Bastian looked up and was shocked to see Donovan had hidden his inner vampire. No fangs. No silver in his eyes. Only the ghostly blue of their natural state.

"I never said I gave up on getting retribution against Rosenbaum." Could he make Donovan understand? "Was what I did impulsive? Yes. Was it a violation of the Code? No. I scented her first, made sure she wasn't bitten and under protection. I was completely within my rights to take down a human."

Donovan clenched his fists. "She wasn't just any human, and you knew that. You weren't taking her to feed. You did it because of..." He fell silent.

"Elise. Her name was Elise."

"I know what her name was. But what on earth made you think going after that woman would make a difference? Even if Christof is in love with her—which I highly doubt—how is taking her life going to help? It won't bring Elise back." Donovan moved to sit behind his desk.

At least there would be no physical confrontation, not that Bastian could fight with the shape he was in.

He took a much-needed seat. "How is it not going to help? He'll know what it feels like to lose a woman he cares about, to watch her die and be helpless to do anything about it."

"What about Nicole? You love her, don't you? I know you haven't been with her as long as you were with Elise, but if you succeed, what will happen when she finds out you murdered an innocent woman for vengeance?"

His gut tightened, and so did his heart. The worst part was Nicole had recently told him that Stephanie was her therapist. He hadn't even thought of that when he'd gone after the woman. Hell, he hadn't thought at all. The only thing that registered in his mind was Stephanie's value to Rosenbaum. Then, flashes of Elise's murder had played through his head.

Rosenbaum held the sword over Elise's catatonic body. Bastian couldn't move, couldn't save her, because he'd been pumped full of liquid silver by that bastard. A glint of torchlight flickered

on the blade as it came down, slicing through Elise's delicate neck. Her precious blood pooled on the floor. Bastian tried to scream, but he lost consciousness from the silver poison.

Rosenbaum still had to pay.

"Bastian?" Donovan reached into the mini fridge beside his desk, pulled out a bottle of blood, and offered it to Bastian. "What about Nicole?"

He wished he had an answer. "Look, all I know is I can't let this go. I won't. He *will* feel the same pain I went through, and yes, another innocent woman will die because of it." He grabbed the blood and gulped it down, but it barely helped.

"I thought you understood Elise held some blame for her death. She knew the rules and chose to break them. *And* she knew the penalty." Donovan slapped his desk. "Please, little brother, stop this before it's too late. I don't want to lose you if you break the Code again."

For the first time in nearly a century, the phrase *little brother* felt affectionate rather than condescending. Maybe it was the fact Donovan had given up pursuing the Enforcer, Olivia, for Bastian, finally understanding the Enforcers would always be his enemies because of Elise's murder. He hoped his need for revenge didn't ruin his relationships with Donovan and Nicole, but there was no other choice. Next time, though, he'd plan his actions, just as he'd intended when he first considered retribution.

"Yes, we're the only family we have, and yes, you've made many sacrifices for me over the years. You'll never know how much all that means to me. But the only thing I can promise is I won't break the Code." Bastian waited for a reaction and continued when Donovan gave none. "I must do this, brother. For Elise. I'll never be at peace until I avenge her. She deserves that much."

Donovan's face was unreadable, but his features were soft, no trace of tension. "Why don't you take the rest of the night off? Stop on the way home to see Mick and restock your blood supply. You'll need extra to regain your strength."

That definitely wasn't the response Bastian had expected. "Thank you for understanding."

"I didn't say I understood *or* approved, but I will always be here for you. I will always support you."

Bastian nodded, shocked that Donovan had agreed to disagree. He stood and fished his keys from his pocket. "I'll see you tomorrow night."

Donovan nodded back but said nothing more.

For once, Bastian had every intention of doing what his brother suggested. He slipped out the back door, climbed into his Hummer, and headed straight for Mickell Slane's funeral home, a few blocks off the Lansford Strip. When the flashing neon lights faded in his review mirror, he let out a deep sigh of relief.

Luckily, Mick was unlocking the front door just as Bastian pulled in.

Mick waited for him to kill his engine and hop out. "Back so soon? Didn't you make a pickup a few days ago?"

Bastian ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah, but I got into some trouble and need a little extra. Or maybe a lot extra."

What did Mick think of him? Because of his business dealing blood, the younger immortal was familiar with all the vampires in and around Lansford so he'd no doubt heard stories of Bastian's checkered past. Still, Bastian had no intention of elaborating on his evening or trying to defend his reputation. He just wanted to buy what he needed and get home.

The stench in the funeral home burned his nostrils as they headed for the stairs. "How the hell do you deal with that smell?"

The other vampire shrugged. "It's just the embalming fluid."

Bastian shuddered. Why that gave him the creeps he couldn't fathom, but it seemed unnatural. All the parlors' doors were closed, but knowing what lay inside them sent a chill crawling over his skin.

The dead shouldn't be preserved for viewing. They should be burned to release their souls, just as it had been centuries ago. It was what he and Donovan had done when their parents were murdered.

Thoughts of the past fled when they descended the stairs and another scent overpowered the embalming fluid. Blood. He inhaled deeply. "Ahhh, it smells better already."

"You make no sense. The embalming is done down here. This is where you should smell it more." Mick flipped on a light switch when they reached the bottom.

Bastian shrugged. "What can I say? I'm really hungry, I guess. The blood is all I can focus on." Truth was, he had been without human blood for two hundred years, and now that he was back in humanity, the wondrous scent sometimes consumed him.

Mick unlocked the door to his left and opened it, motioning for Bastian to follow. Normally, Mick had him wait in the anteroom, but maybe the other vamp had learned to trust him instead of judging him by his past.

After opening the lock on the walk-in refrigerator inside the small room, Mick swung open the stainless steel door, stepped inside, grabbed an armful of plastic bottles from one of the shelves, and turned to Bastian. "Is this enough or do you need more?"

It would easily take three or four to replenish what he'd lost and feed him on top of that, but he had a few at home. "Yeah, that'll do. I'll probably be back in a few days. It's easy to stop in since work is so close."

"Just remember, I'm not usually in until midnight, and my daytime workers don't know about my little side business. You're lucky I needed to get in and out of here quick tonight."

Bastian grinned. "Hot date?"

Mick snorted as he kicked the refrigerator door shut and handed the bottles to Bastian. "I wish." He grabbed a plastic bag from the cabinet beside the door. "Here you go, buddy. That'll be a hundred dollars."

What a racket this guy has going. "Yeah, I know the drill."

Twenty bucks a pop for what looked to be no bigger than an average bottle of water seemed damn steep, but Bastian bagged the blood and paid the vamp.

"If you can show yourself out, I'd appreciate it. I've got some things I need to take care of." Mick locked up.

Bastian nodded. "Sure thing."

A stab of hunger jolted him, and he bolted up the stairs and out the front door. Clutching his bounty, he climbed into his beast of a Hummer and rolled out of there. By the time he'd reached the stop sign at the end of the street, his gut tightened with growing hunger. The ten minute drive home felt more like ten hours.

As soon as he got inside, he chugged three bottles, hands shaking from the bloodlust. It barely took the edge off. He snagged the last two from the bag and guzzled them down. They were enough to slake his hunger—for now.

Even though it was still in the mid-seventies outside, he flipped the switch to bring the gas fireplace to life, waited a minute until the heat poured out, and tossed the bottles and bag into the flames. The plastic crackled and dark ashes floated upward into the chimney. Before long, all remnants of his meal disappeared, and he turned off the flames.

Still on edge, he grabbed his keys and headed back out, hoping a long drive might relax him.

Unfortunately, as he made his way out of the suburbs, his mind only wandered more. He might have blown his only chance at retribution.

What if that bastard marks Stephanie so I can't touch her? He gripped the wheel tighter. *I have to do something before it's too late.*

Glad he'd already researched her, he jerked the wheel and swerved onto a side road that would lead him into the country—and straight to Stephanie's house.

SIX

Johnathan had been living in a holding pattern for decades, going out only to work with the Enforcers and stock up on blood, and hiding away, restoring his old brick farmhouse the rest of the time. The only changes to his routine recently were his weekly visits to Stephanie.

Tonight was different, though. Something in the way she had looked at him, what she'd felt for him, made him want to live again. He was ready to visit his sire on a social call for the first time in ages.

When his V Star roared into Alex's driveway, a comforting sensation washed over him. He could sense his sire in the house. Alex was the closest thing to family he had, but when he wasn't working, he pushed the older vampire aside, along with everyone else in his life.

Before he had a chance to remove his helmet and sunglasses, Alex threw open the front door and strode out, hazel eyes glowing in the moonlight. "I heard you coming up the drive and could hardly believe my ears. How are you?" Alex ushered Johnathan inside without giving him a chance to answer. "Want something to drink?"

"To tell you the truth, I could use a drink." Johnathan had almost forgotten his hunger, but his gut spasmed at Alex's offer.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, but I haven't fed in a while."

"Come." Alex led him into the kitchen and poured them each a glass of blood.

Johnathan accepted the repast with a nod and chugged it.

"Slow down. Didn't I teach you better than that? How the hell did you let yourself get this bad?" Alex sipped his meal and a look of contentment played over his face.

"Sorry. It's a long story. Lost a little blood." Johnathan wiped a sleeve across his mouth.

Alex threaded his fingers through his wavy brown hair. "What's going on with you? I've tried to respect your wishes and leave you alone when we're not working, but if I'd known you were in such a state..." He shook his head. "Why didn't you come to me?"

Alex took another sip, and Johnathan felt the soothing effect the blood had on him since his sire wasn't shielding his emotions.

"How do you do that?"

"Do what?" Alex looked puzzled.

"Let the blood calm you like that? I mean, I know you tried to teach me, but it's never worked. Fuck, my nerves are on edge. I'm paranoid all the time. I can't stand people. And the only thing the blood does for me is take away the hunger." Johnathan stared at his steady hand, the glass not shaking at all, but inside he was a trembling mess.

"You know what the problem is. I've been telling you for centuries." Alex continued sipping his meal.

"Well, you'll be glad to know I'm finally taking care of it."

"How's that?"

"I'm seeing a therapist."

Alex nearly spat out his mouthful of blood, but then he swallowed hard. "You're what?"

"You heard me. Like you said, you've been telling me to work on my shit. I finally decided it was time."

“But I never thought you’d actually go through with it. Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad you did, but— Wait a minute. How does blood loss fit into this?”

Johnathan sat and explained the evening’s events while Alex listened intently, grinning at all the interesting parts.

When Johnathan finished, Alex pinned him with a fatherly stare. “So you’re certain she’ll keep our secret?”

“Yes, I’m sure. She’s a good person. I could feel it in her. She wasn’t lying.” Johnathan stiffened. “Don’t you trust my judgment?”

“Face it, Johnathan, you haven’t given me much reason to lately, and—” Alex’s phone interrupted him. He looked at the screen and laughed. “Christof must want to go out and get into some trouble. I’ll call him back later.”

“Go ahead and take it.”

“I’d really rather not. I don’t feel like being dragged around on another *vamps’ night out*.” He shoved the phone back in his pocket.

“I don’t know how you two have been friends all this time when you’re so opposite, *and* when he can be such an arrogant prick.” Johnathan leaned back in the kitchen chair, started to put his feet up on the table but quickly thought better of it, and wished he had a friend like his sire had.

Alex shot him a disapproving glare. “And *I* don’t understand why you two can’t get along. But I’ll tell you, if he takes me to that damn casino of his again, I’m going to drain him dry. Losing a hundred grand in one night is *not* my idea of fun.”

The phone rang again. Alex pulled it out, hit *Ignore*, and shoved it aside.

“Maybe you should’ve answered it. Something might be wrong.”

“No. He does this all the time, gets his fangs all extended and won’t let up until he can sink them into some pretty little thing and use her for a good luck charm. For some reason he insists on me going with—”

Another ring.

Alex rolled his eyes and answered the phone. “Don’t you get it? When I don’t take your call it means I’m not interested in—”

Johnathan’s heightened hearing allowed him to listen in on Christof’s side of the conversation. “Alex, stop. This isn’t a social call. We’ve got a problem, and one of your offspring is the cause.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Johnathan confided our secret to a mortal therapist, and she came to Surrender looking for trouble. Oh, and did I mention she found it? We got jumped by Bastian when we were leaving and—”

Johnathan’s heart sank. “Is Stephanie okay?”

“Oh good, he’s there with you. Just get over to my place, and I’ll explain everything.”

The call ended.

Johnathan stared at Alex. “She’s okay, right? He would have said if she wasn’t.”

“I’m sure she’s—”

Johnathan didn’t wait for Alex to finish. He flew out of the house at vamp speed and had his helmet on and motorcycle started by the time Alex made it outside.

Johnathan kicked the stand up. “Don’t give me that look.”

“What look?”

“That fatherly look like you want to tell me to calm down before I go tearing out of here.”

“I do want to tell you that. You know Christof wouldn’t let anything happen to her. Go slow. We don’t need the police involved because you’re speeding. I’ll be right behind you.”

Johnathan grunted and headed out slower than he’d originally intended. Alex had a point. If a cop busted Johnathan it would take him that much longer to get to Stephanie. Still, he had to push it a little. But when Alex’s Challenger bore down on him, he glanced at the speedometer.

Okay, so he was pushing it a lot.

He eased off the throttle, and Alex backed off his ass.



Christof’s penthouse was only a few blocks from the club, but a good half hour from Alex’s country home. By the time they arrived, Johnathan’s hands trembled. He ripped off his helmet and tossed it on the ground in the parking garage. Alex wasted precious time picking it up and placing it in his car.

When Alex caught up with him, Johnathan pounded the button for the elevator repeatedly, tapping his foot and fidgeting. “Why the hell can’t these things move any faster? It’d be quicker to use the stairs.”

Alex rested a hand on his shoulder. “Johnathan, look at me. She’s okay.”

“You don’t know that. I should have had you call him back to be sure.” The elevator finally opened, and Johnathan stepped inside then continued his attack on the buttons. “What the hell was she doing there anyway? And what did he mean about her *looking for trouble*?”

“We’ll know soon.”

The second the elevator doors opened, Johnathan bolted down the hall to Christof’s door. He burst into the penthouse without knocking. “Stephanie?”

“Well, hello to you, too. Now be quiet, she’s in bed.” Christof had a smug look on his face.

Johnathan strode toward Christof, knowing the elder vampire’s proclivity for using the club’s mortal patrons to fulfill *all* his needs. “You better not have—”

“Alex, get him under control. I only gave her the suggestion she needed some rest.”

Alex snatched Johnathan from behind just as he was about to grab the lapels of the designer suit jacket the pompous bastard wore. “Stop this. Christof is like family, not some rogue we need take out.”

Christof smirked. “So this is the thanks I get for protecting her? Remind me not to do you any more favors.”

Johnathan glared at Christof, shrugged out of Alex’s grasp, and eased himself onto the plush recliner. “I’m fine. I won’t do anything. But I’m not happy that he fucked with her mind. I want to know what happened.”

“And you will, starting now.” Alex sat across from Christof, giving him a scowl Johnathan knew all too well.

His sire would get answers.

Johnathan couldn’t remain seated with worry gnawing at his brain. He shot up and paced as he listened to Christof explain what he walked in on at the nightclub.

“Wait a minute. You make it sound like you knew her before tonight.” Johnathan remembered Stephanie’s discomfort when he asked her why she wrote vampire novels. Had she been so fascinated by their kind that she would let herself be someone’s—Christof’s—meal?

Christof shifted, avoiding Johnathan’s glower. “I think that’s something you should take up with her.”

Johnathan lunged at Christof, but he was too young to match the older vampire's speed. He only ended up toppling the oversized sofa and crashing into the baby grand piano behind it. Wood splintered and keys hammered an unmelodious racket.

Before he knew what was happening, Christof yanked him to his feet, eyes molten silver, fangs extended. "Do not think that just because you are Alex's offspring I will hold back if you continue to disrespect me and my home. You would be drained by now if you were anyone else."

Christof slammed Johnathan into the marble floor. His head bounced and pain shot through him. The marble cracked from the impact.

But the next sound was Stephanie's beautiful voice. "Johnathan, are you okay?"

She knelt beside him, glancing from him to Christof then to Alex and back again. He hadn't realized how much she meant to him before tonight, or maybe it was because of tonight. Because he'd finally allowed someone in. To know what he truly was.

He sat up and a stab of pain made him wince. He touched the back of his head only to pull away and see blood on his fingers. "Fucking bastard."

Christof rolled his eyes. "Don't whine like a baby. Your head's probably already healed, but my living room is going to need some TLC. And *you* will pay the bill."

"Yeah, why don't you send it to me? Too bad I don't need to shit anymore or I'd use it to wipe my ass."

Alex stepped closer and extended his hand to Stephanie. "Miss Taylor, please allow me to apologize for these two. They've never been able to play well together. I'm Alexander Mitchell, Johnathan's sire."

She rose, clearly shaken, and slowly reached for Alex's hand. "You can call me Stephanie. Nice to meet you... I think."

Alex laughed. "I can see how you might question it, but I assure you, despite appearances, we're not bad people. Oh, and you can call me Alex."

"I...I'll take your word for it."

Johnathan stood, the pain subsiding. "Alex is speaking for me and himself, not the prick over there."

"Get him the hell out of my home. I've had enough of this." Christof crossed to Stephanie, clasped her hand, raised it to his lips, and kissed it. "I look forward to seeing you again, my dear. You know where to find me whenever you desire." He glanced at Johnathan then turned back to Stephanie. "As you did tonight."

Johnathan vamped out, preparing for a full-on attack, but Alex jumped between him and the pompous ass.

"Christof, must you antagonize him?" Alex held Johnathan firm.

Christof merely laughed and waved his hand dismissively.

Alex shoved Johnathan toward the door. "Come on. We're getting out of here before the two of you scare Stephanie again."

Tension drained from Johnathan at the thought of her. He wanted to reach for her, but the confused look on her face stopped him. Instead, he allowed Alex to lead her out of the pretentious apartment.

An awkward silence fell between them, making the elevator ride down seem even longer than it had on the way up.

Johnathan had no idea what to say to her. He had no right to be upset because she'd gone to the club—and sought out that bastard—but it didn't stop him. She was too good for that. To be food, treated like an object, only there for the pleasure of some perverted immortal.

I hope to hell that's all she did with him. And I hope no one else fed on her.

He couldn't think about any of that now. There were more important things to take care of.

When they stepped off the elevator, Johnathan faced her. "So...apparently you've known Christof for a while." He hadn't meant it to sound like an accusation, but it was too late. "And what happened? He said Bastian attacked when you left the club."

He wanted to hear her side of things even though her anxiety was palpable, hitting him in waves, rolling off her and smashing against him. But his was off the charts, and it took all his preternatural strength to steady himself. The last thing he wanted was to take his anger at Christof out on her.

Alex unlocked his car. "Why don't you make sure she gets home? This isn't the place for a discussion. I'm going back up to get the rest of Christof's story. Lock my car after you get your helmet out." He headed for the elevator, once more not giving Johnathan a chance to respond.

Johnathan glared at his sire's back until Stephanie spoke. "Um...my car is still at the club."

She rode here in his car? He gritted his teeth.

"Johnathan, are you okay?"

"He didn't hurt you, did he?" He nearly reached out to cradle her face but stopped himself since she would say it was improper.

"What? No. Christof moved so fast that Bastian didn't have a chance to—"

"No, that's not what I meant. Did *Christof* hurt you? Did he...bite you?"

"He saved me. Bastian wasn't going to take *no* for an answer once he realized he could get back at Christof through me. If Christof hadn't shown up..." She looked away, and he felt a rush of fear overtake her.

"Stephanie, it's okay. You're safe now. Alex was right. This isn't the place to discuss anything. You need to get home and rest." Johnathan grabbed his helmet from the car and handed it to her. "Here, put this on."

She looked up at him, confusion in her warm brown eyes. "I...this... We can't... It's wrong."

"I'm only giving you a ride back to your car. We're not doing anything inappropriate."

"Yes we are. It's unethical."

"What, to let a vampire give you a ride?"

She laughed. "I guess you're right. This isn't a normal therapeutic relationship."

Johnathan opened one of the bikes saddlebags so Stephanie could place her purse inside then he helped her with the helmet. He swung a leg over his V-Star, settled into the seat, flipped down the passenger floorboards, and reached for her. She slipped her hand in his, preparing to climb on. A flash of electricity surged through his body. The softness of her skin, the warmth and tenderness were pleasures he hadn't allowed himself to experience in decades.

She cocked her head to the side.

He couldn't help but grin at how cute she looked. "What's wrong?"

"I'm just not used to seeing you ready to ride without your sunglasses."

With his free hand, he pulled them from his pocket and put them on. He'd honestly forgotten about his shades in all the chaos. "There. Better?"

"Yep."

She slid into place behind him, causing his body to react instantly. His fangs slowly extended, his eyes shifted, and his cock stirred. He was glad she couldn't see the effect she had on him, but how could he tell her to hold on without his raspy voice giving away the fact he'd vamped out from having her so close?

Calm down. Don't screw this up. She's been through enough.

"You should hold on." His voice cracked.

"No, I can't..."

He looked back, careful not to open his mouth wide, hiding his fangs as he spoke. "I'm not used to worrying about a passenger, especially a mortal. My reflexes might be too quick if there's a problem."

"Well I can't hold onto you. That would really be crossing a line."

"You have to. We're not moving until you do."

Stephanie was quiet for a moment, and Johnathan sensed her apprehension. He contemplated grabbing her hands and wrapping her delicate arms around him, allowing himself to imagine it momentarily, nearly shuddering from desire. To be touched by her... She was sexy as hell, and the tight shirt she wore tonight showed off her cleavage.

Stop it. I can't think about her like that.

Besides, something seemed to have changed inside her. She no longer radiated arousal and desire as she had in her office. Sure he'd felt her concern when Christof slammed him into the floor, but she looked at him differently now.

"I guess you really aren't going to move if I don't, huh?" Stephanie shifted, inching closer.

"No...I'm not," was all he could manage.

"Okay."

When her arms tentatively encompassed him, Johnathan held his unneeded breath for a moment. It was a stiff embrace, but it still sent chills through him. His cock stiffened more, and he instinctively inhaled, taking in her intoxicating perfume.

"I'm ready whenever you are." Stephanie laced her fingers together, nearly dipping low enough to brush against the protrusion in his jeans.

Unable to speak, he simply started the motorcycle and headed to Nocturnal Surrender. He did his best to ignore the heat of her body against his back and her hands on his abs, focusing instead on riding more carefully than normal. He shifted gentler, cornered slower. Occasionally the shifts were harder than he intended, and her arms squeezed tighter.

Before long, the neon lights of Surrender came into view.

After they pulled in, she pointed out her blue Prius, and he parked beside it. She eased off the seat, her hands sliding around his waist, sending shockwaves through him. As she removed the helmet, he took a few deep breaths to calm himself. He climbed off the motorcycle, and she set the helmet on the backrest then fluffed her hair.

Somehow he found his voice as he gaped at the way her luxurious tresses framed her face, from her sexy eyes, to her dainty nose, to her full, kissable lips. "You look good." *That's one hell of an understatement.* "No helmet hair, I promise."

Her smile made it hard to ignore those lips. "Thanks for the ride. It's been a long time since I've been on a motorcycle. I'd forgotten how much I loved it."

He opened the saddlebag, and she grabbed her purse. She hurried to her car, got in, and started the engine. As Johnathan approached, she closed the door and put down the window.

She obviously liked setting her boundaries.

He rested his hands on the roof of the car and leaned down. "I'm going to follow you to make sure you get home okay."

It was no surprise she protested, but he wasn't giving her a choice after what had happened. Eventually, she relented.

He had to find out what was going on to determine if she'd even be safe in her own home.

He hopped back on the bike and followed her. His mind spun with questions as they left the bustling Strip behind, but he tried to push them aside and enjoy the ride back into the country. It didn't work.

When they arrived at her house, she made it clear she wasn't comfortable inviting him inside. Her damned ethics again.

"Can we at least sit on the porch and talk?" He admired the wrap-around porch of her blue Victorian home.

Impressive. It suits her.

She looked around hesitantly, and then nodded. "I suppose that would be okay, but only for a few minutes."

After she led him onto the porch, she nervously eyed the mostly-empty expanse until her gaze came to rest on the swing. She shook her head as if to tell herself *no* and stared off into the woods next to her house.

The sounds of the night rang in his ears, but while crickets chirped, leaves rustled, and nocturnal creatures scurried about, the questions that had been eating at him since they'd left the penthouse raced through his mind.

Unable to contain them any longer, he cleared his throat. "So, what exactly happened when you and Christof left the club, and how long *have* you known him?"

**Excited to find out what happens next?
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About the Author

Lorraine Pearl writes erotic paranormal romance. She loves to read and write about sexy vampires that actually bite, and hot angels and demons. She lives in the northeastern US with her family but dreams of moving to a tropical climate someday. For more information about Lorraine and her books, please visit her website.

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