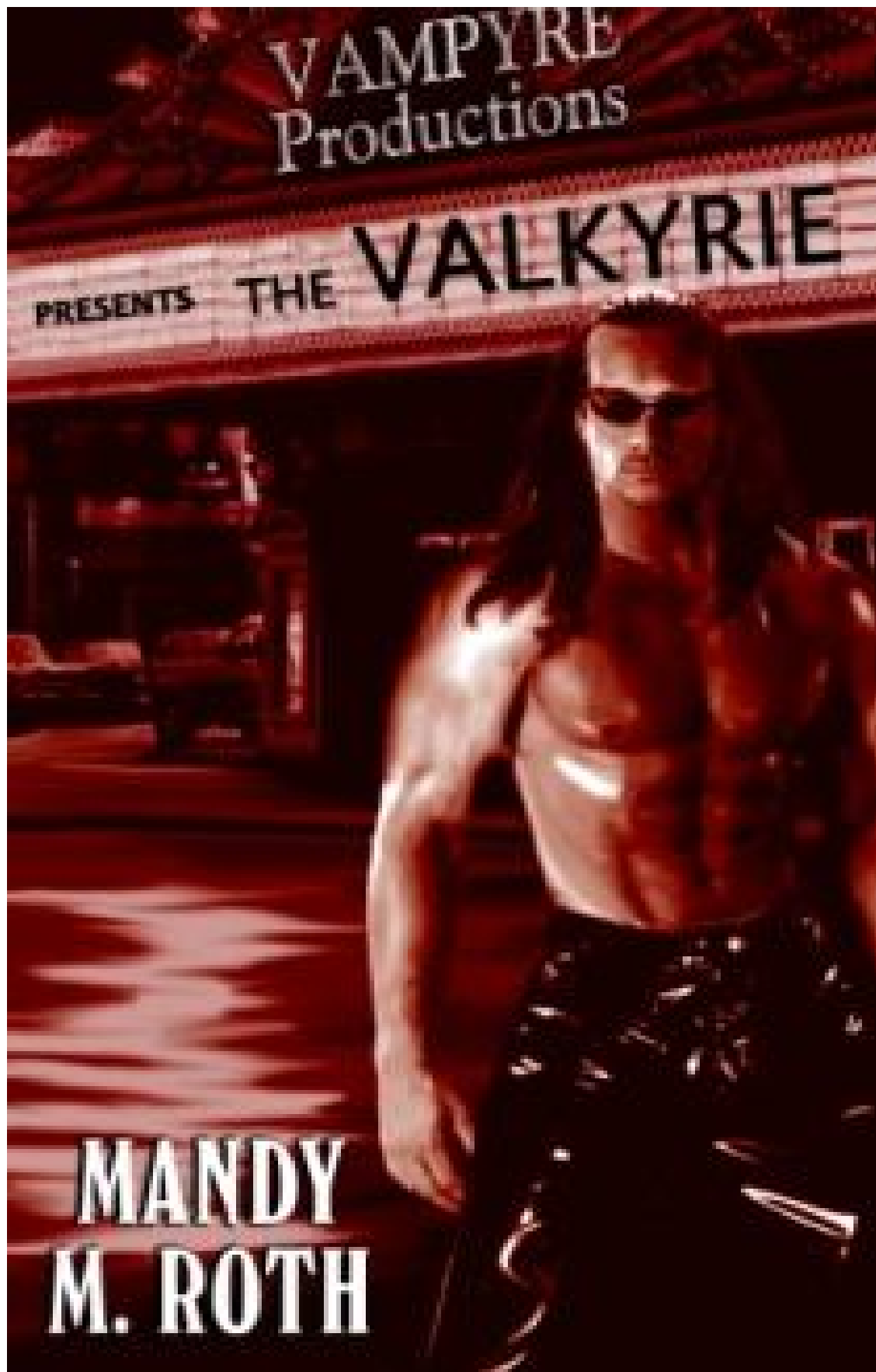


VAMPYRE  
Productions

PRESENTS THE **VALKYRIE**

**MANDY  
M. ROTH**



**Vampyre Productions:**

**THE VALKYRIE**

**by**

**Mandy M. Roth**

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Dedication

To my husband Shane:

You've never once questioned what I do, and you've answered my questions about vampires with a smile on your face. There aren't enough words to thank you for overwhelming show of support. I love you will have to suffice. Thank for all that you do, and for three beautiful little boys.

## Chapter 1

"What do you want to eat tonight?" my roommate, Molly, yelled from the other side of the bathroom door. Her voice was so soft that getting it loud enough for me to hear over the blow dryer took some skill. I clicked it off and flipped my head back up. Black hair fell down my back, over my shoulders, and covered my face. I had to run my fingers through it all to be able to see. It was long now and in need of a cut, but it had been longer once. Five years ago, my hair had hung to the back of my knees, or so I'd been told.

"Pizza or Chinese?" Molly pounded harder this time.

"Pizza sounds good," I yelled back.

I finished running the brush through my hair and gave one last quick check. I had debated putting on some light eye makeup, because after the last time Molly and I went out dancing I looked like I'd been through a war, or about to say "I do" to Frankenstein. Either way, eye makeup and dancing didn't mix in my world.

I don't care what the manufacturers say, no mascara is run proof. I didn't feel like playing tarantula eyes again tonight, so I opted for just lip gloss. Besides, I'd been blessed with turquoise eyes and thick dark black lashes. Most people who saw me asked where I purchased my contacts. I finally gave up trying to convince them that my eyes were really this color and just started making up names of fictitious contact manufactures. My favorite to date was still the Stickitnure Iris Company, or pronounced slower, stick it in your iris company.

Molly pounded on the door again. "Valerie, I called down to Joey's, he's refusing to deliver to us," she said, on the verge of panic. She fell into her best impersonation of Joe, the Pizza shop guy's, voice. "You wanna eat, you come on down here and kiss the cook, or if you're feelin' frisky you could do a little somethin' else." I laughed. Molly had managed to get Joey down pretty good. "I can't believe the nerve of that guy."

I buttoned up my jeans and pulled the fitted cotton shirt over my head. "When are you going to stop trying to order from him?" I didn't need to hear her answer, I knew why. She loved the attention Joey gave her. The two of them had been flirting with each other since I'd known her.

Joey was a great single guy who'd gone so far as to send flowers to the hospital where Molly works, as a nurse, to apologize for her food being late once. In fact, the first time I'd ever met Molly she'd been carrying flowers for me from Joey. I didn't know who the hell Joey was, but he'd heard Molly talking about me and wanted to pass along his well wishes. Since, apparently, nobody else did. It didn't bother me any. My first few weeks in the hospital were a complete blur. It wasn't until my third month that I caught on that the only people who visited me were hospital employees. No friends or family ever showed up to see me.

The only information I had to go on came from Molly. She'd been in the emergency room when the ambulance brought me in. She told me about the terrible shape I'd been in when I'd arrived. To this day, my doctors tell me that it's a miracle that I not only survived my injuries, but also show no signs of having ever sustained them.

Nearly every bone in my body had been broken, and everyone thought for sure that brain damage was inevitable. After all, the police report said I was assaulted, left for dead in the center of the highway, and then struck by a car. The driver of the car had been convinced that he'd killed me, but I pulled through. It only took me four months to heal. Molly said it was impossible. She said that no one could heal from injuries like that. I guess she was wrong.

Molly was bothered by my lack of visitors while in the hospital. The newspapers had splashed my story all over the headlines, but no one came forth with knowledge of my identity. I was little help. I couldn't even remember how I'd gotten to the hospital.

Molly was my only link to the events of the night I arrived in her care. She could only tell me that I'd been wearing a short skirt and a leather bra

that was so soaked with blood she couldn't be sure what color it had originally been.

I can't say that I was no help to the doctors. I knew my name, but that was it. They said that was common for someone who had sustained injuries as bad as mine. I had no choice but to accept their word.

Molly and I had hit it off right from the start. She was shorter than me, which made her damn near microscopic. Being five foot five inches had me on the short end of the stick. Molly was at least two inches shorter. She was also very dainty. The most she'd ever weighed in her life had been one hundred pounds, which made my one hundred and fifteen pounds seem like a lot. Molly seemed to think my breasts alone weighed at least ten pounds. I couldn't argue there. They were rather on the large side. Borrowing clothes was definitely out of the question. That may be why being roommates worked out so well.

I had nowhere to go upon my release from the hospital, and Molly was desperate to get a bigger place. On one salary, she couldn't afford to move out of the tiny apartment that she'd been sharing with six other nurses for over a year. I had no job, but money never seemed to be a problem for me. An anonymous donor, who read about me in the paper, set up a trust fund, so to speak, for me. It more than covered my hospital bills. The donor was very specific that this money was to be used to help me 'start a new life'.

"You about done in there?" Molly shouted.

I slid my black sandals on and opened the bathroom door. Molly stood there wearing one of the shortest shirts known to man. If she bent over, I was sure that everyone around her would get a free peep show. Her top wasn't much better. She had on a tiny white shirt that was unbuttoned. Her very black and lacy bra showed through. I shot her a look. She buttoned two buttons and stuck out her tongue. Away from work she dressed like a hooker and seemed proud of it.

"You look easy," I said, smiling at her as I walked past. She gave a little snort and walked into the bathroom.

"Yeah, and you look like you need to get laid." I heard her rumbling through my makeup bag. I didn't care. She could have whatever she wanted. "Speaking of getting laid, have you talked to Dr. Sullivan lately?" She knew damn well that I had. She'd been the one to call me at work to tell me that I'd missed my appointment with him.

"Grow up," I said, and headed out to the kitchen to grab some cash out of my cookie jar. I know, not very original, but it looked good in the movies. Molly came out of the bathroom with more cleavage than she'd gone in with. I had no doubt that two-ply tissue was her new best friend.

"I'll grow up, if you tell me what's going on with you two," she yelled back. She seemed intent on making Dr. Sullivan and me an item. He was in his early thirties and handsome as hell, I'd give him that. But, he had seen me broken and bruised. He'd been one of the doctors who'd saved my life. I never felt comfortable enough around him to accept his offers of coffee or dinner. He and Molly were good friends so avoiding him was an issue.

"Nothing is going on with us, and yeah I talked to him today. His receptionist sent me back to him as soon as I called. He read me the riot act about not coming in and then he had to go." I was shocked that he'd let me off the hook that easily. It wasn't like Dr. Sullivan to let things go. "You know, he's normally got a mouthful to say to me."

Molly's light blue eyes lit up. "Well, hmm, maybe he'll get a chance to talk with you more tonight." I glared at her. Blond and cute could get her far with the guys, but it wasn't going to save her from me.

"What the hell are you up to?"

She gave me her best 'who me?' look, and I threw my hands in the air and gave up. There was no use fighting it. I was sure she'd arranged to meet with him later. At least she'd given me a heads up.

## Chapter 2

"Valerie, I see the little vixen managed to get you out of the house tonight." Joey said from the other side of the brown counter. Joey easily weighed two-hundred pounds. He was a big boy that much was for sure. His shaved head and dark brown goatee only added to his ominous appearance. The twinkle in his brown eyes gave him away--he was a teddy bear. His gaze wandered to Molly and stayed there. I didn't know why the two of them had never dated. They were obviously into each other.

"Screw you, Joey!" Molly called out to him. He gave a nod and wink. It was plain to see that he was accepting her offer. Molly rolled her eyes and walked over to our usual table. We'd been coming into Joey's pizza place at least three times a week since we'd moved down the street from it. I had a sneaky suspicion that Molly liked our house more when she found out it was close to Joey's.

Joey had been pretty cool. He'd even offered me a job in the restaurant. I had to turn him down. I was heading into my senior year at the local university and working for the admissions office part-time for extra cash. School had been hard to get into at first. No one had any records for me, so Dr. Sullivan and his coworkers banded together to put pressure on the university to let me in. The university had used every excuse in the world to keep me out.

"What's her age?" I remembered hearing the Dean of Admissions asking Dr. Sullivan. He couldn't give him a definite number, but by their guess I was in my mid-twenties. Questions of my academic abilities followed closely behind that. The university insisted I take entrance exams. I apparently blew them out of the water because they stopped questioning me and let me enter. I'd been overloading myself with classes since I'd started. In the two short years that I'd been there, I'd managed to get enough credits to be considered a senior come fall. That was music to my ears.

"Have you listened to a word I've said?" Molly's voice brought me back. The sounds of the pizza place filled my ears. More and more lately, I'd noticed myself letting my thoughts trail away. It was part of the reason that Dr. Sullivan was so adamant that I keep seeing him. "Hello, Val?"

"Sorry, no, I didn't hear anything you said."

"Well, there's a shocker." Molly's attention went to Joey as he brought our pizza out to our table. She fidgeted with her hair and tried to look uninterested. It didn't work. Joey walked away and Molly continued where she'd left off. "Like I was trying to tell you, I read in the paper this morning and that a film crew from Vampyre Productions has been spotted around town."

I just sat there looking at her. She was movie obsessed. Every time someone was foolish enough to challenge Molly to trivia about movies, they were annihilated. Her favorite genre was horror. I could watch just about anything else with her, but those did me in. I couldn't sleep for weeks after the last one she'd brought home. Having a major movie filmed in our city was definitely the highlight of her year, especially since it was being made by one of her absolute favorite studios, Vampyre Productions.

"Anyways, the paper's speculating that the lead actor in the film is none other than Guytano Marsarius," she said with so much enthusiasm that I felt bad for drawing a blank, so I just stared at her. Her eyes bugged out at me. "You're kidding right? You know the hot Italian dude, Guytano Marsarius." I shrugged my shoulders. This sent her into a dither. She ran down the list of his movies. None of them rang a bell. "I give up, if you'd watch some of my absolute favorite movies of all time, you'd recognize him."

"Oh, you mean if I'd subject myself to the mindless scream flicks that you seem to never tire of, then, and only then I'd know the magic of his very name being mentioned." I flicked my hair back from my face and did the best catty girl performance that I could come up with. It wasn't much, but it was all I had.

"I heard that in honor of being chosen as a location for the Vampyre Productions new movie, Pete's is going to have a movie marathon," she leaned forward and whispered to me. I was under the impression that she was concerned that if others heard this, they'd buy up all the tickets Pete's Cinema was offering, and she'd miss out on it. I looked around at the crowded pizza place. Fat chance of that happening. "So, you wanna go with me?"

I looked up at her. I hated letting Molly down again and again when it came to this kind of stuff. I had refused to attend the vampire's convention that was held in the city last month. She'd ended up going



with a friend of hers from work. The two of them looked more like ladies of the night than vampires. The fake teeth and overdone makeup had made me exceptionally pleased with myself for refusing to attend.

"Mol ... I'll think about it." I answered slowly. This surprised her. She let out a small squeal--effectively drawing the attention of everyone around us. I smiled and blushed. Our town was small, and most of the patrons at some point in time had been under Molly's care. They nodded at her and gave their best polite smiles. None of them bothered giving me the same courtesy.

Only a handful of people in Miskiwe had taken to me in the five years that I'd been a resident there. It had nothing to do with Molly, but everything to do with my mysterious arrival. The tiny town was within twenty minutes of the city. They had fought hard to maintain their small town independence and status. My story had brought more media attention to this tiny place than was wanted. Some longtime residents had banded together and 'suggested' that I seek another place to call home. This infuriated Molly. She looked for a house right in the center of town, and that's how we'd ended up here.

We sat awhile and talked together while finishing our pizza. Molly and Joey continued to joke with each other. At one point during our meal Molly suggested to Joey that he needed a woman's touch around the pizza place. He had informed her that the position was open, if she was looking, and that he'd be interviewing sometime next week. I nudged her with my foot under the table. She rolled her eyes in an attempt to dismiss what he was saying as a joke. I knew that it was Joey's roundabout way of asking Molly out.

Molly and I headed out to go to The Raven, a kick-butt dance club in the city. We walked down the street to my car. As much as Molly hated to ride in it, hers was currently in the shop for a new battery, so she had little choice. She'd been on my back for years to buy a car that was reliable. I was growing fond of my Ford Fiesta. It was so tiny and white that it resembled a pregnant egg on a roller skate, but hey, it got me around town and was good on gas. I really couldn't ask for more than that. Yes, I could have used the money in my trust fund to purchase a new car, but I hated to tap into it. I'd been forced to use it for medical bills already. I didn't want to have to rely on it for anything else.

Molly made the sign of the cross and said a little prayer before she got in. I ignored her. The last time she'd been reduced to riding in my car she'd shown up with a bike helmet on and a copy of her will. "Just in case," she

said to me. I laughed so hard I cried, then I made her call Dr. Sullivan for a ride to work after that. I wasn't taking any chances.

I put the key in and the engine tried to roll over. Molly's cell phone rang and startled us both. That telltale tune from the Addams Family played. I found it completely annoying; she found it adorable. She flipped it open and said hello. Her eyes flickered to me, and her voice dropped to a whisper. "No, I haven't seen her." She did her best to avoid eye contact with me. I knew who was on the other end. I put my hand out for the phone. Molly gave me her best I'm sorry look and handed it over.

"So, you've taken to harassing my friends now too?" I knew my voice sounded harsh. I meant it to. I was tired of playing this game.

"Nice to hear your voice too, sweetie."

"What is it this time Dillon?" I asked. Normally, I would have just slammed the phone down on him, but I was feeling charitable this evening.

"That's a hell of a way to greet your fiancé," he said. I didn't have to be in front of him to know what he was doing. It was after six, he was headed home from work, or at least I thought he was. I pictured him loosening his collar after he tossed his tie in the passenger seat. I had no doubt that his jacket had been shed the moment he entered the vehicle.

"I'll greet you any damn way I like, and you're my ex-fiancé. Get it right," I said. I wondered if he was running his fingers through his chestnut brown hair. There wasn't much to it anymore. I had convinced him to cut it close to his head. When I'd met him it was to his ears. It was nice if you were a male model, which I firmly believed Dillon could have been if he tried, but being a college professor called for something a little more professional, although I'm not sure who would pay to sit through one of Dillon's lectures on demonology.

Dillon and I were introduced a few weeks prior to my release from the hospital. He'd shown up with Detective Gonzales, who'd been assigned to my case. At first I had assumed that Dillon was another police officer. I'd been wrong, he was doing some research for a book he was writing. He loved to write paranormal mysteries. It was Molly who pointed out that men with Dillon's kind of money didn't generally make personal visits to victims of bizarre crimes. She was right. Dillon's interests had been strictly personal. I enjoyed his company so I refused to let Molly chase him off.

"I'll ask you again Dillon, what do you want, and why the hell are you calling Molly?" I didn't have to wait to hear his response. He was calling Molly because I'd been leaving my cell phone turned off. I was tired of the endless calls from him. He knew the stalking laws, and I'm sure he knew he was breaking them. We'd been over for almost eight months now. He wasn't taking it well.

"Aunt Karen's birthday is coming up, and I thought you'd want to come and see her. You know how much she likes you," he said, in a low tone. His reason for calling would have sounded lame to anyone else, but to me it sounded legitimate. It was true Dillon's aunt and I did enjoy seeing each other. Aunt Karen was one of the things I missed most about not dating Dillon. As much as I wanted to see her, I didn't want to give Dillon the idea that he had any chance of getting me back. Women calling my home at all hours and wanting to know why Dillon ran out so suddenly had ruined his chances with me. Silly, I know.

"I'll make sure to call Karen and wish her a happy birthday."

"Come on Valerie, don't do this to me. I've apologized to you at least a hundred times, please don't..."

"No, you don't! Don't call me anymore, don't email me, don't send me letters, don't drive past my house, and don't park at my school. Don't bother me anymore, Dillon." I closed Molly's phone and handed it back to her. The Addams Family tune started again. She shut it off and put it in her purse.

"Sorry," she said.

"How many times has he called you?" I asked. She froze. It was plain to see that this wasn't his first time. I don't know why this surprised me. Going through Molly to get to me did seem like a good idea. Problem was, he'd had me and he'd blown it. I didn't want him anymore. I was moving on.

I got the car started and said a silent thank you prayer for it. Yeah, each time I started the car I was sure it would be its last. We headed on our way. Molly seemed tense. She was afraid that I was mad at her, and she had every reason to be, because I was. I couldn't believe that my best friend would go behind my back like that.

I stole a sideways glance at her as I drove. She was looking off into the distance.

"Val, what do you want me to say?"

"How about nothing? How about not talking to Dillon at all?"

"I did ignore him at first. I was on the Dillon hating band wagon with you in the beginning," she said softly.

"So, what made you change your mind?"

"You did."

I swerved off to the right. I managed to keep the car on the road, but not by much. I was suddenly very happy that the roads into the city were not heavily traveled. Most cars would be taking the highways. I liked the feel of the back roads. Molly's hands held tight to her seatbelt. She was ready for my verbal assault, as she should be.

"What the hell do you mean?"

She shifted in her seat a little. "It's just that, you were so happy when the two of you were together ... and ... and... I hear you now at night. I hear you crying in your room. I've noticed you pulling away from everyone. I just thought..."

A sudden realization swept over me. "Christ Molly! This is why you've been pushing me to date so much isn't it?"

"Yes."

Things were so much clearer now. Molly's countless attempts at being a matchmaker were well beyond getting on my nerves. Now I understood her reasoning for it. I had no idea that she could hear me at night. As much as I wanted to deny it, I couldn't. I had been sinking into an odd state of self-realization lately, and what I was seeing wasn't exactly inspiring. It had less to do with Dillon, and more to do with disturbing, reoccurring dreams that had begun to plague me. I didn't want to go into the details of them with Molly, so, allowing her to think it was loneliness was all right by me.

I pulled up outside of the nightclub and looked at Molly. Her light blue eyes fell downward. She was ashamed of herself. As much as I wanted to let her feel bad about this all night, it wasn't my nature. I reached out and patted her leg.

"Don't sweat it. I'll be fine."

"You're not coming in are you?"

"I'm not really in the mood to party tonight. Can you get a lift home?"

"Sure, Vivian and Sherry are supposed to be here, and so is..." she stopped in mid-sentence. She didn't need to go on any further. Dr. Sullivan ran up to the passenger window. Molly looked over at me, her eyes pleaded with me to forgive her. I smiled.

I leaned over her and rolled the window down. The smell of expensive cologne filled the car. "Hey, Doc!"

A set of white teeth greeted me. Dr. Sullivan had one of the best smiles. His tanned skin and light blond hair helped to make the package complete. He leaned in the window. I noticed his eyes gravitate to Molly's cleavage, and then quickly pull away.

"Umm ... er ... are you going to go park?" He asked.

"No, I don't think we're going to be staying," Molly said. I looked over at her. She was going to come home with me. It wasn't purely out of guilt; it was out of friendship. I gave her leg another pat and looked up at Dr. Sullivan.

"What Molly means to say is, she's staying, I'm not. I have a slight headache, and I think I'm going to find something a little quieter to do tonight." Molly opened her mouth to protest, I squeezed her knee hard.

"Not in the mood to live it up, huh?" Dr. Sullivan leaned in further. I was convinced that he was going to crawl through the window soon if someone didn't put a stop to it.

"Yep, that's the plan. You want to join me?"

I was sure that the phrase 'hearing a pin drop' was coined during a moment similar to this. Molly looked over at me, and then to Dr. Sullivan. He was looking at her as well with wide eyes. They must have discussed my reluctance to accept his invitations before. I wondered how many other things they'd discussed.

"I'd like that very much," he said.

It took a few minutes to say good-bye to Molly. I waited to make sure that her coworkers were inside before I pulled away. Dr. Sullivan had gone around to get his car because I had no idea where I was heading. Anywhere was better than a nightclub tonight. I drove several blocks and took a right. I wasn't too familiar with the city. I did know my way around the University section, but that was the extent of it. I brought the car to a stop outside a tiny green building. I'd passed it enough leaving class to know that it was one of those bookstore/coffeehouse places. I'd never actually stopped in before, and now seemed like as good a time as any. I snatched my purse off the seat and walked toward the entrance.

I watched as Dr. Sullivan pulled his shiny black Lexis up behind my car. The extreme social class difference between us was not lost on either one of us. He clicked the button on his keys and his car beeped, indicating it had locked. He looked over at mine.

"I guess it is its own burglar deterrent."

"Well, maybe I'll get lucky and snag a man who is loaded and then he can buy me a new one."

"I don't think you'll have much trouble with that." He looked over at me and winked. His ocean blue eyes glistened. "So, this a favorite place of yours?"

I looked up at the coffeehouse. "Nope, just looked quiet. Do you want to give it a try?"

"I'd follow you to the depths of hell," he said in a low voice. He opened the door and made a sweeping motion with his arms. "After you, my lady."

"Cute, Doc, does that win over all the ladies?"

"I'll let you know later tonight."

## Chapter 3

"Well, looks like we'll have the place to ourselves." I heard Dr. Sullivan's voice close behind me. Normally, being on a first date with a man in a place this empty would have freaked me out, but Doc was trustworthy and the place was cozy. Bookshelves lined the walls, and two-person tables littered the center of the shop. Tiny handwritten signs adorned each bookcase. I took one look around and knew that the majority of the books on the shelves were used and quite old. I'd always had a thing for old books, and I couldn't explain it.

"What can I get for yins?" I looked up, startled to find an older woman standing at the edge of the room. Waves of silver framed her tiny face. She wore a long light-brown dress that hung to the floor. There didn't appear to be any buttons or zippers on it. I had half a second to wonder how she got in and out of it, before she asked again if she could help us. I looked back at Dr. Sullivan.

He smiled at her and walked around me. "Yes ma'am, we'd like two cups of tea."

Tea? I didn't really drink tea. I was much more of a coffee drinker, or at least I thought I was. I couldn't really ever remember drinking tea. Molly didn't care for it, and I left shopping up to her, so we never had any at home. The woman looked at Dr. Sullivan, and then at me.

"Hmm ... somethin' is abrewin' all right, and that wouldn't be tea that I'm talkin' 'bout." She turned and headed out through a small door.

I walked over to a seat and pulled it out. A hand ran over mine and I looked down. Dr. Sullivan was trying to pull my chair out for me.

"Doc, I think I can handle it." I said, no part of me wanting him to move his hand from mine.

Thankfully, he didn't let go. "I'm sure you can, but what kind of a date would I be if I let you wait on yourself."

I didn't respond. Chivalry was not dead in his world, so who was I to question it. I let go of the chair, and he slid it out for me. I took a seat and watched him carefully as he walked around to his side of the table.

"You know," he said looking at me hard. "I have a first name. It's Payton."

I smiled and tipped my head to the side. "I know your name, but I like calling you Doc."

"Ah, well, if you like it, then so do I."

The silver-haired woman reappeared with our tea. She set them down before us and walked over to busy herself behind her counter.

Doc looked down at his cup of tea and wrinkled his nose. "Do you smell that?"

I smiled. "Yes."

"What is it?"

"If I had to take a guess, I'd say Lovage."

He looked at me quizzically. "Lovage? Why the hell would someone put that in tea?"

I looked over at the woman. She tried to look busy, but I knew she was listening to us. "It's used in love spells. Some believe it's an aphrodisiac."

"How the hell do you know that?"

I opened my mouth to answer him, but closed it quickly. I didn't know how I knew that, I just did. He touched my hand. "Valerie, it will come back slowly. I'm sure of it." I knew that he was referring to my past. Sometimes, I wondered what my life was like before. One thing was for sure, I knew what Lovage was.

"Well, if it's an aphrodisiac then bottoms up." He put his cup to his lips and reached his hand out to gesture for me to drink as well. I laughed so hard that my cup shook. I spilled a few drops onto the white tablecloth, then onto my lap.



"Shit," I said. Payton looked over at me and it was his turn to laugh.

"Here I was, worried about slipping up and saying something wrong. Guess I have to watch out for you, you've got a bad mouth." He winked at me.

The silver-haired woman appeared next to me with a towel. She dabbed up the mess on the table and handed me the towel to clean up my lap. I reached my hand out to take the towel and brushed against hers. A jolt of energy passed between us. She went to yank her hand away, but I held tight.

I closed my eyes and felt a wind start to tickle the back of my neck. It tugged at my shirt and at my arm. I thought, at first, that someone had entered through the shop door behind us, but the air was warm and full of life, not cool like the night. I tipped my head and listened, I heard the faintest of sounds. I listened closer. It was a mix of howls, drums, and women chanting. I tried to make out what the voices were saying, it sounded a bit like my name.

"Valerie?"

My eyes snapped open. I sat there with my hand still on the woman's. Payton was looking at me like I'd grown a third eyeball. I let go of the woman's hand and looked up to apologize to her.

"Sorry ma'am I..."

"There's no need to apologize." She leaned down to pat my shoulder. "I know what you are, valkyrja. Blessings, follower of Odin," she whispered in my ear.

I jerked back from her. She turned and walked away. I watched her head toward the back door. She stopped and looked back at me before she left. She smiled brightly and moved her hand in a circular motion. A tiny gust of wind shot out from near her, and she turned and walked away. I jumped to my feet.

"Valerie, what's wrong?" Payton asked.

"Didn't you see it? Didn't you see the wind, the..." I struggled for the words to describe it. He shook his head and stood up.

"I think that we should probably get you home." He pulled his wallet out and tossed a twenty-dollar bill onto the table. That was way more than our bill would be, but I didn't argue. I let him lead me out of that place and took in a big breath of fresh air when we hit the sidewalk.

"Care to tell me what that was about?"

I turned and looked at Payton, and said "No." He looked less than pleased. I turned and walked. I had no destination in mind, just the need to be moving. Driving in my car right now would not cut it. I knew that I needed the fresh air.

"Hey, wait up." I heard Payton call out behind me.

He caught up with me and matched my fast pace. We'd walked at least two blocks before he finally got up the courage to ask where we were going. Since I didn't know myself, I just growled at him and kept walking. He made no effort to talk to me. He just walked next to me.

I knew that he was physically fit. Molly had told me about his interest in running marathons. That had never sounded like fun to me. I didn't mind running, but I seemed more drawn to dangerous sports. Molly was always talking me out of doing something stupid.

The cool air on my face, the stillness of night, and Payton's silence gave me a much-needed chance to think. I'd been avoiding doing that lately. I wasn't really sleeping anymore. The dreams were getting worse and it was to the point I avoided sleep altogether if I could. The last one I'd had had been by far the worst. I had leaned my head back on the sofa to rest my eyes.

A coppery smell filled my nose. Soft laughter filled my ears, and smooth hands ran over my skin. I opened my eyes to find myself in bed with a man. Our naked bodies pulled tight against each other. His touch was warm, and I craved warmth. My skin had cooled years ago, and I longed for the touch of life again.

I pulled on his back as he drove the hard length of his shaft into me. His body was solid under my touch. He was a strong man, but I knew myself to be stronger. It was no fault of his. I knew that my strength was otherworldly.

I could smell others near. They had no business here. I had taken great pains to keep my lover a secret from them. I slid my hands around my

lover's back, and used my legs to flip him over. This left our bodies still pressed tightly together, but with me now on top. He pulled my hips to him, harder and harder. Driving his hard cock deep within the recesses of my body, my silken channel convulsed around him, begging him to release. My orgasm was swift and I raked my hands down the bed so as to not cause him undo pain.

"Amore eternal," he whispered over and over again. His heart beat fast. His blood pumped hard through his body. His body tightened and he bucked hard against me, filling me with his hot come. I wanted nothing more than to please him again and again, but I knew that danger was near. Part of me wanted to taste him, wanted to drink him in, the other part wanted to protect him. My love for him was strong. The protective part won out. I leapt off him and flew into the air. The feeling of weightlessness seemed natural to me in the dream. I didn't look back at my lover. I knew that I couldn't bear to see the look of scorn on his face. He would never understand my reasoning for leaving him.

I hit the night sky and flew naked, soaked in the juices of our lovemaking. I knew not my destination, only that I was drawing the attentions of my pursuers. When I'd covered enough ground, I slowed. I knew this would allow them to catch me, and that's what I wanted.

A massive force struck me from behind and entangled itself with me. We plummeted to the ground. I turned my body in mid flight, putting my attacker in the position of striking the ground before me. He struggled and snarled, trying to outmaneuver me. It was useless. I was stronger and older than him, and I knew it.

The ground came upon us fast. I closed my eyes at impact. Immediately, I found myself covered in wet sticky goo. I opened my eyes and found that my opponent's head was shattered. I lifted what little was left with my hand and found that a large rock had been what greeted him upon impact.

I didn't struggle to get to my feet. Instead, I leaned forward and used his shirt to wipe the skin tissue from my eyes. When I was satisfied that most of it was gone I rose to my feet. I listened as the sound of the night shifted. I knew that four of them were coming toward me. I lifted my head and smiled. Now they knew I was ready.

They came at me and tried to pull me with them. I fought hard and sent them propelling away. The shifting of the weight made us all tumble down. We were only slightly off the ground, but when we were airborne,

they had had the upper hand. As the dream ended, I knew that I had won, at least this time.

As I walked, I listened to the night as I had in my dream. At first I heard nothing but the crickets and the low hums of cars. Then I heard it, the sound of something not human. I knew that I was letting my imagination run wild. Something touched my shoulder, I screamed, and turned ready to fight.

Payton's eyes widened at the sight of me. "Valerie, what's wrong?" He moved closer to me. I put my hands down and hunched my shoulders. I thought at first that I was going to laugh at the absurdity of it all, but I didn't. Tears welled up and I had nowhere to go with them but out. I reached out for Payton, and he wrapped his arms around me tight.

"I'm here ... it's okay sweetie. I'm here ... Doc's here." Hearing him refer to himself as Doc made me smile. I leaned in close to him. His chin came to a rest on the top of my head. I held my cheek tight to his chest, listening to the beat of his heart. I closed my eyes and ran my hand up and over the source of the noise.

I ran my fingers over his hard chest and lifted my head slowly. His face held nothing but concern for me, and that warmed my heart. The draw of his mouth was overwhelming. I stood on my tiptoes in an attempt to be near it. Payton stooped down a bit and our lips touched, soft at first, then feverously. I'm not sure how long we kissed, pulled, drank at each other's mouths, but when I pulled away, I felt safe.

Cold air smacked against my back. I silently cursed myself for not wearing a jacket. Payton pulled me closer to him. I could feel goose bumps on his arms as well. His thin dress shirt was providing him little protection from the night air.

"It's late, and you're cold," he said, as he pulled back from me a little.

I glanced around and recognized nothing. The buildings all looked the same purplish-gray color as moonlight. The street was narrow, only one car width, which was odd for the center of the city. I'd lost track of walking relatively quickly while remembering my dream, and by the look on Payton's face, he hadn't been keeping track either.

"I don't suppose you know where we are," he said, looking around at the neighborhood we were standing in.

I shook my head no and looked around too. The buildings near us were in desperate need of upkeep. The one closest to us had a couch sitting on the front porch along with half dozen or so kitchen chairs, none of which matched or had a table to accompany them. I looked at the other homes and saw a similar scene replayed at each one.

Headlights appeared from around the corner. Payton and I both stood, still holding each other as the car slowly approached. Payton let go of me.

"Maybe we should ask for directions." He suggested. I grabbed hold of his belt, pulling him to me. The man was obviously raised in a suburban setting. I had no clue where I'd been brought up at, but I knew enough to not go flagging a car down in the middle of the night.

The car pulled up close to us. I looked in at the occupants reluctantly. From what I could tell, the large old car held at least five people. I glanced at the young men in the vehicle. They didn't look to be a day over eighteen. Babies out for a joy ride with trouble on their mind was never a good sign. The driver looked over at me and nodded his head.

"You ain't from around here, are you?" It was definitely more of a statement than a question.

"No ... no, we seem to have gotten turned around," Payton said. I turned and released my hold on him. The car came to a stop. The two long doors opened and the men slowly spilled out of the car. Each one looked more dangerous than the next. The driver's short-sleeved shirt left his heavily tattooed forearms exposed. I liked tattoos, but he made them seem scary, even menacing. I looked up at him. The tiniest of black goatees graced his young face.

"So, I take it that you're lost," he said.

Payton stepped forward. Two men advanced on him and came within striking distance before stopping. Another man stepped out. He looked at me and grinned.

"You shouldn't be wanderin' round here at night by yourself." He said looking directly at me. Payton stepped closer to me and took a protective stance.

"She's not by herself."

I flinched when I heard Payton rise to their obvious challenge. The two men closest to him pulled out weapons. One had a silver gun and the other a knife. Payton sucked in his breath. It took him long enough, but I think he finally understood the severity of our situation.

"What business do you got down here?" the driver asked.

The short one looked over at him. "Tomas, doesn't matter what they say. We've got to protect our own--our families. They might be the reason things are the way they are."

Tomas, shot a nasty look over at his friend. The other man backed away quietly. Payton shifted his weight toward me. The already unnerved boy with the gun fired. I heard a loud popping noise, and time came to a halt. I put my arm out and shouted the word "Venire." I watched the bullet change its course from Payton's chest to my extended arm.

"Manere," I said, breathlessly as I felt the impact of the bullet in my lower arm. It came to a grinding stop. Shouts sounded around us.

The boys scrambled to get back into their car. Tomas didn't move. They shouted at him to come, but he didn't budge. He reached into his pocket, pulled out his keys, and tossed them into the car. He said something that I didn't quite understand to the others, and the car sped away.

Payton grabbed hold of my arm and panted. "Oh, shit, Valerie." I looked down at the source of his concern. There was a large hole just under my elbow. He turned it over slowly and let out a gasp.

"This kind of bullet should've come out. Hell, it should've blown your arm off," he said. I looked closer at it. It hadn't blown my arm off, and it hadn't come out the other side. If it would have then it would have gone straight into Payton's body.

"What the fuck?" Payton shouted at Tomas.

I really didn't think it was wise to provoke Tomas, he was obviously into the shadier side of life, but Payton kept on shouting. Tomas made eye contact with me and held it.

"La bruja oscura," he said softly.

"What?" I asked.

"He called you the dark witch." Payton said. Tomas and I both turned to him.

"You speak Spanish?" I asked.

He smiled at me and shrugged his shoulders. "Surprise."

Tomas came over and removed his shirt. He handed it over and bowed his head down slightly. "Here, you should wrap your arm up, and I'll get you to a doctor."

"No, I'm fine. He's one," I said, moving my head toward Payton. "I'll be fine. How about you?"

Tomas stopped and looked at me. He was surprised to see my concern for him. I understood that he might be in hot water with his friends for staying. He looked down the road, in the direction that the car had left and back to me. My arm was now bleeding everywhere. Payton had long since been applying pressure to it, but it wasn't doing much but getting him soaked with my blood.

"Valerie, we need to get you to the hospital," he said.

"No, I'm fine."

"Fine! You have a bullet in your arm. How exactly is that fine?"

"Doc, I said no."

Tomas looked at me, and then down the street. He motioned for us to follow him. I tried to, but Payton held tight to my arm.

"Valerie, you need to go to the hospital."

"She doesn't want to go to the hospital, man..." Tomas said coming at Payton. I brought my other hand up and Tomas froze.

"It's okay. Can you help us find our way back to Sixth Street? Our cars are parked there."

Tomas smiled wide at me and nodded his head. "Yeah, it's back this way. It's not too far a walk. You sure you're up to it, bruja?"

"Yeah, I'm up to it," I said, looking down at my arm.

## Chapter 4

"I can't believe I let you talk me into this." Payton said, as he dug into my arm with a pair of elongated pliers. He had been adamant that I go to the hospital. I had been equally adamant that I not. In the end we'd agreed to split the difference. So here I was, sitting on the edge of the examination table while he dug out the bullet.

Tiny beads of sweat formed on his forehead. It was clear that he was in deep thought. I winced a little as he dug into my arm.

"I didn't know you spoke Latin," he said, never bothering to look up. He just concentrated on the task before him.

I quailed, and then forced a smile to my face. "I don't."

"Well, you could've fooled me." There was an odd feeling of pressure, and then nothing. Payton pulled the prize out of my arm. He dropped the bullet into a tiny puke pan, started dousing my arm with antiseptic, and moved over to get a piece of gauze. "I heard you ... I heard you speaking in Latin ... and I felt..."

He looked up at me. His blue eyes said more with one look than he could have said in a lifetime. I wondered what kind of struggle was taking place within him. He had dedicated his life to science and medicine, and he'd



just witnessed what some would call a miracle. His head shook slightly. I'm sure this was his way of clearing his thoughts.

He reached behind him and pulled out a curved pair of scissors and some black thread. "What's that for?" I asked.

"You need stitches."

"No I don't."

"Umm ... yes, you do. We could stand here all damn night arguing if you want, but the fact remains that you need stitches."

I touched his forearm. His muscles tightened. Was he flexing? The thought of Payton being worried about impressing me made me smile. I looked once more at his arsenal of emergency supplies. I had the option of letting him fix me up the way he thought was best or I could tell him the way I knew was best.

"Are you going to tell me what you thought of tonight?" I asked. I had to hear it from his lips. I had to know what he was thinking.

He took a step back from me and looked up at me. "I think that Tomas might be onto something."

"What do you mean?"

"He called you the dark witch. I think he's right."

I sat there with my mouth open. I wanted to deny these charges, and call Tomas superstitious. I wanted to pretend like none of this had happened, but it had. I knew for sure that I wasn't normal. I hadn't really considered the possibility that I might be a witch. I had first assumed that I was insane. The dreams, the nightmares, the other bizarre occurrences all led me to think that I was slowly coming unglued.

"So, what? You think I'm a witch?" I attempted to get down from the exam table. Payton put his hand up and touched my knee. "That's absurd. I'm not green, I don't have warts..." I wanted to keep listing all the reasons I couldn't be a witch.

"Valerie, I thought, no--I've known, since the moment I laid eyes on you that you were different. Strange things happened when I was alone with you, checking on you in the hospital ... things in your room, they would

move on their own. At first I thought it was sleep deprivation on my part, but then I realized that it was you ... you were doing it." I protested. He put his hand up and stopped me. "No, I'm not saying you did it on purpose, but I'm sure you were doing it." He put his head down and looked ashamed. "I used to hold your hand ... when you first came in, and you were unconscious... I'd sit by your bedside and touch your hand. Heat rose up from your body, I checked you over, you had no fever, yet I could feel the heat rising up off you." He cleared his throat and continued. "I put a chair up against the door. I didn't want anyone to walk in, and I ... I sat and watched you for hours."

"What happened?" I asked.

"You spoke in tongues. I was able to understand bits and pieces of it. I recognized some French, German, and Italian, but some were languages I'd never heard before. That wasn't all of it. The flowers that Molly had brought in for you lifted out of the vase and stayed suspended in mid-air for several minutes. I touched them, and they didn't fall to the floor. You kept mumbling things under your breath and the machines started beeping." He looked around the room, carefully avoiding my gaze.

"I had to run around and unplug everything, for fear you'd bring in the entire nursing staff. Some part of me knew not to let them see what was going on. As soon as it had started, it ended. I checked you over and found that you had begun to heal yourself. I stayed with you every night after that. Once you were alert enough I told Molly about what I'd seen. She didn't believe me at first, then she stayed with me one night and watched you. After that, she was a believer. Between the two of us, we managed to keep an eye on you, until it was time for you to leave."

I sat there looking like someone had just announced the arrival of Elvis. "That's why Molly pushed for me to move in with her. She wanted to keep tabs on me?"

"No, no that's not it at all. She and I talked about what would happen if others found out about you. I knew that they'd lock you away and study you. Neither one of us could bear the thought of that happening to you." He leaned back against the white wall. "It was only supposed to be temporary. Just until you got your memory back, but..."

"But, I didn't get my memory back, and Molly and I became friends." I answered for him. I'd known them both for five years now and suddenly it seemed like I didn't really know them at all. "Guess, I don't have to hide this from you anymore then."

He looked up at me. I didn't wait for him to reply. I looked down at my arm and willed it to be whole again. I closed my eyes and drew in a large amount of air. This was more to keep from throwing up than anything else. My nerves were shot. I looked back down at my arm and exhaled slowly. My skin pulled back in and sealed smoothly. There was not a trace of injury there.

Payton backed up against the wall even further. If he were a mole, he'd be able to burrow right out of there and away from me. I put my hand out to him, and he looked at my healed arm with an odd fascination, followed closely by fear. I'd shared too much with him, too soon. He'd thought that he'd been prepared to deal with what I was, hell, I wasn't even sure what to call me.

I slid down off the exam table and headed for the door.

"Valerie?"

"Thanks, but I'm leaving."

"Leaving? You mean you're leaving for good, don't you?" he asked, pain evident in his voice.

I turned and looked at him. He was still huddled against the far wall. I scared the shit out of him that much was clear. "Look at yourself, Payton. You act like I'm going to turn you into a frog."

"That'd likely be an improvement over a coward," he said, pushing himself toward me. I turned to leave, and he grabbed my shoulders. "Don't go Valerie... I'm sorry... It's just different, that's all."

"I'm scared of it too, Doc, but I can't stand to see the fear in your eyes when you look at me. Good-bye."

## Chapter 5

I sat down and listened to Molly talk about her date with Joey. I was only half paying attention to what she was saying. It's not that I didn't care. It's just that she and Joey were going out every night now, and I was tired of hearing the same details.

It'd been two months since I'd talked to Payton. He'd called me the morning after our little witch-office-revival to see how I was feeling, and I hadn't talked with him since. It was my fault. He'd left plenty of messages for me, but I hadn't returned even one. He'd even shown up at my front door wanting to talk. I pretended like I wasn't home and waited for him to leave. I couldn't bear to see the look of fear on his face again.

Molly had given up trying to act as a go-between. She'd seen where trying to get Dillon and me back together had gotten her, so she knew to stay out of it. Payton wasn't the problem. I was the problem. In no way was I ready to come to terms with my demons, so how could I expect him to? My nightmares were getting worse. I now had them almost nightly. My lack of sleep, combined with the knowledge that I might be a real live witch made me a real sweetie.

"So, what do you think?" Molly asked. I looked at her light blue eyes and wondered what it was that she'd been talking about. I smiled and shrugged my shoulders at her.

"What? You mean to tell me that you don't have an opinion on me moving in with Joey?"

My stomach clamped into a knot. I knew that this day would come. I just didn't expect it so soon. "You guys have only been dating seriously now for two months."

She rolled her eyes at me. "Valerie, we've been into each other for six years. You know that. Besides, I'm pretty sure that he's going to propose."

"Okay, dish," I said, leaning back against the sofa's edge.

"Well, Vivian told me that she saw Joey down at Baker's Jewelers. She said that he was looking at their rings. Now, I'm not holding my breath or anything, but he told me that he has something special that he's planning, and I'd better be thinking long term."

I thought about how much the two of them cared for each other. I knew that Molly loved him. She'd been in love with Joey since the day she'd met him. As much as I hated to admit it, they were perfect for each other, and she would be leaving soon.

"Why would you want to move into Joey's? It's half the size of this house." Before I was done saying it, I knew why. Me. "No, Mol, you two can stay here. I'll find a place. I should've found one a long time ago." I stood up and headed for the kitchen. "I'll start looking tomorrow. Do you want to help me?"

"Valerie, no, I can't ... we can't let you just go. Joey and I talked about it and we both want you to stay. I couldn't stand having you far away from me."

"Geesh, Molly, I was thinking about finding a place on the outskirts of town, not Egypt." This made her start to laugh. She came over and gave me a big hug.

"You're such a brat."

"You wouldn't have me any other way," I said, sticking my tongue out at her.

"Call Payton," Molly said, catching me off guard. I gave her questioning look and she smiled.

"Umm, weren't you supposed to say 'no, Val, you're not a brat'?"

Molly shook her head vigorously. "No, my job as your best friend isn't to soften the blow, it's to point out the obvious. And, the obvious thing here is that you should call Payton." She tossed me a pleading look. "Call him, please."

"Maybe."

## Chapter 6

"Why don't you come and stay with me?" Payton asked as he slid his hand under the sheet. He ran his fingers down my stomach, heading toward a very sore spot. I pushed his hand away gently and put my fingers on his chest.

"No, no more of that." I shifted in the bed to face him. "I don't think I can handle any more."

"Me either, but you can't blame a guy for trying." He leaned up and kissed my forehead. "I still can't believe that we did it." He sounded like he was sixteen years old again. I laughed and kissed his forehead.

Payton moved his hands up and caressed my arms gently. "You know, you'll be healed in a few minutes, and well, I'm thinking that I could suffer through some more pain, if you're up to it."

"Suffer?"

He leaned forward and pressed his lips to mine. His tongue traced the edges of my lips before darting into my mouth. Cream soaked my inner thighs. How I could be ready to take him again was beyond me. The man was a machine. He was bordering on more than I could take, both size and stamina. Doc wasn't as innocent as he looked. No, he was a tiger between the sheets.

As if on cue, he growled. I moved my hands down the length of his hard torso and found that he needed little in the way of encouragement to

suffer through another round with me. "Payton," I said, as I pulled away gently. "Don't you have to go now?"

He growled, again. "Yes ... no, Valerie I can't leave you. I don't want to miss out on a second of being with you." His mouth found mine again and he slid his hands around me, flipping me over hard and fast. I let out a yelp, and he laughed softly. His fingers traced the edge of my spine and danced along the small of my back.

I loved the way Payton was able to use his fingers to do the most amazing things. He definitely had the hands to be a surgeon. He'd had me screaming out his name on several different occasions throughout the night with just the touch of his fingers. Now was no exception. His caresses were long and languorous. Each one managed to relax my body and still drive me to the edge of sexual insanity. Payton formed tiny circles on my buttocks, pressing them apart, and moving his fingers into my moist silk.

"God, Valerie, you're so wet and tight. I can't get enough of you. I'll never get enough," he said, dropping down on the bed and forcing his face down to me. He tongue lapped up the cream that he had caused and he moaned slightly.

I clutched the sheets and moved my hips gently against the bed, rubbing my clit against the firm mattress. Each swipe of Payton's long tongue sent my body into spasms. I wanted to scream out for him to take me, but I knew that he was already late for work, so I bucked to get him off me.

He rolled my body fast, his blue eyes wild. He made a move to kiss me and I pushed on his chest, holding him at bay. "Doc, I think you need to get going, you're going to be late."

He groaned. "I'll write myself a sick note, and besides, I think you feel a little warm. I should take your temperature before I go."

I let out a tiny laugh. I knew a proposition when I heard one. "And, what, may I ask, are you going to take my temperature with?"

His eyes locked on me. "Well, I've checked it orally, and it was a little hot. I should probably see how my thermometer is doing. It's a bit sore."

Payton gave me little time to protest. He kissed my arm and artfully managed to get past my feeble protest. He licked the inside of bellybutton and had me laughing so hard that I almost rolled off the bed. He grabbed

hold of my hips and repositioned me before he pushed my legs apart. His tongue was the first thing that greeted me. He licked along my folds and traced the edges of my opening slowly, carefully. I cried out and grabbed handfuls of his hair. He'd already had me on the verge of an orgasm, now this was just plain torture. I pulled gently and looked down to find him watching my face. The look in his eyes was raw, primitive. I didn't look away. I maintained eye contact as he pushed his long tongue deep within me.

Tiny moans escaped me, and I thrust my hips up slightly.

Payton pushed his fingers into me as he licked the top of my engorged clit. Each flicker of his tongue made the already heightened nerve endings radiate waves of pleasure throughout my lower region. I tried to pull his head up and get him to join me for my orgasm, but he kept his head right where it was. I clawed at the mattress, trying hard to avoid digging my nails into his back. I'd already done that to him twice during the night and I felt horrible about it each time. He didn't seem to care.

"Payton!"

He pulled away slowly. I tried to move down on the bed, to take his glistening shaft into my mouth, but he slid his body up and over mine. The head of his cock pushed into my tender channel. I kissed his ear and let out a wild noise as his impressive width pried me open. He pushed himself in until fully sheathed. I slid my fingers over his back, and his muscles tightened as he pumped himself into me.

I turned my head as he kissed my neck and noticed the almost empty box of condoms laying there. "Doc, hon," I said softly, as I tapped his shoulder. His rhythm slowed and he looked over at the end table. He dropped his head down on the bed next to my mine.

"I'm sorry, Val, I didn't mean to start without..."

I reached out and grabbed hold of the last little foil package. He took it from me and leaned up long enough to open it. "Do you need some help?" I asked. We'd managed to make a game out of all the other times throughout the night.

He withdrew from me slowly and moved his hand down. "No, I've got it. I'm so sorry."



I kissed his arm and pulled him to me. "We don't need a little one, not this early in the relationship," I said softly to him.

Payton's gaze shifted upwards. "Relationship?"

My stomach tightened. Oh, God, I'm pushing him too fast. I tried to sit up, but he moved his mouth down and his lips hovered right above mine. "I didn't mean to push, I just..."

Payton's lips met mine, as he re-entered my body. I cried out from the mix of pleasure and pain. He thrust himself into me hard, harder than he'd done any of the other times we'd coupled over the night. His hips ground my body into the bed, and I loved every minute of it. I moved my legs up higher and wrapped them tightly around his waist. He bit at my nipple until he was able to catch it, then he drew it into his mouth and sucked hard on it. The pending orgasm hit me hard, and I cried out his name as I dug my fingernails into the backs of his arms. He slammed his hips down on me, and his face went slack. I knew that he was coming too.

I bit softly at his shoulder and let out a small laugh. "I take it that you're okay with being in a relationship with me then."

"Of course I am, Valerie, I've been trying to get you to go out with me for the last five years. Why wouldn't I want a relationship with you? I just can't believe that it's finally happened."

I couldn't believe it either. I'd finally given up and called him back. He was angry at first that it'd taken me three months to respond to him, but he got it over quickly. He'd asked me how house hunting was going. Molly had told him that she and Joey were engaged and that I was insisting on moving out. At some point in our conversation, I ended up inviting him to go look at two houses with me. I'd made appointments for late afternoon and was concerned about my car. It had been acting up more and more lately.

Payton had shown up with two dozen red roses and a big smile. Viewing the houses together was a riot. I looked at places well below what my trust fund could support. I didn't want to find anything too pricey. I'd taken all the money I'd been making from working at the Admission's office at school for the last three years and pooled it into a nice sized down payment. It wasn't a ton, but it was enough. I'd been offered a full-time position at the university and was thinking about taking it.

One of the houses we arrived at looked very similar to a lean-to. I thought for sure that barnyard animals would feel right at home there. The floors were rotted through, and a nice layer of earth showed beneath them. If that had been the only problem I'd have thought about it, but no, all the windows were shot, the roof leaked, and the house had a mean lean to the left. I was beginning to give up hope of finding one in town.

Payton had insisted on taking me out to dinner. I'd given up and let him. We had a wonderful evening. We talked and laughed, never once touching on the witch subject, and then came back to my place. Molly stayed at Joey's again. They were like little bunnies, always going at it. It was nice to have Payton with me. I hadn't realized how lonely I'd been until now. We'd started watching a movie on the sofa and ended up here together.

The first time we had sex, he'd been so gentle with me. He'd taken his time and made sure not to rush it. After I clawed his back and screamed at him to fuck me harder, he did. We'd spent the night going at each other.

"Doc, do you regret it?"

He pressed the length of himself against me. He was ready and willing to prove he'd do it again. "No, Valerie, I'll never regret this. I love you."

I didn't know what to say to that. I looked away to avoid eye contact and knew that I'd hurt his feelings. I couldn't tell him that I loved him too. I didn't, at least not yet.

Payton looked over my shoulder at the clock and shot up out of the bed. The morning sun was peaking in the window behind him. It illuminated the tiny brown fuzz that covered his tan chest.

"What's wrong? Don't go, I'm sorry, I just..."

He dropped to one knee and started moving clothing off the floor. He let out a small "Aha!" and pulled his jeans out of the mess. We'd been in such a hurry we'd trashed the place.

"I was supposed to be at the hospital for a meeting twenty minutes ago," he said.

"Are we all right?"

He leaned over and kissed me. "We're fine. I'm not sure why I said that. It just fell out. It's probably sleep deprivation ya' tiger."

I pulled the tan sheet up and covered my breasts with it. He hopped on one foot around the room while he stumbled into his jeans. I leaned over and tossed him his shoes. He had his blue shirt in his mouth, but I was still able to make out a muffled "Thanks."

He leaned forward and kissed me. "I'll call you when I get done."

"Sounds good ... no, wait, I won't be here. I've got another house appointment."

"I'm telling you, give it up and move in with me, after all, we're in a relationship now. And I just made a complete ass of myself by professing my love for you, so what's to lose."

I tossed my pillow at him as he headed out the door. I threw myself back on the bed and stared at the ceiling. Had I really just spent the night in Payton's arms? It seemed so unreal to me. Good, but surreal, because he'd always seemed so untouchable to me.

I rolled out of the bed and let my feet adjust to standing. My body hurt everywhere. Sex with Dillon had been like this, it'd left me stiff and tired. I wondered if all men were like that or if it was just me. Both had made comments about me being a tiger between the sheets.

I bent down and picked up the scattered mess. I was pleasantly disgusted to find several used condoms thrown about. In my state of disgust, I did a count, five. Not bad for one night, not bad at all.

I made mental note to replenish Molly's stock. Neither one of us had expected this to happen, so needless to say we weren't prepared. Molly thankfully was. I knew she kept boxes of them in her room. I was worried that it would kill the moment to steal away to retrieve them, but Payton seemed even more ready when I returned.

I reached up and yanked the sheets off my bed. I turned and got a fresh set out of the closet and made it up again. My cell phone rang as I laid the last pillow back on the bed, and I snatched it up.

"Hello."

"Just checking to see if you miss me yet." Payton said.

"You've been gone all of fifteen minutes."

"Funny, felt more like ten days, Val. I just wanted to hear your voice. I better get going. They're all in there waiting for me."

I sat the phone down and headed to the shower, smiling all the way. It felt good to be loved by him, even if I wasn't sure that my feelings were the same.

## Chapter 7

I stood outside waiting for the realtor to arrive. She was running late again. When she'd told me about this house yesterday, I was skeptical.

"It sits on about twenty acres of land. It has a great little pond out back, stocked with fish. Now, I know that you're single, but I think you might like it, even though it's a lot of land to take care of," she'd said.

I'd asked her about the price. Surprisingly enough, it was exactly the range I'd been looking to be in. I'd expected to find a tiny shack sitting in the center of all that land, but when I pulled up, I was shocked. I did a triple take to make sure I got the address correct.

The driveway was paved and led up to a small ranch-style home. The white house was everything I'd been hoping for and so much more. I

wondered if a family of five had been slaughtered in it. How else could it be in my price range? I looked back at the two other buildings that sat on the property. One looked like a garage and the other one looked like a miniature version of the main house.

I saw Bernice, my realtor's, yellow car pulling down the driveway. A small puff of dirt followed behind her. I waited for her to come to a stop before I bothered to walk up and greet her.

"Oh, dear," she said. Her tiny plump face looked up at me and a smile poked out of it. I had to smile back. Bernice reminded me of a clown. She dyed her hair orange and always had on the brightest colored clothing. I looked down at my blue jeans and red T-shirt and felt incredibly boring.

"Sorry, I'm late. I was held up with the Andres family. You know how meticulous Mr. Andres is about everything."

I laughed. I did know Mr. Andres and he was meticulous. It was easy to envision him triple checking every nook and cranny before he agreed to purchase anything.

We headed in and looked around at the house. Even if a family of fifty had been slaughtered in here, I was positive I would take it. Four bedrooms, two baths, one fireplace, one kitchen, one dining room, and one living room later, we emerged onto the porch. The décor was dated, but other than that, the place was perfect. It was too perfect.

"I love it, but what's the catch?" I asked. Bernice winced.

"Well, see ... now some folk round here think that Gina and Arnold were ... well they think they were into no good."

I gave Bernice the hairy-eyeball and waited for her to explain this further. "See, Arnold, he died some ten years back. He was a good man, kept to himself mostly. But Gina his wife, now, she was different. Always runnin' round town telling people to stop out and see her. She had an herb or ointment for whatever ailed you. Now, I myself never thought anything of this, but some folks in town did. They say that she was a..."

"A witch," I finished for her. She looked ashamed to have suggested it. I smiled and looked around.

"Didn't they have any family?" I asked.

"Who, Gina and Arnold?" She didn't wait for me to answer. "Oh, no they never did have kids. They did a young feller livin' out in the guesthouse for the last five years. Must have liked him well enough, they left it all to him."

I looked around. "Why the hell is he selling it?"

"There's the problem. He doesn't want it. He told me himself that he had no need for their money. I'm not sure what he's plannin' on doin' with it. He was adamant that I find a buyer for this place, and he told me that they could have immediate possession. He did have one stipulation about the place."

"What's that?"

"That whoever purchases it must agree to never develop it, and let him stay in the guest house for no less than a year or until he can make other arrangements."

I looked over at the guesthouse in question. It sat far enough away from the main house that it wasn't an issue. My neighbors now were ten times closer to me than that.

"You say that you've talked to him. What's he like?"

Bernice looked up at me and smiled. "Oh, Mr. Douglas is a nice man. He's a young one. Oh, and a handsome fellow too. He keeps mostly to himself. He told me that he works out of town. He seems nice enough. He's no criminal if that's what your wonderin'."

That was exactly what I wondered. I looked around one more time and turned back to Bernice. "I'll take it."

## Chapter 8

"Oh my God, Valerie, I can't believe you got it for that cheap. You know that's close to Necro's Magik World." Molly said. I watched her toss boxes of cereal in the cart. She just randomly picked them off the shelf while she walked. I knew it didn't matter to her. She'd eat anything.

"Magik World?"

She stopped the cart and stared at me. "Sometimes I wonder if you live in a bubble. It's an amusement park with a supernatural theme. I told you about them breaking ground on it two years ago. It's not supposed to open until next spring. But still, that's only like twenty minutes from it at most."

"Sounds great. So long as I'm not bothered by it, I could care."

"Honestly, Valerie."

I walked with her as she picked up groceries. I never bothered to try to pick out anything. Molly liked junk food and only junk food. Our refrigerator was always full of crap. Occasionally, I would stop and pick up fruit or actual food to cook. She would wrinkle her nose at it. I'd taken to eating out. It was easier than cooking for one.

"You tell Payton about it yet?" she asked.

I suddenly found a box of whole grain oats very interesting. "Well, not exactly."

"Valerie?"

"No, it's just, he asked me twice to move in with him. I don't think he was joking. I don't want to hurt his feelings, but..."

"But, you aren't in love with him."

I put the box back on the shelf and looked at her. "How will I know?"

She reached out and patted my hand. "Honey, I can't tell you if he's the right guy for you. Only you can figure that one out. I can tell you that he loves you."

I turned and stared at her. She smiled up at me. "It kind of slipped out this morning."

After browbeating Molly all the way through the supermarket, I found out that she'd seen Payton right after his meeting. On the drive home she told me about how Payton was grinning from ear to ear. Someone suggested that he looked like the "love bug" had bitten him. He replied that he'd been bitten by it five years ago and had just sealed the deal this morning.

"When he turned around and saw me standing there, he turned red. Of course, I knew who he was talking about. I pulled him to the side and

demanded an explanation. He told me that he couldn't help the way he felt, that he tried not to fall head over heels in love with you, but it didn't work."

I followed her into the house and put the grocery bag down on the kitchen table. I listened to her go on and on about Payton's feelings for me. I wanted to run as fast as I could out of there. I wasn't ready for love. Dillon had ruined me. I'd loved him and found out that he'd had several affairs. I wasn't ready for that kind of pain again. I liked Payton. I found him attractive. I even cared for him, but I didn't love him. At least not yet, anyway.

"Joey wants us to come down to the pizza place. He's making a pizza for us. I told him we'd be down by seven. Is that all right with you?" Molly asked.

I looked around at all of the groceries. I'd long since given up on trying to understand her. She spent all that money at the store to turn around and go out to eat.

"That's fine. Let me go change."

I headed upstairs to my room to freshen up. The water felt cool on my face, but much needed. I glanced around and found a hairbrush. I yanked it through my hair. I pulled the long black strands out before me and held them tight with my fist. I brushed hard, to get any snarls out, and let it fall around me. It was now down to my butt. I had stopped in to get it cut a few weeks back, but decided against it. A witch has to look the part, right?

I pulled a pair of black pants out of the closet and found a long gray sweater to wear with it. It took me a minute to find my black boots, but I did. I looked in the mirror. It would do. I grabbed my navy blue scarf off the corner of my bed and headed out the door. The end of September marked the start of cold nights.

I met Molly at the bottom of the stairs. "How do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"How do you take clothes from a thrift store and make them look like a million bucks? You must have model blood in you somewhere."



I snorted at her as she grabbed her sweater from the closet. I'd tried to warn her against wearing a sundress out on a night like this, but she ignored me. We headed out the door on our way to Joey's.

"So, tell me about this Mr. Douglas guy." Molly said.

"I wish I could. I've never met him. I signed the papers on the spot with Bernice. I figured, the place came furnished--I couldn't pass it up. I can take immediate possession. I guess that I'll pack up my clothes and stuff and be out within the next couple of weeks."

She put her arm around my waist, and I slid mine over her shoulders. I didn't need to hear her say it. I knew she'd miss me. I'd miss her too. We weren't really going to be that far away from each other, but both of us knew that our lives would be busy and our time together would be limited.

We walked into Joey's still clutching each other. Joey's big bald self greeted us at the door. "Feels like fall already."

Molly didn't wait to respond. She threw her arms around him and gave him a big kiss. Standing there watching the two of them, I was struck by how opposite they truly were. Joey was a tall, large man with dark features. Molly was shorter than me and weighted next to nothing. Somehow, they managed to look just right together.

We found our table and sat down. Joey left us to go work in the kitchen. He owned the place and in no way had to go back and make the pizzas, he just felt the need to. I looked around the tiny pizzeria.

"Can you see yourself working here?" I asked.

Molly looked around and then back to me. "Why?"

"Well..." I looked down at the rock on her left hand. "You're marrying into the place. I just thought you'd end up having to lend a hand now and then."

She looked at me and her eyes grew wide. "Well, if he thinks he's getting a free waitress in me he can forget it ... I mean, I..."

I put my hand up to stop her. Joey walked over and put drinks down in front of us. He bent down to kiss Molly, but she turned her head away from him. He looked at me, and I shrugged. He shook his head and

walked away. He knew when he was beaten. A few minutes later, a young boy with red hair and freckles brought our pizza out. Joey was nowhere to be seen. Man, he really did have Molly's number.

I picked up a piece of pizza and dropped it almost immediately due to the extreme temperature of it. "Shit!" Was all I got out before I leapt up to toss it off my white shirt. The grease threatened to burn right down to my breast. Molly hopped up beside me. She went to put her hand down my sweater. I had to deflect her hand away. "I'm okay, Florence Nightingale, but I need to go change."

"Joey Fantozzi, get you're no-good too-hot-pizza-making ass out here." Molly screamed. Everyone in the place turned to look at us. My cheeks reddened. I wasn't about to attempt to calm her down. I knew her too well for that. I leaned over and patted her tiny hand.

"I'm gonna go change," I said. She nodded at me and kept right on yelling at Joey. I knew he wasn't being yelled at for serving scalding hot pizza, he was being yelled at out of her fear of ending up a waitress. No, she didn't come right out and say it, but that's what it was.

The early autumn night air felt wonderful against my burnt skin. I made a right and walked down the well-lit street. If there was one positive thing about the small town we lived in, it was its lighting situation. At Christmas time, everyone walked around with sunglasses on at night. The town was big into celebrating. That's why I'd fallen in love with it. It was close enough to the city to allow access to a more cultured environment, but far enough out to give off that middle of America feel. People were warming up to me, now that they'd seen me with Dr. Payton Sullivan, their local hero.

I saw Mr. Watts sitting out in front of his barbershop. That was his usual resting place. He quit giving haircuts at least an hour before the sunset, and always sat out to enjoy the view. I smiled and waved at him from across the street. His thin black arm reached up and waved back. "How ya doin' tonight, Valerie?"

"Fine, Mr. Watts, just fine. How about you?" I called back.

He sat back in his chair nodding his head slowly. "It's a good night, yep, it's a good night."

I laughed and walked on. Ever since I'd met the man, he'd said the same thing every time I passed him. That's part of what made me love this little

town. The few people like Mr. Watts who had always been kind to me, kept me here. The fair-weather friends I'd started to acquire meant little to me.

I reached the end of the business district, which sounds so much more glamorous than it actually is. The district only consists of six blocks, two of which are public parks. All of our festivals were held here, in the center of the town, in the park with the brown gazebo. I really did love it here. It was far enough from the city, and I hadn't as of yet, had any thugs jump out of a car and shoot me here.

I did occasionally have Tomas stop by. I'd done a little digging and found out how to reach him. He was cool with me and knew my secret. I knew that he was a good ally to have. I was happy to find out that his friends had taken him back with open arms. He told me that they were a little scared of him now that he had an 'in' with a live bruja.

I stopped at the crossing to make sure it was safe to continue to the other side of the street. Even though I had no memory of being struck by a car, I still had uneasy feelings walking out in the road. Call it silly, but not being able to remember ninety percent of your life will do that to you. Everything seemed clear and I headed out. Someone screamed. I froze and listened closely. I had thought that my ears were playing tricks on me. I heard it again, only this time I was positive that the scream was from a female.

I tore off in a run in the direction that it came from. I ran through Mrs. Parker's prized flower garden. I did my best to jump over everything I could, but was sure that tomorrow morning she'd find things smashed. She may recover from the blow, her Gardening Club members probably wouldn't.

I hit the end of her property and ran past the bushes in the Mills lawn. The ground was softer here. My boots provided little in the way of traction and my leg slipped out from underneath me. Hot pain shot up it as my knee cracked the ground. The woman's screams echoed louder. I pushed myself up and continued running. I thought about stopping at one of the neighbors' houses to have them phone the sheriff, but I was afraid of wasting too much time.

I'd never been confronted with anything like this before, and truthfully I'd never pegged myself as being someone who'd run toward a problem. Of course I had taken a bullet for Payton, but that was different, right? My feet hit the gravel and I knew that I was on the edge of the old steel

mill property. The mill had closed down years ago. The town would've been huge by now if the mill had stayed open. Town council members had been debating on what to do with the building for years now. No one could figure out an economical way to deal with it, so it kept being put on the next meetings ballot.

I caught the faint outline of a girl with long blond hair running into the back entrance of the old mill. She screamed. A dark shadowy figure followed close behind her. For a minute I couldn't move. I was upset that I hadn't brought my purse because my cell phone was in it. I didn't want to leave the girl alone with a crazed maniac, but I really didn't want to go running in after her. My mind raced, but my body reacted before I'd even finished processing my options. My feet hit the gravel again, one after another in a fast running motion. I tried to will myself to stop, I couldn't. I hit the steel door and thrust it open.

"No!" yelled the woman. It echoed all around me. I had the urge to go right, and I followed it. I did. I ran down an aisle flanked by crates and boxes. When I hit the end, it opened into a large clear area. In it, I saw the blond woman crawling backwards on her hands and knees. The look on her face was nothing short of pure terror. Her blouse had been torn open enough that her soft cleavage showed through. I looked in the direction of her gaze.

There before her stood a tall man with broad shoulders that led down to bulging pale-skinned muscles. His top half was bare but his lower half was covered in black leather. My mind raced to psychotic killers who had the fashion sense of a porn star, I came up blank. What I did manage to come up with was a broken piece of wooden crate. I grabbed it and ran out after the man. His dark black hair which hung just below his shoulders flung wildly around. He had sensed me coming at him. Oh well, now I was committed. Every bit of me screamed at my body to turn and run, it didn't. I lifted the wood back, in much the same way you'd swing a bat, and brought it around hard at him. His left arm shot up and deflected the hit. The wood snapped in two, and he seemed unaffected by this.

Great, I picked a fight with a superhero.

Screams sounded all around me. I didn't stop to look at for the source. I just did what felt natural. I swung my leg around hard and fast. This did manage to catch the man off guard. My foot met his mid-back. His body fell forward. I brought my right hand down to strike the back of his neck. I didn't think about it, I just did it. He swung around quickly, and caught

hold of my wrists. I saw his eyes, and they were pitch-black. For a quick second I thought I saw flecks of yellow push up through them.

His eyes called to me. I'd never seen anything so beautiful. The face that held them wasn't too bad either. His smile was just this side of being too feminine. The soft rose color of his lips kept him from looking like an overdone rocker. I saw the yellow flash in his eyes again, and I came to my senses. Drooling over a guy's sex appeal during a fight was never a good thing.

His grip on my wrists was firm, but not painful. From the strength in his hands, I was sure he could crush them in an instant if he really wanted to. The way that I stood put me higher than him. I used this to my advantage and brought my head down hard into his.

Head butting someone looks like an easy task in the movies, in real life it hurts like hell. I think that I took him by surprise with that one. Kind of caught me off guard with that one too. He let go of me long enough for me to pull away. As much as sparring with a crazed sexy killer appealed to my wild side, I let my head take over and ran.

"Oh, leaving so soon?" I heard a deep voice say. "You went to all this trouble to find me. Don't you at least want my autograph?" That one got me. I stopped and turned around. Was this guy for real?

Yeah, please sign my coffin lid for me, asshole!

Stopping was all he needed. He was faster than anyone I'd ever seen before. He was on me in an instant. Our bodies flew backwards. I closed my eyes and prepared for impact. His hand slid up and cupped the back of my head. Somehow, he managed to spin our bodies around in midair. If I had to compare it to something, I would say flying. We hit the ground, but he took the force of it, and let out a small grunt.

Screams and lights flashed all around me. I didn't have time to think about it, I brought my knee up quick and hard. I wasn't playing games. I encountered his most prized possession. This time his grunt sounded more like a moan. I tried to push myself up and off him, but he held me tight to him.

"Let go of me, you fucking psycho!" I screamed into his face.

His lips curled into a smile. Hands grabbed at my back and my shoulders. Someone pulled me off the top of him. He didn't want to let go of me. It

was a tug-of-war game between the sexy guy below me and the unseen force behind me. Problem was, I wasn't a rope. It felt like I was about to be ripped in half. My feet never actually touched the ground. I kicked and carried on like a lunatic.

Hey, when in Rome.

The man rose to his feet. He stood a good head taller than I did. The guy managed to be menacing even without the scary eye trick, but man was he stunning. A tiny trickle of blood ran from the corner of his mouth. His tongue flickered out and over it, and his head tipped downward slightly, as he looked me over.

I turned and looked at what held me up. A tall olive-skinned man with very short black hair had hold of my right arm, while a rather large dark skinned man with braids that hung just below his ears held my left. I struggled to free myself, but their grip was too strong. The olive-skinned man spoke first.

"Shit, Guytano, I've never seen anyone this anxious to see you."

I looked at him. I didn't even know how to respond to that. The guy was as nutty as the dude dipped in leather. The leather clad man, as if on cue, walked up to me and touched my cheek. His fingers were ice cold. That didn't bother me as much as it should. What bothered me was the feeling of static electricity that pushed against my skin.

"Been rubbing your feet across the carpet for fun?" I asked. I noticed that at certain times of my life I'd been quick to open my mouth before thinking. This was turning out to be one of those times. The man's eyes widened. He put his other hand up to me. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. The static feeling increased, followed by a low buzzing noise in my head. I jerked my head back. His eyes widened more, before the feeling suddenly stopped.

The men holding me tightened their grip. I cried out from the pressure they were putting on my shoulder blades. "Charan, Marvin, careful with her. We don't want her to break before the police get here."

The police? Had he really just said the police? I couldn't let this one go. "Great, once they're here could you please explain why you were stalking that little blond girl?" The leather-clad man laughed. His laugh was so deep that I felt the slightest vibration from it in my lower stomach. It made me catch my breath.

"Let her go. She's not a crazed fan. She has no idea what is going on here. Do you?" He asked, looking directly at me. I shook my head no slowly.

"But, Guytano, shouldn't you let the police talk with her first." The olive-skinned man asked.

"Charan, I told you to let her go. Now do it."

With that, both men loosened their hold on me. I wanted to turn and run as fast as I could, but was distracted when the blond girl I'd seen screaming walked up to Guytano. "What's goin' on baby?" Her voice fit her perfectly. It was high pitched and void of any substance.

Guytano's hand slid around her tiny waist. "Nothing that concerns you. Tell everyone that I am done for the night." She made a tiny noise that sounded like a protest. He brought his fingers to her lips and silenced her. I didn't understand what in the hell was going on. I looked around the old mill. Several lights were shining on us. I looked harder at one, and put my hand up to shield the glare. I made out a figure perched up high behind what looked to be a camera. The man waved at me and tipped his head out from behind it.

"Damn, Guytano. I wish we could get Becca to do that. That was some great footage." He leaned out further. "Hey, where'd you learn those moves? Are you a local? Would you consider wearing a bikini and doing that again?"

"Enough!" Guytano yelled out. Everyone fell silent. I took one more look around before it hit me. The film crew that Molly had told me about, the one with Guytano Marsarius, they were here using the old mill to film their movie. "You're from Upyr Productions, right?" The entire room burst out into laughter. From the look on Guytano's face, I'd gotten the company name wrong. I bit the corner of my lip and looked down at the floor. I'd never wanted to disappear more. "Sorry." I said softly.

He let out a loud chuckle. "Well, we can safely rule out her being a fan now, can't we?" The whole room laughed harder. I closed my eyes. I couldn't believe myself. It made perfect sense now. That's why no one bothered to call the sheriff. They knew a film crew was in town to shoot a horror film. I was the only one stupid enough to think someone was in trouble. I made a note to self--start reading the local paper. It was times like these that I felt my naiveté.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt your work. I just thought, I just thought..."

"You thought I was going to slaughter Becca." Guytano finished my sentence for me. I shrugged and nodded. "And you came to her rescue. That makes you either very brave or very foolish. Which is it?" I didn't know what to say. In truth, no part of me wanted to come in here. Every sane portion of me wanted to be running in the opposite direction. I wasn't a fighter--at least I was fairly sure that I wasn't. I didn't have an answer for him, so I avoided giving one. "Do you at least have a name?"

I looked up at him. Crisp dark blue eyes stared back at me. I could have sworn that his eyes were black when we were fighting--I guess I was wrong. The blue definitely softened him up a bit. He no longer looked like he could rip my head off at any minute. "Valerie Falkyr." I said softly. Guytano walked up closer to me. I took a step back.

"Well, Valerie Falkyr, I am Guytano Marsarius." His hand extended out to me. I was reluctant to accept it. I wasn't sure about him. He had a funky vibe about him. I just looked down at his pale hand, not attempting to be social or pleasant. That surprised him. He was obviously used to having women do whatever he wanted. He didn't try to take my hand again. Instead, he backed up and motioned for his goons to move away from me.

"You are a cautious one, aren't you?" he said with a smile. I nodded and he laughed. "But not so cautious as to not attack me when you obviously thought I was a killer."

I closed my eyes and felt my face go bright red. I willed myself to disappear. Unfortunately, when I opened my eyes the only thing that had disappeared was the film crew. That left Guytano and me alone. I knew from hearing Molly's endless ramblings that he was a heavyweight in the world of Hollywood, but that didn't make me any more comfortable around him. Something was different about him, that much I was sure of. He approached me quickly, stopping just shy of touching me, which was good because I think I would have screamed.

"Valerie Falkyr, tell me how it is that you learned to fight like that." The way his voice rolled over me was unnerving. It was sexy, yet scary all at the same time. I made out the faintest of accents, Italian perhaps. He had gone to great lengths to perfect his English, but it was obvious that it was not his first language. I looked at him. I'd never actually seen one of his movies, so I didn't really have a comparison, but the man was gorgeous.



If the magic of the movies made him look even better, it was easy to see how women around the world worshiped him. "Cat got your tongue?" he asked.

I had to think for a minute about what he had asked me. I hated to admit it, but his beauty caught me off guard. It wasn't every day that you found a man beautiful. Fighting, that's what he had wanted to know. "I don't know," was all I came up with.

"You do not know? You take me on with a speed and strength that rivals my own, and yet you claim that you don't know where you learned this from?" He sounded amused with me. He walked around me slowly, sizing me up.

I nodded my head. "It's the truth. I don't know how I did it. I just did."

He looked over me. I had the urge to look behind me, but resisted it. He smiled and flashed me his pearly whites. A tiny piece of me melted. "I know it's the truth." He said it so matter-of-factly that he left little room for questions.

Great, psychic and a superstar. Didn't they have nine-hundred numbers for those people?

His hand flew up. I thought he was about to hit me, so I immediately dodged out of the way. The look in his eyes told me that I'd been baited.

"I guess we could stand here all evening saying nothing, or we could walk together."

"Walk together?" It came out so much faster than I wanted it to. This made him smile even wider.

"Would you like it if I joined you? You were headed somewhere, correct?"

My jaw dropped open. Fear of looking like I was catching flies didn't bother me. The nerve of this guy did. "Join me? Umm ... no, I don't think I'd like that very much, but thanks." His jaw tightened. Man, he was not used to rejection. With a body like his, I could see why. I think he was about to make a snappy comeback when the sound of clicking feet caught our attention.

We both turned to see a freakishly tall red-headed man standing near us. He tapped his foot on the concrete and gave us a wicked grin. He looked like he'd just caught us having sex. I turned to Guytano. He stood perfectly still. The static energy that I'd felt earlier slammed into me again. I made a small noise and tried to keep my footing. This caused the tall man to look at me. His eyes were a deep Kelly green, and his face was perfectly square. The only thing that softened his hard look was the head of hair that fell straight and to his shoulders. I think it hid some of his massive neck. If it did, it meant the guy's neck was as wide as his head. The body that it was attached to was just as overwhelming. He had to have been pushing the mid to upper two-hundreds. There didn't look to be an ounce of fat on him. He looked like he was about to compete in a strongman competition, and win.

"Guytano, it's been a long time old friend." His voice was so deep and full of bass that it seemed to vibrate the ground around me. Coolness combined with static danced near me. It played at my back and danced along my bare arms. It was smooth. I felt no need to panic.

"Torin, it has indeed been awhile," Guytano said. "What brings you to these parts?"

The muscle-man, Torin, made a move toward us. I fought the urge to step back. He wore a dark blue dress shirt that was barely buttoned and a pair of light tan slacks. He looked like he could go from the office to a nightclub and not miss a beat. I didn't know that they made clothes that big, but apparently, they did. He was handsome, and he knew it. The closer he got, the more I was able to make him out. His skin was a few shades darker than Guytano's, and that wasn't saying much. I'd been blessed with a creamy-tan skin. It always looked sun-kissed even though I rarely saw the light of day.

"New lover? I am surprised. Did you forget Sive so soon? She will be most upset. To share her bed for so long, only to leave her for this." Torin never looked away from me as he spoke. His dark green eyes locked on me. I couldn't help but to stare back. My body wanted to be near him.

The longer Torin looked at me, the more I wanted to touch him. I was a believer in love at first sight, but this wasn't love, this was lust. I drew the corner of my mouth up slightly. Molly had told me once that when I did this I looked like a bad girl fighting to get out of a good one. Torin made a move toward me, and I had to catch my breath. If he touched me, I didn't think I'd be able to stop myself from leaping on him. I thought I heard someone saying my name. I ignored him. Part of me did want to

look toward the voice, but Torin's gaze held me. He took another step toward me. My knees grew weak.

"Valerie?" Guytano's voice sounded in my ear. He touched my shoulder, making the static energy between us intensify. I swayed and turned to look at him. The feeling of being lost in Torin's trance left as soon as I stopped looking into his kelly green eyes. I put my hand up and touched Guytano's. I wanted to throw his hand off me, but I didn't, I just held it. I didn't need to be told that he had just brought me back from the edge of having sex with a stranger. That won him a spot on my good-guy list.

"Oh, Guytano. You have been hiding your new toy from us all. She is a beauty, is she not? How is she in other areas?" Torin's accent was thick and Irish. I had a hard time making out some of what he was saying. In truth, the accent made him even more appealing. Calling me a toy however, did take away from any charm he possessed.

"Last time I checked, I didn't have Mattel stamped across my ass." The minute I said it, I regretted it. Typical. Molly's personality had rubbed off on me. She was the one I'd spent the most time with since my accident, so I'm sure that was to be expected. Heck, I may have been a smart-ass prior to the accident as well.

Guytano gripped my shoulder tighter, as he tried to shut me up. Torin laughed, with such intensity that it tickled my ribs. "I like her Guytano. Give her to me and I shall consider your debt to my family paid." I flung around and stared at Guytano wide-eyed. Did he commonly walk around trading women? I knew that being rich and famous gave you certain privileges, but swapping chicks on a whim seemed outrageous, even for a star.

"Torin, this girl simply walked in off of the street. She means nothing to me." Guytano made a motion as if he was tracing my outline in mid air. "Look at her. She is so ... common."

Common? I fought the urge to kick him in the gut. Calling me a monkey's butt would have sat better with me than common. Torin let out another laugh. "Oh, you are good. I think that we both know you are lying now. She is exquisite. Look at her silky black hair and the luscious shape of her hips, the way she is slim, yet not lacking in the curves a woman should have... Oh, she is a precious one. Guy, if she means so little to you, then give her to me."

I'd had enough of this macho junk for a lifetime. I did appreciate the flattering things that Torin had said about me. But I wasn't a stock--I couldn't be traded. "I don't belong to anyone. Not Guytano and not you." I spun around and glared at Guytano. I was so angry that I had to fight to keep my voice from shaking. "Don't ever talk about me like a piece of property again, or I will ... I will..." I wanted to say, "rip your head off and spit down your throat," but it seemed a bit extreme. Plus, I was scared that his head might actually pop off. I still wasn't too sure about the witch thing.

In an instant Torin flew toward me. If his feet touched the ground, I didn't see it. However, I did see him. His large hand came out at my throat. I brought my hand up and blocked his. The impact of his body against my left arm caused pain to shot through it almost instantly. I didn't cry out, instead, I went to strike him with my other hand. A black blur got in my way. I ended up hitting that instead. Guytano stumbled and fell into Torin. The two of them tumbled to the ground.

I decided to make a break for it. They could beat the hell out of each other all night long for all I cared. I just wanted out. I had no interest in rubbing elbows with the rich and famous if it meant getting my ass kicked on a semi-regular basis or being bartered off like a peasant girl from centuries ago. I heard snarls, and fighting the urge to look back, I increased my pace.

It didn't take me long to make it home. I seemed to be in overdrive. Part of me knew that it was from the adrenaline of the night's events, but the other part knew it was something more. Being around Guytano had lit a fire in me. Maybe I was star struck after all. Who knew? I rubbed a stain stick over the pizza on my sweater and found a few specks of blood on it as well. I hadn't remembered bleeding, but apparently, I had. I stood before my bathroom mirror in only my bra and black pants.

I let the cool water run, filling up the sink, and put my face down into it. It was just what I needed. I flung my head up and sent water splashing all around me. I didn't bother getting a towel. I preferred to just dry off naturally. Opening the bathroom door, I headed up to my room.

"Oh ... umm, getting ready for me so soon?" I heard a familiar male voice say from the living room. I turned around and looked out. Payton sat on the sofa turning his head to stare at me half dressed. His sandy blond hair was cut closer to his head. The tips of it were blonder and it made his tanned skin come out more. He must have made a stop at the barber before coming to see me. I liked it.

"Hi Doc, I didn't expect to see you here."

"Hey, if you don't want me here," he said, and headed toward the door with a mischievous grin upon his face.

"No. Don't go." It came out louder and faster than I would have liked, but oh well. He stood now, but no longer headed for the door. "I just need to grab a shirt and then we can head out." He smiled. I turned to head upstairs.

"Do we have to go out?" he asked.

I walked toward him. He looked so good standing in the warm light of the living room. I thought about what Molly had told me, about him being in love with me. I stopped short of touching him. I wasn't sure of my feelings for him, and I didn't want to hurt him. He reached out to me and touched my cheek, bringing himself closer to me. Our lips met, and I let go of any concerns I had. The burning in my body took hold and kept me near him. We pulled away from each other slowly. His hand ran past my arm, and I made a small moan as pain shot through it.

"Valerie, what the hell happened to you?" The seriousness in his voice made me jump. His eyes were wide, and very blue. He motioned for me to come toward the light. I didn't question him, I just did. This put me half-naked in front of the living room window. This night was getting better and better. I had half a mind to look for a piano falling from the sky or a meteorite. Yeah, at the rate I was going it's bound to be that.

Payton put his hands on my shoulders and drew in his breath. He turned me slightly and looked at my back. "My God, what happened to you? Were you attacked?" He ran his fingers over my skin, and I winched in pain. Apparently, my little rumble with Guytano had left me a bit banged up.

"It's nothing." I said.

He snorted. "Nothing? This is hardly nothing. Shit, your arm." He took my left arm into his hand. Everything suddenly hurt like hell. My legs gave out from under me. Payton's arms wrapped around me quickly.

I saw vivid images flashing before my eyes. I was pulled out of the back of an ambulance. I heard the voices all around me. They were talking about how bad I was. They were calling me critical. They had thought me dead at least twice on the ride to the hospital. The cold night air hit my skin as the doors opened. "What do we have?" I heard Payton's voice ask. There was a women's voice answering him. She gave him the condensed version, which was, "She's a mess, and she'll never make it." I managed to get my eyes open. I could only see out of one, but I saw him. I saw him standing above me. I made out others around me. They all looked at my body with horror and disgust, but Payton held none of that. He looked shocked to see me, and then his eyes filled with care and concern. I knew right then and there that he would do whatever he could to save my life.

"Valerie?" Payton whispered my name in my ear. He held me tight to him as we stood in the living room. I looked up at him. He had that same look of concern in his eyes for me.

"I think I remembered something," I said softly. I made no attempt to pull away from him, and he didn't offer to let me go.

"Well, that's a good thing. I told you that it might happen." His voice was calm, and he moved his hand up my back "Do you want to tell me about it?" I shook my head no. He stiffened up. "It's okay to tell me anything. I keep waiting for you to tell me that you have a husband in Jersey waiting for you."

I hugged him tight, and took him completely by surprise. I found it funny that he would automatically assume that my memory had nothing to do with him. "Doc."

"Payton" he corrected me.

That was at least the four-hundredth time he'd told me to call him Payton. Today I did. "Payton," I said, as his body tightened up under my touch. "What I remembered was you. It was you meeting me at the ambulance. It was the look in your eyes. You made me feel safe, and that was the first time I'd felt safe in a long time." He made a small noise. I didn't try to pull away. I held him close to me. He would always be there for me. I knew that now. I, hopefully, could return the favor. His fingers ran over my bra strap in the back. I turned my head and kissed his cheek.

"Thank you for being there for me." I said.

"I don't think you could get rid of me even if you tried. Move in with me, Valerie. Live with me and you'll always feel safe. Marry me and I'll be here with you always"

I stared at him, unable to form the answer he needed to hear. I cared deeply for him, but I wasn't sure if what I felt was love or just lust. I closed my eyes, unable to face the hurt that I thought would show on his face.

"Hey, sorry, just tossing that out for good measure," he said, his voice cracking from nerves. We both laughed. I leaned into his embrace and a wave of static energy brushed past me. I lifted my head and looked over his shoulder out the window. There on the dark street in front of my house stood Guytano. I blinked, and he was gone. I felt the lingering effects of cold air around me. I knew that I wasn't imagining him, or was I? No one could have vanished from thin air. It just wasn't possible. Payton took my pulling away as rejection. His hands fell away from me, as he backed up.

"I'm sorry Valerie. I thought after last night, that we were ... you know, a couple. I thought that you felt a little more for me than just friendship and an a good screw."

My attentions were on the darkened street, and not on Payton. I glanced around again, but saw nothing. I looked at Payton. I'd never seen him look vulnerable before. Now he looked young. He looked like I had the

power to scar him for life using only my words. I didn't know what to say.

"Payton, I ... I ..." my mind was running in overdrive. Words didn't seem to want to come to me. A nervous habit of mine was to run my fingers through my hair. Doing this brought another sharp pain through my arm. This time I did cry out. Not so much in pain, but in frustration.

The night had thrown more at me than my brain was ready to deal with. I wanted life to be simple again. School, work, home, rinse and repeat. I didn't need drama, and since the moment I laid eyes on Guytano Marsarius that is exactly what I'd gotten. Before I was able to mutter another word, Payton was on me. He was in full Doctor Mode. He led me into the bathroom and looked in our medicine cabinet.

Nothing like a little pain to change the subject.

"It doesn't surprise me that you don't have a first aid kit, but Molly's a nurse. She should have something around here." A box of feminine napkins fell out of the cabinet and into the sink.

"Those are hers. Does that count?" I asked. His face lit up as he blushed. I never thought feminine hygiene products would embarrass a doctor, but he was still a guy no matter what his profession was. He had to make do with a bag of ice and a pat on the shoulder. He did make me swear to get some sort of first aid kit in my new house. I promised that I would.

Twenty minutes later my arm was numb from the ice and turning a pale shade of blue. I had to practically beg him to let me remove the ice bag. It took some convincing before he finally gave in.

"I feel sorry for any kids you may have," I said.

He looked up at me as I headed for the staircase. "Why's that?"

"Well, they might die of hypothermia from a scrape on their knee." I gave a half-hearted grin and ran up the stairs.

"Oh no, you don't."

I heard him following close behind me. I made it into my room and fell across my bed. Payton followed close at my heels. He stood over me and leaned down slowly. He hovered above me before pressing his lips against mine. I drew his tongue in with mine. We dipped in and out of



each other's mouth feverishly. I pulled the back of his shirt out of his pants and ran my fingers over his smooth back. He pulled back from me slowly.

"Care to tell me how you got all these?" He motioned to my newly formed bruises. "I think I have a right to know. They're preventing me from making love to you, so the least you could do is tell me the truth."

Had he just said making love? I looked up at him. It was true he was hooked. A tiny pulling sensation started in my chest. Did that mean I was hooked as well? I motioned for him to sit down on the bed, and told him about the events of the evening.

"So, you fought with this actor guy, and you say you knew what you were doing?" He asked.

"Yeah, it was weird. I just knew what to do, and it was..." I stopped.

"It was what?"

"It was really strange, but I felt like there was something not human about the whole thing."

He just laid there looking at me. He waited a couple of minutes before he spoke. "Do you think they might be witches too?"

I stood up and went to get a shirt. "How the hell am I supposed to know that? We don't even know if I'm one. I don't have caldron-brewed potions in my basement! I just know something was off."

"Hey, calm down. That's Hollywood version of a witch anyways. It's not real. I didn't mean anything by it, I just ... I just thought that maybe you'd sensed something."

I had sensed something, and I didn't want to get into it with him. The last time we'd discussed freaky magic stuff we hadn't talked for months. I couldn't do that again. I'd touched his body and knew him in ways that I hadn't before. I looked over at him lying across my bed and had to fight like hell to keep from running to him.

"Payton?"

"Yes."

"I found a house." I said, softly, unsure of his response.

"I know, Molly told me."

"You don't sound too happy about it."

He gave me a sideways glance. "I'm just worried about you, that's all."

"Maybe you could stay with me, it's a big house and there's plenty of room... I know that it's a longer drive into town for you with your practice, but..."

He rushed to me and pulled me into his arms. "Val, are you asking me to move in with you?"

"Yes, I mean no, not if you don't want to. I just thought that..." I wanted to crawl into my closet and disappear. I'd never been so forward with a man before, or at least not that I could remember.

Payton's lips crushed mine. He didn't give me a chance to prepare, and after a second of having his tongue in my mouth, I didn't need any prep time. He moved me back toward the bed. I had to push on his chest to get him to stop. "Are you trying to take advantage of me before you tell me no?"

"Valerie, I told you once before that I'd follow you into the depths of hell and I meant it. If you want me with you, I'll come. I have to figure out what I'm going to do with my house. Maybe I could rent it out?"

I broke into tears of joy and hugged him tighter to me. He buried his face in my neck and covered me with soft kisses. His fingers slid up and over my bra. The thin silk did little to hide my erect nipples--each one standing, waiting for his touch. When his lips finally found one, I shuddered as he drew it into his mouth. The hard nub rolled easily under the wet silk, causing my channel to dampen. Payton slid his fingers down the front of my pants.

"You're soaked," he said breathily.

"Mmm, and horny. Fuck me."

Payton's head shot up. "Valerie, you..."

I let a tiny smile start to form on my face. "I what? Frighten you? Shock you?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "You make me so damn hard that I can't stand it." He moved down the bed fast and pulled my pants off, stripping his clothes off in the process as well. When he slid up and over me, his warm chest scraped past my nipples. I cried out and he laughed, catching one in his mouth and sucking hard. His fingers pushed into my hot, wet core, and I clawed at his shoulders when he rubbed my clit with this thumb. His finger in me, my nub being stimulated, and his warm tongue rolling my nipple around in his mouth, had me on sensory overload.

"Oh, Valerie," he said, moving up and thrusting his hard cock into me. I screamed out from both the pain and pleasure of being impaled by him. His thrusts were anything but gentle, and I encouraged him to fuck me harder. I bit at his earlobe and dug my nails into his back.

My lower stomach tightened, and I convulsed around his cock as my orgasm tore through me. Payton cried out and plunged deep into me, spilling his seed. Our bodies shook, and we lay still for a moment, taking in the awe of the pleasure that still enveloped us.

"Oh, shit!" he said, pulling out quickly. I looked at him, my eyes wide. He grabbed hold of his shaft and his grew wide. "I didn't use protection."

"Payton," I said his name like one would scold a child. It wasn't his fault. I'd been caught up in the moment too. Something moved over his face and he smiled slightly. "This is a good thing?"

"See, now you really should marry me," he said, grinning from ear to ear.

I let my gaze go hard and drew my lips in tight. "You planned this!"

Payton looked shocked, then hurt. "Valerie, no. Don't accuse me of trying to trap you. I got carried away, that's all."

"Yeah, I'll just bet you did," I said, feeling our sexual leftovers starting to leak out of me slowly. I rolled my eyes and stood to head for the shower.

"Damn it, Valerie, don't do this! Don't use this as an excuse to push me away!" Payton screamed at me as I tried to move past him. I kept going, and he grabbed my arm. I jerked away from him. It seemed like a good idea right up until the pain from my martial arts expo hit me again. I grunted, and he let go of me.

"I'm going to go down and have a talk with this Vampyre Productions crew. I can't believe that they didn't have signs up stating that they were filming, and really having no security..."

"You'll do no such thing. I told you already that I don't think that group is on the level. I don't want anything happening to you, Doc."

He gave me a wicked little grin and raised an eyebrow at me. "Really? Does this mean that you're not mad at me anymore?"

"Really, and yes, I'm still mad at you." I said, pecking him on the cheek.

I climbed out of the bed and turned my attention to getting dressed. I tossed open my closet door and rummaged around until I found a nice baby blue cashmere sweater. I pushed the closet door shut slightly to see my reflection in the full-length mirror. Not too bad, if I said so myself. I spent enough time in the gym with Molly to be allowed to like the results. I had no problem hanging out and admiring my reflection all day, but the hairs on the back of my neck rose. The feeling of static energy closed in around me. Seeing the majority of my room in the mirror, I knew I was alone. Why didn't I feel alone?

I turned around quickly. I caught a flash of something moving past the outside of my window. I was on the second floor. Whatever I'd seen was too big to be a bird, and the last time I checked bats weren't that size either. As I approached the open window, I realized how very stupid this was. I mean, there's nothing like sticking your head out so a crazed killer can chop it off. I had a moment to decide what to do. I came to the decision that if a serial killer had gone to the trouble of scaling my house to hang upside down from the aluminum siding, then he in effect, had earned the right to try to kill me. At no point did I ever claim to be logical.

I stood back from the window and looked around. The streetlight's glow didn't reach this side of the house. Molly and I had talked about putting in a motion activated light. I'd never seen the point. First thing tomorrow, I'd call Tom, the local repairperson and get one installed, even though I was in the process of moving. I didn't want to worry about Molly when I was gone. I looked around the backyard. We had three large maple trees in our yard. They tended to start to look like they could harbor at least ten criminals after dusk. I saw nothing. I'm not sure what made me check the skies before I checked the ground. Part of me fully expected something to come barreling down at me. I had to step closer to the window to see if anyone was near our back porch or in our yard.

My waist pressed against the window ledge, and I put my hands on both sides of the window and braced myself. I leaned forward, carefully ducking my head under the open window to avoid a nasty collision with it. The cool autumn night air blew against my face. I closed my eyes and drew in the sweet smell of nighttime. I had always loved the scent of dew forming on the grass, the sound of crickets chirping, and the utter stillness of the night. The smell of the night changed. There was something there. I drew in another large breath, turned my head to the right quickly, and opened my eyes. I had only a fraction of a second to try to make out what I'd seen. I blinked and only tree limbs stared back at me. I leaned out further. I could have sworn that I'd seen Guytano sitting in that tree. That was absurd. Why in the hell would a rich and famous actor sit in a tree?

"You're not going to jump are you? I swear that I'll take care of you no matter what happens," Payton said, his voice light, jolly. I pulled back quickly and slammed my head on the window. I turned around and saw Payton standing up slowly from the bed. In the height of excitement, I'd forgotten he was there. He made a movement with his lower jaw that implied he was embarrassed to have startled me. I reached up and rubbed the back of my head. He took a step forward. "Do you want me to take a look at that?"

I shook my head no. He didn't need to keep doctoring me every five minutes, or did he? I smiled at him and moved toward him. I was greeted with open arms and a warm embrace, which was interrupted by the doorbell.

"I'll get it," he said. He turned quickly and headed down the stairs. I retraced my steps to the window. I still had the feeling that someone was watching me. I was within a foot of it when I heard a loud crashing sound. Payton yelled my name, and another loud sound boomed in from downstairs. Someone came up the stairs.

"Payton?" I called out.

No one answered. The footsteps slowed, and then disappeared. I made a run for my door and then stopped. I wasn't sure running out into the hallway was the smartest thing to do under the circumstances. I wanted to check on Payton, and I was positive that whatever was coming toward me was not him. I was covered in a heightened sense of danger. My senses seemed to be fine-tuning themselves. I listened closely, but heard nothing. I backed up. My body bumped into the open window. I was lucky that I didn't fall right out. That sounded like something I would do, avoid a crazy man, and fall out a window.

"Valerie!" I heard someone shout from outside. I turned quickly expecting to see Payton. Guytano stood in my back lawn staring up at me. "Valerie, invite me in."

"What?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't think that will be necessary. Do you?" A loud voice boomed behind me. I shot around and for a second time cracked my head on the window. I'd have one hell of a goose egg come morning. I turned. Torin was standing in the center of my room. He was wiping his hand on a white handkerchief. He tossed it aside. I glanced down at it and saw it smeared with something red. Blood, it was covered in blood. Payton. I screamed out for him. Torin laughed and took another step toward me.

"I would not bother with him. He is of no use to you now." He put his hand out to me. He was so massive. He seemed to fill up my room.

"Guytano, your buddy is up here!" I yelled.

"I know," he said. I turned around. Guytano looked at me from the other side of my window. I backed away, scared and confused. Backing away put me straight into Torin's body. His arms wrapped around me tight. I cried out. Guytano pushed his body against the open window.

"Valerie, invite me in." Guytano said. His voice was calm, but his eyes held worry. Everything happened too fast. I looked at him. If he'd gone to the trouble to get a ladder and not use the front door, why the hell didn't he just climb in? The window was open. Torin's grip on me tightened. He bent his head down next to my ear.

"You do not want him in here with us, do you?" he said. His voice was so deep and rich that it moved through me. Of course, I wanted Guytano in here. I didn't know him, but I was betting he was the lesser of the two evils. I wanted to yell out yes, but that wasn't what came out.

"No," I said softly. What was wrong with me? I looked up at Guytano. His dark black eyes locked on me. Black eyes? I thought they were blue. He pushed against the air. Why didn't he just come in? It was obvious that I needed a hand here, wasn't it? Torin's hand traced the side of my cheek. He slid it down my neck, over my shoulder, down my arm, and to my wrist. He grabbed my wrist gently, brought it up, and placed it behind his head. His other hand came down to my waist. He began to sway gently. There was no music playing, yet we danced to a melody that I

heard only in my head. My fingers moved in his hair. Our bodies rocked back and forth slowly together. I lost my will to run away from him.

"You smell like one of us, yet I can tell that you are not." I had no clue what he was talking about. I didn't care if he read the phonebook to me. All I wanted to hear was his rich voice. "Do you want me?"

"Yes," I said.

"Then you shall have me," he said. His arms wrapped around me, and he pressed his body against mine. The feel of him against my back told me that he was ready for me. It was me who took his hand and pulled it to my stomach. I pushed his fingers under my cashmere sweater. His cold fingers brushed my skin. It felt like someone had dropped an ice cube on me. I looked up. Guytano banged against the closed window. Who closed it? Why had I not heard him banging? My mind was foggy. Torin's icy hand slid up to my breast.

This brought me back slowly. I looked at Guytano. His eyes widened. Torin's lips were on my neck. He planted cold kisses along my shoulder. Fear seized hold of my body. I knew this could only end badly for me. I wanted to strike out and send him flying to the ground. I couldn't get my body to cooperate with my mind. I found myself caressing Torin, egging him on. My body wanted to feel him closer to me. Something was very wrong here. I did the only thing that I was able to, I screamed out.

"Guytano, come in!" The window burst open, and Guytano rushed through it.

"No!" Torin yelled. He propelled my body forward. I slammed into Guytano. The force of my body hitting his sent us both flying backwards. I heard the glass breaking around us. Guytano's arms wrapped protectively around me, and he drew me into his body as we went out the window. I closed my eyes tight, preparing for impact. This was all too close to the horrible dreams I'd been having. I didn't want to wear Guy's head all over me when we hit the ground. I prayed that if he went, I'd go too.

We hit the ground with such a force that it knocked the wind out of me. Guytano lay motionless beneath me. I felt for a pulse, nothing. I rolled off him. My knee hit the hard, bubbled up, earth. Guytano's body had pressed into it!

The force of the fall should have left his body broken and bleeding. It didn't. I leaned over his face. I was stiff, but still capable of moving. I put my mouth over his, I was afraid to move his head. If his neck wasn't already broken, I didn't want to be the one who did it in. I pressed my mouth over his cool lips and blew two breaths into him. I ran my fingers over his chest and felt for his rib cage. I traced it up and found what I was looking for. I put my palm down, one hand over the other and counted off five times, as I pushed in. I leaned back up to his mouth and blew a breath in. His tongue pushed into my mouth, and his hand went to my hair.

I pushed off him, and he let out a small groan. I wasn't sure if it was due to pain or not being able to kiss me anymore. I didn't really care. He sat up. This motion was so very inhuman that I fell back onto my butt. He cocked his head to one side, and then the other. It cracked both times. He looked over at me and smiled.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

I just stared at him. This guy had just fallen from a window that was easily twenty feet up, with me on top of him, and he was worried about me. I turned to the window. It was smashed outwards. That didn't hold my attention as much as the facts that there was no ladder near it.

"You flew?"

He smirked. "I think that you've lost a little too much blood." He reached up and touched my neck. He came away with his fingers soaked with my blood. I brought my hand up. The glass from the window must have cut my neck open. I pulled my hand away. It dripped with blood, and I no longer felt fine. Seeing my own blood made me sick. Guytano seemed to swirl around me.

"Close your eyes. I will take care of you," he said.

"Payton?" It was the only thing I was able to get out before I gave into the blood loss.



## Chapter 10

I closed my eyes tight and tried not to be scared of the flames shooting up and around me. I looked down the long dark hallway. A hooded figure moved off in the distance. He represented all that was safe, and I knew it. I ran to follow him. Flames shot past me again, and I screamed out. The hooded figure stopped and turned to me. I caught a glimpse of brown eyes and pale skin. He continued down the hallway.

"Wait!" I cried out and ran after him. He didn't stop. I chased after him. The faster I ran the faster he went. His stride was long and fluid. He went through an open doorway, and I followed closely behind him. In an instant I had found him. I brushed my fingers over the soft robe and pulled on it. It came loose from his body. Darkness swept around us so quickly that I couldn't see, and I panicked. I twirled around in circles and reached out with my hands.

"Oh God!" I cried.

Strong arms caught me and held me in place. I stood very still. The man's body was close to my back, his heart beating steady. I listened to it echoing around me. The smell of vanilla filled the air. I knew that smell. I knew that this man was a friend. I tried to turn to see him, but he held me in place.

"No," he said. His voice was strong, yet smooth. "You are hurt." He ran his cool fingers over the wound on my neck, sending shockwaves of pleasure throughout my body. "I will not allow this to be. I am more powerful than the one who bit you. I can make it right. Do you wish this to be so?"

I knew that voice. I couldn't place it, but I knew it and I trusted it. "Please," I said. His lips rested over my wound. The need for him to hold me, kiss me, love me was greater than any I'd ever known before. What magic did this man possess to make me want him so?

An unseen force tugged on me, light at first, then hard. The man drew back from me slowly. "You must go back now," he said with a hint of sorrow in his voice.

My heart raced. I didn't want to leave him. "I want to stay with you." I wasn't sure why I said it, but I knew that I meant it.

He laughed softly, the sound of it bittersweet. I closed my eyes and leaned my head back against him. His body tightened with my touch. I wasn't sure if he didn't trust me or himself. I wanted him to wrap his arms around me and never let me go. How could he send me away when it was obvious that he felt this way too? I pleaded with him in my mind to let me be with him, to let me stay with him for all time. "Soon, soon, now you must go. This is not a place the living should linger in. It is good to know you are well. I did not believe the magic-man when he told of your arrival, now I see that it is true. Go now, I will come for you soon."

"Promise," I said.

I took a step forward then turned around fast. I could see nothing, but I knew he was still there, still before me. I leaned forward and reached my hand up. My fingers went to his long hair. Even without seeing him, I knew everything about him, yet I knew nothing. I stood on my tiptoes and whispered to him. "Amore eternal." I had no idea what I'd just said, but he did. He pulled me tight to him and kissed my forehead. Desire washed over my body and the need to have him in me flooded my senses. I tilted my head up and his sweet lips met mine. It was all that I'd hoped it would be, and so much more. Each swipe of his tongue over my lips made me damp and hungry for more. I nibbled at his mouth as his tongue continued to trace the edges of my mouth.

We kissed as though we'd been lovers all my life. There was no awkwardness between us, no fumbling. My nipples puckered as our bodies pressed close. I ached for him to touch me, to take me.

Flames, suddenly, shot up around us. Terrified, I screamed out.

His lips met mine, and he held me tight to him. "Do not be afraid." His voice rattled around in my head. "Dream little one, dream and remember."

Heat rushed over my body. I closed my eyes, and surprisingly enough, sleep came to me. My mind lifted and allowed the memories to filter into it. My eyes flickered open. I knew that I wasn't awake, yet this was no dream.

I saw before me a pile of naked bodies. Men and women lay crumpled in the pile. Their vacant eyes stared out at me. I felt no fear. I felt full. My lips curved into a tiny smile as I watched the blood run from the inner thigh of the woman closest to me.

A male voice spoke softly behind me. I didn't turn to see him. He moved his body close to me and ran his fingers over my naked skin. He moved around to my breast, and I bent down to the woman's body to admire our handy work. Her eyes met mine. She was not dead yet, close, but not yet.

I knew that she would not scream out or fight. I knew that she was mine now to do with as I pleased. I also knew that she'd been a wicked woman who had enjoyed killing men. That was how I had found her. She'd tried to seduce my lover. She had lured him away at the ball we'd both attended. She knew he was rich and she wanted a piece of it. Her plans had been to lure him back to her room and have her male companions rob and murder him. They'd all gotten the surprise of their lives when I'd shown up to aide my lover in his time of need. Together we had killed every one of them. We had drunk of their blood until we could drink no more. We let it flow from their dead bodies.

We were not normally wasteful, but this group had been killing people throughout Europe for years. We put an end to that. The woman who lay before me was not the mastermind behind the scheme, no--he lay dead in the heap of bodies. No, this woman was of simple mind. She'd been recruited for her beauty.

Her rich blond hair had been hidden under a powdered wig of white. The dress that she'd worn was as green as her eyes. Oh, yes, she was a remarkable sight. I wanted her to be forever one of us. I could turn her to help us eradicate the evil ones. I knew I could. My lover had agreed to let me have her. He was always making exceptions where I was concerned.

My lover kissed my neck gently, his cool lips sending pleasure throughout my nether regions. Each tiny caress, each brush of his lips made me thick with moisture and a need to have him buried within me.

I normally would have used my powers to hold the woman's mind and even kill her, but she'd been a naughty girl. She had planned to kill my lover. I planned on her holding her mind enough to keep her lucid, and then releasing her to feel her end in its entirety.

Finding a companion to wander the world with for over a hundred years had not been easy. Finding a soul mate had been even harder, and she had tried to lure mine to his death. Much to her surprise, his death had taken place many centuries before her tiny plan formed. Yes, he was no longer of the living.

He put his naked body against mine. He kneaded my breasts, tweaking each nipple with precision. I leaned farther forward so that he could enter me. I cried out in pleasure as his thick cock entered me. My channel held it tight, contracting, pulsating as he drove himself deeper into me. His balls smacked against my clit as he claimed my body over and over again.

His thrusts seemed perfectly choreographed with my kisses on the woman's soft lips. Each lick of her soft flesh I took sent him closer to the edge of release. I knew his body as if I knew my own. His body tensed and I could feel the shared climax approaching. I lifted my magic from the woman. Her eyes unglazed, she blinked. I opened my mouth wide and sank my fangs into her neck. Her scream coincided with our orgasmic release. Her life slipped away as we hit full-blown ecstasy.

I collapsed onto of her body. I propped myself up on one arm and moved my finger up to my full breast. I ran my fingernail over it, slitting it open. Blood swelled to the top of the fresh wound. I ran my finger through it, collecting it before putting it in her mouth. She blinked, and her lips tightened on my fingertips. I lifted her head to my chest. I pressed her mouth to my bleeding breast and let her suckle my sweet demon blood.

"With this blood, I call you to me from the pit of hell. You will forever be mine." I spoke in a language I did not recognize, yet I understood every word. "From this point on you will be known as Camille, the unblemished one." I pulled her from my breast. Blood ran down the corners of her mouth. I leaned forward and lapped it off her chin. "Tell me my child. Tell me what I want to hear."

"I am your Camille, your unblemished one." Her green eyes locked on me. "I shall always obey you, Mistress."

I stood slowly from her with my lover still close behind me. I turned and caught a glimpse of a mirror on the wall. I was covered in blood. The startling turquoise in my eyes was all that remained recognizable.

I looked for my lover. He was gone. Flames rose slowly around me. I stood wide-eyed staring at my smeared reflection. I reached my hand out as the flames engulfed me. A moment later, I screamed out.

Cool hands grabbed me. "Valerie, it's all right now." I looked up to see Guytano standing over me. I could still feel the temperature rising. I still felt like I was burning. Guytano jerked his hands off me.

"The heat. How did you do the heat?"

What the hell was he talking about? I'd just had one of the freakiest nights of my life and this guy suddenly thought I could change the temperate of the room at will. Yeah, the day was shaping up to be a doozy. "Well, while you weren't looking, I rubbed two sticks together and hoped for the best."

He rolled his eyes. "I take it you're feeling better."

I thought about it for about a millisecond before I nodded. I didn't feel fine. I grabbed my neck and it was smooth. I was relieved, for a minute, I actually believed that Torin had bit me.

Guytano smiled at me. I really liked his smiles. I could see why fans lined up to spend money viewing him--he was amazing. My hands brushed against my sides, someone had changed my clothes. I was in something long and satin. I looked down. The black sheets and I matched perfectly. How cute.

"Where am I? Where's Payton?" I looked around. The room was very large and dark. The walls were painted dark red and the carpet matched. Huge heavy black drapes hung from ceiling to floor on the wall to my left. To my right, two doors stood on both sides of a large black dresser. The place looked like a Goth wonderland.

My gaze fell on Guytano. He only had on a pair of loose black pajama bottoms and a matching silk shirt that was completely undone. I saw a theme with his taste in clothing. The look of his naked chest was enough

to take my breath away. I backed up against the cushioned headboard. I didn't want to let him have that kind of power over me.

"Where am I, and where's Payton?" I repeated my questions. This time my voice wasn't nearly as calm.

"You are a guest in my home." He looked around the room. "Or should I say my home until the end of filming."

I didn't want to be another notch in some rich guy's bedpost. Even though he was the most gorgeous man I'd ever laid eyes on. "Where's Payton?"

Guytano's head fell down slightly. He seemed to be searching for just the right words. "I am assuming that Payton is the man from your house. If that is so, then you should know that he's not here." I slid out of the big bed quickly. I was about to start another screaming match. Guytano continued and held me off. "I did go in to look for him. I was not able to locate him."

"Why the hell are you following me around? And, more importantly, what are you?" I shot him a nasty look that anyone else would have cowered from. He stood his ground. "And, why in the hell is your little buddy, Torin, attacking me and mine." Great, it sounded like I had marked my territory. Maybe I was part of the Mafia before my accident? Not likely.

Guytano was suddenly in front of me. I hadn't seen him move. He startled me. I fell backwards. His hand slid around and caught my waist. "I am afraid that you are mistaken. Torin and I are no longer friends." I managed to get my footing, but he didn't move his arm. "I was not following you. I was following Torin. After you left us, we continued our little 'disagreement'. I feared that he would seek you out to punish me, and I was correct. I lost his scent in front of your home." He looked at me with those black eyes, and my body tightened. I wanted to be stroking that smooth pale white chest. I had to fight with myself to keep from reaching out to touch him. "I assumed that he had doubled back to the old mill. When I did not find him there, I went back to where I'd lost him. That is when I found you and your lover." The word lover came out harshly. I let it slide. It was none of his business who I did and did not sleep with, but something he had said sat well with me.

"Scent, you said, you followed his scent. Like a bloodhound?" I asked.

His head tipped back, and laughter spilled from his lips. My inner thighs tightened. This guy had a voice that made you want to have sex with him. Add that to his muscular body, smooth skin, dark blue eyes, and voila, you have my version of a walking sexual fantasy.

Guy made no attempt to answer my question. The rich and famous probably didn't have to answer for much. He slid his hand down and touched the top of my butt, causing my body to shiver with excitement. I wanted to close my eyes and have him run his hands all over me.

"Why am I here?" The words popped out of my mouth. Leave it to me to go all practical at the first stirrings of lust. Guytano moved his hand over my arm. I didn't pull away. I should've, but I didn't. His touch made the tiny hairs on my body stand on end. Unsure of my feelings for Payton and being eager to find any excuse not to commit, I closed my eyes and savored his every touch.

Guytano's hand continued to caresses my bare arm lightly. "Torin tried to hurt you to send me a message." He looked past me. His eyes glassed over, and I watched as yellow flecks pushed up through them.

"Your eyes."

"Yes, it's not important. I won't question you about being a witch and you will leave my eyes alone."

"Fair enough," I knew when I was getting a good deal.

"Torin and I have quite the extensive history together. I believe that he thinks you and I are a great deal closer than we are."

I wasn't sure what to say to that. "You mean sexually?" It seemed like a reasonable question before I said it, now it just seemed silly. My cheeks reddened. Great, blushing again, what a shocker! Guy's smile told me that Torin definitely did think he and I were an item. "What difference does that make? It's not like you can go around attacking people just because you're pissed off at them. There are laws against that you know." This brought a huge smile to his face.

"I've lived for many years, and never once has the law ever held any power over us." His voice was calm. I took a good look at him. Many years? He didn't look much older than me.

"Can the cryptic lingo. I'm sure that in your, what, thirty years on this earth that you've been good at avoiding the law. Big deal, I've managed that too. In fact, most people live their entire lives without being incarcerated." I could have gone on and on. I wanted to know who the "us" was that he referred to. I wanted to know exactly how I'd gotten into these pajamas. There were a ton of things I was dying to ask him, but I got the impression that baby steps were called for here.

"Valerie, looks can be deceiving. You of all people should know that." If I was supposed to know what he was talking about, we were screwed. I was beyond lost. "You're correct many humans do not draw the attention of the law makers." The way he said humans was not normal, there was much contempt in his voice.

I'd had enough. I broke contact with him by taking two steps to the left. "I don't give a shit about the little rich boy who had a tough childhood." I looked around the room and lifted my hand out, motioning to his furnishings. "From the looks of it, you're doing just fine now. None of this is an excuse for one of your little buddies to come after me. Now if you will excuse me, I'd like to get dressed and file a police report." I headed for the door. "I need to call Dr. Sullivan ... Payton, he needs to know I'm okay."

Guytano grabbed my wrist. He put enough pressure on it to stop me, but not enough to hurt me. "I am afraid that you cannot bring the police in on this matter. It is of a personal nature." I looked at him. How could he stand there and tell me that I couldn't go to the police for help? Some steroid-crazed sex god was after me, and I was just supposed to sweep it under the rug and hope for the best? Yeah, right! I yanked my wrist free and headed for the door.

"Valerie, I forbid you to leave this room." He said it with such conviction that part of me wanted to stop and listen to him. The other part of me, the sane one, wanted to get the hell out of there. I listened to that one and headed for the door. Guytano beat me to it. I'm not sure how he did it, because I never heard him move. He put his body in front of the door. I had no problem going through him, if it came down to it. "I said that I forbid you from leaving this room."

I smiled at him. He was joking right? "Umm, well, Master, I think I'll do as I damn well please. Now move or I will move you."

He looked shocked, but he moved. "Interesting, you are acting like you're one of us now." He took a step closer. I backed away.



"Would you tell me honestly if you were?" he asked.

"If I was what?"

"One of us."

I didn't have time to answer, a voice from the other side of the door called out to him. "Hey Guytano, where are you? You're not coffin bound are you?" Guytano froze for a minute and looked at me. If he kept on expecting me to understand him, it was going to be a long day.

Guytano pulled back and walked out of the room. I of course followed. There was no way I was going to miss out on a thing. I followed him out and into an enormous room. The room seemed to be many rooms in one. I saw a large group of blood red sofas, facing each other, and a huge black table between them that could easily dub as a coffee table or as extra seating. The ceilings in the massive room had to be at least thirty feet high

"Sorry, Guy, I didn't know that you had someone here." A man that I recognized from the other night in the warehouse said.

"Yes, Charan, thank you."

For the next hour I argued with Guytano to let me leave. I tried to use his phone, but he didn't have one. What kind of star didn't have a phone? Charan had been nice enough to offer to let me use his cell phone. I tried Payton's house, then Molly's, I even resorted to calling Payton's office. I couldn't get ahold of anyone.

Guytano retired to his room. In my opinion, that was the best place for him. I'd had more than enough of his cocky, yet somewhat charming behavior. I was sick with worry over Payton and needed to get to him.

"You know, Guytano's a really nice guy once you get to know him," Charan said, as we headed toward the door.

"I'll just bet he is. Now can you take me home?" I asked. I had no idea where we were. If we were still in town, then I had no doubt that I could walk home. Our town was about as tiny as they come. If we were in the neighboring city, then I'd need to get a ride. He gave me an odd look and checked his watch.

"You sure you want to head out? The sun's coming up in less than an hour. You could hang here today if you want."

Wow, these guys would make millions in the business of confusing people. I stepped out and into a long hallway. The brick was painted a soft cream color out here. It helped to take away from the heavy Goth theme the place had going on. I made my way down to the exit marked stairs. I saw an elevator door next to it. I wasn't taking my chances. This didn't feel like an apartment building. Something was different about it. We headed through the green metal door and down the stairs.

We hit the lower level and I pushed the large wooden door open. The hour just before the sun rises is so beautiful, and the view was amazing. I looked out at the large, well-manicured grounds and caught the faintest glimpse of the sun poking up. Charan came to a stop beside me.

"See a lot of these?" he asked.

I turned and gave him a questioning look. He smiled and gestured to the rising sun.

"Yes," I said.

## Chapter 12

Charan drove me back to Molly's house. It was odd not thinking of it as home anymore, but it was true. He didn't ask me to invite him in, he just followed me. He took one look at my bedroom window and excused himself.

It took me most of the morning to get my stuff boxed up, but I managed. Charan had reappeared halfway through my packing with plywood and nails in hand. He tried to be quiet as he boarded up the window. The more he worked, the more I watched him. There was something very familiar about his look and his gestures. I felt very comfortable around him.

I put a call into Tom, the local repairperson, and set up with him to stop by and fix the window. Molly walked in while I was on the phone with him. Tom asked what broke it, and I told him it was a large tree branch. Hey, it was all I could think of on the spot. Molly nodded behind me in a very 'that's what I thought it was' way, and headed out the door in her work whites.

Charan helped me load my car full of boxes. He even offered to fill his car up with some as well. I didn't have that much stuff, so it seemed unnecessary. Shortly after he left, I headed back in to do a quick double check. Molly wouldn't care if I forgot things. I bet that I'd still be here a few times a week anyways. Mostly, I wanted to take one last look at the only home I could ever remember having.

The blinking light on the answering machine caught my eye and I stopped to press play.

"It's Dillon. I just wanted to touch base with you. I've been wondering how you are and if you'd like, I could come in to town and... Beep." It cut him off. I did a silent thank you prayer and waited for the next message.

I heard Payton's voice. "Valerie, I'm fine. Sorry about last night. I was paged with an emergency and had to go. I hope that it was okay to let your friend in. I'll call you later, sweetie."

I breathed a sigh of relief. Payton was all right. He didn't see any of the horror Torin had brought with him. I picked up the phone and tried his house--no answer. I tried his office, cell phone, and pager--nada. I waited for about fifteen minutes and headed out to my car. My sudden need to hear his voice took me a bit by surprise.

The drive to my new house was quiet. It gave me time to reflect on the last few months. As hard as I tried, the puzzle wouldn't fit together. My head hurt, and I gave up trying to sort out the bizarre events surrounding me. By the time I pulled onto the driveway leading up to my new house, I was tired.

The key was exactly where Bernice said it would be, in an envelope stuffed into the door. When I pushed the door open, the smell of stale air hit me hard. I stepped in and put the key down on the tiny table next to the door. It was dark in the house. It was broad daylight outside, but all of the curtains were pulled shut. I reached my hand up, felt for the light switch, and flicked it on.

I looked at the very green and very old wallpaper on the walls. I hated it, but it was mine--all mine. I had a house of my own now. I slid my fingers over the wallpaper and savored the rough texture. I glanced into the large kitchen and laughed. I could make the meals I wanted now. No more Twinkie dinners, well, not unless I was menstruating.

Every room of the house was furnished. I'd given most of the clothing in the house to the local charity. I had no use for it. I'd had new mattresses for two of the beds delivered a week prior. There were four bedrooms. I only really cared about the one I'd be sleeping in at the moment, but the guy at the mattress shop cut me a great deal on a second one. I couldn't pass it up.

I lucked out. The house had hardwood floors and throw rugs. I didn't need to have carpet cleaners come in. I did need to take the curtains down and wash them, but it wasn't really high on my to-do list. My number one goal for the week was to meet Mr. Douglas. I'd been to the house a handful of times, none of which revealed the mystery tenant to me. Bernice assured me that he was real, and I believed her. I guess he was just very busy.

My phone rang and I was excited to pick it up. I didn't even care if it was Dillon. It was my phone, my first phone, and my first phone call. Well, not my first, but it had my name on the bill now. I answered it with a smile on my face.

"Hey, chick, how's the pad?"

"Its great, Molly, thanks."

"You up to going to a movie tonight?" she asked.

"Sounds good, babe. Call me on your break and we'll work out the details."

"Congrats on the crib, Valerie."

I hung up and smiled. She was right, I had a crib. Sure, crib was an ultra hip way of saying house, but I'd take it. It was mine. I picked up the phone and tried to reach Payton again. I didn't have any luck. I hadn't talked to him since he'd left my house. I debated on whether or not to tell him about falling out of a window with a superhuman actor. Knowing Payton, he'd wrap me in ice until I froze to death.

The phone rang again, and scared the hell out of me. I snatched it up and found Charan on the other end. "What's up?"

"Guy would like to treat you to dinner for all the trouble that he's caused you."

"Hmm, he must be real broken up. He had you call me," I said, derisively.

Charan sighed. There was silence on the other end for a minute, then I heard a groggy voice. "Valerie, sorry, I'm a touch tired still. I did not mean to insult you by having Charan call. I just didn't want you to make other plans. I am not an early riser and wanted to be sure that I had this opportunity to make things up to you."

His voice was so sexy through the phone that I wanted to agree to whatever he wanted. I thought about Molly and came to my senses. "I'm sorry, but I just made plans to go to a movie with my friend."

He exhaled noisily, sounding a bit defeated. "I see, well, I did want to try to make up for all the problems I've caused for you..."

I had an idea. "I'll meet you for a friendly dinner, if you'll come with me to the movies and meet my friend. She loves you, I mean she loves all your movies." I made sure to stress the friendly part.

"It's a deal. I will be there to get you within the hour."

That was fast. "Guy, what should I wear?"

He let out a very male laugh. If he said nothing I'd hang up on him. "I'll handle that. Just be waiting there for me."

I hung up the phone and vowed that I'd look into getting a Guytano decoder first thing in the morning.

## Chapter 13

I looked at myself in the floor length mirror. The one-piece black denim dress that Guytano had shown up with fit very snugly. This was not

something I would have chosen for myself. It left the tops of my breasts exposed. The thick belt that hit below my waist made the skirt portion seem even shorter than it already was. I didn't have time to wonder if my sandals would go with it because Guytano held a pair of knee high black leather boots out to me. Thankfully, the heel was on the thicker side and only two inches high. I'd kill myself in anything higher than that. I slipped them on. They fit perfectly. I gave him a puzzled look.

"Okay, I'm willing to go with the idea that you keep women's clothing on hand for emergency friendly dinners, but the shoe thing is a bit much."

He put his hands up in a 'who me' gesture. "You are of average height and shoe size," he said.

"Yeah, 'us common folk' tend to come that way." I knew that I sounded harsh. I intended it to be that way. It was petty, but hey, that was me. I took a good look at myself in the mirror. Wearing all this black blended with my hair and made my turquoise eyes stand out. I had always tended to avoid too much black. My hair was jet black enough. I looked a little too eager to go to a funeral. The Morticia look never appealed to me. Apparently, it appealed to Guy because he winked at me.

"Are you all set?" he asked.

"Yes, but I'd like to call Molly's and leave her another message."

"Most certainly."

I walked over to the phone. I was not used to walking in boots that went up to my knees. They felt odd against my bare skin. I dialed our number and waited for the machine to pick up.

"Hey Molly, it's me. I'm still going to meet you for a movie, but it will have to be the later showing. I'll come by your house, and I'm bringing a surprise for you. I just didn't want you to worry about me..." Her machine cut me off.

I tried Payton one more time before we headed out. I wasn't too happy with the way I'd left things with him. The last time I'd spoken to him, I'd accused him of trying to force me into marriage.

## Chapter 14

Guytano pulled up outside of "The Tall Hat." It was a local country bar that had a reputation for serving one of the best hamburgers in the Midwest. I'd never actually tried one of their burgers yet, as I wasn't altogether that fond of red meat. It had less to do with animal rights, and more to do with the fear of E. coli poisoning. I could stop bullets with my hand and heal at an abnormally fast pace, yet I worried about something as simple as E. coli. I couldn't explain it either.

I had been worried about going somewhere too fancy and making a fool of myself in front of Guytano, but The Tall Hat wasn't upscale by any means. Guy had gone out of his element to see to it that I was comfortable. That said a lot about him. I looked down at my black denim outfit, and to him. Now, the choice in attire made perfect sense. I was just about to make a snide comment about us only needing cowboy hats to make the ensemble complete when he reached behind me to the back seat and pulled out two hats.

"This should just about do it," he said, slipping his on. My heart fluttered. I'd never been much into the cowboy look, but I was starting to see its appeal. Guy looked unbelievably hot.

I picked up my black hat, put it on, and turned to him. His tongue ran out over his lower lip. I don't think he did it on purpose, but he ended up looking at me like I was the sexiest female on the planet--yes, the cowboy thing was working out well.



I blushed, and he leaned over to me. I knew what was coming, yet I did nothing to stop it. His soft lips pressed to mine and his tongue worked its way into my mouth. I tipped my head, trying to drink him down. Guy got out and came around to open my car door. I had already started out when I realized what he was doing. I stayed put and let him be the gentleman that he was brought up to be. I was running into more and more nice guys lately. Something had to give soon. I mentally began the countdown to meeting a jackass and got out the car.

We made our way up to the entrance. A young man with a tan hat sat on a stool by the door. He gave me a wink as we passed by. I smiled back at him. He wasn't my type of guy, but he was handsome all the same. A sneer fell over his face. That sort of killed any hope of him looking hot to me again. It just made him come off as a dirty-creep in the making

Mental note--one jackass down. How many more to go?

Guytano never even looked in the man's direction, and after sparring with Guy in the warehouse, that was probably a good thing. Guy had the skill and power to cause some serious damage. Come to think about it, so did I.

As soon as we entered, the sound of twangy country music filled my ears. From what I could see of the dance floor, it was full of people line dancing. I'd never been much into any of that. Molly was the line dancer in my circle of friends. She'd only recently given up on trying to get me to go out dancing with her. She'd spent the last two years trying to convince me that line dancing should be an Olympic sport. I personally thought it should be outlawed. When I told her that, I thought she was going to go ape shit. She spent the next hour criticizing my favorite music, punk. Granted, there was no achy breaky in it, but still.

The thick crowd of denim-clad people parted for us. We made our way to a tiny table in the back. A tall leggy blond waitress came out to greet us. I took one look at her hair and wondered why someone with such pretty blond hair would bother dying the roots black.

Yeah, I know, I'm a bitch. What else is new.

She told us her name was Stephanie. That seemed to suit her well. I ordered a beer and Guytano ordered the same. Stephanie eyeballed him for a minute or two before sashaying off to get our drinks.

There was a basket of peanuts, still in the shell on the table--cute. I glanced around. The place was not that big and it was packed. I guess organized dance and gourmet nuts in shells was how everyone else liked to spend their evening too.

"Well, did I do all right?" Guytano asked.

I turned and looked at him. He looked like New York's version of Billy the Kid. I had to laugh. If his Hollywood buddies caught sight of him in a place like this, I'm sure they'd have a field day. I still couldn't comprehend how I had ended up in a country music bar with one of the richest and not to mention sexiest men in the world. Saying he was normal would have been a lie. Saying he was a superstar didn't cut it either. He was just Guytano.

I took one more look around. At the opposite end of the bar I caught a man staring at me. His forest green eyes had been what caught my attention. His shoulder-length silky blond hair made me do a double take to see if he was, in fact, a he. He caught me looking at him and turned away quickly.

"Valerie?"

I turned to Guytano. "Sorry, yes, you did very good."

He looked pleased with himself. He tipped his hat slightly and did a few John Wayne impersonations. He had me laughing so hard that I actually teared up. I was glad that I'd avoided snorting, that would've been a big no-no. Guy seemed to be loosening up as well. He still had that layer of tall-dark-and-mysterious but some very male tendencies were showing through. Two redheads in short shorts came past waving and blowing kisses at him. His gaze lingered over their derrière's before shooting back to me with a smile across his face.

"Glad to know you're not dead," I said, as I leaned over to make sure my boot was zipped up.

"What?" he asked, with a hint of panic in his voice.

I looked up and found the redheads still huddled next to each other and still staring at him. I pointed at them, and I saw his shoulders relax. As I watched him look around the bar, I was suddenly very sad that I hadn't had Molly's flare for horror films. I'm sure she knew everything about him. I was always clearing celebrity magazines off our coffee table when

we lived together. I never bothered to read them, now I wished I had. I'm sure that most of what they print could be considered trash, but at least it was something to go off.

"You know, I don't really know anything about you," I said.

"Nor I, you."

He had me there. "Hey, I don't know anything about me. I'm half-tempted to hire a private investigator to tell me if I got my name right. Sad isn't?" He nodded, and I kept right on going. "So, tell me about yourself... I gather that you're not from around here." It was the most tactful way I could think to ask him what country he was from. I had caught the slightest hint of an accent several times from him.

"Well, I have lived in America for thirty-five years now. I was born in Genoa, Italy."

"Wow, I want the number for your spa. You don't look thirty-five."

He leaned back against the wall and looked at me from the corner of his eyes. "Looks can be deceiving."

He moved his hand slowly across the table. I slid my hand over and let my fingers dance along the table's edge. I wanted to touch him, but I wasn't sure he wanted me to. I sat there waiting to drum up the courage.

Music filled the bar. The song was slow and beautiful. I moved in my seat to see who was on the small stage. The man with the forest green eyes sat on a stool with a microphone stand between his legs. He had his hat pulled down, almost covering his eyes.

He's shy, I thought to myself.

His hand moved up to the sides of the mic. It was a simple movement, yet he made it seem strangely erotic.

"I am happy to see that you're not impressed with my fame." Guytano said, waving his hand in front of my face. He looked over his shoulder at the man singing.

"Not bad, if you like this sort of thing," he said, unimpressed.

"I don't know. I think he could make you like country music. He's making me a fan."

Guytano shrugged his shoulders and moved his hand over mine. The touch of his cold skin brought all of my attention back to him. I'm sure that was his plan.

"You're ice cold. Are you feeling okay? Do you want to go?" I asked.

"No, I'm always like this. Genetic I think." His hand moved over mine. My fingers touched his wrist. Something was very different about him. Something was missing. I tapped my fingertips on his skin lightly, and then let my hand lay still. I'm not sure how I caught it, but it hit me, he had no pulse. I don't just mean that he had a weak pulse, or low blood pressure, I mean he had no pulse. I jerked my hand away, quickly.

"So, are you going to tell me what's going on, or will I have to beat it out of you?" I asked. I knew that it sounded more like a proposition to him than a threat. I had intended it to. There was no shame in wanting Guytano, half the women in the world did. There was something different about him, and I wanted to know what it was. He looked around the bar and then at me.

"I am not sure what you mean."

"Like hell you don't. That's the second time I haven't found a pulse on you. Care to elaborate, or should I just go?" I said.

His eyebrow rose up. "Will you?"

"Will I what?"

"Go."

I stood and he grabbed my wrist. I'd had enough of the games. The least he could do was tell me the truth. My life had been pretty normal until he'd waltzed into town. If you don't count bizarre levitating instances, and run-in's with people calling me a bruja, then my life was boring before Guy. I would never get that safe-suburban feel back, and that should've pissed me off, but it didn't.

"Don't go," he said. I looked down at him, daring him to give me one good reason to stay. "I am a vampire."

That did it!

I shrank down into my seat. "You mean you play one on TV right? I've heard about you. I know that you make a living playing a vampire in movies. Hell, you've taken being a part owner in Vampyre Productions to the extreme here." He shrugged. "Yeah, and I'm a witch, I think. Now, tell me what's really going on."

His blue eyes locked on me. I watched as they darkened to near black, and little yellow specks of color swirled to the surface. I gasped, and he tightened his grip on me. He ran his tongue out and over his teeth. For the first time I realized that he had fangs. Why hadn't I noticed them before? I should've screamed bloody murder and wet myself. I did neither. I sat quietly across from him in a silent state of awe.

I let my head fall down a little. It was hard to soak in the knowledge that the person sitting across from me was technically a monster. The scariest part of it all was that it didn't bother me. Okay, so he was a vampire, at least he had a steady job. That was more than most men could say. Had I been this jaded before? Was I someone who hung with the afterlife, dark-lovers-club prior to my accident? Did I want to know? I knew then that I didn't. I had no burning desire to find out about my past. I never had. Molly found that unusual. If things like this surrounded me before my accident, then I could understand my need to forget. I was going to ask Guytano if there were others like him, but I didn't.

Stephanie, our waitress, came back with our drinks. She may have been the slowest server I'd ever had, but right then and there, I was happy to see her. I thought about ordering dinner, just to keep her around, but I had pretty much lost my appetite two minutes ago when the reality of Guytano's being dead sunk in. I wasn't sure he could have dropped a bigger bombshell on me even if he tried. I kept waiting for him to yell "Boo!" or "Just kidding!"

He refrained from making any jokes, but he did try to get my past out of me. I'm sure that he felt the need to make small talk to avoid the obvious burning questions I had. He wanted to know where I grew up. I couldn't answer that. He took it as a sign that I didn't want to tell him. I had to explain that I really could not answer him, because I didn't know.

Stephanie reappeared with drink refills for us. She sat Guytano's down gently in front of him, and batted her overdone eyelashes at him. I cleared my throat. Her attention turned to me long enough to toss my drink down. In doing so, she knocked Guytano's untouched beer over. It spilled into his lap, and he leapt up. She immediately went to wipe it off, and he caught her wrist in mid-motion. "I think you've done enough."

I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing at her. She looked like he'd just run her puppy over. Guytano fought to maintain his cool. "I'll be right back," he said, as he headed off to the men's room. Stephanie followed close to his heels. I don't think she had a clue how pathetic she looked.

I stood up to find the ladies room to freshen up too. I was definitely in the mood for cold water on my face. Maybe I'd wake up and find out this was all some crazy dream. Yeah, that was it. I'd probably eaten chocolate before bed and was having a nightmare that wouldn't end.

The green-eyed singer started a new song. This one was on the faster end of the spectrum. A large group of women came rushing toward me from the table next to me. I got caught up in their tangle of big hair, perfume, and fake breasts. When they finally stopped shoving and carrying on, I found myself out on the dance floor. The girls all lined up and began to move in unison. They looked like a group of synchronized swimmers minus the water. I turned to head off the dance floor. I ran smack into a man's chest. The thick smell of musk clung to his dark blue T-shirt. I looked up. The man from the entrance to the bar stood before me.

"Sorry, I didn't see you there," I said. I attempted to walk around him. He didn't move. I tried the other way. His arm came out and caught mine. "Hey."

"Name's not Hey, it's Dustin." He had a thick southern drawl. I had lived in this state long enough to know how bizarre it was. Some people sounded like they just stepped out of a rodeo and others had no trace of an accent. "What's a sexy lady like you doing with a pretty boy?"

Pretty boy? I'd never heard someone be so polite about implying someone was gay before. Not that it would have made a difference if Guytano was gay. He would have still been my choice of company for the evening. Hell, he had just confessed to being a creature of the night and I was still choosing him over ol' Dustin here. That wasn't saying much about Dustin.

"I don't want any trouble," I said, as I tried to pull my arm away. He held tight. His other hand came down and touched the top of my breast. I brought my hand up and slapped his face. His head jerked to the side, but he didn't loosen his grip on me.

"Feisty lil' one, aren't you?" He grinned at me.

If he wasn't such an asshole, I'd have thought he was a good-looking guy. There was a lot of that going around lately. So many men ruined their cool image when they opened their mouths and nonsense fell out. Dustin was no exception. I tried to pull away from him. It was clear that he had no intention of letting me go.

"This guy bothering you?" We both turned to see the man with the forest green eyes standing near us. I hadn't noticed that the music stopped. His silky blond hair spilled over the shoulders of his jean jacket and stopped. Except for his brown hat, he was dressed completely in blue denim. I would have normally busted out laughing at a man dressed like he was about to wrangle a herd, but not this time. He was the same height as Guytano, and that made him tall. He had wide shoulders but a slender build. His body screamed that it was toned and perfect. His skin looked soft and milky white. I looked into his eyes and he stared at me. A look that I could not read passed over his face.

"Gregorios?" I heard myself speaking, but didn't understand why I'd chosen to call him by that name. I had no memory of meeting him before. Of course, with my history, that in no way implied that I didn't know him. His eyes widened even more.

"How?" He squinted at me. "You remember me?"

Aha! I'd been right. I didn't have any idea how the heck I knew the guy's name, but I did. Maybe, I'd heard Molly talking about him. She was a regular at places like this. He reached his hand out to touch me. I jerked away. Great, just what I needed two perverts on one dance floor.

I made another attempt to free myself from Dustin's grip. He wasn't budging. I didn't want to have to resort to violence, but after my chance meeting with Guytano in the warehouse I'd learned that it wasn't below me. I turned my arm quickly and swung it around. These movements made him loosen his grip on me. The look on his face said that he wasn't expecting that. He tried to grab me. I turned my body slightly toward him and threw my elbow out and up into his chest. This knocked the wind out of him long enough for me to punch my other hand straight out at him. Dustin fell on his ass on the dance floor. That's when I noticed that everyone had stopped dancing and started staring at us.

Gregorios made a move to touch me again. I spun around and brought my right leg up to kick him. This seemed like a great idea until I remembered I was wearing a short denim dress. I knew that I was giving everyone a free peek. My foot rounded toward Gregorios' head. His eyes never left

my face but he caught my leg in midair and dropped it to the floor. He could have used that opportune moment and really inflicted some pain on me, but he didn't. He looked at me and blinked. "Valerie?"

I froze. This temporary moment of not paying attention cost me a great deal. A large mass slammed into my side. I hit the floor hard and fast. My head cracked against the dance floor with such a force that my brain rattled. It took a minute for my vision to clear. I looked up and saw Gregorios fighting with a group of men. There looked to be at least six of them and only one of him, yet he was holding his own fairly well. I turned and looked at the weight that was on top of me. Dustin had me pinned to the ground and gave me a less than friendly look.

I tried to wiggle out from under his body weight. He had slammed me down so hard that parts of me quit working for a few seconds. Dustin jumped to his feet. He bent down and grabbed me around the waist. In one swift movement, he tossed me over his shoulder and headed toward the door. I pounded on his back. He never missed a beat. The exit burst open, and I watched as Gregorios had another swarm of at least eight men come at him.

Stephanie, the slowest waitress known to man, appeared in the doorway. She gave me a wicked little smile and shut the door tight. I knew then, that when I was done dealing with Dustin, I was going to beat the crap out of her too. Maybe, that would teach her some customer service.

Dustin threw me down onto the hard stone parking lot. Tiny sharp stones dug into my body. I cried out, as he glared at me. The look in his eyes changed to a hungry one, and I watched as yellow filled his irises. I didn't scream, in fact, I quit moving altogether. He smiled wide. Huge fangs sprouted in his mouth. He lunged down at me. I brought my feet up quickly, driving the heels of my boots into his chest, and pushed backwards. He stumbled but didn't fall. His body shot into the air and levitated above me for a minute before pouncing on me.

"Change for me baby and this could be so much fun," he said, with a hint of glee in his voice.

I had no idea what he wanted me to change into. I didn't really care. His face hovered above mine and I watched in horror as it twisted and turned. A demon with yellow eyes and fangs stared back at me. He moved his face over my breasts and let his tongue slide out and over them. I shuddered. I didn't want this thing near me.



"Change ... change and we can fuck all night. Hell, it don't matter to me none if you want to go like this. I can smell it on you. You're a naughty lil' vamp aren't ya."

I was on the verge of hysteria. The harder I fought Dustin, the tighter he held me. I had to close my eyes and take several deep breaths to keep from screaming again. I stopped struggling and lay still. A thought came to me. Calming down had opened my mind up.

Some part of me, the same part that had brought forth the daytime vision of me biting the woman named Camille, took over. It instructed me on how to best handle the situation. I pulled my hand up and stroked the monster's cheek. He stopped licking the tops of my breasts and looked up at me.

"I knew you'd want to play. I could smell it on you the minute I saw you," he said, his voice a few octaves lower than before. "You're a powerful one aren't ya?"

"Oh, yeah, I want to play," I said, trying to sound convincing. "But, I want to be on top."

A look of pure joy swept over his face. He rolled off me in a heartbeat. Heat flared through my body. I was no longer driving. Some other part of me that knew how to handle this took the wheel. At that moment I would welcome just about any help I could get. I rose up off the ground and straddled Dustin's body. I stood above him and felt the heat raging through me.

A swooshing sound came from behind me. I didn't turn around. "Do not move, Guytano." My voice sounded so much stronger and sure of itself than it normally did. I had no idea how I'd known that was Guytano. I turned my head and saw him take a step toward me. I threw my hand up. The heat within me flared.

"Manere!" I shouted out.

Guytano looked like he'd walked into an invisible wall. He staggered backwards and shouted out for me. I looked at my hand and then to his dark blue eyes. I pleaded with him to understand that I didn't know what I'd just done. He nodded to me and then looked down at Dustin. His eyes widened when he saw the monster that lay beneath me. His astonishment told me that he wasn't aware that he wasn't the only vampire on the

premises. I wondered how many more were lurking around, but I couldn't worry about that just yet.

I turned my attention back to my new little friend. "So, Dustin, you want me to play with you, huh?" The way I said it scared even me. His yellow eyes widened. He attempted to scoot back away from me a little but I bent down and grabbed his belt buckle. "Don't you want to play with me anymore?" I fought to regain control. I was losing to this overwhelming pull, this dark side of me. Part of me wanted to lean down and lick his pale cheek. The idea of fucking him sounded better and better. I shook my head. What was I thinking? I didn't want to screw this piece of crap. I fought to swim to the surface. I was almost there, so close that I could almost feel it.

I backed away from Dustin and staggered. He took this opportunity to get to his feet, thinking that he was about to gain the upper hand. "Yeah baby, I want to play." He flew at me, and I literally mean flew at me. Guytano screamed my name and begged me to free him. I wanted to free him but I didn't know how to do it.

Dustin was almost upon me. I focused in on his chest. Right before impact, I put my hand out and screamed out, "Core." My hand passed through his clothing and deep into his flesh, wrapping around his beating heart. I held tight to it and pulled backwards. Dustin's body fell away from me, his still beating heart in my hand. I brought it up to my lips and flashed back to the vision of the woman calling me Mistress. I looked at the heart in my hand and threw it onto the ground. I tried to run backwards, but hit something hard. I screamed out, dazed and sickened by my own actions.

"It's all right... It's all right now." It was Gregorios. I looked up at him and then down at my bloody hand. He nodded his head and pulled me close to him. I didn't fight him. I let him hold onto me. The moment our bodies touched, I felt safer and calmer. It was then that I realized I was crying. I pulled myself together and looked over at Guytano. He was still pressed against the nothingness that held him.

"Guytano!" I called his name like he was the last person on this earth that could save me. Maybe he was.

"Valerie, you have to free me," Guytano said calmly. I wasn't sure what kind of life he led, but if he was used to things like this happening I was done hanging around with him. I looked down at my blood-soaked hand. I had no clue how I'd done what I'd done or how to undo it.

"I don't know how."

Gregorios' arms loosened on me. "I can help, if you'll trust me."

I looked up at him perplexed but not in a position to argue. "I don't think I have a choice."

"No you don't." He raised his hand up and said, "Abdere." Gytano dropped to the ground. I broke free of Gregorios' grip and ran to him. He was on his feet before I was even close to him. His eyes darted down to my bloody hand and turned his face away from me, closing his eyes tightly. I looked back at the heart still beating on the ground.

"Upyr." The one word fell from my lips effortlessly. I said it with the conviction of ten men. I knew that it meant vampire, but I didn't know how I knew. Tears welled up inside of me. I wasn't crying because I'd seen what every person believes only exists in nightmares, I cried because I knew that somehow I was connected to them all. Did that mean I was a monster as well? I looked to my blood-soaked hand for confirmation. I felt hot and dizzy. My vision blurred just before I hit the ground.

## Chapter 15

I woke to find myself in Molly's bed. I wasn't sure how long I'd been asleep, or why I was with her instead at home at my place, but I was

happy to be out of The Tall Hat's parking lot. Molly had left a glass of orange juice on my bedside table with note underneath that demanded I tell her everything when she got home from work later.

I stood up. I was still wearing the same clothes I'd had on at the bar. My hand was wiped clean but little dried bits of blood were still under my fingernails. I scrambled to get out of the clothes and yanked the sheets off the bed. I hit the bathroom door with such force that I was surprised I didn't rip it off. I filled the tub with hot water and slid in. It was much hotter than I normally made it, but having pieces of a guy's heart under your nails will make you do things you normally didn't do.

I scrubbed until my skin was raw. By the time I was done the water was ice cold. I grabbed my robe off the hook and headed to my room to get dressed. I noticed the answering machine was blinking. I stopped and pressed play.

"Valerie, its Payton. Are you there?" It beeped. Funny, I hadn't heard the phone ring. In my fit to get clean, I'd missed the one call I'd most been looking forward to. I checked the time. It was pushing seven. I called Payton's house. No answer. I tried his office and managed to get his nighttime answering service. I left a message for him, just in case he checked in. I needed to see him. I needed to make sure he was all right--that we were all right.

I snatched a pair of khaki pants out of my closet and paired it with a navy long-sleeved knit shirt. It was snug and even though it covered me completely, it looked sexy. The scooped neck and tight material put a lot of emphasis on my breasts. I reached down and instinctively went for a pair of navy flip-flops. I gave a quick thought to the week I'd been having and tossed them aside. I ended up settling on a pair of brown hiking boots. I wasn't in this to win a fashion competition. I was in it to stay alive.

I yanked the brush through my hair and pulled it into a loose ponytail at the base of my neck. The phone rang again, and I dove to answer it.

"Valerie, hey it's me," I heard Payton's voice. I exhaled. I didn't even know I'd been holding my breath. "I need to talk to you. Can you meet me at the old mill?"

"The old mill? Why don't you just come over here?" I asked.

"Am I really still welcome there?"

I nodded my head and realized that he couldn't see me. "Yes, of course you're welcome here." I wanted to talk with him more, but he said he had to go. I promised to meet him at the old mill in an hour. He thought it would be nice to look at some of the leftover movie equipment there. I'd already seen it and didn't care to have a repeat performance, but I needed to escape my new reality. I jotted a note down to tell Molly that I was meeting Payton and put it on the table near the front door. I snatched my purse up and headed out the door.

"You look like you're feeling better, all things considered."

I stopped and turned slowly around. Gregorios, the blond-headed cowboy from the bar last night was sitting on my front porch. He looked comfortable with his feet thrown up on the rail, slouched in the wicker chair. I had to swallow hard to get the lump out of my throat. After what I'd seen and done last night, I wasn't too keen on the idea of surprises.

"What do you want, Gregorios?"

He didn't bother to sit up. He just tipped his head to the side and looked at me with his sexy green eyes. Eyes that crisp weren't natural. Mine were turquoise so I was anything but natural, too. I took a step backwards. I wanted to have plenty of room to maneuver if need be. I wasn't planning on a fight. After all, he had been on my side last night, but I was learning very fast that things aren't always what they seem.

"I want to know how you knew my name." That seemed like a simple request. I wish I had a simple answer for him.

"I don't know." It wasn't a romantic or even educated response, but it was all I had to offer. Take or leave it, it was the truth.

He nodded his head, approvingly. "Well, it was more than I could've hoped for." He put his legs down. I jumped and backed up.

"I'd never hurt you, Valerie." He looked away as he said it, suddenly very interested in his black boot. Could I trust him? Could I trust anyone? Guytano had revealed himself to be an honest-to-God vampire. I'm sure God had little to do with it, but still. I smiled at the irony of Guy living amongst us under the guise of being an actor who took his career seriously.

The man from the bar had been a vampire too. I tightened my hand into a fist when I thought of holding Dustin's heart in my hand.

"Are you a vampire?" I asked.

Gregorios sat straight up. His eyes widened. "No, I am not a vampire." He shifted in his seat a little. "I serve a greater good--one that destroys things like that."

"Terminator for the undead? That's a new one."

He nodded his head. That explained why he was at the bar. I wondered if Dustin was his target, or was he after Guytano? "You're not in town for Guytano are you?"

"Would it matter to you?" he asked. I thought long and hard before I answered. I was growing fond of Guytano. Seeing what he truly was should've scared me. It didn't.

"Yes," I said. He looked at me and bit the corner of his full lip. "I'll go out on a limb and say that he's a friend of mine now. I wouldn't want you hunting him down and killing him."

This made him laugh. I didn't find much humor in killing people, apparently he did. "What makes you think I kill the things that cross my path?"

It was my turn to laugh. "The very fact that you refer to them as things says that you don't value their lives, and I've never heard of a vampire on trial for a crime. I'm assuming that they are just dealt with. Hell, I didn't even know they existed until last night."

"No, you knew they were real. A part of you knew they were real," he said, poignantly.

I walked up and took a seat next to him. I was positive that he wasn't here to kill me. I was still not sure how safe Guytano was from him. He had done some sort of mojo magic thing to free Guytano from whatever the hell I did to him. Maybe, just maybe he didn't mean any of us any harm. I knew I was being naïve. What else was new?

"You know me, don't you?" I said, anxiously awaiting his response.

"Yes, I've known you for many, many years." His voice grew softer, and he avoided making eye contact with me. He was my key to the past and I wasn't sure I wanted to unlock that piece of me.

"You should know that I have no memory of you. I haven't got a freakin' clue how I knew your name but I don't remember you. So, you could lie to me and I wouldn't know it."

He turned to me and put his hand out to touch my knee. I pulled it away a fraction of a second before he touched it. This hurt his feelings. I could see it on his face. "If you could remember our time together you wouldn't be afraid of my touch."

Our time together?

Had we been intimate? I looked Gregorios over. He was a thing of beauty. His looks were a little on the side of androgynous. His blond hair was pulled back into a tie behind his head. He had a dark green bandana tied around the top part of his head. He had the distinct look of being a baby-faced biker. His face was soft, and there were no real hard edges to him. He looked like he could've been the front man for a band. He was hot, I'd give him that much, but I found lots of men good looking.

"How'd you do that last night?" I looked hard at him, willing myself to remember him. "How'd you free Guytano?"

"The same way you bound him to that spot. I used magic."

"Are we witches?" I asked, gravely.

This made him let out a small laugh. "No, well, yes and no... I mean, you are part witch, I think. There were rumors amongst our people that your father was a wizard. I don't know if they were true. Your mother never told a soul who your father was. It was all pure speculation." He stopped and rubbed his palms on his knees nervously. I would've been, too, if I was trying to explain to someone about having magic in their paternal gene pool.

"I'm a Fey, a creature of magic. I lived a quiet life as a soldier for the Roman Empire. I'd always known that I was different from others, in the sense that I could make things happen with my mind or control the elements at will. I had to hide this from all or I would have been thought to be a sorcerer and would have been executed. I loved Rome and always will. I served under Emperor Constans and his son Constans II. When Magnentius murdered Constans, we were outraged. A battle occurred in Mursa that would go down in history as the bloodiest battle of the century, and I cannot argue with that."

Gregorios shifted in his seat and moved his feet to the floor. I wanted to stop and verify what he was telling me. If it was true than he was really, really old, and that made me wonder how old I was. I racked my brain for a timeline and then it hit me.

"September 28th, AD 351," I said this slowly, but with much conviction.

Gregorios looked up at me and smiled. "Yes, Valerie, that is the day of the battle of Mursa, and the day I met you."

That made me move in closer to him. Somehow, I knew that he was telling the truth. I stopped trying to make sense of it all and just listened to him. "It was a horribly bloody battle, as I already told you. Fires burned, and the stench of death was all around me. I found myself backed into a corner by six of Magnentius' guards. I didn't expect there to be any witnesses, so I went ahead and summoned some of the surrounding fire. It came at me but did not burn me. It spun around in my hand. I flung it out at the men as I rammed my sword deep into one's chest. I had never done anything so horrific in my life and never wish to again... Sometimes at night, I still wake to see the skin melting from their faces as they screamed out in shock and horror at what I was and what I'd done."

I had to swallow to avoid throwing up. If I hadn't had just come off ripping a guy's heart out of his chest, I might have been judgmental, but I didn't have a leg to stand on. "You said that we met then. How could I be on the battlefield? I was a woman then, right, Gregorios?" Suddenly, I wasn't too sure, what I'd been. With my luck I was a reincarnated male monk or something.

He laughed softly. "Yes, you were the same beautiful woman that sits before me now and Gregory or Greg is fine. Gregorios is a bit dated. You were the one who told me that, remember?"

I smiled at him and wished that I did remember renaming him. His eyes softened and he moved his hand toward mine again. I didn't yank away this time as he told me how we'd met. "After the men had perished, I fell to my knees to pray for forgiveness. I knew that I'd been given the power for a reason and I doubted that it was to maim my fellow man. I'm not sure how long I was there before a bright light appeared before me and you walked out of it. I'd never seen a woman of such beauty before, not even at the grandest Coliseum events. Your black hair hung to the back of your knees and it blew slightly in the wind. Your tunica was different than I was used to. It was shorter, much the way a miniskirt is by today's standards, and you wore no stola. Normally, only whores went without



the proper attire, but I knew that you were no whore. The gold cording that wrapped around your tunica was too ornate for you to be a plebian and your glorious body held many daggers and other weapons, none of which a commoner could afford. You walked toward me with your sword drawn. I thought perhaps that you were a goddess, come to punish me for misusing my magic and to take my dead body from the field. In many ways that's what you were."

He paused to catch his breath and to choke back what looked like tears that were forming in his eyes. I squeezed his hand, encouraging him to go on with his story. "You told me that I was one of the bravest warriors that you'd ever seen and that you'd been watching me since I had joined the army. I asked about your eyes, they were, are, so different from anyone else's I'd ever seen. You laughed and explained that where you were from that your eyes were thought plain. I told you that I couldn't understand how anyone in their right mind would think you plain. You came to my side and helped me up. You told me that you were a..."

"Valkyrie, a Falkyr and that I'd been sent to collect your soul." I finished his sentence for him without thought, yet I'm not sure how I knew what to say. I couldn't remember any of the events that he told me about, yet somehow I knew. "You thought I had said that my name was Valerie, and that made me laugh. I hadn't laughed in so many years and I couldn't bring myself to do as I had done so many times before, take your soul back to Valhalla, the heaven from which I hailed from.

"I had grown tired of the Valkyrie's ways and their customs, and I had longed to find that perfect someone, that match for me. I'd watched you from afar for many years and suspected that you might be the one, because, I too, had the gift of magic, and wanted desperately to have someone to share that power with. I'd suffered an enormous loss once already and could not bear to continue living with the void in my heart, so I did something that I'd never done before. I gave you the choice to come with me, or to stay where you were. I explained that you were not destined to die for many years yet, and could, in theory live out a normal happy life in Rome."

Greg's fingers wrapped tight around mine. "I fell in love with you the moment I laid eyes on you, and I had no one to require that I stay earthbound. I begged you not to leave me, that I couldn't live another day knowing that I had passed on the chance to be by your side. You agreed and instead of taking my soul, you shared your life force with me and made me one of your own kind."

It was my turn to laugh. "Oh, I did anger the elders with that little stunt, didn't I?"

Gregory pulled my hand to his lips. "It was worth every second of it, at least that's what you told me then." He kissed the back of my hand lightly. It was a simple gesture that should not have made my nipples as hard as they were. I exhaled in a pathetic attempt to chase the horniness away.

I smiled up at him and knew that I had indeed been in love with him and most likely still was. He put my hand into his lap and caressed my arm softly. "The name Valerie stuck and you went by that. Your given name was Linnea, but it was your mother's name too, and you hated going by it.

"Everyone would comment on how inseparable the two of us were. They rarely saw one of us without the other. We were so very in love. I asked you to be my wife and you accepted. The elders had never heard of such a thing. It was bad enough that you'd brought a man into their midst as an equal, but now you were expecting them to sanctify the union. They were outraged. You were equally as angry. You talked me into leaving Valhalla with you and we surfaced in Italy in 1780.

"I didn't understand what was going on at first, you then explained how Valhalla was without time constraints and that Valkyries were free to move about time to collect the souls of warriors."

I sat still as he told me all of this. As unrealistic as it sounded, I knew that it was the truth. I knew that Valhalla possessed the magic to be free from the constraints of the time-space continuum, and that I'd spent many years moving in and out of the past and present collecting the souls of warrior men. The men that were brought back trained with us and fought by our sides during key historical battles. They were never thought of as equals. They weren't slaves, but not equals.

My knowledge of the Valkyrie culture surprised me. I even knew that once you set foot upon Valhalla's sacred ground, you never aged again, no matter if you left immediately or not. There was one tiny portion of the island reserved for the growth of children. Valkyries were able to have babies and the children needed to grow to adulthood, so they were born and raised on that portion of the island and allowed to touch sacred soil on their eighteenth birthday. I had been stubborn. I'd refused to go to join my mother until I was pushing twenty. I don't know how I knew this,

but I did. I also knew that I'd never gone to the future before. It was considered dangerous for even a Valkyrie to try that.

I also knew without being told that Gregory and I had shared a bed hundreds upon thousands of times in the hundred plus years that we were lovers. I knew every inch of him without laying a hand on him and I'm sure that he knew every inch of me, too. The way he stroked my arm with such gentleness and knowledge of every dip in my arm told me that I was right. He did know me well.

"How did I end up here? What happened to us? Why weren't you with me?" I had so many questions to ask him. He moved my hand to his lips and kissed it softly.

He smiled. "It is me, this time, who has been watching you from afar for five years. And when I would play this moment in my head, it was you taking one look at me and knowing what we'd meant to each other. I knew that would never happen. I knew the spell that was used was too powerful to allow you to remember." He leaned toward me. I didn't back away this time. I wanted to interject and ask what spell and they who, but he kept going. "My magic is powerful. It would take someone equally as powerful to break it. I did hope that if anyone could, it would be you, Val. You always had something special about you. You were always different. When you said my name at the club, I thought that you remembered me. I was elated but the levelheaded side of me is happy that you don't remember everything about us, Valerie."

I sat there letting everything he'd just said soak in. Magic, powerful, a spell, collecting souls, it was a lot to be hit with all at once. "Why are you happy that I can't remember you?"

"Things changed, you changed, and we parted ways for a while. Our paths crossed again, and ... and..."

I brought my hand down to meet his. His hand was rougher than Guytano's and a great deal warmer. My hand looked so small on his. I looked up to see into his eyes. I looked hard at them. I reached my other hand up to touch his cheek. He closed his eyes and tipped his face to meet my palm. When his smooth face touched my hand I wanted to kiss him. I wanted to lean forward and offer him a piece of my heart. It trusted him and that was all I had left to rely on. I leaned closer to him.

"I hate to interrupt..." I pulled back quickly at the sound of Guytano's voice. Gregory jumped to his feet and a gun materialized from his back.

He pointed it directly at Guytano's chest. I jumped up and put myself against the barrel. I would die before Guytano. I was putting my life in the hands of a stranger. I really hoped that I wouldn't regret this. I didn't turn around to see Guytano's face. I could feel his presence near me. The cool static energy pushed against my skin.

Gregory looked at me. "Move, Valerie."

"No," I said. I pressed my body against the gun barrel harder. Gregory's finger eased off the trigger. It took him a minute to lower the gun, but he did. I sighed. One thing was certain. Gregory had no love for Guytano.

"What? Not in the mood for target practice this fine evening? Letting the little lady dictate what you can and cannot do. I thought immortal warriors were real men." Guytano said. His tone was so horribly condescending that I almost asked for the gun to shoot him in the foot myself. I rounded on him. My look must've spoke volumes because he backed away and smiled.

"Enough, both of you!" I yelled. Guytano winked at Gregory. Gregory's body moved in an attempt to charge at Guytano or possibly shoot him. As much as I wanted to deck Guy myself, I wouldn't let the two of them fight. I stepped to the side. Some part of me knew that Gregory would not hit me. His body pressed into mine and grabbed my shoulders. He held tight to me in an attempt to keep us both from falling.

"Stop protecting him, Valerie. He's a monster." Gregory said, his voice laced with pain. I looked at Guytano. He flashed me a fangy smile and winked at Gregory again. I pointed my finger at him and heat rose from my body.

"Guytano, no more, do you understand? No more." The porch was getting very warm very fast. Guytano looked around and then back to me. He nodded and backed up to the porch swing and sat down quietly. I turned in Gregory's arms. This left us in an almost hugging position. He had so much rage in his face that it scared me. I touched his baby soft cheek and the hate dissipated before his eyes locked on me.

"You had the opportunity to kill him last night. Why now, why not then?" I asked. Guytano moved. I didn't turn around I put my hand up. He stopped. I was creeping myself out.

"I didn't know much about him. I knew he was like some others in the past. He'd struck out and went public. We've been keeping an eye on this

group of undead that seems to think going public is the answer. What is the whole Vampyre Productions thing anyways, a taunt?" Gregory looked past me at Guytano and glared. "I had no idea who his creator was. I didn't come here looking for Guy. I had no reason to look up his history. I never dreamt that the two of you would meet."

"Why does who created him matter?" I asked. "Why should who his mother is be any reason to want to kill him?" This brought laughter from the both of them. The tension on the porch eased up. I hadn't meant for my question to be humorous. After I said it, I realized how silly it sounded. If half of the way Hollywood portrayed vampires was true than Guytano was old, really old. And I was betting that by creator, Gregorios hadn't meant Guytano's mother, he'd meant sire. I laughed too.

"Okay, strike the part about his mom. Why does his sire matter?" I asked.

Gregorios looked past me at Guytano. "A vampire's master can say a lot about the vampire itself. If the master is not a threat, than normally those that they sire are non-threatening as well. The opposite is also true. A powerful, evil master can create powerful, evil offspring, and Lucha is evil."

I turned and glanced at Guytano. He didn't seem evil to me. The whole vampire-thing did tend to hang over him like a cloud a bit, but hey, we all had our faults. I tried to find signs of him being some wicked demonic monster. I found none. I tried to picture him murdering masses. I couldn't. I could, however, remember my very vivid vision of the piles of dead bodies. I shut my eyes and counted to ten slowly. I did not want to be sick in front of two very hot looking males.

"Valerie, are you all right?" Guytano's voice was smooth and near me. Gregory's hand tightened on my arm.

"Ouch," I said, pulling back from him. He looked down at his hand and apologized. The tension levels started to rise again. Gregory didn't want Guytano near me, and as far as I could tell, Guytano just wanted to piss Gregory off.

"So, who's Guytano's creator?" I asked.

"Oh my God!" I heard Molly's tiny voice squeal. "Oh my God! It's Guytano Marsarius... He's here, he's on our porch." I turned to see her making her way up the sidewalk in front of the house. Her eyes were locked firmly on Guytano. This was a big moment for her. She'd been a

horror movie buff ever since I'd known her. "Valerie, do you know who that is?"

"Yes," I said.

Molly turned to look at me, her eyes wide. She mouthed the words "Oh my God!" one more time before she finally composed herself. She looked striking in her white, with her hair pulled back tightly from her face. Her light blue eyes glistened. I had no doubt that visions of Guytano danced in her head. I also doubted very much that she had any idea that he was a vampire. I looked at Molly's dress. It was an all white cotton polyester blend with a v-neck. Having her hair pulled back left her neck fully exposed. A wave of panic swept over me. I looked at Gregory. He stood in the background staying out of this. Smart man. I looked at Molly's neck once more, then to Guytano.

Guytano was looking directly at Molly. She made her way up the stairs and stopped before him. He reached out to her. I gasped. He looked at me and tipped his head slightly to the right and then smiled. He lifted her hand to his lips and planted a tiny kiss on it. His charcoal black hair fell forward, covering his face. Molly made a small sound, halfway between a giggle and a moan. I saw Molly's knees start to shake. In an instant, they went out from under her. Guytano's arm wrapped around her waist, holding her tight to him, she looked like a rag doll. Her neck was fully exposed to him now. I sucked in air. Guytano's eyes flickered to me. He must have seen the horror on my face because he looked at Gregory.

"Take her," he said. His voice was deeper than normal. Gregory did not argue, he walked over and took Molly from Guytano. He lifted her like she was only a feather. I held the door open for him as he walked past. I wanted to follow him in but knew that once I did Guytano would be gone. I turned to Guy. He wasn't looking at me. He was looking out into the night.

"I frighten you," he said, still not looking at me.

"Umm, ye..." I wanted to say yes. I looked at his profile. I tried to think of all the reasons to send this man away. I ran the lists in my head. He walked slowly off the porch. I ran to him and touched his arm. "No, no you don't frighten me. The idea of a vampire scares me but you don't. I just wondered if you viewed Molly as an open buffet. Did you?"

He stopped walking and turned back to me. "Valerie Falkyr you are an odd one to read. One minute I see the look of sheer terror on your face

and the next you tell me that I do not scare you. I know that you're not lying. In all my years I have never been quite so puzzled by anyone as I am by you."

I was at a loss for words. Gregory's reappearance on the porch saved me from having to come up with anything earth shattering to say. The best I could come up with was that I had to go. I had to meet a friend of mine. Both men looked skeptical.

"What friend?" Gregory asked.

"Why, have you been keeping tabs on all of my friends?" I asked. I was just joking. The look on his face told me that in fact he had indeed been monitoring all my friends. I wanted to spit in his face. Instead, I took a deep breath and smiled. "Is Molly all right?" I asked instead. My, I was impressed with myself. At my current rate, I wouldn't even need anger management classes.

"Yes, Molly will be fine. I put her in her room," he said, curtly.

I didn't even bother to question him on how he knew which room was Molly's. Five years of lurking in bushes will get you some pretty interesting firsthand knowledge of the other person.

I looked at the two very different and very beautiful men who stood before me. So many strings were attached with each of them that I wondered how my life had come to this. Things had been normal for me. Well, except for the appearing out of nowhere five years ago, having no memory of my past, getting engaged and unengaged in a matter of six months. Yeah, I'd say things had been normal.

"I'll come with you," Gregory said.

"No, I'll accompany you." Guytano shouted more at Greg, than me.

"Neither one of you are coming with me. You two seem to be violence magnets. I'll take my chances on my own thanks."

I walked past Gregory and locked the door. Molly would be fine. I planned to be back within an hour anyway. I snatched my purse up off the chair and headed down the steps leaving the two of them staring at me. I didn't want to play peacemaker. If they wanted to kill each other I wouldn't stand in their way anymore. I needed to see Payton. I'd almost forgotten about him in all the confusion.

The walk to the old mill wasn't too long. It was eerily quiet. I had a newly developed case of the goose bumps. I glanced behind me once. I thought I could feel someone there. I saw no one. Finding out what Guytano was had gotten my imagination running on overtime. Every bush I walked past I pictured a huge werewolf waiting to devour me. Every flutter in the trees above made me think of a killer vampire waiting to strike. I wondered how many other creatures of nightmarish tales were real, and in what numbers did they live among humans. Every shadow now looked like a possible threat. Panic gripped my body.

My heart was pounding so loudly that I could hear it. I ran full force toward the mill. Why had I let Payton talk me into this? I hit the metal door so hard that I fell through it. I landed hard on the concrete floor. The thin khaki material that I wore provided no protection.

Feet appeared before me. The sight of the rather large, shiny black dress shoes made me tense up. I stood slowly. I didn't have to look up to know who it was.

"So glad you could make it." Torin's loud voice rocked me.

I had to fight to keep my balance. I let my eyes scan the length of his body. He was so tall that I had to take a step back to look into his face. He smiled down at me. My mind told me to run like the wind but my body wasn't cooperating. I didn't feel him clouding my mind. That was a good thing. I knew enough now to recognize his prickly energy for what it was - he was a vampire. I now understood the signs.

I managed to get my right foot to take a step backwards. I was starting to see a pattern here and odds weren't good that this would end pretty.

"Leaving so soon?" Torin asked. "You've only just arrived. I have a present for you."

"A present?" I asked.

"Yes, it is customary for a gift to be given to one's mate," he said. I looked up at him. There was no way in hell I was going to mate with him. The vampire thing was creepy enough, add that to the guy's size and you had me scared. Besides, this guy had some serious character flaws.

"I think that there's been some mistake... You see, I umm, I have someone in my life right now ... at least I think I do, and he's well, he's not really going to want to share me, so I'm going to have to politely



decline your very generous offer." I made another attempt to leave. Hands seized my shoulders. I screamed.

"Oh, really Torin, when you summoned me I thought that you'd found the perfect woman." A cool female voice said next to my ear. "This one's a little jumpy, don't you think?"

Torin looked down at me. "I have tasted her. She tastes of power and sex." He looked down at me and gave me his best attempt at a smile. For a guy who was turning out to be psychotic, his smile wasn't that bad.

The woman gripping my shoulders pushed me toward Torin. I stumbled and fell into his massive chest. Falling into a brick wall would have been softer than he was. His arms shot around me and he kept me from falling to the ground. He lifted me and tossed me over his wide shoulder. I didn't bother to struggle. From this position I could clearly make out the woman who had grabbed me. She was gorgeous. Her red hair was cut close to her head. She was tall and fit. She had that perfect body builder's body that so many women tried to achieve. I got a view most men would kill for down the front of her leather cat suit. One of her breasts alone was bigger than my head. I wasn't sure how she'd gotten them in that outfit. She looked up at me. Her face was square. I looked at her features closer. She reminded me of someone.

"Sive, where do you want me to put her?" Torin asked.

Sive? That was the name that Torin spoke of to Guytano. My body tightened up. I was in deep shit if this was one of Guytano's scorned lovers. She screamed vampire and evil in a big way. She caught me looking at her and flashed her fangs at me. I winked at her, realizing it was a huge mistake the minute I saw her hand fly up. She struck my cheek with such a force that my vision blurred for a moment. Torin tossed me down onto a pile of unfolded cardboard boxes. My cheek burned; it was on fire. I brought my hand up to it gingerly and Torin bent down to look at me.

"I want her whole to bed tonight, Sive," he said.

Sive's heels clicked loudly and she poked her leather-clad body out from around Torin's. "Oh, dear brother of mine it was a harmless tap." She glared at me, daring me to argue with her on the matter.

"Harmless tap my ass," I said. Her face twisted around. She made a lunge for me and Torin's arm came out to stop her.

He peered down at me. "I would not provoke her if I were you, little witch. She has quite a nasty temper." He bent down and took my arms behind my back, tying a piece of satin rope around my wrists in the process. It was courteous of him not use plain old rope. I would have thanked him if I wasn't positive his motives were purely personal. He didn't want me damaged. He couldn't have as much fun with me if I was hurt. I shuddered.

"Are you cold?" Torin asked. The sincerity in his voice caught me by surprise.

Sive gave him a nasty look and turned her head with disgust. "I'll get the others."

I watched her walk away and was suddenly very aware of how alone I was with Torin. Having Sive hovering over me making threats seemed better than being alone with him. Her intentions seemed clear, beat me then kill me. His weren't so clear cut. I looked up at him warily.

"Torin," I let his name roll off my tongue. He stopped moving. "Torin, why tie me up? Don't you want me to be with you because I want to?"

This made him smile, as he brought his large hand out to touch my face. "I have no cares if you like me or not. Once I bring you over, you will do as I say."

This made my throat tight. He wasn't planning to rape me. No, he was planning on making me into a vampire, and then claiming me as his mate. I pushed backwards with my legs. My body moved across the cardboard smoothly. Torin loomed over me. "If you keep struggling, I will knock you out. You need not be conscious. In fact, you may actually prefer not to be." I had no reason not to believe him, so I sat still. Payton would be coming soon. Part of me was relieved, the other part was terrified. He'd be no match against the evil Vaughn-fang family.

"Torin, untie me and I'll follow your orders." If he was like Guytano he could sense a lie. I gave it my all to believe in what I was saying. Besides, I wasn't planning on running. I was planning on trying to kill him. Perhaps vamps couldn't sense truth with technicalities. I could only hope.

Torin walked closer to me. I batted my eyes at him. I'd never been much of a flirter. There was no better time to give it a try. I moved my face as close to his as I could. "My, what a thick neck you have. Is all of you like that?" I lowered my voice considerable, trying not to gag on my own lies.

I thought I sounded like a deranged lunatic, but to a man, I most likely sounded sexy. Torin's jaw tightened and his gaze flickered downward. He was thinking about it.

"If I let you go, will you runaway?" he asked.

"No," I said, truthfully.

He seemed to think about it for a minute. His head shook slightly and pulled back. I panicked and did the only thing I could think of doing, I licked his lower lip. His lips came down on my mouth with such a force that it made me cry out. This must have sounded encouraging because his body slid up and over mine. The pressure of his large frame with my arms tied behind my back made my shoulders feel like they were about to snap.

I tried to push him off me with my legs. It was a little like trying to move a bus with my pinky finger. He wasn't budging. My left shoulder pulled so hard that I was sure that it was starting to tear. The pain was so excruciating that a wave of heat came over me. I turned my head up to try to regain my thoughts. I caught a glimpse of white blond hair from behind a set of crates. More pain shot through my shoulder. I wanted to cry out. I looked again in the direction where I'd seen the streak of blond. Gregory was moving quietly toward us. He had his index finger pressed tightly to his lips. I nodded my head. No way in hell was I about to give him away.

Torin pulled away. "No, don't go. I want to touch you... I want to run my fingers over your body," I said. I meant every word of it too. I did want to touch him. I wanted to touch him long enough to yank his heart out too. Somehow I got the feeling that this guy was a hell of a lot more powerful than the wanna-be cowboy from the bar. No, tearing his heart out wouldn't work, but that didn't stop me from wanting to try.

Torin moved his hands down my sides. I thought he was going for the ropes at first. His fingers touched my waist. They lingered there for a minute, before moving between my legs and cupping my mound. He took a deep breath in and his eyelids fluttered. It was plain to see what Torin was packing beneath his slacks, because they were pulled taut. His erection was obvious and I had to fight with my body to keep it from going rigid. I glanced backwards. Gregory was gone.

"I didn't come all this way for you to skip the necessary steps." Sive's voice boomed out. Torin sat up quickly. I would've laughed at a man his size being scared of his sister, but my arm hurt too bad to do anything. Sive bent over me. "So, you are the one that Torin found Guytano with."

She reached out and pinched my chin in her hand. She turned my head to the left and to the right. Her eyes were the same shade of green as Torin's. When they locked on me, all I saw was jealousy.

"I take it that you know Guytano." I said with my lips poked out from her tight grasp on me.

"Yes, you might say that. We were lovers for over thirty years. I was with him right up until he grew a conscience," she said.

"What? Did he stop eating children?" I said, sarcastically. I was willing to talk any route that would prevent me from picturing the two of them being intimate, even if it meant getting my ass kicked.

She looked down at me surprised. "Yes, as a matter of fact he did. The Mistress was most displeased with him after that. She always taught us to be ruthless. Guytano's newfound bleeding heart routine did not impress her. Guytano's sire is even worse than my own. He will tear Guy's heart out and feed it to him."

Well, it worked. I wasn't thinking about them being intimate anymore. I was now thinking about them slaughtering children. I looked into Sive's face. Her beauty was undeniable. I didn't want to see what lay underneath that. I couldn't. If Sive changed into something hideous then I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to look at Guytano the same again. She leaned in close to me, and I saw her lips come toward mine. I knew what she was planning on doing. A kiss would be fine, but no, she was planning to strike out at me--bite me. I could almost smell her desire to taste me. I wasn't in the mood to be a snacking buffet, so I fell backwards and threw my feet up. I came into contact with her stomach and kicked out as hard as I could. The pain in my shoulders was unbearable, I cried out, unable to see if I had knocked her down.

There was no way I was going to be able to get to my feet in time. I rolled away. Each roll felt like someone was jabbing a hot poker into my arm socket. By the third one, I was all but numb. I got into a seated position and looked around frantically. There was no sign of Sive. I seriously doubted that she'd flown the coop. No, she was one who would want to make someone suffer. She'd be back, and I wanted to be ready for her. I used my legs to slide myself backwards. I pushed out hard and decided to make an attempt at standing up. Something grabbed hold of my wrists, and I screamed.

"It's me," I heard Gregory's voice say. Part of me still wanted to scream, not because he scared me, but because it seemed like a great tension reliever. Gregory loosened the ropes, and he rubbed my hands over and over again. Feeling returned slowly to them. At first, it was that shooting, prickly pain that you can't escape, and then it was a dull throbbing ache. I tried to move my hands forward to look at them. My shoulders wouldn't cooperate.

Gregory's face moved next to my ear. "Do you trust me?" he asked. Since I didn't really have much of a choice I nodded my head yes. He seized hold of my shoulders. I knew better than to cry out even though every part of me wanted to. He held tight. Heat swelled up behind me. At first I thought a fire had broken out and then I realized that the heat was coming from Gregorios. That's why he'd asked if I trusted him, he knew that after his confession about the battle of Mursa it would seem like he was trying to burn me. I thought back to the fires in the dream with the hooded man. As close as they had come, they had never once hurt me. Looking like you were going to bake someone alive and not doing it seemed to be the running theme on trustworthiness lately. I really needed to surround myself with normal people.

I closed my eyes and chased any thoughts of Gregory burning me alive out of my mind. He moved closer. I could feel his breath on the top of my head as he whispered something. It sounded like he was speaking in Latin. I didn't let my guard down to listen. If I did, then I was sure that I wouldn't be able to keep quiet. I didn't know where Sive and Torin were, and I didn't want to alert them that I was being freed. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. I scanned the room.

"Behind us!" I shouted out, unsure how I knew that we'd been flanked.

Gregory's hand shot off of me. He cried out as his weight was ripped away from me. I put my hands on the floor and pushed off to stand up. No pain. I made a mental note to keep a bottle-of-Gregorios next to my bed at all times for pain relief. He was cuter than a bottle of aspirin that much was for sure. Besides, every time he touched me I wanted to sink into his arms, so I could get used to having him around.

I stood and turned. Torin held Gregory with one hand. Gregory's head was slumped down. I made a movement to run to him.

"Who to choose? Who to choose?" Sive said. I looked behind me. She stood there holding Payton in front of her. She had his head tipped back. I looked at his neck. He had bite marks covering the length of it. The vomit

rose up, as the realization of them having Payton since the night at my house hit me. I had no doubt that he'd been tortured. I scanned the rest of his body. It was only then that I noticed that he was naked. Sive pulled his head back further, and opened her fanged mouth wide.

"Don't, please!" I screamed out. "He's a doctor. He saves people... Please don't do this to him, he's a good man." Her green eyes locked on me. She was enjoying hearing me beg. I promised myself right then and there that I would kill that bitch. I glanced back at Torin. Gregory's body was still limp in his hand. I didn't have time to marvel at Torin's inhuman strength. I looked back at Payton and took a step toward him.

"So you've made your decision then?" Sive asked. I looked at Payton's body. His skin no longer held the same deep tan color it had. My first thought was blood loss. My second was to the phone call I'd gotten from him--the one where he invited me down to the mill, and where he wanted to know if he was "still welcome in my home." Guytano had needed me to invite him in and he was a vampire. I looked Payton's body over, and found what I was looking for. Bite marks lined his inner thighs. He was one of them now. I had no doubt about it. Gregory wasn't and I wasn't willing to let them have him. I spun around and went at Torin. He put his hand up to block my body. I swung my foot out and managed to hit his knee.

Gregory's body fell down on me. I put my hands up to catch him but the force of him hitting me sent us both falling to the floor. I scrambled to get out from under him. I managed to get in a seated position. I cradled him on my lap and looked up Torin. He didn't look pleased.

"Tell me witch, why did you pick the magic man?" Sive asked. I didn't take my eyes off of Torin. He was only two feet away from us. I'd seen how fast vampires can be. He was well within killing distance.

"I picked the magic man..." I stopped and stroked Gregory's head. He stiffened under my touch and touched my leg. He was okay, but not moving. Smart man indeed. "I picked him because he still had a soul to save." I turned to look at Payton. "That's not my Payton anymore."

Payton's eyes fluttered open and he hissed at me. There was something very snake-like in his demeanor. He moved with fluidness that humans do not possess. I looked for signs of the Payton Sullivan I knew. All I found was his shell. I closed my eyes to try to stop the tears from flowing. I failed. Gregory's finger rubbed the side of my leg harder. I leaned into him and cradled him in my arms tight.

"Guytano," Gregory whispered to me. I couldn't help myself. My head shot up and I looked wildly around the old mill. Sive's laughter echoed around us, and I could hear Payton's snarls. I couldn't look at him like that. I couldn't remember him as a monster. I looked up at Torin. His green eyes softened.

"Why are you not happy with my gift?" he asked. He looked genuinely hurt. It took me a minute to realize that the gift he was referring to was Payton. He had grand illusions of us being together and his 'gift' to me was Payton. In a warped way, it made sense. He found someone that I trusted and had feelings for and brought him over. I was suddenly angry with myself for following Guytano into the mill in the first place. I should have minded my own business. Payton and I would be living together right now, not doing this. We'd most likely be at a show or dinner together right now enjoying each others company. No, no I had tried to play the hero, and look where it had gotten me.

"Guytano," I said his name with disgust.

"Ha! You think your precious little Guytano will come and save you," Sive said. I was beginning to see that she had a way of sounding condescending with little to no effort. "He is long gone. He is a coward. He ran from my Mistress long ago. He hid among the living, so she could not punish him without fear of the human's finding out about her. He has found protection with the others like him--the ones that think that they can make a life for themselves with mortals. They will soon see that the mortals will reject them and that they are no longer welcome with their own kind." She laughed. It sent a chill up my spine. "No, I do not think Guytano will help you now. No, not unless he and his companions can have the movie rights."

A loud clapping noise came from the far end of the mill floor. Everyone but Gregory turned to see the source of the noise. There, dancing along the shadows of the room was Guytano. He was dressed like a gothic hit man. He looked like he'd been dipped in leather. The long trench coat sealed the deal. He was truly a superstar and I hated him. Every ounce of me wanted to tear his throat out. He brought this on us. It was his longstanding fight with Torin that brought them here, and now the Payton I knew was dead.

"Very lovely speech, Sive," Guytano said. He continued to clap softly as he spoke. "Did you just make that up, or was it borrowed? I truly hope that your not repeating the Mistress verbatim again, it is so like you to not form an original thought."

I watched her face harden. She hated Guytano more than I did at the moment. I wondered what her reasoning for it was. My guess was that she was a scorned lover, but hey, what did I know? "The Mistress is on her way. When she arrives you will pay for your disloyalty. She will wipe that arrogant look from your face."

Guytano looked at Payton, then to Gregory and me. "I think it is you who will pay tonight, not I," he said, as Sive hissed at him. Torin lunged over the top of us and toward Guytano. Gregory looked up at me.

"They'll kill him," he said softly.

"He's already dead."

"That's not how you really feel. When your mind is clear, you'll regret this."

No, it wasn't how I really felt. I knew that the psycho-twins would be the end of Guytano and a minute ago I wanted to kill him myself. No matter how angry I got at him, no matter how much I blamed him for what happened, he didn't deserve what they would give him. I pushed Gregory up from me. He stood without a problem. He was a fast healer that much was for sure. He put his foot out and kicked a wooden crate. Pieces of it flew out. He caught two stakes in midair and tossed me one.

"Do you know what to do with that?" he asked.

I looked down at the wooden weapon in my hand. Part of me wanted to drop it and run. In some deep recess of my mind that was one of the worst weapons to see your opponent have. The sane part of me, the one that was having trouble finding the surface lately, knew exactly what to do with it. I nodded at Gregory. He winked at me and looked over toward the now fighting vampires.

"Play nice boys and girls," he said. I had to laugh a little when I saw the look on Sive's face. It was when Payton stepped out that my laugh died away. My heart shattered into a million pieces. My feelings for him ran deeper than I thought.

"I can't kill him," I said, weakly.

"Then go," Gregory said.



I thought about dropping my stake and leaving. I thought about running as far away from the fabulous life of Guytano, mega-Hollywood-hunk, as I could, and then I thought about Payton. He'd always been so caring and had dedicated his life to saving people. He would not have wanted me to leave him like this. He wouldn't want to be a monster. I gripped the stake tightly in my hand. I walked toward the vampires. Dark shadows flew out at Gregory and me. We ducked down, narrowly avoiding being struck. I turned and looked around. The mill was now crawling with dozens of vampires. I backed up into Gregory.

"Looks like the party started early," Gregory said.

"Any ideas?"

"Yeah, don't fall on the pointy end of the stake, and try not to get your neck snapped or bitten," he said. I laughed. Humor was the only thing that was keeping me from screaming, so I went with it. "You take the ugly one."

I looked around. None of them looked remotely human. "So, what you're saying is I have to fight them all?"

This time it was Gregory's turn to laugh. "One, two, three!"

We both took off forward. It took everything in me to run full force at a group of vampires. My eyes locked on one with reddish brown hair and fangs the size of quarters. I think it was a she; it had breasts. She looked at me and lunged toward me. I let my body do what came naturally. I'd learned fighting Guytano that I had some skill when it came to hand-to-hand combat, and I was guessing that being a Valkyrie had something to do with that.

Bringing the stake up, I stepped to the left. The she-vamp kept coming at me and her own body weight forced the wood straight into her heart. I expected her to go poof, but she didn't. She did, however, fall to the floor with my only weapon still deep within her chest. I looked up and found myself face to face with an even uglier vampire. Great.

The new vamp was an odd grey color. His brown hair was cut close to his head. Several gold earrings lined his ears. He was dressed like he was ready to walk down a runway, but his face looked more like roadkill at the moment. He snarled at me. The thick scent of blood hung from his breath. I fanned the air before my face and plugged my nose with my other hand. "Did something die in there or have you just given up on

mouthwash? Wait, let me guess, you've stopped drinking blood and started eating roadkill." He pulled back from me and looked down. I took this opportunity to punch him in the jaw. My hand cracked. His head tipped back, I went to try another repeat performance of my hand through the chest heart removal. I shoved my right hand at his heart. This time I didn't break his skin, but was pretty sure I broke at least two of my fingers.

"Try not to call up any magic." Gregory's labored voice came to me. He was trying to hold a conversation with me while he beat the crap out of vampires. Surprisingly enough, he was doing pretty well. He'd amassed quite the little pile of dead vampires around him and was still going strong.

I cried out and pulled my hand back to my body. "No worries there."

"It's a good thing, 'cause the more magic we call the more the supernatural critters will show up," he said, over the sound of the fighting.

I took another swing at the vampire. I missed. It grabbed me by my neck. I clawed at his hand, trying to get him to release me. No air was moving into my lungs. I was expending too much energy struggling with him, so I stopped. My vision blurred from lack of oxygen. I pulled my foot back and brought it hard into his most prized possession. I had no time to brace myself. He let go of me, and I plummeted to the floor. I fought to take a breath.

"Oh joy, oh joy! I am happy that I came to see the show. I would have been most upset if I would have missed it," a heavily accented feminine voice said. The vampires around me backed away. Their attentions were no longer on killing me so much as they were on staring at the newest arrival. As I rubbed my sore throat I turned to see the source of the silence. I had to blink twice, I didn't believe my eyes.

"Camille," I let her name fall from my lips. She spun on her three inch white high heels and looked at me. Her white pantsuit was a far cry from the naked pile of bodies I'd dreamt of her in, but it was her all the same. Her blond head of curls framed her delicate face. Eyes of green stared out at me and I could see her try to register who I was. Her head moved back and forth slowly.

A ruckus from her left caught her attention. She turned and looked as Torin held Guytano's head back. Sive was standing before him with a

small knife out. Guytano's chest was sliced open in two different spots that I could see, but with the amount of blood running down him I was betting those weren't his only wounds. I watched as Sive plunged the knife deep into Guytano's throat. I gasped.

"Enough!" Camille ordered.

Both Torin and Sive played the part of the obedient children. Sive pulled the knife from Guytano's neck and Torin held him up to keep him from falling. I watched as blood dripped down Guytano. His eyes met mine. He was still alive, or whatever it was that he called himself. He looked back at Camille. It was easy to see the terror in his dark black eyes.

Camille walked toward me. She was being flanked by twin beauties. Both men were just a little taller than me, naked, and wearing studded collars. The girl knew how to travel, if you were into that sort of thing. I staggered to my feet and looked at her. I got the sense that she was powerful, but I was not afraid of her. I'd seen her at her worst. I'd been privy to the night she was made.

"No, it cannot be," she said, sounding astonished. "You are gone. You are dead. I saw you die, I saw..." She appeared before me, and her tiny hand came out to touch my cheek. I didn't move away. I let her touch me. Her icy cold hand rubbed across my skin. "You are warm," she said, as she pulled her hand away.

"Leave her out of this, Camille. It is me that you are after, not her." Guytano said. His voice was hoarse. Torin was still holding him up. From where I stood, it looked like he was even trying to stop some of Guy's bleeding. I wondered if Torin would have been on the bad guy's side had his sister not been insane.

Camille turned to Guytano. "Yes, I will admit that my intentions were to bring you back with me and to make you beg for my forgiveness ... but now," she looked at me, "now, I am most curious as to how you came to know this woman."

Guytano looked at me. "Valerie?"

"Valerie?" Camille asked. She tipped her head back and laughed. "Oh, my how you do bear a remarkable resemblance to someone I once knew. Your warm skin should have told me that you could not be who I thought you were." She waived her hand back toward Guytano. "Since you have nothing to hold my interest here, let us go. Take him!"

"Camille, the unblemished one," I said, never once wavering. "You were a poor man's whore when I found you, and now you're a sadistic bitch. My how you've grown. It's interesting to see you running the show. You were always such a follower."

She stopped and stared at me. "No ... it cannot be."

Gregory walked forward. His shirt was soaked in blood. I expected that some of it was indeed his. He seemed okay, so I didn't panic, yet. When Camille saw him she backed away from me. "I watched you, magic-man, run your sword through her chest. I watched you slay her... I watched ... no. She was powerful, but even she could not survive that."

I looked at Gregory. He tipped his head down slightly and he nodded. He was confirming what she said was true. He had indeed stuck a sword through my chest. He took another step toward me, but kept his eye on Camille.

"I had no idea that you were watching," Gregory said to Camille. Something registered across his face. "You, you were the one responsible... All these years I thought that it was...."

"Me," a deep voice said.

I looked to my left and watched as one of the sexiest men I've ever seen walked toward me. His six foot tall muscled body was covered in designer clothing. The red mesh short-sleeve shirt he wore showed off his muscular arms. His black dress pants were definitely tailor made. I rescanned the length of him. I ended up on his squared face. He had a face that commanded respect and made you look at his full lips. His skin was so pale, yet it had an edge of creaminess. A head of wavy black curls that hung to mid-back and matched his eyes perfectly.

"Lucha, how nice to see you," Camille said.

I glanced at Guytano. He had looked scared of Camille. He looked at Lucha like he was the Devil himself. It's never good when the vampires are scared of something, too. Gregory moved his body toward me and took a protective stance in front of me. "Yes, Lucha, I thought that you were the one who slaughtered the villagers. I received word that it was under attack. When I found you there wandering the streets, I thought that you were the one who masterminded Valerie's death."

Lucha looked at Gregory. His eyes were hard for a moment and then softened as he looked past Gregorios to me. He took a step toward me and I moved closer to Gregory's back. I look like a scared child and that was pretty close to how I felt. Lucha stopped coming toward me and set his attentions back on Gregory.

"I, too, received word that the villagers were under attack. I came to find my sweet Linnea and to stop the senseless killing. When I saw you carrying her dead body, I vowed then and there to kill any human that I came into contact with." He looked at me and tipped his head in shame. "To hide her from me for over a hundred years is quite a feat, Gregorios. I knew that your kind were powerful. I had no idea just how powerful they truly were," Lucha said, his face full of pain. It tore at my gut to see him hurting and I wasn't sure why.

A hundred years? How could Gregorios hide me for that long? Gregory's hand came behind him. He touched my waist and pulled me to him. I didn't fight him.

"Five years," he said, barely above a whisper.

"Pardon me?"

"You heard me Lucha, I said five years. That's how long I've kept her hidden from you, not a hundred. I thought you were the one who..." He turned and looked at Camille before he finished. "I thought you were the one who set Valerie up. She told me before she died that she'd been summoned to the village when she'd heard that you'd gone crazy and were slaughtering innocents. I'd been told that it was a female who was on the killing rampage, so it was obvious someone tipped me off in the hopes that I'd kill Valerie. I assumed that someone was you. I thought that you'd tired of her and were moving onto to that one," he said, pointing at Camille.

Camille came forward. "No, Lucha. It is not Linnea. She is called Valerie. She is not our..."

Lucha's hand shot up. Camille fell silent. "You have always been of simple mind. You know that Valentino's children were renamed. His reasons varied. Even you, Camille, were given a fresh start. That is what she tried to give you, isn't it? But I do believe that Linnea is her true name, so I am not sure how she came to be called Valerie. But I would know her anywhere, regardless of her name." He looked at me for an answer. "Do you have any insight into the matter?"

"Hey buddy, I'm so lost in what's going on here. You might want to defer to someone else," I said. Gregory seized my arm in a death grip. I got his point. This guy was dangerous and I needed to stop taunting him. I looked around the room. We were grossly outnumbered. Even more vampires had arrived with Lucha. Saying that we were surrounded was such an understatement. Saying we were screwed seemed to sum things up nicely.

We weren't leaving the mill alive that much was clear. I touched Gregory's arm. "Can someone tell me what's going on? How is it I know Dracula's bride over there, and how is it that Lucha knows me? And..." I turned to Guytano, "did I know you too?"

Guy shook his head no. His eyebrows rose up as he shrugged. Great, he was as lost as I was. My attentions went to Camille, and her face twisted in disgust. I think the Dracula's bride comment pissed her off. Oh, well. Lucha made a move toward me and I looked at Guytano. He shook his head no. If he thought the guy was dangerous, then I was in trouble. I'd seen the people Guytano hung around with. He didn't act scared of Torin, and he was pretty damn intimidating.

"First, let me see you, Linnea." Lucha said, holding his hand out to me. "Then I will tell you all I know."

Gregory stepped away from me. "No, Lucha, she is not the same. She, she is alive, and of warm body. She's no longer like you. When I turned her over ... after I shoved the sword into her." I put my hand up and stroked his back. I was beginning to view him as a very practical man. If I needed slayin', I needed slayin'. There were no two ways about it. "When I turned her over I saw who she was. That's the point when you must have left Camille. If you would have stayed longer you would have seen that Valerie did not die instantly. She had no memory of me, your Valentino saw to that when he lured her out of hiding and turned her into a vampire. When I told her where she was and what she'd done, she was full of remorse. She conjured a spell that would bring the dead innocents back to life in exchange for her demise. When I looked at her I knew that she could be the wonderful caring woman she'd once been." His shoulders slumped forward. "I tried to beg her to stop, but she ignored me and continued with her magic."

I moved closer to Gregory and put my hand up to caress his back as he spoke. His hand touched my arm and an electric spark leapt between us. My body stiffened. Lucha saw this tiny gesture and his face hardened. I

wasn't sure I wanted to get him pissed off, but I needed to hear what Gregorios had to say, and right now he needed my support.

"Valerie finished the spell and quickly cast another to dislodge the sword from her chest. I could have reversed the death. It was by my own hand and I think part of her knew that. Instinctively, I reached out to stop her. I grabbed the blade, cutting my hand in the process. My blood seeped into her body. She looked at me and remembered me; she remembered everything. She told me that she must battle her demons, and when she was done, she would return."

Lucha took a step forward. He looked like he was going to ask a question, but decided against it. Gregory continued. "She had been gone for a hundred years, and I knew that she would take every minute of that time to atone for what she'd done. I wasn't sure that Valerie would ever feel that she'd sacrificed enough. I knew her well enough to know that she'd gladly spend eternity in hell if need be, so, I summoned her back five years ago. She came to me frightened, beaten, confused, and with no memory of her life. Although she did not tell, I believe her to have been in the depths of hell, literally, fighting for redemption. There was little to no trace of anything civil or human in her. It was to be expected, but seeing the magic that surrounded me scared her. She ran away from me into the night. I did not find her. Several days later, the newspaper told of a mysterious woman with no memory fighting for her life in the hospital. I didn't want to scare her again, so I watched from afar. I have always watched from afar."

"You, you're the mysterious benefactor," I said. Everything suddenly made sense.

He nodded his head. "I have lived for sixteen hundred and eighty-five years. As with most of us here today, we have amassed more money than we could ever dream of spending. Whatever I have is yours, Valerie."

"You should have told me," Lucha said, sternly. "I had a right to know. I loved her too."

Gregory looked up at him. "I thought that you or Kerr were the ones who made her. It was only a few years ago that I learned that it was Valentine who sired her. I didn't notify you that she was back then either because I thought you were the one who called me that day telling me about the upyr killing innocents."

"Linnea never killed an innocent and I was made long after her. Valentino thought it funny to kill me after he found out about our affair. She tried to stop it but she arrived too late. The best she could do was to offer me a choice, death or eternity as a vampire."

"Linnea?" Guytano asked.

He walked toward me. I looked around. None of Camille's people were here. They had used our revelations period to cut out. I couldn't say that I blamed them. If I'd been smart enough to take off, I'd have done it too.

"No, you can't be the legendary Linnea they speak of..." Guytano's voice was hushed.

"Master," I turned to see who was speaking. A thin man with a head of yellow hair was standing near the entrance to the mill. His hair hung to his waist and was slightly wavy. His skin was pure white, and his eyes were amber. He looked like someone had just yanked him into this time from one long ago. My guess was that he was from the days of Vikings, and knowing this bunch I was probably right.

"Paging this century," I said aloud and surprised even myself.

Gregorios laughed under his breath. The blond-haired man turned his attention to me. His eyes widened and he took a step backwards. I scared the guy. I found that pretty funny since I was ready to wet myself about an hour ago. He looked to Lucha for guidance. Lucha nodded his head in approval.

"Mistress Linnea," blond-boy said, and dropped to one knee as he said it. I turned and looked behind me convinced that another sneaky vamp-chick was standing there. No one was there. I glanced at Gregory. He looked as lost as I felt. Guytano made a move to come to me.

Lucha looked at the new arrival. "Yes, Folco, it is Linnea, but she is not the same. She is no longer one of us." Lucha put his hand out to Guytano, who was still trying to make his way to me. "Stop! I will deal with you later."

Guytano froze in place and looked at me. I could see how very sorry he was. I was suddenly angry with myself for blaming him for all of this. From the way it sounded I was in it long before he was. The only catch was that I didn't know I was playing the game. I watched as Guytano ignored Lucha's orders to stay put and moved back toward me. Lucha



moved so quickly that he blindsided Guytano. His hand came out fast. He struck Guytano mid-chest, and sent him flying backwards.

"No!" I screamed out and ran to Guytano. Gregory tried to grab me, but I dodged out of his reach. I cried out for Guytano to "Go, fly away!" He didn't move. His body was limp on the floor. My feet lifted off the ground. I wasn't moving anymore. I was being turned around in someone's arms. At first, I thought Gregory had managed to stop me, and then I saw the black head of wavy curls. Lucha. I looked into his dark eyes and looked for the evil monster that everyone here feared. All I saw was a man who oozed sexuality and made most cover models look ugly. He set me down on the floor so that we would be standing face to face. He kept his hands resting lightly on my arms. I was betting that being gentle with me was harder for him than it looked.

"Why do you run after him? Do you know what he is?" he asked.

"Yes, he's Guytano, he's a vampire, and he's my friend."

Lucha looked over me at the slumped Guytano. "You do not fear him? You do not view as a monster?"

"No, I don't view him as a monster. I..." I searched for the right words to describe how I felt for Guytano. I didn't love him, that much I was sure of. I did care for him, though I wasn't sure it was only as a friend. "I..."

Lucha's eyes swirled with flecks of orange. He tightened his grasp on me. "You have been intimate with him." He said it like he was positive it was true. I shook my head no and Lucha looked back at Gregory who was now standing within ten feet of us with his gun drawn. Lucha didn't look very concerned about being shot. "Have you been intimate with him as well?"

I opened my mouth to deny all of this but changed my mind in mid-thought. "How dare you show up here and assume, no demand to know who I've been with. I don't really give two shits how you know me. I don't know you at all and you will not stand there and threaten me with your creepy vampire tricks. Are we clear?" I reached up to pull his hands away from me. He yanked me to him. His lips met mine hard at first, then softer. I struggled against his kiss, at first, not wanting to give into his dominant male trip. My body took over, wanting him more than life itself. I bit at his lower lip and his tongue danced cleverly around mouth. We drank one another, pulling, kissing, sucking, biting until tiny moans escaped from us.

Lucha caressed my face, shoulder, then back, coming to a stop when his hands reached the small of my back. He formed tiny circles there and matched the movement with his tongue. I panted, damp with the anticipation of having him deep within me. I wanted him to throw me down on the floor and ravish me.

"Let her go!" Gregory shouted, breaking the moment of passion that Lucha and I shared.

Lucha stiffened and drew his lips back from me slowly. "Amore eternal," he whispered with a sigh. He was the man from my dream, my lover, the one who told me that he'd see me soon. He had indeed found me.

"Don't hurt him, Gregory!"

"Valerie, get away from him," he shouted.

"Gregory is right Valerie, get away from him." Guytano said from behind me. "Lucha is extremely dangerous."

"He's not going to hurt me and he won't hurt you either." I looked at him. "Will you?"

I caught a small smile creep onto his face. "You had only but to ask, I have always obeyed you," he said, as he let go of my arms and stepped backwards. Gregory eyed Lucha suspiciously as he walked over to me. He looked me over for obvious signs of being turned into a vamp. I thought that was cute.

"I'm not sure you should trust him." A look of uncertainty came over Gregory's face.

Lucha glanced at me and held my gaze. "I would never harm you, this is the truth. Well, not unless you asked me too." The promise of ecstasy in his words did little in the way of helping my wet panties problem.

Guytano was suddenly very close to my back. "He speaks the truth. I have known Lucha for a hundred years and he has never once broken his word."

## Chapter 16

An awkward silence followed us as we made our way out of the old mill. I walked very close to Guytano. This, I'm sure, did not sit well with Lucha or Gregory. The only one who seemed relatively unaffected by my choice was Folco. The Nordic looking vampire had been careful to stay as far away from me as he could. That made me wonder what kind of person I really was. On one hand, I had Gregory talking about how sweet and wonderful I was, and on the other I had vampires terrified of me. My pocket beeped. I jumped, so did Guytano.

"Cell phone," I said, reaching in grab it out. "Yeah?"

"What? We've dispensed with greetings altogether now?" Dillon's voice sounded like music to my ears. I knew then that it had been a rough night when a cheating ex-fiancé sounded good.

"Sorry, it's been rather interesting around here lately."

"You can say that again. That's what I'm calling you about. Shit's hit the fan over there. I got a call about an hour ago telling me that the local sheriff called in the state police." Dillon's voice broke up a little.

"Valerie, I think you should lock your doors tight. Call Joe and have him come down with you and Molly till I get there."

This wasn't like Dillon. I knew he would try just about anything to get in my pants again, but scaring the hell out me wasn't one of them. "Dillon, what's going on?"

He was silent for a minute. "Valerie, the sheriff ... his men were responding to a call, and ... and his men claimed that the assailants

weren't human." He let out a forced laugh. "Now, I know that sounds crazy, but Valerie, I've known Sheriff Robinson for ten years now. He's not one to exaggerate and if they're calling me for expert advice it's bad."

I squeezed Guytano's cold hand. No, the sheriff had been right in his fears. The problem now was how much damage had Camille's people caused. "I believe you. I can't tell you how I know this, but Sheriff Robinson is right." I took a deep breath. "How bad is it?"

"It's bad enough that I'm heading that way now. As far as I can tell so are the state police, along with several of the city cops. Valerie, promise me you'll stay at Molly's house. Get the bat out of the hall closet. Hit anything that moves. Put on the necklace I gave you, the one with the silver cross. Don't ask me why, just do it, okay?"

"Don't come here Dillon. I'm fine. I have several friends with me now. We're on our way back to my house. Trust me when I say they are much better equipped to deal with the problem than the police, and even you." I said, hoping that he'd leave well enough alone and not come.

He protested, angry with me for being out and about on a night like this. I couldn't go into details. He didn't need to know what was going on, at least not yet anyway. I made him swear not to come. He made me promise to give him a second chance. I didn't want too, but I wanted to see him hurt less than I wanted to stay mad at him. I agreed.

"What did Dillon want?" Gregory asked.

I turned and looked at him, a bit shocked. "You know Dillon?"

"I told you that I've been watching over you since you ... umm ... got back. Of course I know who Dillon is. I thought I'd be watching you walk down the isle already. It's a real shame that didn't work out." The way he said it told me that he was happy that I didn't end up marrying Dillon. Lucha looked over at me. I glared at him. He didn't bother to accuse me of anything. I think he knew I'd attack him. Guytano's grip tightened on my hand. It was a subtle warning, but a warning all the same.

"Can someone answer a question for me?" I asked.

All the men, except for Folco, said yes. "Will Payton ever be the same?"

Guytano responded first. "Valerie, you need to understand that there is an adjusting period once you've been made. Dependant upon who your

maker is, you may or may not retain characteristics from when you were human."

I thought about Payton's touch and his caring face. He had been my friend for five years, and now my lover. He had fought hard to save my life. If there was a chance I could save his, I had to know. "You seem somewhat normal to me."

Guytano smiled. "I'm also a hundred years dead. Your friend is only a day or two into it, and he's been exposed to a great deal of violence."

"What about you?" I asked looking at Lucha.

His eyebrow rose up. "I would like to think you would remember that, after all you made me."

I stopped walking. Guytano didn't and he nearly yanked me over. He reached out and caught me as he gave me an apologetic look. I turned to Lucha, horrified. He had just confirmed my suspicion. I was a vampire. I was a member of the blood drinkers' club. How many people had I slaughtered? How many people did I make into monsters?

"I'm so sorry." I said as I walked over to him. Guytano didn't want to let go of my hand I had to pry my fingers out of his tight grasp. "I am so sorry that I did this to you."

Lucha looked down at me and touched my cheek lovingly. He brought away a tear. I didn't know I was crying. "Do not weep for me. It was long ago. You gave me the choice to live as this or to die. You made me be the one to decide. I picked this, and the two of us spent many, many years together. The only regret I have is losing you."

I was crying even harder now. It was Gregory's clearing his throat that brought me back. Guytano was pressed against my back. I had been so captivated by Lucha's speech that I hadn't heard Camille's people surrounding us. The twin blond men that had been accompanying her stood very close to Lucha and me. There were at least a half dozen other vampires that formed a circle around us. The two blonds looked at each other and then back at us. They smiled. I watched in horror as their faces twisted. Their noses spread as their faces lengthened before my eyes. Tiny hairs sprouted all over their bodies. Their shoulders thickened and their legs widened. I took a step back. My body was firmly pressed against Guytano's.

"They can smell your fear," Guytano said. He didn't attempt to be quiet.

My pulse rate quickened. I looked back at them. They no longer resembled men, they looked like walking wolves. Then it hit me, werewolves. I had only a moment to think about how I'd managed to get myself surrounded by a magic man from Valhalla, vampires, and werewolves. My, how my life had changed, or had it?

One of the wolves lunged at me. Lucha's hand came out and seized the animal by its throat. It let out a whimper as he twisted and snapped its neck.

One down, how many more to go?

My lack of remorse scared me. I should have felt bad, a life had been lost, but I didn't. I knew that this was a case of kill or be killed. There was no way I was going to let these things roam the streets in my town, not if I could help it.

The other wolf made a fast movement at Lucha. A shot fired and it fell backwards into the grass. A hole the size of my fist was showing on its chest. Both Lucha and I turned to look at Gregory. He gave a Gallic shrug and looked down at his gun.

"Silver bullets," he said, grinning.

Lucha nodded and smiled. Nothing like male bonding over lethal toys. Two vampires charged Lucha and a third went for Gregory. I pulled at the back of one of the vamps that had gone for Lucha. It acted like I wasn't even there. It made no movement to get me off it. I was nothing more than a fly to it. I grabbed it by the back of its head. Its short, dyed-blue hair was slicked full of gel. I wondered if that was comfortable to sleep on. I let that thought run through my head for a millisecond before I twisted quickly. The vamp's head jerked violently to the side and its neck snapped. It dropped away from Lucha.

Lucha turned to me. He had the other vampire at arms length. He looked down at the vampire on the ground and back up at me. He nodded his head in approval. Apparently, I'd done a good thing. Kill a vamp, gain a nod--score one for me.

The air behind me moved. A cold staticy tingle slithered up my back. I spun around with my leg extended. My foot came into contact with a

vampire's head. He grabbed my foot and twisted it, sending me to the ground. He took one look at me and then looked at Lucha.

"What the hell?" His voice was tainted with a bit of an accent. If I had to lay money on it, I'd say Scottish. His red hair hung in his eyes, and he pushed it back to get a better look at me. He had that great color of red, not the fake red that you see so many teens trying to wear, but true red. His skin was as pale as Folco's. His eyes were only a few shades lighter blue than my own. "Linnea?"

"I don't know, maybe. I go by Valerie." I extended my hand out to him. It was a brave move on my part. I got the feeling that he was on our side. He hesitated before he accepted my hand, pulling me up gently and bringing my hand to his lips. His kiss was chaste yet I still moaned softly. Heat rushed to my face and I knew I was blushing.

"Aye, it's good to see you again, lass," he said, his voice warming my very soul. "It's been awhile."

"Well, Scotty, you know my name now, what about yours?"

I think I saw him blush. When he spoke again it was with almost perfect English. "I'm sorry, name's Kerr."

"Kerr, see her safely back to her house," Lucha said.

I turned and looked at Gregory. He was in the process of fighting off two more vampires. Guytano was doing the same. Lucha saw my concern. He came to me and touched my cheek. His hand was so cold that I almost pulled away, but I didn't. I turned my face into his palm and closed my eyes for a minute, savoring the way he made me feel. Lucha made a small noise and I looked to find his face full of raw emotion. "I give my word that I will see that they are safe. I cannot watch them and you. Go with Kerr, he will see you to safety."

With that I turned and led Kerr back to Molly's house, I'm not sure why I bothered moving out. I'd spent more time at her place in the last twenty-four hours than at my own home. We were sprinting by the time we reached Molly's. I came to a grinding halt. Her front door stood wide open, and the living room window was smashed in. No lights were on. "Molly!" I screamed as I ran in the front door. I ran into the entrance. I called her name out. No one answered me. I searched with my hands for the light switch. My fingers ran across it, nothing. I had to fight hard to

keep from panicking. I kept my hand on the wall and moved quickly toward the living room.

"Linn ... Valerie," Kerr called out from the porch.

"Come in!"

"Thanks."

"Molly?" I called out. I could feel Kerr close at my back. I knew that he would do as Lucha told him. I wondered how much of his loyalty was to his Master and how much was to me. He touched my shoulder lightly and I panted. I turned toward him wanting desperately to know how I knew this vampire.

"I think we should look upstairs," he said, effectively bringing me back to the task at hand.

"Why?"

"Cause that's where the smell of blood is comin' from," he said, slipping right back into his Scottish accent.

I turned and ran for the steps. It wasn't easy to maneuver in my old house in the dark. I hit the stairs before I thought I would and stumbled up two. Kerr was right behind me guiding me back to my feet. I took the steps two at a time and ran for Molly's room. I felt for her doorknob. Something cool and sticky coated it. I jerked my hand back. It smelled sweet and coppery. It was blood. I reached back down and twisted the handle. The door flew open. I ran in. The room was so dark. There was no moon out tonight and walking in her room was a little like walking in a black hole of nothingness. My knee slammed into the corner of her bed. I jerked it back, and let out a small noise.

"Are you all ri..." Kerr's voice was cut short. I heard a loud boom from the doorway, followed closely by the very obvious sounds of something heavy tumbling down the steps. I turned to run out after him. Molly's door slammed shut.

"No, I think you'll be staying here with me." Payton said. His body blocked the door. I looked around for a weapon of some sort. I couldn't kill him but I wouldn't let him kill me.

"Payton, where's Molly?"



He smiled. He looked like a stranger to me. There was no trace of the Payton I knew. "They let me play with her before you came."

"God, no, Payton, she's your friend."

He licked his lip. "She was a good friend, too."

Molly was dead, she had to be. I knew that now, and I also knew that Payton had killed her. I made a move to the right. He was a blur, his body smashed into mine. We fell back onto the bed and he ripped at my clothes. I slapped and clawed at his bare back.

"Fight if you want, but we both know that you've already given it up to me anyway," he said.

I couldn't argue with that. Things were different now. He wasn't the same man that he was before. I pushed at him to get him off me. I felt him through my thin pants, growing hard. His mouth came down on my lips. He nipped my lip with his fangs. Blood swelled to the surface, and he pressed his body against me with such force that I thought the bed would give out beneath us. I pried him off of my face. My fingers dug at the corners of his mouth. I was pretty sure that I was going to be losing one or two of them if this continued. I'd made up my mind that I'd sacrifice some digits to stay alive.

"Dr. Sullivan!" I screamed into his face. "DOC!" He blinked at me.

"Valerie?" he asked. He looked down at me. "Are you hurt?" His hand squeezed my breast hard. He let go of it immediately and looked down at himself. He was naked and covered in blood. "Valerie, honey what's going on?"

"I'll tell you what's going on." Sive's voice came at us from the doorway. "You are mine now and I demand you to fuck her and then kill her."

Payton looked down at me. His eyes widened. "What? Valerie? I don't want to..." he stopped. I'm glad he did because we both knew that he most certainly did want to fuck me. It's the killing me part that had him stumped.

"Do you dare to defy me?" Sive sounded livid. "Kill her!"

I saw the struggle happening within Payton. He looked down at me and then leaned forward kissing my cheek gently. "Run!" he whispered. He rolled off me and went for Sive. I turned and scrambled off Molly's bed.

I tripped over something lying on the floor. I crawled around in the dark and turned to see what I'd fallen over. There lying before me was Molly. Her eyes were open wide and glossy. Her head was twisted at an odd angle. I knew without touching her that her neck had been broken. Her white work dress had been ripped away from her body. Her breasts were exposed and from the looks of it, she may have been raped. I reached past her and pulled the sheet from the bed. I covered her body with it and slid toward the closet. I couldn't fight it any longer. I threw up near the edge of her closet door.

When I was done I moved my hand up along the edge of the doorframe. My fingers glided over a cool metal pole. I pulled it out and looked down at it. I had forgotten that Molly liked to ski. I'd never gone with her on her trips, but when I saw the pole I made a promise to give it a try, if only for her memory. I picked it up and held it like a pole-vaulter would, waiting for the right moment to leap.

Payton still struggled with Sive. She thrust him aside. I had a clear shot of her chest. My hand went back to throw the pole at her. The door to the room burst open. Lucha stood there looking at me.

"To kill her is to kill your friend," he said.

I looked at Payton. He crawled across the bed toward me. My eyes went down to Molly's sheet covered body. He looked down too and yanked the cover back. He fell before her and checked in vain for signs of life. Sive found this amusing and laughed. Her laugh had gone from sounding sexy to sounding like a cackle. I wanted to ram this pole through her. I wanted to pin her to the wall, spit in her face, and gouge her green eyes out.

I looked at Payton. His hands were covered in Molly's blood. He looked up at me. "She's gone."

"I know," I said softly.

"Did I do this?" he asked. I couldn't answer him, so I just looked away. He let out an ear-piercing scream. The ski pole was ripped from my hands. I looked up to see him charging at Sive. Lucha stepped aside to allow Payton a clear shot. He rammed the pole straight into her.

Her eyes moved to Lucha. "Lucha, my love..."

"Die knowing that you will not be missed, nor have you ever been loved," Lucha said with a slight smile upon his chiseled face.

I watched Payton fall to the floor clutching his chest. I ran to him, dropping to my knees, and cradling his head in my lap. He looked up at me and tried to talk. I put my fingers to his lips and kissed his forehead.

"I know ... you were her puppet. She did this, not you. I love you, Doc." I whispered to him. His blue eyes stayed on me. I kissed his forehead and heard the police sirens coming toward us. I looked up at Lucha. "Don't let them find him here."

"He will be dead before they arrive," he said.

My face grew hot and my insides twisted with rage. "I know that he will! Don't you think I know that I'm losing him? I don't want them to find him here in this mess. The only thing he has left is his name. He was a good man, and I want to make sure he's remembered that way."

"Do you really love him?"

I looked up at Lucha. "Yes."

"Then I shall do what I can." Lucha reached down and picked up Payton's body. I kissed his cool lips and watched as Lucha went to the open window and stepped out with him. The fact that vampires could levitate and fly no longer caught me off guard. I nodded to Lucha and he left. I dropped to the floor and waited for the police to arrive.

## Chapter 17

The house was streaked in red and blue. At least fifteen squad cars littered the street and they all had their lights going. I sat on the curb with a blanket wrapped around me, watching the bodies being removed from the house. The young police officer who had first arrived on the scene was bent over near the neighbor's bushes. He had to be running out of cookies to toss. The police had found several more bodies on the front porch. I'm guessing that they were the vamps that Torin and Sive had brought. Torin wasn't one of the dead and that scared the hell out me. I searched every one of the dead for Kerr. There was no sign of him. I assumed that he made it out all right. Why I was so worried about him was completely beyond me.

I sat there answering the detective's questions quietly. My hands had finally quit shaking.

"Valerie!" I heard Dillon's voice.

I looked up to see him searching around the perimeter for me. His eyes scanned the body bag that was in the process of being carried out and his face paled.

"Dillon!" I called out to him. He looked in my direction. His face lit up as he ran toward me. I stood up and let him hug me. The smell of his expensive aftershave filled my nose. For the first time in almost a year I was happy to smell that again. He whispered something into the top of my head. It took me a minute to make out the words "Thank God."

Dillon stayed with me as the paramedics did another check of me. I refused to go to the hospital. They said I was in shock, but until I passed out, they couldn't force me to be treated. I heard someone calling my name. I looked and saw Joey running toward us. He looked around at all the squad cars.

"Valerie, where's Molly?" he panted.

I looked up at the house. Two men in their early twenties were coming out of the house carrying a body bag. I looked at Joey. Our eyes locked and the reality sunk in. He crumbled to ground and sobbed. I went to him and wrapped my blanket around him. I rocked with him as he cried over losing her. I knew that he had loved with all his heart.

"She loved you too," I said softly to him. He held me close and cried. I looked down the street. In the crowd of gawkers, two in particular stood out. Guytano and Gregory stood side by side, watching from afar. I nodded to them and watched them back away. It wasn't safe for them to reveal themselves to the world. No, the police were on a witch hunt now. They were convinced that a group of drug addicts had formed a satanic cult and believed themselves to be real vampires. I didn't correct them. I thought it would help the people of this town sleep better if they could explain it away.

## Epilogue

Molly's house mysteriously burnt to the ground the day after the horrible instances took place. A few days after I found out about the fire I received a dozen red roses from Lucha. A box of matches took the place of a card. "Amore eternal" was written inside the cover. I smiled. He knew that I'd never wanted to be in that house again and now no one else would be either.

Gregory, as it turns out, is my mysterious tenant Mr. Douglas, and now has an even easier time keeping tabs on me. He swears that he didn't plan for me to buy the home, it just happened. Gregory and I have been trying to get to know each other, again.

Guytano's latest movie is on hold and I think he'll be heading out soon. He says that he doesn't want to leave--I know he's lying. He loves what he does and I can't blame him. He's good at it. He told me that I could have his house. I wasn't interested. He's refusing to sell it. I think he's only keeping it so he can come back and see me. We've become pretty good friends since the ordeal and his movie company, Vampyre Productions, is going to film a movie based on Valkyries. He's even gotten Gregory to promise to help with factual details, not that the public would know if they lied or not.

I haven't seen Lucha since the night of Molly's death. He sends flowers on a regular basis but he doesn't come around. I wish he would. All the death and violence is still fresh in my mind and losing Payton has left a hole in my heart. Lucha might hold the key to filling that, even if he is a vampire.

Guytano is impressed that Lucha thinks so highly of me. Guytano has told me stories he'd heard of the famous Linnea. I'm not sure how much I like her. I can see why Folco was afraid of me. I haven't talked with him either. I didn't expect that I would.

Kerr calls and stops in every now and then. I'm positive that he's Lucha's eyes and ears. That's all right by me. He's a nice guy and not too bad on the eyes either. He always seems like he has something on his mind, something he really wants to tell but he holds back. I'd ask him but every time I get within a foot of him, he takes two steps back.

Dillon and I haven't made another go at it. He's not pushing as hard anymore. I think he knows that I need space after losing the two most important people in my life. Joey helped me with the arrangements for Molly's funeral. I think it gave him some sort of closure. I don't think I'll have closure until I get to see Camille's body twitching after I ram a stake in her heart.

Dr. Payton Sullivan is still listed as missing with the local Sheriff's department. I saw some people cleaning out his house the other day. I can't say I blame them, I don't think he's coming back either. I never did find out what Lucha did with him. I have faith that he took care of Payton

in his final few minutes on this earth. I have too. Somehow, I think that Lucha would do that, at least for me.

Camille has managed to disappear. Kerr thinks she's gone for good. Guytano and I think she's just waiting for the right moment to seek her revenge. I've had to try to live with the fact that I made her. She walks this earth as a demon with no conscious because I gave her the power to do so. I hope that I get the chance to take it away.

I'm struggling to accept who and what I am. No one seems to be able to put a precise label on me. For a time, I was one of them, a blood drinker, a vampire, and according to Gregory that shouldn't have been possible. Word on the street is that this Valentino is not only a master vampire, but a sorcerer as well. I'm hoping that I don't find out for sure what he is. I can't handle any more excitement in my life right now. I'll just be happy when I can sleep through the night again.

THE END

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## Chapter 1

Peren Matthews sat there and listened to her friends yak away about their stressful weeks. She turned her green eyes to the window and stared out at the night sky. Her gaze flickered to the crescent shaped moon, and she had to fight the urge to trace the edges of it with her fingers. She'd always been obsessed with the wonders of night. As a small child she'd sit in her window and long to be among the stars. They seemed so peaceful, so free from care or concern. That had been what she wanted most as a child. Now, on her twenty-fourth birthday, she sat in the back of Melanie's cramped Escort and tried to wish herself somewhere serene. She found little amusement in the fact that she'd come full circle.

She shifted awkwardly in the seat and pushed the pile of used tissues away from her feet. Melanie was far from a neat freak, and the lipstick stained tissues on the floor told her that Mel had a habit of tossing trash behind her as she drove.

Missy fixed her dark brown eyes on Peren and looked disgusted. "Girl, you need to lighten up--it's your birthday."

Peren let a fake smile creep onto her face. Yeah, it's so easy to lighten up. Kyle's gone and he'll never be back. It's wrong to be celebrating with him not here. She tried to hide the emotions on her face, but Missy's expression told her she failed.

She couldn't get angry with Missy or Melanie. They were only trying to help. Since Kyle's disappearance, they'd gone out of their way to try and help her deal with her loss and move on. "You need to climb back up on that dick again, darling ... that's bound to make you feel better." Mel had told her this on more than one occasion. Sure, she still had the same desires as the next woman, maybe even more, but moving on was the last thing on her mind. She just wanted to go home, curl up, listen to sad music, and wallow. She didn't need or want their planned interventions.

"Let's go to that new country music club ... you know...," Melanie said, eyeing Missy, "the one that has the line dancing. Maybe we could find some hot guys there tonight?"

Peren sighed. She was committed for the rest of the night to them--their prisoner until dawn. She'd agreed to be a willing captive and they'd agreed to leave her alone about dating other men. Most of their blind date choices had been disasters. The first two were your typical college guys. They had one thing on their mind and that was to get into her pants. Melanie was upset that Peren didn't give in to their advances. Sure, they were hot, and she could have used a good fuck, but she wanted something more.

The third guy they'd fixed her up with, Ben, had been decent enough. His short black hair and light blue eyes had been a fantastic combination, and his conversational skills were far better than any of the men she'd been out with before. That wasn't the best thing about him, though. The best thing had been his smell. As silly as it sounded, he smelled like musk and fresh morning dew. Kyle had had that very same natural scent. It drove her wild with lust.



Missy had been most surprised to find out that she'd gone on multiple dates with Ben. She really had enjoyed his company, but felt guilty about betraying Kyle and cut it off. The nameless, faceless other dates meant so little to her that she'd lost count of them.

\* \* \* \*

"Do you smell that?" Lukian Vlakhusha asked his longtime friend, Roi.

"Smells like teen spirit all right," Roi said, his tongue ran across his lips.

Lukian ignored the comment because he'd known Roi long enough to know what his tastes in women were, and teenage girls weren't one of them. He turned and looked at a gaggle of young women as they walked into the nightclub. Nope, these weren't the ones they were shadowing. These girls didn't look legal. The ones they were after were a bit riper. Not old, no, just a little more mature.

"Tell me again why we're here?"

"Because we have to be," Roi said dryly.

The answer wasn't the one he wanted to hear, but it was the truth. They did have to be here. Lukian knew what their mission was, probably better than Roi. He was after all, first in command. Search and destroy, that was the mission. The target was what he had a problem with. It'd been a long time since he'd been forced to take a woman's life. He didn't look forward to it now.

He glanced down at the photo of the auburn-haired girl he'd been carrying in his back pocket. Her large green eyes had haunted him since he'd first been given the assignment. He knew the rules: don't get attached, don't put a face to the name. He'd broken them both. He'd been fixated on Peren's picture since he'd received it. He silently hoped that he wouldn't have to be the one to deliver the killing shot. He'd been doing this kind of work for too long, and was too good at it to let this one get to him.

"Showtime," Roi said. He watched the tiny turquoise car containing their target pull in.

