

VAMPIRES REALM

FE HEATON

SEVENTH
CIRCLE

Seventh Circle

F E Heaton

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Cover by Felicity Heaton

Seventh Circle

Dark, sensual and fast-paced, *Seventh Circle* is a story of forbidden love so strong that it will save the world.

Born with strange powers similar to a vampire's, Lilith has spent her life hunting demons for Section Seven. Now, on the very same night that she watches a vampire kill her best friend, she's faced with her worst nightmare.

A client who is not only attractive, but a vampire.

Lincoln, a powerful pure blood vampire, has a problem. The prophecy he's caught up in is coming to pass and his only chance of survival is relying on those he hates most—vampire hunters. It has been foretold that one will save him, a female hunter, and when he meets her, the attraction he feels is both instantaneous and forbidden.

Their mutual attraction becomes difficult to deny as they work to unravel the mystery of a contract between Lincoln's lord and the Devil. The barriers around their hearts fall, but is there only pain ahead of them? With Lincoln's life on the line, can Lilith find the strength to protect him and embrace a side of herself that she wished didn't exist? Can Lincoln overcome his fear in order to save Lilith even if it means parting from her forever? What price will they pay to be together?

Chapter 1

Blood.

No matter where she looked, Lilith couldn't escape it. It spotted his face and arched over his jaw from the wound on his throat. It seeped into his damp blond hair, darkening the whole side of his head. Turning away, she swallowed her desire to be sick and stared at the ground. Crimson coated the grass until it glistened under the harsh sodium streetlight on the cemetery path. The acrid smell thickened the air, filled her nostrils and choked her lungs. Cold stole through her, rising up from her knees where they pressed into the wet dirt close to his body, chilling her as it swept towards her soul.

"Jackson!" Her frantic patting of his cheek did nothing to rouse him. Her rough, erratic breathing and the thundering beat of her heart filled her ears as she stared down at him. Panic consumed her. "Jackson, don't you die on me, Jackson."

His eyes opened, igniting a spark of hope inside her. The darkness of despair extinguished it when they closed lazily again a second later.

She was losing him.

"Jackson." Lilith patted his cheek again, faster this time, a constant drumming that matched her pulse. Her other hand pressed the wad of material harder against the wound. Sticky, warm blood coated her fingers, sickening her. "Don't give up. I won't lose you!"

He convulsed and his face contorted into a look of sheer agony. A thin line of darkest red crept from the corner of

his lips. Lilith held him down, restraining him in the hope of stopping him from killing himself by moving, and her eyes widened as the crimson trail eased down towards his ear.

Everything became still.

Her ears rang with it, with the numb and icy cold filling her, sending sweeps of shivers over her skin as what was happening finally sunk in.

This was no way to feel, so drained of life and welcoming death with open arms, watching for it. Not when the creature that had done this was still nearby.

Waiting.

Lilith focused again, searching for it while applying more pressure to the wound on Jackson's throat. Was it to stem the flow of blood, or the flow of hope as it left her?

There was no way she could save him.

He was pale now, barely breathing. Tears blurred her eyes, hot against her cold face. Not five minutes ago, he'd been so full of life, full of jokes that had always annoyed her for some reason. Funny how it could disappear so quickly. You thought you were strong, indestructible. In reality you were as fragile as a butterfly when faced with one of them—one of the pure bloodlines.

A low laugh sent a shudder through her.

She knew what it found so amusing.

Jackson was dead.

Lilith closed her eyes, touched his cheek as a goodbye and prayed that he had found a better place on the other side.

Picking herself up, she shut down the side of her that said to throw herself over his body and cry her heart out for him, and for her own loss. She had a job to do. He'd understand. It had been his job too.

She stood and stared down at him. The world seemed strangely blue and quiet. Cold. He looked peaceful lying there on the grass, darkness shrouding his body while the streetlight crowned his head in golden light.

Almost angelic.

Her gaze fell to her hands as she brought them out in front of her, palms facing the heavens. She frowned at the dark liquid coating them and then at the torn sleeve of her shirt. So much blood but she felt nothing as she stared at it. This was no time for mourning. She could do that later. Right now, she had business to attend to.

She wiped her hands on her black combat trousers and then retrieved her wooden stake from the grass.

A breeze.

A sigh.

The world blurred as she turned on a pinpoint and blocked the vampire's attack.

It grinned at her, teeth sharp and eyes bright, challenging her to make a move. She knew what it wanted. It wanted her to run, or scream, or at least give

it a good fight before it finally killed her. It was playing with her.

Well, she wasn't about to play with it.

This man, this thing, was going to die for what it had done to Jackson.

It turned and the streetlights caught its eyes, making them flash like mother of pearl. She gave no quarter, turning with it and keeping their arms locked. Its weight pressed against her and she pushed back, her eyes never leaving its. It could throw her if it wanted to. It was far stronger than she was.

That smile it wore wasn't fading. It was beginning to unnerve her. It curved the vampire's face, cutting across it in a sinful line that exposed the points of its bloodied teeth. Jackson hadn't stood a chance.

She didn't stand a chance.

Neither of them had ever fought one of the pure bloods. Those that did rarely survived to tell the tale. She'd never heard of anyone managing to kill one.

Before she could blink, it had disappeared and she stumbled forwards from the release of pressure against her. She turned sharply in all directions, panic guiding her movements, and then forced herself to slow down. Her senses reached outwards into the inky night, desperate to locate the vampire so it couldn't attack without her noticing.

The early spring breeze tousled her honey hair, sending a shiver dancing down her spine as its cold fingers worked their way under the hem of her black shirt and

into her collar. When she faced Jackson, she sniffed back her tears and tried not to look at him. This was no time to lose focus, or she'd be joining him in the afterlife.

Something shifted.

She tensed and then relaxed when it didn't move again.

The graveyard was quiet. Too quiet.

It could only mean one thing. The vampire was stalking her. It had slipped into the shadows to watch her. She could feel its eyes on her, touching her, studying her. It was looking for a weak spot, a momentary drop in her defences when it could slip in and kill her with a single move. Her heart thumped hard against her breastbone at that thought and she steadied her breathing in an attempt to slow it down. Panic made her hands shake and her body threatened to join them.

Her fingers flexed around the stake several times. It did nothing to soothe her nerves as she'd hoped. If she didn't calm down and regain her focus, she didn't stand a chance. The vampire would be able to sense her fear. It would drive it on. It would make it hungrier for her blood. She had to do all she could to maintain control and a steady heartbeat. Only then would she have the slightest chance of killing before she was killed.

Doubts crept in at the corners of her mind, sending the edges of her thoughts black and sinister. She pushed them away, not wanting the distraction that the memory of seeing Jackson killed was bringing, and not wanting to lose her concentration by imagining herself suffering a similar fate.

No one, not a human and definitely not a vampire, was going to bite her neck.

Ever.

She frowned into the distance where the darkness swallowed the trees and nothing but the night reigned. She had nothing to fear. An elite hunter had no fear.

Her training had been the same as Jackson's and the rest of her company, except she'd always excelled where they had merely passed. She'd taken the rank of elite hunter three years earlier than expected. She was one of only a handful to hold that title.

She could defeat this vampire.

She would win.

She had a gift.

Her eyes rolled closed and she released her breath, emptying herself. Her hands came up in front of her, close to her chest, her stake held steady in her right and her left joining it. Her heart rate slowed to a steady beat and her blood rushed through her veins. There was such strength in it if only she'd be brave enough to embrace it.

Her soul surrendered to the call of the night.

The world blackened.

Lilith didn't need to see the change to know it happened. Everything felt different. The air tasted metallic, like blood. The rising of her instincts made her senses razor-sharp and sent painful throbs down her spine from her aching head.

She could only hold this for seconds or she'd fall into the darkness she could feel encroaching at the corners of her soul.

A few seconds would be enough.

A flicker of movement and she could see the world through her closed eyes. Silvery threads outlined everything, scribbled onto the darkness like rough chalk drawings on a blackboard. She saw the trees sway in the breeze. She saw Jackson. She saw death.

Her eyes shot open and she gasped at air to save herself from drowning in the shadows. It filled her lungs, burned them and her blood. She ran regardless.

She ran straight at the vampire.

One hand on top of the stone sarcophagus was enough to vault her over it and she landed with precise grace on the other side, right beside her quarry.

Her hand came down in a blurred arc, so fast that the vampire couldn't fully evade her attack. She missed the heart as the vampire dived to the side. Her stake caught its shoulder, scraped hard against bone. The vampire growled and then roared at her. She flipped backwards before it could attack and gave herself over to the fight, letting her instincts guide her as her senses locked onto the vampire. She could almost see its movements before it made them, a ghost of it shone in her eyes.

Except time was running out.

The lingering effect of her gift would soon disappear, leaving her to fight without these sharpened senses.

She would be vulnerable.

She would be weak from calling on her gift.

That was the price.

She cart-wheeled away, still gripping the stake. The moment the vampire closed in, she stopped and swept her leg around in a fast, hard kick, grunting with effort. The vampire laughed and slid to the side, away from danger. Before she could put her foot down and attack again, it had hit her in the chest with a kick of its own, sending her flying backwards into a tombstone.

Her breath left her on impact, a red hot bar across her back marking where she'd hit the heavy stone. She needed a moment to recover, only she didn't have one. The vampire was on her before she could blink and she was barely able to block it. She crossed her arms against its chest, holding it off her.

It snarled and snapped its jaw.

With each gnash of its teeth and each millimetre closer it got to her, her heart accelerated, until it was racing so fast she had trouble breathing. Adrenaline mixed with the panic coiled deep inside her. For the first time in her life, she could taste death, could see it coming, and it had red eyes and sharp teeth, and a mane of black tousled hair. It bore down on her, its body pressed hard against hers, trapping her between it and the headstone.

Lilith clutched the stake, hands trembling as she weakened.

The vampire growled.

There was no chance of escape, but blind panic and a will to live forced her to try.

She pushed with all her might, shoving her left hand against the flat end of the stake as she drove it forwards.

The vampire sprung backwards the moment the stake made contact with its shoulder. She didn't give it a chance to escape. She threw herself at it in a last ditch attempt to be the victor in this deadly dance.

She tumbled to the floor with it, wrestling for control. The world blurred and sped by. The pain of the vampire's blows barely registered in her tired body as she struggled to keep it away from her neck and get her stake against its chest. The noise was deafening—the rush of her breathing, the snarls of the vampire, and the harsh pounding of her heart.

Then silence.

She was on top.

Her stake plunged deep into its chest.

Her gaze locked with his.

It was a man now in her eyes.

He was breathing, fast gasping breaths. His eyes were wide, wild, as he clawed at his chest and the wooden shaft protruding from it.

She pulled the stake out and stood, looking down on him, watching him die. Her body shook from the adrenaline and the exertion. Her fingers loosened and the stake fell to the grass with a soft thud. Exhaustion

surrendered to shock. She couldn't believe it. She'd killed it. She'd killed a pure blood.

His eyes rolled closed and then he began to disintegrate as time raced to catch up with him. Before a minute had passed, he was nothing more than ashes scattering in the breeze.

Lilith swept a hand over her sandy blonde hair and sighed.

It was over.

No, it had only just begun.

She'd never heard of a vampire of the pure bloodlines travelling into this area. There had been reports of hunters meeting them in London, but never out here, so far from the capital. She'd only ever fought vampires from the weaker bloodlines.

What had he been doing out here?

She remembered the flash of his red eyes. A Vehemens? The violent. The last she'd heard, they rarely ventured outside Scandinavia. All the stories had been of hunters encountering vampires from the other bloodlines—the Caelestis, Aurorea, and even sometimes Venia or Validus. Never the Vehemens, Tenebrae or Nocens.

So what had brought him here?

She frowned at the patch of dust that represented him now. Maybe she should've asked him. Her superiors weren't going to be pleased. A pure blood in her area and she'd killed it without any attempt to extract information.

A shiver bolted up her spine and she rubbed her bare arm.

The report was going to be hell to write.

What was worse, a voice at the back of her mind was screaming that what she'd done tonight was going to have repercussions. The pure bloods didn't take lightly to hunters killing their kind.

Leaning over, she picked up her stake and pocketed it. Her dark eyes scanned the cemetery, searching the shadows for any sign of danger. The moon broke free of the clouds, illuminating even the darkest corner and chasing the shadows away into the trees. Nothing came to her. It was silent and empty. It filled her with cold and dread.

Her gaze fell to Jackson's body. The pain she'd been stifling all this time broke to the surface.

She would have to file a full report on his death too. How could she write what she'd seen? Jackson hadn't stood a chance. The vampire had torn his throat open before she'd even sensed its approach. She'd had no chance of saving him, not even with her gift.

Her heart ached to see him lying on the grass, motionless and cold. It could have easily been her in his place. Would he have managed to kill the vampire? It didn't bear thinking about. She had survived. Jackson was dead.

Lilith walked towards him and her knees buckled when she reached his side. Their impact with the dirt sent pain shooting up her spine and jolted the tears from her eyes.

They dashed down her cheeks, turning into freezing streaks of ice as the wind blew against them.

She let them come, no longer able to hold back the surging tide of her emotions and needing to get them out of her before she returned to the compound. She couldn't let the others see her like this. Reaching into her pocket, she pressed the alarm button on her phone. It would trigger the GPS back at base and send them to her. She had fifteen minutes to gain control of herself. She would need every second.

Her hand found Jackson's and she held it, not caring how cold it felt in hers, or the way it made her feel as though she was touching death itself.

The sobs started out slow but built until she was gasping at air, her throat tight and chest aching as she stared down at Jackson's peaceful face.

She couldn't let them think she was weak.

She was the strongest they had.

Jackson would tell her that if he was still alive. He'd always told her that. He'd always been there for her, getting her out of scrapes and protecting her.

She'd failed to protect him.

Leaning forwards, she rested her head against his still chest and closed her eyes. Silence engulfed her as she lay with him, her mind empty. The night called her. She always felt this way after she'd used her gift—close to the darkness, at one with the shadows. She didn't understand the words drifting around her head or the

tugging sensation in the depths of her heart. She felt the meaning though. It wanted her.

She curled up.

It couldn't have her.

She was a hunter.

The elite.

She killed those that heard the call of the night.

She killed any vampire she came across.

Nothing was going to change that.

* * * *

Lilith trudged into the mansion house, desperate for the solitude of her quarters. The team had arrived to find her standing beside Jackson's body, all sign of her emotions wiped from her face. She had given them instruction to take him back to the compound and had then told them that she would walk back. The thought of travelling with Jackson's body in the back of the van had been unbearable. The night had offered her so much comfort, the darkness hiding her feelings from the world, and she'd taken it all. The walk back had been long and had given her time to regain true control of herself.

Only now, she was walking the halls where they'd once walked. It was a painful reminder that only one of them had returned, while the other lay in the morgue below her feet.

No one ever spoke of the morgue.

It was as though by never mentioning it, they could make it go away, make all the deaths of their friends disappear.

“What happened?” A sharp voice snapped her out of her thoughts and she found she was standing in the entrance hall staring down at the floor, seeing straight through the solid stone to the cold grey morgue below.

Lilith raised her head, looked Daniel in the eye, and then turned away. Her throat was too tight to speak. If she tried, she would lose what little control she’d regained and would start to cry again. She’d never lost a friend on routine patrol before. She hadn’t lost anyone since her sister.

He caught her arm before she could pass him, stopping her dead. She knew better than to break free of his grasp. As her superior, he commanded her respect. Her hands came up in front of her and she stared at her palms, at the dried and cracked blood that still coated them. Nausea swept through her, cramping her stomach, clenching her heart. Numbness followed it, stealing away the sickness until she felt nothing. It was so hard to breathe. Everything was so hard. She was too weak from the fight and the drain of controlling her emotions.

“Jackson. Son of a bitch got Jackson,” she said, voice steady and showing no trace of the turmoil inside of her. “We didn’t hear it coming. I didn’t feel it.”

She stared into Daniel’s green eyes. The amount of concern in them surprised her. He gave a sympathetic smile, causing crow’s feet to surround his eyes. When had he become so old? He seemed so grey now when before he’d always been the young man she’d first

known when she had been a child. She looked around the hall, wanting to avoid his questioning gaze. Everything seemed so grey and different.

“It was one of them, a Vehemens,” she said. “What in God’s name is one of them doing around here?”

Daniel didn’t look at all shocked by her news. His expression remained unchanged and he removed his hand from her arm only to place it lightly on her shoulder. She frowned at the strange sensation that filled her—something was wrong.

“Did you kill it?” he said.

“Of course.” She went to move past him again. His hand tensed, gripping her shoulder and stopping her. She sighed. “Daniel, I really need a shower and bed. Can’t the debrief wait until morning?”

“It can, I wouldn’t want to make you talk about what happened until you’re ready... but... I need to speak to you about a contract that just came in.”

Her right eyebrow rose. It had been a while since Section Seven had been contracted by anyone. They were rare and required only the elite hunters.

It piqued her curiosity and almost made her agree. The ache inside her overruled it though. It had become a dull throbbing and she knew that warning well enough. She was close to collapsing from fatigue.

“Can’t that wait too?” she said, hopeful.

“I don’t think the client will wait any longer.”

Her eyes widened. “They’re here?”

“They’ve been waiting all night for your return,” he said. “I know this isn’t the best time, but it has to be now. It can’t wait.”

Staring into Daniel’s eyes, Lilith could see that he wasn’t going to budge on this. She had to meet the client tonight. He was right. It would be rude to keep them waiting until she’d had a chance to get some rest and she didn’t want to blow her first contract.

“I’ll clean up first if that’s okay?”

He nodded. “He’s waiting in my office.”

She watched Daniel walk away. He? She wondered what kind of problem they had as she walked. Someone was in the first bathroom she came to so she carried on along the hall until she was near the cafeteria. She avoided going in. By now, news of Jackson’s death would be spreading and she didn’t have the energy to meet her client let alone field all the questions people would have. A couple of men from her company walked out of the room. She dived into the nearest bathroom, desperate to hide from them. Locking the door, she pressed her back against it and stared at herself in the mirror.

She looked like hell.

Moving closer to the mirror, she gingerly prodded the cuts and bruises on her face and arms. The vampire had done a real number on her. At the time, she hadn’t noticed. The adrenaline and shock had taken all feeling away. Washing her cuts, she stared into her brown eyes and thought about what had happened tonight. Why hadn’t she sensed it? Normally she could sense vampires before they got within twenty metres of her. Normally she was fighting weaklings.

Were those of pure blood really so superior?

Her phone buzzed in her pocket and she didn't need to check it to know it would be Daniel. She finished making herself look more presentable and then stared at her torn shirt. She couldn't do anything about that.

Stepping out of the bathroom, Lilith hurried down the hall. She turned the corner that led to the commanders' offices and bumped into a woman from her company.

Her eyes fell to the woman's black jacket. "Can I borrow that?"

The woman hesitated for a moment, looked her over with a raised eyebrow, and then peeled the jacket off. "Important meeting, huh?"

"You could say that. Do you know about the client?"

"I heard someone arrived... walked in through the door with the section chief from London... but I didn't see him."

Lilith slipped the jacket on and buttoned it up.

"Thanks for the loan." She waved idly and walked away, her thoughts now firmly fixed on her client. A man that had arrived with the section chief. Whoever he was, he had to be important to garner that kind of escort.

Reaching Daniel's door, she rapped her knuckles against the mahogany and waited.

"Come in." Daniel's muffled voice drifted through it.

She paused, needing a few seconds to gather herself and push her fatigue and feelings to the back of her

mind, and then opened the door and walked into the large office.

Directly in front of her was a heavy mahogany desk. Daniel was leaning against it with his arms folded and a wary look on his face. The tall curtains of the office's two windows framed him. They were drawn. She glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was nearing six in the morning. The sun would be rising by now. It was unusual for Daniel to keep the curtains drawn against the sunrise.

She sensed her client's presence. He was sharp, focused, watching her and studying her movement across the room. There was something familiar about that.

She stopped in front of Daniel. Worry had joined the concern she'd seen in his eyes earlier. He knew she wasn't in the mood for this meeting. If he hadn't been so insistent, she would have continued to refuse his orders until he backed down. His words, however, had made it clear that this client was important and he wasn't one to wait any longer for an audience with her.

Her gaze roamed the room, seeking the man out. It scanned along the packed bookshelves and their leather-bound tomes. They found him masked in the shadowed recess to the side of the bright fire. Darkness shrouded his face and obscured his figure. Her senses spoke to her.

Here was a dangerous man.

Here was one who demanded respect and commanded power.

"Lilith, our client," Daniel said behind her.

The man stepped forwards and the warm firelight instantly chased the shadows from his face. He was young, handsome in a way that had her staring. In fact, she couldn't take her eyes off him. He ran slender fingers over his short black hair and then around the back of his neck, drawing her attention to it. She frowned at the scars there. Bite marks? Was he a victim of a vampire attack? Her gaze darted to his mouth, absorbing the gentle bow of his lips, and then rose to meet his.

His dark eyes met hers and a shiver of recognition bolted down her spine and sent alarm bells ringing in her head.

His mouth became a thin line and tilted into a cruel smile, one that fitted him perfectly.

She'd been wrong.

He wasn't young.

His appearance betrayed his age.

Here was one older than she'd ever met.

Lilith stepped forwards, defiant in the face of him, and reached for her stake.

Anger rose inside her and everything faded until there was only him.

He was no victim.

He was a murderer.

"Vampire." She sneered, assuming a fighting stance.

He growled and she felt that command deep in her soul.

She refused follow it.

To drop her stake would be to leave herself open to attack.

“Lilith!” Daniel said, his hand on her wrist making her tense. He lowered it for her.

She looked at him, stunned. Her gaze slid warily to the vampire, her anger not abating. How had he fooled her? She’d thought him nothing more than a man. She’d found him attractive. Her stomach rolled with that thought. Only the darkness in his eyes had betrayed him and lifted the veil from hers.

“Mr. Lincoln is our client.”

She glared at the vampire. He had a name.

They’d never had names before.

They’d been nameless, faceless demons for her to eradicate. Now there was one whose name she knew, and for some terrible reason, it made him seem more human.

The vampire smirked, a challenge, the same as the one in the cemetery had issued her. She amused him. He meant to provoke her.

“I am not working with it!” She flung her arm around to point at the vampire at the same time as she turned to face Daniel. There was no need to look at the vampire to know he was glaring at her. The heat of it caressed her skin until she was burning wherever it touched. She shook the feeling away, and the attraction she’d felt towards him, and focused with all her effort on Daniel.

“For all we know this could be bullshit. It could want to drain me dry.”

The vampire snorted contemptuously, as though that was one thought that would never cross his mind.

“I’m being serious.”

Daniel just shifted position, folding his arms across his chest and giving her the impression that her tirade had fallen on deaf ears. The only one paying the remotest of attention was the vampire. Her gaze roamed to him against her will. A brief glance was all it took to see he was still standing in the same spot in front of the fire, staring at her with intense dark eyes. She told herself that look wasn’t making her body burn. It was anger and the fire.

A sigh drew her attention back to Daniel.

When she looked at him this time, she could see that he wasn’t happy. She frowned at the floor. The section chief from London had brought Mr. Lincoln to this place to meet with her and Daniel. Daniel had as little choice in this matter as she did. The vampire had cleverly gone over their heads and left her superior powerless, unable to get her out of this mission.

Her eyes narrowed on the vampire. He smirked and nodded. If he’d had a hat, she swore he would’ve tipped it. Her fists clenched and she wished to God that she could wipe the smug look off his face. Taking a deep breath, she clawed back a little control. He wasn’t going to provoke her. He didn’t frighten her. She was going to find out what this contract was about and then do everything she could to either get rid of him as soon as possible or get out of it.

“So what do you want, vampire?” she said, striding up to him until she was close enough to see he wasn’t breathing.

He was very old then, and he was powerful. At this range, she could feel the power radiating off him, sparking her senses and making her instincts kick into gear. They told her to run. She stood her ground.

“It is a pleasure to meet you too, Lilith,” he said in a mixed accent. There was a lot of English in there and an equal amount of European too. If she had to guess, she’d say he’d spent a lot of time in Scandinavia and wasn’t a weakling.

“What bloodline are you?” Her tone was nothing short of venomous. Her eyes searched his, trying to discern whether he was going to lie to her or ignore this question too.

He straightened to his full height and looked down on her.

“Vehemens.”

That one word made her stomach drop and broke the restraints that had been holding her anger at bay. Before she could stop herself, her hand was around his throat and she was forcing him backwards towards the fire. She growled in frustration when he planted his left foot against the cast-iron fireguard behind him, effectively stopping himself from moving, and yanked her hand away from his neck.

It went straight for the stake in her pocket. She grabbed it and lunged at him with it. He caught her wrist and twisted it until she had to kneel in order to stop him

from breaking her arm. His eyes darkened. Her heart sped, fear saying he was going to attack.

He surprised her by releasing her the moment her knees touched the floor. She was back on her feet before he could move, the stake still held firmly in her hand.

“Lilith!” Daniel stepped between them, his hand on her shoulder forcing her backwards. She moved farther away and pocketed her stake to show him that she wasn’t going to attack again. He went back to his desk. She glared at the vampire.

“Bastard!” She spat it at him with as much hatred as she could muster. “It was your fault wasn’t it? You’re the reason they were here!”

He looked confused, a trait she’d not witnessed in one before. She hated him even more for it—for attempting to look human by reflecting such emotions. She had no doubt that he knew what she was talking about. It couldn’t be chance that two Vehemens had arrived in her city in the same night.

“I wish to discuss the contract in private with you.” His words were calm, measured.

Her attack hadn’t shaken him in the slightest. The idea of that made her feel weak and fatigue crept in again as she remembered watching Jackson die. She’d been powerless then, and she was powerless now.

“Discuss it in private all you want, but I’ll still have to write it all in my report anyway, and everyone will know. Hell, I might post on the bulletin board that you’re a vampire and sit back and watch the show.” She hoped that her words carried all the spite behind them. It was

childish, but she wasn't about to make anything easy for the vampire. If she couldn't attack him physically, words would have to do.

"Lilith," Daniel warned again. She sighed and ignored him.

"Why do you hate my kind so much?" the vampire said. It caught her off guard.

She stared at him, knowing that she looked like a rabbit in headlights and that she needed to recover herself before he realised that he'd rattled her.

"You seem very driven to hate us... to kill us."

Her eyes never left his. She held his gaze even as the barrier around her heart came back up as swift as a dart, shutting out his attempt to peer into her innermost thoughts and feelings. She wished she could shut out the pain as easily. She turned away from him and walked to the door.

"Come with me," she said and stepped outside the office.

Lincoln stared at the open door and the hall beyond. He frowned, dark thoughts stirring at the back of his mind and plaguing him. A glance at her superior told him that he wasn't pleased with the way his subordinate was acting. She seemed headstrong and wilful. Perhaps a little too wilful.

"She openly detests my kind," Lincoln said, getting the superior's attention. In his world, a superior wouldn't tolerate such behaviour from one below him. He had never tolerated it. "Are we going to have a problem?"

The man looked thoughtful. “No. Today has been hard on her. She’ll work with you as agreed in your contract with us.”

“I would like to know one thing.”

“And that is?” The man pushed away from his desk and walked around it to sit in the plush leather chair.

“Why does she hate vampires so much?” Lincoln said with another glance towards the door.

He could feel her waiting in the hall, knew that she would be able to hear him. She hadn’t answered his question, and he needed a reply. The idea that she would hate him contradicted everything he’d been told.

The man sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“Her sister was murdered by a vampire,” he said and then looked at the open door, “and tonight Jackson was killed. He was Lilith’s closest friend and he died at the hands of a Vehemens.”

Lincoln frowned. That explained her outburst. She was probably right. Not many of his bloodline lived outside the safe houses scattered across Europe or the family mansion in Oslo. The Vehemens had been here because of him.

“I think it’s understandable that she should hate your kind... you.” There was so much anger in the man’s voice, so much loathing and disgust in his words. He’d never realised the extent of the humans’ hatred towards his species. With hatred like this directed at him, he was glad that only the hunters knew demons existed. “No

one here is going to welcome you with open arms... no matter how much you pay our superiors."

He gave the man a dark look, matching his glare and tipping the balance in his favour. The man looked away, turning towards the closed curtains. Lincoln turned towards the door and reached out with his senses, focusing them on the woman. Lilith.

Had they been wrong about her?

Could one so fixated on destroying his kind truly save him?

Chapter 2

Lilith couldn't believe that this was happening. In her own compound was a vampire. A vampire!

The only thing worse than that was the fact he was her client.

What sick and twisted joke was this? It was the last thing she needed after Jackson's death. This place, her home, was supposed to be her sanctuary from the demons. Here, she was meant to be able to find peace. Now it felt too small, too packed with people, and a vampire was shadowing her.

Her hand hovered over her pocket, over her stake.

She scowled at the vampire.

He stared back at her with intense brown eyes, calm, relaxed and utterly unfazed. His pose as he leaned against the wall outside Daniel's office, his expression, everything about him said that he didn't fear her. She was no threat to him.

Hunters turned the corner. All men. Seven of them. They stopped, stared, grouped together to regard the vampire with suspicious eyes. It was only a matter of time before they figured out he wasn't human. She watched the exchange of looks between them and the vampire, curious to see what would happen.

It began as a quiet string of murmured comments among the men and grew into a restless moving as they jostled each other, provoking one another, trying to make one step forward.

Her gaze flicked to the vampire. He seemed wholly unbothered by this on the surface. Her acute senses said different. She could detect the faint threads of his underlying tension and anger, and the incredible restraint that controlled them.

One of the men stepped forwards and twirled his stake, his air cocky. Lilith expected the vampire to move. He didn't. He stared straight at the man, facing him, neither retreating nor attacking. He was holding his ground. She wondered why. The boys would be dead in seconds if he chose to attack. It would be a blood bath and no one would be able to stop him, not even her.

Why didn't he?

They were taunting him enough, provoking him unduly considering that he was a client. She realised that was why the vampire wasn't attacking. They would drive him from the compound if he did. They would revoke her services. He was clever.

Whatever this case was, it was of great importance to him, enough that he would only tell her the details and that he would endure the impotent threats of the young hunters.

"Mr. Lincoln," she said, stepping forwards. Her eyes met the men's, every one of them, and she made sure they saw her anger at their actions.

They backed off, the one in front slipping his stake away as he gave her a look that was a mixture of disgust at her actions and shame at his own.

She watched them walk away, all too aware of the vampire's eyes on her. They set her skin aflame as they

trailed over her, called to her soul and begged her to look at him. She tightened the cords of her restraint, locking away the words of temptation her heart whispered. He was a vampire. He was a demon. She killed his kind. He murdered hers.

“Come with me.” Her tone was deadly, laced with all her anger over the death of her sister and Jackson, and all the others she’d seen in her lifetime.

The corridors were growing quiet now. Most of the hunters in the mansion would have turned in for the day, would be researching, or would be in the cafeteria for breakfast. Lilith led the vampire to a meeting room and opened the door. She didn’t hold it for him. She was too tired to play the chivalrous host, especially to a demon.

“So what’s the problem?” she said again, hoping he’d answer her this time.

He moved a good distance from her, his eyes still trailing fire over her body. She wished that he’d become ugly the second she’d recognised him for what he truly was. He was still handsome, barely thirty in appearance and tall, and powerful enough that she feared him to a degree.

Not that she was going to let him see that.

She took a seat at the long mahogany table. He continued to stare at her. Patience wasn’t her strong suit. If he didn’t talk soon, she was going to get physical. Right now, she didn’t need this. She wanted a hot shower and a long dream free sleep. Tonight’s patrol was one she didn’t want to replay in the vivid Technicolor of her dreams.

The vampire walked around the table and drew out the seat opposite her. He slid into it. His forearms rested along the length of the chair arms, his hands dangled limp over the ends.

“You do have a problem, right? That is why you’ve hired us? Although I can’t see why a vampire would hire a bunch of vampire hunters... unless you’re that desperate, or this has something to do with humans.”

“Neither. Sorry to disappoint those wild theories that are most likely running rampant through that pretty head of yours.”

She inwardly cringed at the reference to her looks. He clearly didn’t know he was only making the situation worse and increasing the likelihood of her attempting to stake him. Her fingers traced the shape of the stake in her pocket. It was a nice fantasy. Something told her she wouldn’t stand a chance against him though, at least not in her current state.

“It is a delicate matter.”

“Ah. Your girlfriend dumped you and you want us to stake her?” She whipped the stake in question out, hoping to get a reaction from him. His eyebrow rose. He didn’t even flinch.

“Again, nothing as simple as that.” He smiled, a real one this time, with no trace of malice.

He leaned further back into the chair and crossed his legs. Her gaze traversed his face, taking in his arched lips and straight nose, and stopped when her eyes met his.

She couldn't look away, no matter how much she tried. She was a prisoner in her body, powerless to break the trance she was slipping into. Was this a vampire power? If it was, she'd never heard of it. She fell into the darkness of his eyes. It didn't panic her as she felt it should. The blackness around her was soft, encompassing her in a cool featherlike embrace that made her want to close her eyes and breathe a sigh of relief. She found herself reaching out to it, wanting to touch it in return, and then pulled away. The room came back and she was staring at him. Her eyes narrowed into a glare. How did he make her feel so drawn to him, as though he was calling to her?

Clearing her throat in an attempt to look as though she was in control, she told herself that it was just the lingering effect of using her gift and nothing more.

"So, what is it?" she said.

Lincoln uncrossed his ankles and pushed back until he was balancing on two legs of the chair. What did he tell her? The truth? Deep inside, the voice that had kept him safe these past few months, his instinct, whispered to him to hold back and not tell her everything. She didn't need to know every detail in order to help him. If he only told her a fraction of his problem, then he could test how resourceful these vampire hunters were.

Lincoln let the chair come forward with a snap and immediately stood. The woman jumped but recovered quickly. He studied her a moment, listening to the steady drumming of her heart, and then walked towards the windows. The curtains were drawn. He closed his eyes and reached out with his senses. It was already daylight outside.

Turning back towards the woman, he regarded her again. She seemed too young to be an adequate fighter, and definitely too young for the role fate had assigned her. He was beginning to get the terrible dark feeling that someone had been wrong. His life rested in the hands of this slip of a girl? What was the world coming to?

Clasping his hands behind his back, he returned to his chair. He pressed his palms into the bar across the backrest and frowned.

“I have a problem with a... prophecy of sorts,” Lincoln said, still deciding how much she really needed to know. The less he told her, the safer he was from her superiors, but the harder it would be to convince her to help him.

He reminded himself that she didn’t need convincing. She had to work with him. He’d paid handsomely to have her protect him.

“A prophecy of sorts?” she said, amusement ringing in her words.

He wasn’t in the mood to be made fun of. If she started pushing, he’d have to push back and put her in her place.

“A potential apocalypse.” He watched her closely, interested to see what her reaction would be to that.

She leaned back and smiled, twirling her honey blonde hair around her finger as though she were a child.

“And you’re involved?” she said and her smile became a smirk. “And you expect me to help.”

“I do.”

He could feel her words coming and knew what they would be.

“What’s to stop me from killing you and getting out of this crappy assignment?”

They were brave words from one in her position and he could see straight through them to the underlying fear. Her superior was right. It was asking a lot of her to make her work with him. He could do nothing about that. He had as much choice in the matter as she did. She had to help him. The alternative didn’t bear thinking about.

He managed a laugh.

“Kill me?” he whispered more to himself than to her. His eyes met hers again. They were darker brown now, near black as she glared, still toying with her stake as though it was going to protect her. “You can sense my strength, and I yours. You are too weak to fight me and your superiors would have your head.”

She huffed and stood, distancing herself by walking across the room to the windows. For a moment, she looked as though she was going to open the curtains, and then she carried on walking until she was heading directly for him. His guard went up, his senses sharpening as best they could without him changing. He didn’t need to frighten her by shifting guise to reveal his true self. That wouldn’t get him anywhere.

“Do you have any other information besides the fact that you’re some player in an apocalypse?” she said, moving

close enough to him that he could smell the mixed scent of blood on her.

Hers was a sweeter, lighter scent than the heavier male blood trampled all over. He was tempted to move closer to her, to try to catch a sniff of her elusive smell. He remained rooted to the spot.

“Not just an apocalypse, Miss Lilith. The outcome will not merely affect vampires. Humans will die too. It is everything and everyone that will pay should you fail to protect me. I am speaking of an apocalypse of biblical proportions.”

Her face paled as he spoke those last words and all her strength seemed to leave her. She sat down hard in the nearest chair and stared at him as though she was having trouble believing what he’d said. Her heart was racing. It knew that he was speaking the truth.

“You’re really not kidding, are you?” she said and then suddenly changed, switching from a lost little girl to the hunter who had attacked him in her superior’s office. “What’s this got to do with me? Why get us involved?”

Lincoln sat down again, close enough to her that he could still easily monitor her heartbeat and read her feelings in it, but far away enough that she had no chance of successfully attacking him.

“It was hard to find you. It took many weeks, which means that time is growing short,” he said.

“Hard to find me?” she whispered before looking incredulous. “You mean you asked for me specifically?”

He nodded.

Her face crumpled in despair for a moment before a look of pure hatred twisted her features. He could sense the rising of her instinct and the anger inside that was fuelling them. His thoughts during his journey here were right. She wasn't going to help him willingly. Would this work if she didn't? The details he'd been given were sketchy at best. Maybe they had been wrong.

"This sucks," she muttered under her breath.

She leaned forwards and cradled her head in her hands. His gaze drifted to her neck. They traced the gentle curve and caressed the milky satin skin. She was as pale as he was. Her position clearly had her sleeping all day. He smiled to himself. She slept all day and went out at night to hunt and kill. They weren't so different really. She'd never admit that of course. Humans were so stubborn and ignorant.

"I'll need more information to give to the research team."

That jolted him out of his reverie. He blinked to clear his mind of thoughts of her neck and the call of her blood.

"Research team?"

"Yes." Her expression asked if he was crazy. "I'm a hunter Mr. Lincoln, not a researcher. It's necessary to have a full team investigating and looking into the books."

He took a moment to consider what she'd said. She didn't look like a researcher and, in London, they'd told him she was an elite hunter. He equated it to an elite guard of his kind. They were reserved for only the

important missions. He doubted that she hunted each night with the lower ranks.

Still, the idea of more people knowing of his problem was disturbing. In reality, he'd only wanted to come here and wait, to avoid at all possible costs his fate, knowing she would save him. Unfortunately, he'd had to give her superiors in London a reason why he needed the assistance of a vampire hunter and her in particular. Mentioning there was potentially an apocalypse on the horizon and handing them a large sum of money seemed to have placated them.

"I do have something," he said, not bothering to answer her request to allow a team of researchers to work with them. She'd make that decision regardless of his input. "In fact it's the best lead that I have, only I have been a little busy to follow it up."

At this stage she didn't need to know that the 'little busy' he'd mentioned was the fact that he'd been relentlessly pursued across Europe.

"And what is that, Mr. Lincoln?"

"Lincoln. Vampires don't have such titles. I shall call you Lilith so we are equal in this matter." He ignored her raised eyebrow and how unimpressed she looked by his correction and suggestion. If he had to work with her, he couldn't have her calling him mister all the time. It would drive him insane. Besides, there was something strangely appealing about having her call him by his name. It seemed intimate on a dangerous level, but her irritated look was too priceless to resist forcing her to adopt a similar level of informality. If she wanted to be troublesome, he would make things hard for her too. "It is something I overheard my lord speaking of many

months ago when all this began. Afterwards I saw the parchment that dictated my future. It was a pact, a contract. I only saw the title.”

She gave him an expectant look.

He wouldn't disappoint her.

“Spiritus Diabolus.”

Chapter 3

Lincoln stared at the ceiling. Sleep evaded him, chased away by the thousand screaming heartbeats in his head. He clapped a hand over his eyes, wishing to shut the world out. The blood of every human in the building still called to him.

None more than Lilith's.

He focused on it as it beckoned him, a strong steady melody in his ears, a siren song. His eyes slipped shut behind his hand and a smile teased his lips as he reached out with sharpened senses and listened to her moving around the small apartment. She was muttering to herself about the heat. It was hot in the building. Everyone's blood was rushing close to the surface, their hearts working overtime to cool their bodies down. It only made them more alluring.

Shifting his focus, he listened to the clanging of metal on metal far below him. Someone was trying to fix the boiler. Its malfunction was obviously the cause of the temporary heat wave.

Lilith cursed again from the other room, loud enough this time that he would've heard it if he'd been human.

Her heart thumped rhythmically, pounding in his blood and telling him to go to her. Neither of them could sleep. Perhaps they could begin researching, although it would probably be unwise to disturb her now. When her superior had told her to share her apartment with him, and that his safety was maximum priority, she'd looked as though she'd been chewing a wasp. Her superior had been right. She did despise his kind, as did everyone

here. Common sense told him to leave before someone got it into their head to attempt to kill him, and not just make idle threats. His heart said that he had to stay. He had to know if she really was the one.

Sitting up, Lincoln stared at the closed door of his room. On the other side was Lilith. She was moving around the kitchen of the small two bedroom apartment. The modernity of this area of the mansion was a strange contrast to the more in-keeping look of the area he'd first arrived in, with its large rooms filled with antique furniture and old paintings. This wing seemed to act like a dormitory for the hunters. Were all the apartments like Lilith's or was hers special? Perhaps hunters shared them. Had she shared this apartment with her dead friend or her sister? His focus shifted back to Lilith as she moved again. He could sense her fatigue. It gave out a call to his instincts, telling him she'd be easy prey in her current state. It was hard to ignore such instincts even when he had to.

It had been near impossible to stop himself from killing those hunters this morning.

Lincoln frowned when Lilith stopped dead and sniffed. Her change in emotions was abrupt and would've been unreadable had he not known her recent history. The death of her friend was upsetting her—a death that he was responsible for. Under normal circumstances, it wouldn't have bothered him. His kind had to feed, and had to protect themselves. A vampire hunter was the perfect target for sport and a good meal, and it meant there was one less in the world when you were done. Yet it bothered him now. He didn't want to consider the reason why.

Getting up, he walked to the door and opened it. Lilith was in the kitchen side of the living room now, busying herself in some vain attempt to pretend he wasn't here, that he hadn't heard her crying, and by the looks of things making tea. He studied her, amused by the way the oversized grey t-shirt swamped her and the loose black jogging bottoms trailed on the floor. She'd tied her golden hair back into a high ponytail. The tips of it brushed her neck. He dragged his gaze away from it and raised it to her face. She looked tired, her face drawn and pale.

He glanced at the coffee table and saw it spread with books. She must have gone out to get them during the short hours of sleep that he'd snatched. Now the sun was growing close to setting and its sway over him was less. Soon night would fall and it would be almost impossible to ignore the lure of the cacophony of heartbeats.

Aware that he was dressed only in his black jeans, he walked with head held high into the kitchen area and leaned against the counter near her.

Her gaze darted to him and then away again. It hadn't made it as far as his face. It had only reached his chest. He smiled internally at this small victory over her. Since their meeting this morning, she'd been a hellion, refusing to work with him and making sure that he knew how much she hated him. She wanted to make things difficult for him and he was more than willing to show her what a pain in the backside he could be to her. Besides, it was interesting to see a human's, a hunter's no less, reaction to a vampire, especially when they couldn't kill them. The temptation to push her to breaking point just to see what she'd do was

overwhelming and a wonderful way of alleviating his boredom.

“You can’t walk around my place like that or I will lock that door just like I threatened.” She frowned at him, her gaze managing to make it to his this time.

“Why not?” He challenged her, leaning back a little and planting his palms against the counter so his muscles tensed. She did a good job of resisting a look. He could see that she was curious.

“It’s...” She swallowed, pensive and still frowning beautifully.

“Distracting?” he suggested with a smirk.

“Off putting,” she said, deadpan and glaring.

She moved to the sink and filled the kettle before putting it on. Lincoln watched her, silent and motionless. The way she moved around was entrancing. Strength laced her natural grace. It spoke of it to him, telling him that she believed herself a force to be reckoned with. Maybe she was in human terms.

“Shouldn’t you be asleep?” she said.

“I could not sleep.” He moved closer to her, leaning against the tall cupboard next to where she now stood waiting for the kettle to boil.

“Vampires have sleepless days?” There was a playful note in her voice that he hadn’t expected. She seemed surprisingly relaxed around him now. The trace of fear he’d detected in her this morning was gone.

“More often than you think when we are hungry,” he whispered, his gaze caressing her throat.

“Never going to happen,” she said without even looking at him.

Her senses were acute if she'd detected his intent without having to see it with her own two eyes. There was something different about her. Perhaps she'd been modified like some of the other hunters he'd encountered recently. Since the Law Keepers' report that humans had been playing god, they'd met more genetically altered hunters. They'd killed every one.

She filled her mug, removed the tea bag and went to move past him towards the lounge area. Her gaze strayed to his torso again.

He tensed his muscles for her and she quickly looked away. Either she was a prude, or it was because he was a vampire that she didn't want to look at him. He hoped it was the latter. It would be fun to prove to her just how curious she was about his kind. Her gaze strayed again and he waited to see what she'd do this time. She stood there, furtively taking in his body. A dull ache settled in his chest, followed by another in his gut. Temptation whispered to push her now while he had the chance.

“Have you ever been curious? Come now, you must have been curious to know sometimes.” Lincoln held her gaze when it darted to meet his. She looked wonderfully innocent and clueless. It didn't fool him. She understood what he was saying. He stepped away from the cupboard and towards her. “What we feel like, what it feels like.”

“Never!” There was such defiance in her voice, such vehement denial. He might have believed it if she’d managed to keep better control of herself. Her eyes betrayed her. They strayed to his chest for a split second.

He grinned, enjoying this game. It was time to up the ante.

He trailed his fingers across his bare chest.

“I know you want to feel it.” His senses locked onto her heart, revelling in the staccato rhythm it had adopted. A rush of adrenaline entered her blood, sending the scent of it into the air through her overheating flesh. She was either embarrassed, or his words held some truth and she wanted to touch him. Another push. “Just reach out and touch. I can see the questions in your eyes, Lilith. Is it cool, hard? Would you feel a heartbeat? Would I feel your touch, feel pain if you scraped your nails down it... feel pleasure?”

Her cheeks blazed and her eyes widened. She went to turn away. He was beside her before she could move, his hand tight around her wrist. He couldn’t let her get away when it was just getting interesting.

Taking the mug from her other hand, he placed it down on the counter away from them, his movements slow so he didn’t draw her attention away from his eyes. He drew her towards him. Her fingers shook in his. Her breath trembled uneasily, quivering with her racing heart. Her dark gaze fell to his chest and she slowly wet her lips with the bare tip of her soft pink tongue. He stared at her mouth, mesmerised by the motion of her tongue against her lips, and then snapped himself out of it.

This game was turning dangerous for them both. It didn't matter. He couldn't stop now.

He had to see what would happen.

"Surrender to it," he whispered, voice smooth and convincing.

Her fingertips barely grazed his skin and he was on fire. His eyes half closed as he absorbed the sensation of her warm caress heating his body. He hadn't expected this. He clawed back a modicum of control, telling himself this was just a game to annoy her, to make her feel weak. It shouldn't make him feel this way.

Her eyes were wide, her pupils dilated as she stared at her fingers where they traced patterns on his chest. She was lost. He could smell the hint of arousal, the alluring pheromones coming off her.

He breathed in a voice of temptation, "Imagine what it is like to kiss me."

Her gaze burned him, trailing fire over his body as it rose to his mouth. He stared at hers, imagining the silky glide of her lips against his and the brush of her tongue, the warmth of her.

"Imagine what it is like to be kissed by me." He smiled to reveal his extended fangs.

She jerked her hand away and then shoved him hard in the chest. He laughed. She stormed off into her room. A small cream table lamp took the brunt of her anger. It hit the wall not five feet from him and smashed into pieces, raining down on the kitchen counter. He'd expected her aim to be more accurate.

Lincoln forced his teeth to recede and listened to her tramping around her room. What was she doing? Was she looking for something else to throw at him? He didn't know why she was angry with him. All he'd done was play a vicious game as she had been. Only his game was different. Instead of being designed to show her how much he hated her kind as hers was, it was designed to show her how curious she was about them and how tempting they were to her.

She walked back out of the bedroom.

He froze and stared at her.

The only trouble was she was becoming tempting herself.

The rose-coloured camisole hugged her upper body to the point where imagination wasn't necessary. It emphasised her breasts. They swayed as she moved towards him, free of a bra to restrain them. Dark blue jeans were moulded to her legs, revealing their slender shapely form. Her small feet were bare, her toes painted a sultry black.

She neared him and he raked his gaze back up her. He didn't make it to her face. She made sure of that. Her fingers skimmed across her chest, gathering the sheen of sweat there until it beaded against her skin. He swallowed. She stopped close to him, not three feet away. He couldn't take his eyes off what she was doing. The sensuality of it only heightened his desire for her, his want to take her and her blood for his own. He curled his hands into tight fists of restraint. It didn't stop his desire from rising. It was no use. He was captivated. She had turned his game against him and triggered

thoughts that he shouldn't be entertaining. What they spoke of was forbidden. It was a sin to want a human.

He licked his lips and stepped towards her, still mesmerised by the motion of her fingers on her chest. A single drop of moisture slid down over the arc of her breast and into her cleavage. His lips parted in fascination and he looked at her. She smiled, all innocence laced with seduction. This was a cruel game to play with a man.

Another step.

She moved before he had time to react, reaching into her back pocket and pulling something out.

His eyes flicked to it.

A stake.

He leapt backwards.

She didn't attack.

His own weakness hit him with tremendous force. She'd lured him in and had drawn her stake before he'd even known what was happening. If she'd been serious about staking him, there was no telling what might have happened, but there was every possibility she would have hit her mark.

"Next time you try something, I will be armed, and I will kill you," she said, voice dark and lethal.

He raised his hands, in control again. "Touché."

She slipped the stake into her back pocket and walked towards him. His gaze followed her and he turned as she

passed him, unwilling to show her his back. She grabbed the waste bin and pushed all the pieces of the lamp into it.

“And you owe me a new lamp.”

Lincoln stared at Lilith’s back, cocking his head to one side. Just below her neck and between her shoulder blades was a black tattoo. He stepped closer to see it better as she picked up her mug of tea. It was a sun surrounded by pointed rays and inside the circle of it was a crescent moon.

She turned to face him and sipped her drink. It had to be cold by now.

His little game would have seen to that.

In the end, he wasn’t sure who the victor had been. She’d touched him and he’d seen in her eyes that she was curious. It didn’t seem to go beyond that. Her scent had only shown a tiny sign of desire. If she’d been a vampire, she would have easily noticed the change in his own scent. He’d wanted her. Looking at her now, he still wanted her. The moment he’d laid eyes on her, he’d admitted to himself that she was attractive for a human. She called to him on some base level where he wasn’t master.

There was no way he could act on the attraction he felt though. The law was there to prevent such trysts between vampires and humans, unless he intended to kill or turn her. He had to uphold the law regardless of his situation. If he survived this, he would face trial for conspiracy against his bloodline. He didn’t need to add any more sins to his list or he would lessen his chances

of making the Law Keepers release him rather than execute him.

“Are you even listening to me?” she said with such an air of irritation that he realised their game still had her flustered.

He wondered if she felt as flustered as he did. Did the hunters have laws to prevent such relationships too? He doubted it. Humans seemed a lawless race.

“From the look on your face, I’m guessing no.” She placed her mug down on the counter and glared at him. “I think we need a few ground rules, or I’m going to end up killing you before this assignment is complete.”

He denied his urge to laugh at what she’d said. Laughing at her when she was already angry with him was going to get him nowhere, no matter how ridiculous her idea of being able to kill him was.

“What like?”

“First, no walking around my apartment naked.”

Lincoln looked down at himself. “I fail to see that I am nude. Half nude perhaps, but not nude.”

Lilith frowned and narrowed her eyes into a look that might have killed him if he’d been close enough.

“Second, I need a reason not to lock you in your room during the day.”

“Other than the fact I could just pull the door off the hinges or kick it down?” Another sour look met his question. “Are you afraid I am going to attempt to kill you?”

“I’m afraid you’re getting ideas above your station, demon.”

He raised an eyebrow at her tone. Snide and derisive. It sounded familiar. She sounded like he used to.

“Speak to me in that way again, and I will show you who is inferior.” His eyes switched to red for a moment, enough to give her a reminder of just what she was dealing with. There was only one reason he hadn’t killed her yet, and that was because she might be key to his own survival. If she hadn’t been, he would’ve turned her into a delicious meal the first time she’d insulted him by grabbing him in her superior’s office.

She walked past him, evidently choosing to ignore his warning.

“I mean it. You’re surrounded by humans and they’re unlikely to ignore you. It’s our calling to kill creatures like you. The treatment the men gave you this morning was just a taster. What’s to stop you from killing them next time?”

The only thing stopping him from killing them was himself. He realised any other demands she might have were just padding to draw his attention away from how important this one was to her. She was worried about her friends and with good reason. He wouldn’t think twice about killing any of them, anyone but her, unless it meant that she would take her services away and leave him vulnerable.

Could he honestly say what she wanted him to say? If pushed, he would push back. Instinct and years of training made him see her kind as below him, as nothing more than fodder for his species. She was asking

something of him that he didn't know if he could do. He could only try.

He swallowed his pride and the bitter taste of his thoughts. To promise her this would be to lower himself, and that was something he wasn't used to. His heart rebelled against the idea.

"I will make a pact with you," he said in a clear voice full of conviction even as his instinct told him to kill them all, to revel in their deaths and force her to help him.

"Your terms?" She seemed so confident and calm. There was a sparkle of victory in her eyes.

She had taken him down, kicked out his legs, bound his hands and forced him to submit to her, and all it had taken was the idea that she would turn her back on him and leave him to face his terrible fate alone.

"You will protect me... and in exchange, I will give you my word not to kill any member of this compound." Those words were easier to say than he'd thought they would be.

A smile bowed her dusky lips. "Agreed."

He frowned and watched her moving around the apartment, gathering a black shirt from where it lay draped over the back of the dark brown couch and then checking a crossbow that sat on the coffee table beside the books.

She'd agreed incredibly quickly. He'd thought she'd protest to the idea of having to protect him. She'd accepted his terms without a moment's pause. He only wished he could accept hers so easily. This feeling of

weakness and his reliance on a human sickened him. He needed to feel strong again.

“Where are you going?” he said when she put the crossbow down, checked her stake was in her back pocket and then started putting her boots on.

She looked over at him, dark eyes still sparkling with diamonds and her smile.

“To hunt,” she said.

No wonder she sounded so happy. He stared into the distance as he remembered what it felt like to hunt—the rush, the thrill, and the beauty of violence. He’d always been happy when he’d been going out to hunt. A vampire hunter had to feel something similar.

“I would be interested to see you hunt.” He moved to block her path to the door.

Her wide eyes spoke of shock. It soon gave way to something else. She held her head high and looked him over, assessing him. What was going through her mind?

“Get dressed then,” she said with a half smile. “And I’ll show you just what hunters are made of.”

* * * *

Lilith’s muscles screamed in protest as she tried to push herself that bit harder. It was too much to ask of her tiring body. There was no way she could keep running at this pace. It was too fast.

Lincoln was edging away from her, taking the lead now.

She'd valiantly kept up with him, wanting to catch the demon before he did for the sake of her pride as a hunter. It was impossible. He was relentless and showed no sign of stopping or slowing.

The dark clouds above surrendered to the pressure of their load and heavy rain fell, drenching the pavement and road, and turning the grass embankment slippery in an instant. She ran onto the path and pushed on, not wanting to admit that she was beginning to slow down. She could continue. She could keep up with him. It wasn't about the demon anymore. It was about Lincoln being better than her.

She hated that.

Even with her gift and her natural strength, even though she could outrun any hunter in Section Seven, she couldn't beat him.

He had to be tiring now, surely? They'd chased the demon across the city and no one, not even a vampire, could keep running forever.

Stopping dead, she keeled over and grasped her knees.

A vampire hunter definitely couldn't.

She breathed hard through burning lungs as her body shut down, shrieking with pain. It was useless. She couldn't go on.

He'd won.

Closing her eyes, she fought to level out her breathing. Her throat was sore and tight, her chest wheezing with each lungful of air she dragged in and exhaled.

“The demon is getting away.” Lincoln didn’t sound as though he was mocking her. Her heart said that he was. The matter of fact tone he’d adopted didn’t hide his underlying thoughts behind those words. He knew he’d won. He’d bested her when she’d brought him out on a hunt with her to prove her strength and superior skills.

“Let it,” she rasped through a sticky throat and dry mouth, dying a little more.

It took all the energy she had left just to raise her head and look at him.

He towered above her, black hair slicked by the rain and forming spikes against his forehead. Droplets raced down his cheeks to his chin and fell to his chest. His clothes were soaked, sticking the black t-shirt to his chest and making her think of this evening.

She couldn’t believe that she’d touched him. Worse than that, she’d wanted to. His words had been so convincing, making the temptation rise in her until she’d no longer wanted to resist it. She’d wanted to feel him and know all those things he’d whispered.

“I could go on alone,” he said and again there wasn’t a trace of malice in his voice.

He seemed to be enjoying the hunt, and it didn’t seem to bother him what he was hunting. She’d dispatched a weakling vampire with all the grace, speed and skill she’d wanted to show him. The fight had been short, but not as short as his one against another weakling.

He’d killed it with one blow.

It had taken seconds.

Then the demon had shown up and she'd seen her chance to show him that she was better than him.

Only he'd beaten her that time too.

He'd outrun her and he didn't even look as though he'd broken a sweat. Did vampires sweat? They probably didn't.

Straightening, she peered into his dark eyes. The light was bad, sickly yellow sodium that did nothing to illuminate his face. She didn't see any sign of fatigue though.

"Aren't you tired?" she said and then wondered when she'd fallen onto such easy terms with him. A part of her said to rebel and treat him as she had when she'd first met him. She was too tired to go through with it. Maybe tomorrow she'd give him hell again.

She hadn't realised how close he was to her until he shifted slightly. He was barely three feet away. It compounded the strange notion she'd come up with earlier in the night. He was always close to her. Was it his need for protection driving him to stay so near, or something else? His desire for her blood? He hadn't hidden that back at her apartment. He'd bite her if she let him, of that she was sure. This was different though. It was as though he couldn't leave her side, as though they were one and the same. She didn't like that thought. It made her stomach turn and made conflict ring in her head.

Her gaze fell to his hand. The angle of their bodies made it close to hers. There was strength in those large hands and long fingers. She'd felt it when he'd held her wrist and seen it when he'd killed the weakling.

Her hand shifted to her pocket where she kept her stake, and she went rigid and alert as a noise broke the silence. Down the road, a man crossed over to the other side. She slumped back into a more relaxed position and lowered her hand. Lincoln moved a step closer and her attention was with him again. He looked thoughtful and then shrugged.

“I am certain that I will need a good stretch come tomorrow night.” He laughed and she noticed his extended fangs. They glistened in the streetlight, capturing her attention until she was staring at his mouth. Would it hurt?

That thought shocked her and she backed away a step, distancing herself from him as though that would rid her of the things going around her head.

“I know what you are thinking,” he said.

Her heart hammered at the idea he might, that any cocky comment he was about to make might actually be true.

“You do?” Her voice shook.

“They take a while to get used to when talking,” he said and relief filled her, swift and calming. “There is a lot of bloodied tongue at first... not that that is a bad thing.”

The idea of that should have repulsed her. She knew that. For some reason it didn’t sicken her to the extent she’d thought it would. She frowned and rubbed her temples. This was all getting horribly complicated and she was beginning to lose perspective.

He was a vampire.

She killed vampires.

That's all there was to it.

She hated his kind. He used hers as food or for amusement and then food.

Her heart whispered a reminder that he wasn't just a demon now, not to her. He'd somehow made himself almost human. She was beginning to forget what he truly was. He was starting to become something other than an enemy.

Her gaze fell to his mouth again and the sight of it stirred thoughts she'd been trying to repress all night—his teeth, his lips, his kiss.

His fangs receded, shifting back into normal teeth, and he flashed a winsome smile.

"The demon?" he said in a voice that sounded distant to her ears.

"Let it go."

What was happening to her?

She was still staring at his mouth when her senses screamed of danger. Her instinct kicked in, her training taking over. Her hand shot to her stake. She turned to face their attacker.

The man that had crossed the road changed in front of her eyes. In the space of a heartbeat, he'd sprouted a curling pair of horns and tattered leathery wings that beat the air. Razor-sharp teeth cut across his widening mouth and scales erupted over his body. The demon

unleashed an ear-splitting shriek that had her desperate to cover her ears.

Another heartbeat and it flew upwards, out of her reach, heading into the darkness.

It had taken Lincoln with it.

Chapter 4

Lilith didn't need this. The heavy rain seeped into her eyes, blinding her and slowing her down as she ran. It froze her skin, sapping her remaining strength. She pushed on, tracking the demon and desperate not to lose it.

Vaulting over a low wooden fence, she followed it across the field and realised she was heading towards the river. She had to get it down before then. If she had to run to the nearest bridge, she'd lose both the demon and Lincoln.

She gritted her teeth and forced herself to run faster. Her gaze scanned the pitch-black sky until they found the demon. She was closing in. It gave her the strength to keep going.

Another glance at the sky revealed that Lincoln was fighting the demon. It had him around the waist and they were facing each other. She couldn't make out anything else. They were too far away and the weather was too poor.

She really wished she'd brought her crossbow now.

She'd made a pact to protect Lincoln, and she couldn't turn her back on him. Duty dictated that she do all she could to rescue him from whatever it was that had him. She'd never seen a demon like it before. One moment it had been a man, the next it was a child of the Devil.

Her eyes flew wide when the demon gave another cry and Lincoln plummeted through the air and hit the ground hard. He lay on his back, splayed out and

motionless. She ran to him, her knees hitting the dirt the moment she was beside him.

He coughed, sending a trickle of blood down his cheek, and suddenly she was seeing Jackson again, dying right in front her.

Panic propelled her, sending her heart racing harder. She couldn't lose another one, not even if he was a vampire. She'd sworn to protect him, and now she realised he really did need someone to do that. Whatever this prophecy was he was involved in, it wasn't a joke or an attempt by him to get close enough to drain her dry. It was serious and she believed Lincoln when he said it wasn't restricted to vampires. The demon circled above, released another loud shriek and disappeared into the gloom. She got the feeling that wasn't the last she'd seen of it.

"Lincoln!" She pressed a hand to the left side of his stomach and wished it were lighter in the field. They were near the fence but the streetlights that lit the walkway beyond it were barely reaching them. They did nothing to help her vision. Was it blood on her hands or just the rain? Was he injured?

The fear and anxiety she'd felt last night returned, choking her and making it impossible to breathe. She had to get control and calm down. Lincoln wouldn't die from such wounds. He was a vampire, not a human. He wasn't human.

"Lincoln?"

His eyes slowly opened to reveal darkness. There was such a black look in them, so much anger and violence.

“Are you hurt?”

He pushed her hand away, discarding it as though he hated the feel of her touch. She withdrew, bringing her hand to her lap and frowning at him. He looked so cold, so different from the man he’d been not a second before the demon had attacked.

“Where is it?” he said, tone low. He scanned the distance.

“I don’t know.” That was hard to admit, both to him and herself. She’d been so distracted by checking him that she hadn’t kept track of the demon. An elite hunter shouldn’t have made such an elementary mistake.

Shutting her eyes, she focused on the night. Her instincts rose and sharpened. She still couldn’t pinpoint the demon, not even when the night began to call to her and she saw the world in silver threads through closed eyes.

Lincoln moved and she opened her eyes to look at him. He stared at her, his eyes piercing hers with a look she couldn’t interpret, and then got to his feet and began running.

She pushed herself up off the soaking grass and followed him. Had he sensed the demon?

Her own senses sparked and she turned sharply to face the way she’d come. The demon swooped towards her, faster than she could evade. Her eyes widened and her mouth opened in a silent scream. The next thing she knew, she was on the floor with someone covering her. It was Lincoln. The metallic tang of blood laced her senses. Hers or his? It was all a blur.

His bodyweight stopped bearing down on her and she got to her knees. He didn't look impressed. He looked angrier than ever.

"Stay down," he growled and then left her again.

Stay down?

She folded her arms and scowled at his back as he ran into the darkness. Who the hell did he think he was, telling her what to do?

The demon swooped overhead again and she ducked. It went straight past her, heading for Lincoln.

A cold feeling stole into her heart.

He was insane.

She was on her feet immediately, sprinting in the direction he'd run. He couldn't fight that thing alone. She had to help him. She skidded to a halt and considered what she was saying. The truth was ugly and she didn't want to face it. Lincoln was her client and that was all this was—a need to protect her client. She'd promised she would. Only it wasn't that pact driving her, she could see that now.

Pressing her hands to the sides of her head, she buried her fingers into her hair and squeezed. What the hell was wrong with her? This couldn't be happening. It had just been a strange and taxing couple of days. If she'd been feeling her normal self, he wouldn't have affected her so much. She hated vampires. She hated them. She hated him.

She kept telling herself that, hoping to chase away the confusing thoughts that collided in her head until the point where she no longer knew whether she was coming or going. She screwed her eyes shut and screamed as loud as she could, not caring whether someone would hear her. She wanted these feelings out of her. They were impossible. It was ridiculous. She had to get them out of her. He was a demon. He wasn't human, no matter how much he looked or acted it. He was a killer.

The voice inside whispered that she was a killer too.

No, she wasn't. His kind weren't alive. They murdered humans unscrupulously, using them as nothing more than a walking blood bag to snack on. She killed to protect her species from such a fate. She was good. He was evil.

The line was becoming blurred, and she knew that the more time she spent with him, the harder it was going to be to distinguish between good and evil. There seemed to be a degree of both in him.

She screamed again, long and as loud as possible, desperate to feel her normal self.

A thought surfaced from the gloom of her mind, stopping her mid-scream and shining there like a beacon of hope.

Taking her hands away from her ears, she stood perfectly still and stared into the darkness. Her senses were still sharp. Her gift was growing. She'd noticed that the more she used it, the longer it lasted without her falling into the darkness.

Her focus settled on the two signatures in the distance. Both demon.

It was hard to keep still, to ignore her instincts as they begged her to go to him and help him. If he were dead, truly dead, then she would be free of all this pain and confusion. She didn't want it.

It felt so wrong though, to stand there and listen to the fight, and to know that she was leaving Lincoln to die when she'd sworn to help him. He had to die. She couldn't live like this. She wanted to hate him so much, and it seemed the more she wanted to hate him, the less she could.

He screamed.

Her heart cried in agony and her senses pushed her to move. She made it a step and then regained control. This was wrong. She had to do it though. A tear slid onto her cheek and she caught it on the tip of her index finger and brought it away. She frowned at it. What did it mean?

Another followed it and the cold feeling inside her began to grow. The night called her, commanded her to help him, to go to his aid. The summons was strong, tugging at the depths of her heart and pulling more tears free.

She couldn't do this.

She felt so weak.

It was making her crazy.

Another cry of pain.

Something rose inside her, smashing the part of her that said to stand firm, until only three words rang in her head.

Go to him.

She ran, as fast and as hard as she could, until her legs threatened collapse and she couldn't breathe.

Go to him.

She had to do as it bid her. She had to protect him, regardless of her own confused state of feeling.

Go to him.

The darkness grew inside her until it began to eat away at her soul. She welcomed it, not understanding why it didn't frighten her today. It was something she needed to keep her going; it was forcing her to do as her heart wanted to and not what her weak mind was telling her.

Her hand slipped into her back pocket and she grabbed her stake. It was going to be of little use against such a demon, but it was all she had. She arrived in time to see Lincoln hit the demon with a lotus kick across the head. The demon stumbled and all it took was a left hook from Lincoln to bring it down. The acrid smell of blood was everywhere. She refused to let the memories of Jackson's death flood her mind. She had to stay strong.

Lincoln was on the demon, knees pinning its arms to the grass. He punched it repeatedly, so hard that she was sure that its skull would break.

She took a step forwards, driven to help. Lincoln roared at her. It sent a shiver through her body, a command

that she wished she didn't understand. This was his fight.

Stepping back, she placed a little distance between herself and Lincoln. He beat the demon, unrelenting and grinning all the while. A tiny flicker of fear ignited in her heart. She backed off another step. In his current state, Lincoln was unpredictable. Her senses were no longer screaming at her to help him, they were screaming at her to run away. It was just as she'd thought on first seeing him.

Here was a dangerous man.

He stood with one foot on the demon's chest. A sneer twitched his lips, revealing his fangs. He pressed his other booted foot against the demon's jaw. The demon grabbed it. Lincoln shoved his foot forwards.

The snap of its neck was sickening.

Lilith looked away. Her stomach rolled.

Lincoln laughed. It chilled her heart. The sound filled the night sky, a twisted melody that she didn't want to listen to.

He'd taken pleasure in the fight, much more than she would have felt had she been in his position. He wasn't human after all.

She looked at him, forced herself to see him grinning at the dead demon.

He seemed so different again in her eyes, reverted back to the evil creature she'd met last night.

His attention moved to her and he stepped off the demon. She dropped her gaze to it, unable to look Lincoln in the eye. They were closer to the streetlight here and it turned her stomach to see the damage he'd done to the creature. The wings were broken, half of one missing, and there were long slashes in the demon's torso. The head was at a strange angle now, distorted and beaten beyond recognition. She'd never seen anything so hideous.

She wanted to vomit.

She couldn't look at Lincoln, couldn't bring herself to see the pleasure that would be in his dark eyes.

Her gaze strayed to his boots as he came to stand next to her. He'd hesitated in making the final blow. He'd stood proud and had looked down on his victim so the last thing it saw in this world was the victory of its opponent, and the pride, the superiority.

Whoever Lincoln was, he was used to distinguishing between classes. Back at her apartment, he'd given her reason enough to suspect as much. He thought she was below him, of lower class. Were all vampires of the pure bloodlines such arrogant bastards?

"What was it?" she said, needing to lift the stifling silence out of fear he'd start to suspect something was wrong.

"Aleaeries."

She'd never heard of that species before. Her gaze travelled up Lincoln's legs and faltered on its path. She still couldn't muster the strength to look him in the eye.

“It must have followed me across Europe. I thought I had lost it after our previous fight.”

“Previous fight?” Her eyes made it to his stomach and she frowned at the long gashes in his wet t-shirt. He was injured. It was his blood she’d smelt.

“It was somewhere near Budapest as I recall.” He touched his side. “It used the same tactic then. Damn poison. I could not fight it at the time. The dawn was coming.”

She looked at the dead demon. Even the pure blood vampires had creatures that were equal in strength to them. Even they were vulnerable. The demon had hurt Lincoln before and tonight it had paid dearly for a second attempt on his life. If she had been in his shoes, if she’d had a history with a demon, would she have relished the kill and the victory so much? It didn’t bear thinking about. She wasn’t a demon. Humans didn’t take such pleasure in killing.

“There is something else that you need to know,” Lincoln said and she managed to meet his eyes at last. He didn’t look pleased. “There is a bounty on my head. Others will know where I am and they will be coming.”

“A bounty? Issued by wh—how much are we talking about?”

He raised a bloodied eyebrow.

For a moment, she didn’t think he was going to answer her. She wasn’t interested in a bounty. The only reason she’d asked was because he’d intrigued her and it had felt natural to want to know. Surely, it would have looked more suspicious if she hadn’t?

“It is issued by my lord, Mikael, for my return, alive. The price, if you are interested in claiming it, is equivalent to five million of your pounds... or you could take the alternative, the blood of one thousand virgins, still alive and kicking for you to do anything you wished with.” He moved away from her, as though he seriously believed that she would want to claim the bounty.

Five million pounds was tempting though. Not only would she be rid of him, she’d never have to worry about money again.

“You’re in serious trouble aren’t you? For someone to issue a reward of that much, you must be in trouble,” she said, taking a step towards him, slow and measured so he knew she had no interest in returning him to his lord. If she did that, then this so-called apocalypse would probably happen. Was it really an apocalypse? They needed to get researching. She’d get Lincoln back to the mansion and into sickbay and then assemble the team and brief them.

“Serious enough that I have asked a human to help me.”

Her eyes met his. He had a good point. She doubted there was ever a recorded case of a vampire hunter helping a vampire, or a vampire seeking help from them.

“What reward would it have taken if it had captured you?” she said with a nod towards the dead aleaeries. “Just out of interest.”

“It would have taken the women and blood in the old days. They are adapting. Human money comes in handy for them. It comes in handy for us all.” His hand pressed harder into his side. Blood trickled through his fingers,

black and ominous in the low light. She hadn't realised the extent of his injuries.

"We should get out of here." She looked away from him in the direction of the mansion. "We need to get researching."

Research seemed a better excuse to return to the compound than the fact he was injured, one less likely to get a violent reaction from him. She started walking, not bothering to check if Lincoln was following her. In his eyes, she'd seen a hint of pain and knew it was best to leave him be. His restraint still amazed her. He showed nothing of his pain on the surface. His expression, the steadiness of his voice, and the ease with which he spoke, could easily fool someone into believing that he wasn't hurt at all.

The stench of blood and that tiny flicker of hurt in his eyes said different though. She had to get him back and get his injury looked at. He'd mentioned poison. There wasn't many she knew of that could kill a vampire, and he'd encountered the demon before and survived being poisoned. Perhaps the toxin slowed healing.

It was a long walk back to the mansion and his pace began to slow before they'd reached it. By the time they did, he was walking at a snail's pace and she no longer needed to use her gift in order to smell the blood. She kept alongside him. It wasn't to offer silent support. It was to keep him from getting angry with her. Instinct told her that if she raced in front, he would feel weak and he would turn unpredictable again. She didn't want that, not when she was taking him, a hungry wounded vampire, back to a house full of young humans with strong blood.

They mounted the steps and she saw that the entrance hall was full of people. She cringed and glanced at her watch. It was time for the nightly shift change. One a.m.

A swarm of muttered comments greeted them as they walked through the doors. She didn't hold them for Lincoln. He needed to enter on his own strength so he didn't lose face. She understood that. His pride was all he had right now, his strength so diminished by his injury. He was vulnerable. He had to do all he could to make himself appear powerful so no one would dare attack him.

Not that she'd let them.

He was under her protection.

The whispers grew louder and she looked over her shoulder at Lincoln. His hand pressed against his side. It was drenched with blood. He held his head high and his eyes narrowed into a look of sheer determination. It didn't fool her. She could see the growing pain in them. He was beginning to lose control of his restraint.

She quickened her pace to see if he could keep up and was relieved when he could. It made the remainder of the journey to her apartment pass quickly. She opened the door for him and let him walk in first. The tension in him was palpable, turning the air heavy and sparking anticipation inside her. He couldn't hold out much longer. He went straight to the bathroom and didn't bother to shut the door. She closed the apartment door and leaned against it, waiting. She could sense it coming.

He roared.

His fists slammed into the wall either side of the mirrored cabinet, cracking the white tiles.

She flinched and shut her eyes.

Opening the door, she slipped out and closed it quietly. He needed some time alone and she needed to get him some blood. As disgusting as the notion of offering him precious human blood was, it had to be done. He'd lost so much that she wasn't sure he could recover without help. When she was younger, her teachers had taught her that you could bleed a vampire to death. How much more blood would Lincoln need to lose before he became critical?

She ignored the stares she received as she walked down the hall, heading straight for the infirmary. Pushing the double white doors open, she smiled at the male nurse who passed her and then went into the temperature-controlled room where they kept the blood.

"How serious is it?" Daniel made her jump and she turned to face him, clutching two packs of blood to her chest. His gaze darted to them before meeting hers again. "I see."

"It was an aleaeries. I've never heard of that species before." She followed him out of the room and infirmary, giving him a grateful smile when he waved away one of the nurses before they could ask what she was doing.

"They're mercenaries," he said with a frown as they walked along the hall. "They don't attack humans so we have no interest in them. They are normally hired to attack other demons."

Even if they were only supposed to attack demons, shouldn't her classes have taught her about all demons? What if she'd crossed paths with one alone, without Lincoln?

She remembered what he'd said to her.

"More will be coming. There's a price on Lincoln's head." She didn't hesitate in telling Daniel. Let Lincoln be angry with her if he didn't want anyone else to know. She'd warned him that she'd have to report everything that happened. "It's not small either, Daniel."

She stopped and looked around to check the corridor was empty before stepping closer to him.

"It's five million pounds." She felt justified in her worry when he looked shocked. "If someone, his lord, is offering that much for his return, we could be overrun with demons searching for him. His lord could come here!"

"We will deal with that if it happens," Daniel said in a calm voice but the worry didn't leave his eyes.

"You're thinking about his contract with Section Seven, aren't you?"

He nodded. "He must have paid us an extortionate amount to even have his request for help considered."

She started walking again. She didn't want to remain in one spot in case someone was listening and she wanted to get the blood back to Lincoln.

She hesitated and then said, "He asked specifically for me."

“What?” Daniel hurried up beside her.

“I’m serious. He asked for me. He told me himself. I don’t know why, but I’m determined to find out. There’s something wrong about all this. The more I work with him, the more I’m starting to think he wasn’t lying.”

“Lying?” Daniel said. “What did he tell you?”

She sighed and looked at him.

“We’re facing an apocalypse of biblical proportions.”

Chapter 5

Lincoln paced across her kitchen, relentless and focused. Lilith could feel the nerves radiating from him, tangled threads that mixed with other emotions she couldn't read. She hadn't expected a vampire to have so much feeling. Her view of them had always been of an animal, a heartless demon, something that only knew killing and was driven by instinct, not emotion.

Everything about him kept shattering her definition of right and wrong, good and evil, taking her finely balanced sense of justice with it and throwing her life into disarray.

"You're still bleeding," she said.

He hadn't touched the blood she'd brought him. He hadn't even looked at it, or her, for over thirty minutes. He'd done nothing but attempt to wear a groove in her wooden floor.

He touched his side and frowned at his fingers when he brought them away. Dark blood stained them.

Concern crossed his face for a moment and he paled, and then his expression became an unreadable mask again.

"Someone could look—"

"It's fine," he snapped and turned his back on her.

"Is it bothering you?" She stood up from the couch and took a few hesitant steps towards him. The last time she'd tried to get close, he'd growled at her.

He said nothing.

“Something is,” she muttered to herself and folded her arms, glaring at him.

His fingers grazed his side again and then he raised them and licked them clean.

“You really should get it seen to.”

“I do not need help.” There was such darkness and anger in his voice that she stepped back to a safer distance. Was this why he wasn’t drinking the blood she’d brought him? He didn’t want her help. It didn’t make sense. He’d come all this way to find her so she could help him, and now he was turning his back on her. He stopped and inspected his torn t-shirt and his wound again. “Do you have a needle, some cotton thread?”

She frowned and went to look in her bedroom. He wanted to sew his clothes? He was better off taking care of himself rather than his top. She found a reel of thread with a needle stuck into the top of it in her top drawer. She carried it over to him and placed it down on the counter.

He leaned against the kitchen cupboards and removed his t-shirt. His hands trembled as he threaded the needle. Her gaze wandered to his side. The wound was a wide slash that cut diagonally across his body from a point near his navel to just below his ribs on his left side. It was deep and ragged. She could only look at it for a few seconds before she had to look away. The blood had soaked into his jeans, all the way down to his boots, creating a wet patch on the now dry material. A trail of red spots marked the route he’d paced across the kitchen floor.

She was surprised when he placed the t-shirt down, pinched the wound on his side closed and pushed the needle into his flesh. He caught the tip of the needle as it poked through the other side and tugged until the end of the black cotton was an inch away from the hole he'd made. She stared, eyes following his every move as he sewed the wound.

There wasn't one trace of pain on his face. Such control. She could sense it in him. Her senses said he was hurting. Fear laced that pain.

He looked at her when he was done and she read the silent request. She took a pair of scissors out of the cutlery drawer and cut the thread for him. Her gaze ran down the length of it. Unable to resist the temptation, she traced her fingers down either side of the wound, inspecting his work. Her gaze roamed to his chest and stomach. He had a beautiful body, muscles toned and speaking of his strength. They spoke to her. They told her to touch him. He breathed in when she reached his stomach, evading her.

She'd never seen him breathe before. He was old enough to have lost that human instinct.

Her fingers dipped forwards until she was touching him again. She knew she should stop, that he was watching her closely and most likely wondering what was compelling her to caress a creature she so openly loathed.

Curiosity.

He'd been right before.

In moments of darkness, when she'd used her gift and killed her vampire quarry, she'd often wondered how they differed—humans and vampires.

He wasn't as cold as she'd expected. His skin felt cool, as though he'd been caught in the cold without enough protection. He felt human and for some reason that scared her, just as it had before. If he hadn't, she might have found a reason to end her change of feelings towards his kind and dispose of these emotions he'd stirred in her.

Attraction.

Desire.

Need.

"Are you done, or should I strip so you can satisfy your curiosity about that too?" He pushed her hand off him and edged away, walking across the room.

The coldness in his voice startled her. She hadn't realised that by touching him she'd upset him so much. He'd pushed her away in the field too.

His thumb swept across the wound again and then he sucked it clean.

She realised why he was acting so strange all of a sudden, so cruel and malicious. This was what was bothering him.

"You're hungry."

He paused and removed his thumb from his mouth.

“You noticed?” There was an irritating air of sarcasm in his voice. It made her want to hit him. His demeanour changed as he studied her, his head inclining to one side and his eyes narrowed into a pensive look. She felt as though he could see right through her. “Few hunters can sense as well as you.”

If he wanted to know why, it wouldn't do him any good to ask. Other than knowing she had a gift, and knowing how to call it, she knew nothing about it. She didn't know why she had it or where it came from. Daniel had said nothing more than the fact it was probably genetic and had come from her parents. She'd never known her parents. Her sister was the only family she'd had.

“You haven't fed in a while.”

“It is not safe,” he said and then paused, narrowing inquisitive eyes on her. “You would not stop me?”

She ignored that question, frightened by the answer her heart had immediately given.

“I brought you blood to help you heal. Won't you weaken if you refuse it?”

He didn't lose the questioning look.

“Some, but I will still be strong. I have always preferred fresh blood.” He picked up one of the bags of red liquid and gave it a distasteful look. His eyes came back to her. “Unless you are offering?”

She backed away. “Never!”

He smiled, amused.

“But if you're weak—” she started.

“It is better than leaving myself open to attack while I feed.” He tossed the bag onto the counter with the other one. “I do not know this place well, and there are many after me. To feed is to let your guard slip.”

He stepped towards her and a look entered his eyes that had her heart racing. It was all warmth and temptation. He lowered his voice to a near-whisper, sensual and enticing.

“To feed is to become lost in the divine taste of warm, fresh blood and the thrill of the kill.” He closed the gap between them. She stood her ground even as he towered over her. “You have no control then, you are a slave to the desire it stirs... the pleasure.”

She swallowed, hating how seductive he sounded and how close he was. The passion in his eyes was unnerving. His words should have disgusted her. He should have disgusted her. Instead, it all conspired to confuse her and make her feel wrong on some level. His words spoke to her, called to her, and she felt everything he’d described—the pleasure, the hunger, and the desire.

She turned away and told herself not to listen to him, not to let him make her feel this way. He was a vampire, her enemy. Blood was precious and to be protected. It was her duty to protect her kind from monsters like him.

Walking to the kitchen counter, she gathered herself. She picked up the two bags of blood and threw them at his chest. They bounced off and landed at his feet. He raised an eyebrow at them.

“Eat it or die. It’s your decision,” she said and then headed to the door. “I’ve got to gather the research

team so we can find out just what the hell is going on with you.”

Lincoln stared at the blood bags. The door slammed. He bent over, pressing a hand to his side and grimacing as his wound hurt, and picked up the bags. It was kind of her to bring him blood, even if it was cold. He straightened and turned the packs over in his hands. Bringing them to his nose, he sniffed. It was real human blood. They must have a hospital in the mansion. It made sense.

He walked slowly to the dark brown couch and eased himself down onto it. He shifted until he was comfortable. It was hard when his side felt as though it was on fire and stung whenever he moved. He kicked his boots off and eased his legs up onto the coffee table. Putting the blood bags down, he frowned. His jeans were filthy and needed washing. There was a chance he'd leave a stain on her couch. He was too tired to care.

Now that she was gone, he could drink the blood and focus on healing. He needed rest. Not eating for two weeks had weakened him enough. The amount of blood he'd lost tonight had only made it worse. Now he was no stronger than a weakling.

Leaning his head back against the top of the couch, he closed his eyes and ran his fingers through his damp hair. He could sleep for eternity. Every inch of his body was throbbing and aching.

He was going to need more than two measly bags of blood to make him better.

She'd probably become angry if he asked for more.

He brought the first pack up to his mouth and sucked on the plastic for a few seconds before puncturing it with his teeth. The chilled blood flooded his mouth and made him want to retch. He swallowed it down. He had to. Blood was precious, and he needed every millilitre he could get.

The first pack was empty for minutes before he finished sucking, so desperate for more that he could barely control himself. He tossed it into the kitchen and bit into the other one, gulping it down in seconds and not leaving any in the plastic bag.

He threw it across the room to join the other one.

His fangs itched.

He needed more.

An illusion of Lilith danced across his closed eyes, dressed in her little camisole and tight jeans. She twirled closer, ever closer, until he swore he could smell her blood and hear the beautiful rhythm of her heart again. He urged her to come closer. He wouldn't hurt her. He just wanted a taste. He'd smelt her blood again tonight. The sweet fragrance had been alluring and tempting, as sensual as he'd imagined, fitting her perfectly. Watching her fighting, she'd been enthralling, pulling him in until he wanted to fight her just to be the object of her attention.

The Lilith in his mind changed her dance until it became a series of faultlessly executed kicks and punches.

He'd fight her. He smiled to himself. He'd fight her just to feel her body against his, her hands on him again,

and to fulfil his desire to touch her. It wouldn't be breaking the law then.

"What the hell?" Her voice shattered the illusion in his mind and he opened one eye to look at her.

She was glaring at him from the kitchen, her hands firmly planted on her hips.

"It's called a bin. You put rubbish in it. It's bad enough that I have to share my place with you... I'm not cleaning up after you too." she said and stooped to pick up the empty blood bags. She put them in the bin and then stalked towards him. "If you get blood on my couch, I'll kill you."

He closed his eyes again, unconcerned by her threat.

Sleep beckoned.

The sun was rising.

Picking himself up and concealing all the pain it caused him, he left his boots by the couch and walked to his bedroom door.

"Don't bleed on the bed sheets either!"

He turned in the doorway and met her scowl with his own glare. "Your concern is touching."

He had to do something about his jeans though. They needed cleaning and his t-shirt needed repairing. He looked at Lilith, getting the feeling that she would actually try to kill him if he asked her to wash his clothes and fix them for him. It wasn't part of their deal or the contract. Neither was it his place to do a menial task.

He'd never washed clothes or sewn an item of clothing in his life. He wasn't about to start now.

"Where are you going?"

Ignoring her question, he went into the bathroom and turned the shower on. He could keep his jeans on while he washed himself, ridding his skin of the lingering stench of demon. Maybe that would rinse some of the blood out of them. Then, in all his life, he still wouldn't have lowered himself to do servants work.

He stepped into the shower and hissed the moment the warm water hit his wound. It stung fierce and burned, like a thousand hot tiny needles puncturing his skin.

His wash was quick, only lasting as long as it took to see clear water running out of his jeans. He turned the water off and ran his hands firmly down his legs as best he could without breaking his stitches. Satisfied that he'd squeezed out most of the water in his jeans, he walked back out of the bathroom and glanced at Lilith before going into his bedroom.

"Don't get the bed sheets wet!"

Would she ever be satisfied?

He slammed the door.

He stripped the wet jeans and his socks off and laid them over the back of a wooden chair in the corner of the room, along with his boxers. Rubbing his face, he padded naked across the room and lowered himself onto the bed. The darkness was comforting. He stared into it.

The aleaeries had followed him.

More would be coming.

His lord would soon follow.

He had a terrible feeling in his gut.

Lilith wasn't going to save him.

Chapter 6

Lilith pushed the book away, as far as possible across the table, and picked her mug up. Empty. She leaned her chin against her upturned palm and yawned. The research team continued, never breaking their concentration for any reason. They were like machines, going through book after book, relentless in their pursuit for knowledge. Two days ago, she'd assembled the team. There were three men and one woman. When she'd told them that she had a potential apocalypse for them to find answers to, and a way to avoid it happening, they'd gone straight to work, all smiles and excited chatter.

Now they'd gone through at least a sixth of the library's books. She couldn't keep up with them. Every five minutes she was making coffee in a desperate attempt to stop herself from falling asleep on the books.

They'd probably kill her if she did that.

She'd never realised how serious and incredibly geeky the researchers were. Now she understood Daniel a little better. He'd never been a field agent, which is probably why he'd managed to live until he was pushing sixty. He'd always been like these young people in front of her. Their fight was for knowledge, against books and mysteries, and ancient prophecies and languages long forgotten. Her fight was for the safety of her kind, against demons more powerful than her. She risked her life night after night to protect the people in this room and the world.

Grabbing her mug, she stood and walked across the room to the coffee urn. She put her mug down and picked the silver and black urn up. A shake revealed that it was empty too.

“I’m going for coffee. Anyone want something? Breakfast maybe?” She looked at the four. They stared at her, their heads barely raised from the books they were reading.

They nodded.

They weren’t a talkative bunch either.

Heaving a sigh, she took the coffee urn and trudged down the hall towards the stairs that led to the ground floor. When she reached the balcony and the staircase in the entrance hall, she had to stop. She leaned against the banisters and stared out of the window. The sky was lightening. Another night had passed and Lincoln hadn’t left his room.

She pushed away from the banister and went down the stairs. He was beginning to worry her. She hated that he could do that. A vampire was the last thing she should be concerned about. He’d been in such a state though. She wondered how long it had been since he’d fed. How long could a vampire last before they weakened too much to kill?

When night had fallen, she’d been tempted to knock on his door or just walk straight in and tell him to come with her and help with the research. Instead, she’d taken another two blood bags from the infirmary and left them outside his door. She wasn’t chicken and he didn’t frighten her. The only reason she hadn’t barged into the

room was that she didn't fancy seeing him naked. At least that's what she told herself.

She'd even become so bored of waiting for him to reappear in the world that she'd taken his t-shirt to the buyers department on the first floor and told them to order another half a dozen in a similar size. She hadn't been able to order him more jeans. She didn't know his size and he'd shut them in his den of iniquity with him.

The cafeteria hushed as she walked in. She ignored the stares and the whispered comments. Everyone seemed to be talking about Lincoln these days, or more precisely, her and Lincoln. She'd told Daniel about the rumours. He'd promised to speak to the other commanders in the compound to put an end to them.

"Can you fill this with strong black coffee please?" she said to a man behind the food counter. He was no older than her.

He flashed a smile and took the urn from her. She idly watched him filling it, her brain temporarily shutting down. She was so tired. Give her a good fight, one that lasted all night, and she'd be wide awake at the end of it. Force her to sit surrounded by books and looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack and she couldn't keep her eyes open.

"Here you go," the man said, holding the urn out to her. She took it with a nod and set it down on the counter.

"Can you get someone to send breakfast up to the library?"

"Sure, anything you want."

She'd expected him to tack 'sweetheart' onto the end of that sentence. He just continued to smile, as though that was his default setting. She couldn't imagine why he wanted to work in the cafeteria at his age. Most of the people here were in their mid twenties like her. It took until twenty-two to graduate. She looked at the man and the other young people serving breakfast to the hunters and researchers gathered in the cafeteria. Maybe this is what happened to you if you failed. She'd never thought about it before. People did fail to pass the exams. She supposed that working here within the compound was better than getting a job out in the world where you knew vampires and demons lurked, waiting to kill you. Here was safe.

She frowned.

At least it had been until a vampire had openly walked in.

"Thanks," she said and then paused. "Send up everything bad would you? All the fatty stuff and nasty sugary treats. I think I need it."

He chuckled and nodded. She turned and walked away, carrying the urn more carefully now that it was full. It smelt wonderful—bittersweet and warm—the enticing aroma of fresh coffee.

She almost hugged it.

It was like salvation in a bottle.

Her footsteps slowed as she reached the first floor and her thoughts returned to Lincoln. It probably wasn't wise to leave him in her apartment alone and with the door unlocked. Not that a locked door stood a chance of

stopping a vampire. It hadn't even stopped Mark that time they'd argued. He'd kicked it right in.

She stopped dead and her eyes widened.

Mark.

God. She hadn't thought of him since before Jackson had died. Everything since then had been a blur. No, that was a lie. She'd had time to think, and it had always been about the contract or about Lincoln. What was wrong with her?

Two men passed her. She recognised them as some of the men that had been enjoying taunting Lincoln when he'd first arrived. They were wearing black.

She frowned.

Now that she came to think of it, everyone in the cafeteria had been wearing black too.

She looked back down the corridor towards the large windows in the entrance hall.

It was grey and drizzling.

It was today.

A shiver raced through her, leaving her feeling cold and alone. How could she forget?

She looked at her watch to see that it was already nearing seven. Only five more hours to go. She'd research with the team for three more and then give them leave to go and get ready.

She'd get ready too.

A commotion in the hall made her hurry back to the balcony and she stared down at a group of hunters as they rushed in. Three men were carrying a small woman. She looked no more than twenty-two, barely old enough to be out in the field.

She was drenched in blood.

She was dead.

Lilith looked out at the world as it began to rain heavily and listened to the clamour below.

Today was going to be hell.

* * * *

Lilith turned the page. An hour had passed in silence. When she'd returned to the library this afternoon after the funeral, Lincoln had been waiting there. He'd thanked her for the blood. She'd said nothing.

The coffee and breakfast goods were cold. No one had touched them when she'd returned this morning and told the team to continue for a while and then leave to get ready. It seemed they'd forgotten too. How could everyone forget so easily? Hadn't he been the life of their group, the one to lift spirits and make everyone laugh? Even she'd laughed a few times.

She had no laughter left now.

The atmosphere in the house was oppressive. It was quiet and she would be able to hear every movement in the hall if her heart stopped beating so loudly in her ears.

“Is something the matter?” Lincoln said from the opposite side of the table.

She favoured him with a scowl and went back to her book. How dare he speak to her? This was his fault after all. He was one of them. He had brought the one that had killed Jackson to this place and then brazenly walked into her life and demanded she protect him.

She hated him.

She hated everything he represented, and all the deaths he brought back to her.

Tears blurred her vision. She refused to let them fall. She wouldn't let him see her like this. She couldn't let him see how much he affected her.

She turned another page, scanning it for a mention of Lincoln's prophecy. Since the words he'd given her were in Latin, they'd started with the Latin books. It had never been a strong point of hers. She'd almost failed it during training.

Eve had been better.

Eve had passed with flying colours.

Her chest tightened and heart ached at the memory of her twin sister. She'd always been so full of life and laughter, so carefree while she herself had been so serious about their calling. She could remember telling her sister not to run down the halls here when they were children, that it was against the rules. Eve had never done anything by the rules.

It had hurt like hell the day she'd died.

Lilith had felt it, felt the pull and snap inside her. Daniel hadn't needed to say a word for her to know what had happened.

Lincoln's kind had killed her.

A dirty, vicious and disgusting Vehemens.

Vehemens seemed to take everyone she loved.

"There is definitely something the mat—"

"Shut up!" She cut him off, slamming her fists down on the table and standing sharply. Her chair flew backwards. "Just shut up!"

He looked shocked, leaning back in his chair in an obvious attempt to distance himself from her anger and staring straight at her with dark sinful eyes.

He was a Vehemens. This was his fault.

"I'm sick of you. I'm sick of the stupid rumours about us. I wish you'd get the hell out of my life." She shoved the table hard towards him. He grabbed it and pushed back, stopping her. A growl of frustration left her and she walked away only to come back a second later. "A girl died today. She'd been a hunter for barely more than a handful of weeks. She was torn to shreds!"

He said nothing.

It was wrong of her to lay blame for the girl's death at his feet when a weakling had killed her. Right now though, she needed someone to pin all these crimes on, someone to take it all out on, and he was the only viable target.

“I hate you!” She sneered at him.

His eyes darkened and he stood.

She didn’t show any fear in the face of him. The anger inside her was overwhelming, boiling up until she couldn’t keep control. She had to get this all out of her before she burst.

“I hate you!”

He narrowed his gaze on her.

“You think this death is on my hands?” he said in such a calm and measured tone that she knew he was upset. There was that incredible restraint again. She wanted to push and push until the tethers holding his anger inside snapped. She was itching for a fight.

“It was your kind, your bloodsucking, filthy kind!”

He stepped to the side, carefully pushed his chair under the table, and regarded her with cold eyes.

“You think we are all the same?”

She wished he’d get angry. She wanted him angry. She could see it in the depths of his eyes. He wanted to fight too. He wanted to retaliate.

“You’re all the same. Murderers!”

He laughed and it turned her insides to hear it. There was cruelty in that laugh, a sense of darkness and unspoken words. He didn’t care if he’d killed her kind. He had no compassion towards humans.

“You came here, bringing your merry band of bloodthirsty murderers with you, following in your wake... you brought them here... you don’t care what the consequences are, as long as you’re ‘protected’.”

He sneered.

“Oh come on... let’s have it then. The excuse. The reason why. The bullshit. I don’t give a fucking damn about you or your safety. The only reason I’m helping you is because you pose a direct threat to humans if this prophecy comes to pass. Right?” She glared at him until he nodded. “I know how to protect you. Get the hell out of my face and stay in your room!”

A flicker of red in his eyes was the only warning she got before he had leapt across the table and was stalking straight towards her. She backed off, instantly switching to the defensive as he closed the gap.

“Get away from me,” she warned.

He kept coming.

She was running out of space.

Instinct kicked in.

She punched him hard across the face.

Silence.

He touched his cheek and the red mark she’d caused. His eyebrows knit. His look turned as black as midnight skies.

Fear rose inside her.

She ran.

She ran straight out of the room without looking back and then slowed to a brisk walk, trying to look collected in case anyone saw her.

The slamming of the library door echoed down the hall towards her, along with the sound of his footsteps.

She doubled her pace. Her senses screamed that he was coming. She'd pushed him that one step too far. It had shown in his eyes the moment his temper had snapped. Her heart hammered against her chest, its frantic rhythm telling her that she wasn't going to make it to the safety of the sun-drenched entrance hall before he caught up with her.

He grabbed her wrist and twisted it painfully. Her breath left her when her back hit the wall. She flinched at his threatening growl. He was so close that his cool breath washed over her face.

Her eyes widened when she stared at his mouth and saw his canines extending. She'd never witnessed it before. They'd always been either human looking or in their vampire guise when she'd fought them. She'd never seen the process of transformation. She could almost hear his bones shifting and the scrape of his teeth as they grew.

He slammed his hands against the wall on either side of her head. The force of the impact made it shudder.

Swallowing hard, she fought for control over her fear. She couldn't let him win this. She couldn't back down. She'd pushed him until he lost control just as she'd wanted him to, only now she didn't know what to do.

The only course of action open to her was to apologise. She couldn't bring herself to do that. A tiny part of her said to push him again.

Raising her eyes, she did her best to look calm. She flipped him a smile.

"What rattled your cage?" she said.

His fiery red eyes narrowed and a growl rumbled through his chest, so low that she could feel the echo of it in her own.

"You don't frighten me."

He moved back a fraction and blinked slowly. Was he going to let her go, just like that, without so much as an attempt to make her pay for her spiteful words? What he did do was the last thing she expected.

He leaned forwards ever so slowly, his cheek so close to hers that she could feel the coolness of his skin. Her eyes closed. He neared her ear and her heart trebled in speed when he dipped his head towards her neck. She grasped the wall behind her, flattening herself against it as though she would be able to evade him. She had to move. His low growl made her knees weak and palms sweat. Fear broke free of its restraints. It wasn't that feeling which shocked her most of all.

Her stomach warmed when his breath washed over her neck. Her teeth teased her lower lip. She swallowed and pressed the back of her head into the wall. Her fingers tensed against it, seeking purchase to keep her standing as her legs began to buckle beneath her.

Their skin touched, his cheek barely grazing her jaw. It sent her trembling, her heart thundering so hard that she couldn't hear anything but the rush of her blood.

She couldn't breathe.

Couldn't do anything but melt into the wall.

She realised that he had moved away from her. Her lust-fogged brain gradually cleared and she opened her eyes, knowing already how he was going to look when they found him.

He inhaled deeply, smirked, and removed his hands from beside her head.

She was speechless.

He wasn't.

"What rattled your cage?" he said in a deep sultry voice that sent tremors through her, aftershocks of what he'd made her feel.

He walked away in the direction of the library, victorious.

She couldn't go back there now. Her cheeks blazed. She was ridiculous. Pathetic. He was a vampire. He shouldn't be able to make her feel that way. She wished he didn't.

Everything was falling apart.

Her feet led the way, carrying her down the stairs in the entrance hall and out of the door. The sun was still shining but it was heading towards the horizon. She walked around to the garden and sat down on a bench near the rose bed. Closing her eyes, she let the sun warm her skin and relax her. She didn't get to see it

much these days, let alone feel it. It was a long time since her and Eve would spend the whole day playing in this garden.

She looked at it, at the tall firs and the rhododendron bushes that surrounded the expanse of neatly clipped grass and borders of flowers.

Tears filled her eyes.

Today had been hard.

She shouldn't have taken it out on Lincoln.

Staring at the scenery directly in front of her, she emptied her mind until she wasn't doing anything. There was no feeling, no hurt from losing those she loved, or pain from the fight. There was no attraction to Lincoln, or lingering desire from their moment in the hall. There were no thoughts of what was to come. No fear. There was nothing but peace and tranquillity, the warmth of the sun, and happy childhood memories.

She longed to go back there, to a world bright with sunshine and long playful days with her sister.

Only she couldn't go back.

She could only go forwards and go on in a world without her best friend and her only family. It was a dark place, a cold one that drained her of life and feeling.

The one thing she'd least expected had brought a spark into this grey world, a flicker of colour.

A vampire.

Lincoln.

Chapter 7

There was no sign of Lincoln when she returned to the library at nightfall. The first group of hunters leaving the mansion had broken her peace, sending her back to her life and responsibilities. She had to research.

She sat down at the table and dragged the book she'd been reading towards her. The one Lincoln had been looking at sat opposite in front of his empty chair. She didn't want to think about where he'd gone. She hoped he was back in her apartment and not out slaughtering the innocent because of her.

Heaving a sigh, she started to read, trying to put everything out of her head by focusing on her work. It started out well and then disintegrated into nothing more than fidgeting with the book and scanning the pages.

The grandfather clock in the corner chimed out the hour. Eight. The night had barely begun and she was already so tired. She wished there was time for her to rest. She couldn't sleep until tonight was over.

She turned another page and stared at it, trying to regain her focus. It was impossible. They'd gone through so many books and Lincoln had given her so little to go on. A pact called Spiritus Diabolus. What kind of information was that? It was hardly useful. If he'd been able to tell her something more specific then it would have made the search a lot quicker. He'd said himself that they were running out of time because it had taken so long to find her.

There was another thing that didn't bear thinking about.

He'd asked specifically for her.

Why? Was she a part of this prophecy too?

She glared at the picture in front of her—a succubus and its prey.

Something told her that Lincoln knew more than he was letting on. He hadn't told her why he needed her on the case, or the real reason behind why he was so reluctant to leave the compound to feed. He'd easily killed that demon. He could easily kill any that came after him. There had to be a reason he wanted her protection so badly. He had more information and he wasn't giving it to her.

She turned the page.

Why was he holding back if he wanted her help in stopping this prophecy from coming true? If she knew more about it, they could find a solution, a way of avoiding it or halting it altogether.

She skim read the next page in her book and then stopped, scanning back up the page until she found the word she'd seen.

Pact.

Lincoln had mentioned a pact.

She read the paragraph that contained the word and frowned when it mentioned the Devil.

Her gaze flicked to the next page. Covering it was a woodblock print in black and white, a grotesque depiction of the Devil and a man. The Devil stood behind, almost in shadow, its huge horned form

towering over the smaller man. It had its hands held out above the man, its claw-like fingers making her think of an orchestra conductor. Below him, the man was twisted into a strange position, his body bent and wretched, and his arms out in front of him, mimicking the Devil's pose.

The more she looked at it, the longer she stared into the Devil's eyes and at the horrifying image of the man, the colder she became.

She looked away, not wanting to see it anymore. For some reason it frightened her. The idea of the Devil controlling people was disturbing, chilling.

She read the Latin inscription at the bottom of the print.

The Devil's Puppet.

The door opened and she slammed the book shut, her heart pounding hard against her chest when she turned to face Lincoln.

She pulled the book towards her, too frightened by what she'd read to tell Lincoln.

"Have you discovered anything?" he said, casual and as though nothing had happened earlier.

"No." Too quick. She should've taken longer to answer, or prattled on about how it was slow going and they'd find something soon.

His brow arched.

His glare penetrated hers.

“Don’t lie to me!” The force of those words hit her hard, rattling her and making her jump. “I can sense something is wrong!”

She clung to the book, hugging it to her chest. She’d forgotten he could easily read her heartbeat and her fear. Her heart pounded faster, driven by the anger in his voice.

“Why’s it so important to you?” The words left her before she’d even had time to consider what she was doing. She shouldn’t be questioning him right now. She was treading on thin ice again and this time it might break.

He growled. “It’s my life at stake!”

She laughed at that, couldn’t help herself. “You’re scared of death?”

The notion was ridiculous. A vampire was frightened of dying. It chased away the fear she’d been feeling, pushing it to the back of her mind.

He growled again, exposing sharp teeth this time. His threat didn’t stop her from laughing. The weight of vulnerability in his eyes did. It grounded her. He’d never looked so human.

“You mortals do not fear death,” he said in an empty voice, distant and quiet. He sounded so broken that she wanted to apologise for her laughter, for hurting him. “You believe there is something good, nice, awaiting you on the other side. We vampires know different. We are blessed with eternity if we are careful, and the more we live, the more we grow to fear death because we know what awaits us.”

He paced across the room to the window and opened the curtains to reveal a beautiful full moon. It bathed him, flooding the room with ice-white light and chasing the shadows away. She stood, placed the book down, and walked over to him. He stared out at the moonlit garden. She studied his profile, watching for any sign of his feelings.

“Those turned to darkness belong to the darkness...” He looked at her out of the corner of his eye. “Hell... and Hell is very real... and it is waiting... for me.”

His words sent another shiver through her, bringing back the image she'd seen in the book. The Devil's Puppet.

His attention returned to the world outside.

He was quiet for so long that she felt compelled to apologise, to tell him that whatever he thought was waiting for him, it would have to wait a while longer because she wasn't about to let anything happen to him.

He looked so lost, staring out of the window, a touch of melancholy in his eyes.

She hated how she felt, and that a vampire had made her feel it. Clenching her fists, she fought for control, resisting the desire to place a hand against his cheek and tell him she was here for him.

“I have seen Hell,” he whispered in a distant voice. “I have looked into the eyes of the Devil. I know my fate.”

She stared at him, stunned into silence, and then at the book on the table. He already knew. He knew.

Closing her eyes, she emptied her mind and called on her gift. She pictured the moon that hung in the inky darkness, focused on the words it spoke to her. Her senses sharpened until her head began to hurt and her body ached. She switched her focus to Lincoln. She could feel the barest thread of his fear. It was black and painful. She'd seen him stand calm in the face of hunters, demons and vampires. None of them had frightened him, not like this. He was scared.

"It does have something to do with the Devil and a pact then?" she said and he looked at her.

He nodded. "I can steal it, if you need more information."

"How?"

He said nothing.

"What I read mentioned a mark. We need to know if this is the pact we're dealing with. The mark is supposed to distinguish the—"

He raised his left hand, silent and emotionless, and exposed his palm.

On it was a thick white scar in the shape of a cross, upside down when he held it as he was now with his fingers pointing towards heaven. If he were penitent, it would be God's cross.

Her insides flipped.

It was the pact she'd read. He'd been branded at birth, destined to play a part in this prophecy all his life. It was hard to imagine how she'd feel if she was in his shoes.

She didn't think she would be able to cope with the realisation that she was fated to be a pawn for the Devil.

"I will steal the contract."

She shook her head. "It's too dangerous. You can't just walk into your family's home and take it."

"No one will see me." He seemed so sure that she almost believed him.

"In that case, I'll go with you."

He laughed. "To Oslo? To the heart of my kind? No."

"You need protection. With me there, you'll have a higher chance of survival." She stood firm, her jaw tight and expression one of resolve. She'd promised to protect him. There was no way he was going to Oslo alone to get himself captured.

"Then I will not go," he said and looked at the garden again.

"Trying to protect me?" She frowned at him.

"No. Quite the contrary. I am protecting myself."

She didn't understand what he meant by that but she didn't push the subject. She could sense that he was growing impatient. The underlying fear she'd felt was gone and he was impossible to read again.

Silence stretched between them. His eyes remained fixed on the scenery while hers took in his face. He seemed talkative tonight, and she was determined to get some answers.

“Why me?” she whispered.

He looked at her, a little confused and evidently needing more of an explanation.

“Why ask for me? You said you did.” She held his gaze, not letting him look away as he clearly wanted to. She needed to know. He had to be able to see that in her eyes.

“Because your name was given to me,” he said in a low intimate voice. It caressed her ears and heated her blood as though he was speaking words of seduction not simple information.

“By who?” she whispered back, unable to raise her voice now that he’d lowered his. It felt too intimate and she knew she should raise hers again until she felt comfortable. Right now though, she didn’t care. She was on the verge of finally getting some answers to all the questions crowding her mind.

“Not a who... a them. By them.”

Intrigue made her eyebrows rise. “And who are they?”

He stepped close to her, near enough that his feelings were clearer on her senses. He was calm, relaxed almost. He seemed to be enjoying this moment almost as much as she was.

“They took a look for me, at my destiny, and gave me your name. It took a while to find you.”

“Who are they?” She moved closer to him, staring up into his eyes and desperate to know.

“I need to go out. This place is stifling me.” He turned away to face the moon.

Disappointment swept through her. She stepped back and looked at the garden.

“We could walk the grounds.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him nod. “That would be acceptable.”

She led him through the building to the entrance hall and out into the night. It called to her. It didn’t annoy her tonight. She let it call, never answering, just feeling that pull in her blood. Taking a deep breath of the clean cool air, she sighed it out. It felt good being out here, in the quiet, with Lincoln.

They strolled towards the garden at a slow pace that made her feel peaceful inside regardless of her company. It was strange how she felt around him tonight, relaxed and tranquil, at one with him, not against him. Tonight he seemed to fit with her, a puzzle piece that made her feel whole. She liked this feeling.

She didn’t feel alone.

“Are you going to sneak off after the contract without me?” she said without looking at him.

His eyes came to rest on her. She could sense them trailing fire in their wake. He studied her face most of all.

“No. It will come to me.” There was no more explanation. She was beginning to expect that of him.

He seemed to enjoy leading her in circles and leaving things a mystery. Perhaps he didn't trust her.

No, that wasn't the case. He trusted her with his life.

It was fear making him hold things inside.

Lincoln watched her, taking in her profile. The moonlight turned her hair silvery and skin pale, emphasising her beauty to him. Her eyes were black pools that swam with her feelings. He could feel the slenderest ribbon of them, the slightest hint.

Their argument earlier and his subsequent revenge had revealed a good many things to him about her feelings. She was battling them as fiercely as he was. They were destined to fail though. It was impossible to resist such a strong attraction, even when the law forbade it.

His gaze left her and scanned over the garden. The bright full moon turned its low bushes and trees blue. The night was cold, crisp, and the sky crystal clear. It seemed like decades since he'd felt so safe, safe enough to take the time to look at the stars in the glorious heavens above.

The peace between himself and Lilith reassured him, lending strength to his belief that she would save him as the Three had predicted.

The breeze whispered against his skin and he closed his eyes briefly to enjoy the feel of it.

He looked across at Lilith again, at the clothes she was wearing. He'd noticed a large number of people wearing suits today, all in black like her. Her outburst had been in part because of her day, and he could forgive her for

that. Death was never easy to deal with. It made you feel mortal. It made you feel the shortness of your days.

She was so quiet. Was it this sense of peace between them or thoughts of the funeral stealing her voice?

He waited, always patient, knowing she'd speak eventually. This is what she needed right now. No pressure or work to bury herself in. No one pressing her to talk. Just someone to listen.

They walked further into the garden, heading around the next side of the house. There were no flowers here. It was an open area of grass enclosed by shrubs and trees.

Two female hunters passed them. He felt their eyes on him. He didn't take his away from Lilith.

"There's a wake tonight," she said in a broken whisper that told him she was having difficulty keeping her feelings in check.

He had that problem too sometimes, even after centuries of training himself. Sometimes they slipped free of the reins and he could only wait until they passed and try to piece himself back together and rebuild his defences.

"For your friend?" His tone was calm, as gentle as he could manage. He hoped it would soothe her and keep this sense of harmony between them.

"Jackson." Her tone turned bitter for a moment and then faded back into quiet sadness. "His name was Jackson."

He nodded. "I am sorry for your loss."

She stopped.

“Sorry?” She laughed, mirthless and cold. “You’re the reason he’s dead.”

“I cannot deny that, but it was you who brought me here.” He hated the way she looked at him in that moment—horrified that he’d dared to mention that and hurt that it was in part her fault her friend had died.

She turned away. “Don’t remind me.”

He stood silent and sentinel beside her. Other hunters were returning. He could hear them in the distance. A lone man appeared out of the darkness, walking towards them. The man gave him a dark look when Lilith turned away, making it obvious that she was upset. Lincoln thought the man would stop and talk to her. He was wrong. The man walked away and continued with his patrol. Lincoln saw another in the distance. The humans were clever enough to have nightly guards in the grounds. They weren’t clever enough to put them in groups. They’d need at least four together to protect the mansion from an attack by a pure blood.

His gaze returned to Lilith. She’d killed a pure blood alone. There was something different about her.

She looked at him with eyes that spoke of anger and resolve. She had changed again. She’d shut down her feelings.

“I’ll beat any vampire that sets foot in this town. Any of your kin. Even you.”

It was difficult to take those words seriously even when he knew that she meant every one of them with all her heart. She believed in herself, in her strength and skill.

She honestly thought she could kill any that attacked her.

“I’m not frightened of your kind. I can handle them. I’ve killed one.”

There was such wonderful defiance in her eyes, like a small child determined to prove itself an adult and that it knew better than its parents.

He laughed this time.

She glared at him, her stance changing. She wanted to fight again.

“The one you killed was nothing more than a scout, so do not start getting too big for your boots.” He looked her in the eye, hoping she’d see that he was serious too and read the message in his words. If she kept thinking she was invincible, she was quickly going to realise that she wasn’t. “He was a scout. It is like fighting an aide or a servant... he would have been barely twenty. Next time it will be guards, or if we are unlucky, it will be elite guards.”

He took a step towards her and lowered his mouth to her ear.

“If we are truly unlucky, it will be my lord and my blood sister, the Chosen Daughter.”

When he pulled back, she looked baffled.

He smiled, amused by her ignorance. She was a child after all.

“My species has not become as strong as they are without developing a social structure.”

She stepped away and placed a distance between them. Her gaze assessed him.

“Where are you in this structure?” she said with a weight of curiosity in her eyes.

“Chosen Son, second only to my lord.” He stood a little taller.

She looked impressed.

“That is around five positions from a vampire you could defeat.”

Her impressed look faded into a sour one and she drew her stake. “I could take you.”

Could she? He looked at her, seeing all that self-belief in her eyes. She really believed that she could.

Her grip on the stake tightened. He stared at her.

“I’ll prove it.” She ground the words out.

He raised a brow. Did she want to feel death’s embrace so much that she would race to meet it? Her foolish pride would get her killed if she wasn’t careful. It was a miracle that she’d managed to defeat even a young Vehemens. There was a reason his bloodline were named the violent.

“Fine,” he said. He was willing to play her game and show her once and for all who was superior. Hopefully it would shake some sense into her. “If you want me to frighten you, I will. First one to the throat.”

He backed off and she frowned at him.

“What are you doing?”

“I will give you twenty metres, a distance at which a weaker vampire couldn’t easily attack.” He stopped when he was adequate distance away and settled his senses on her. Her heart faltered occasionally, disturbing its surprising steadiness and betraying her underlying nerves about what they were doing. “Are you ready?”

She sniffed, rolled her shoulders, and adopted a fighting stance. A deep breath and flex of her hand followed. Her focus was so intent that he could feel her staring at him.

She nodded and took another breath. “Ready.”

Before she could even finish saying the word, he was behind her. One hand held her around the front of her throat while his other captured the one in which she held the stake. He slid his hand to her jaw and tilted her head back and to the side, exposing her neck. She released her breath. Her heart thundered.

He lowered his mouth to her neck, lips hovering bare millimetres from her skin. He swallowed reflexively, breathed deep of her tempting scent of warm blood and flowers. His fangs extended, his eyes turning red.

Her heart pounded in his chest. Her blood rushed through his veins. With her body pressed against his, trembling in his arms, she was impossible to resist. No internal battle with his desire, no matter how fiercely fought, was going to stop him this time. He shunned his feelings, pushing away from them. He just wanted a drop, that was all. Hunger was driving him, not a need to taste her, to have her.

Lilith hadn't seen him move. One second he'd been in front of her and the next he'd been behind, his body close to hers and his hands on her. She hadn't even had a chance to breathe out or blink. Her heart raced and body shook as she waited to see what he was going to do.

His cheek brushed her neck, cold skin against her cool. Instinct made her close her eyes, made her lean backwards into him as his slender fingers held her jaw and caressed her skin into flames.

Her eyes shot wide when a tiny pinprick of pain followed, a cat scratch by one of his fangs. They closed again when his lips grazed her skin and he sucked softly, stealing what had to have been no more than a drop of blood as his reward for winning.

She hated herself for letting him do this to her, for breaking her vow, but she felt powerless to stop him. Deep inside, she didn't want to. As his lips left her, her sense returned and she jerked free of his grasp. She turned to face him, touched her neck, and frowned.

"That was a lesson," he said and there was something in his eyes—concern or annoyance. She couldn't tell which. "Learn from it. Against me, you would not stand a chance."

He walked away, leaving her standing alone in the garden grasping her neck and again wondering what had gotten into her. She could have stopped him. So he'd beaten her. That didn't mean she'd had to let him do that to her. She'd promised herself that no one ever would. She'd let him do it, she'd known what was going to happen and she'd made no effort to stop him.

Her hand moved, following the path his had taken to her jaw. His touch had been fire. It hadn't been fear that had set her heart racing. It had been that touch, that gentle caress and silent command to submit to him, to surrender to her feelings.

She couldn't move.

He'd had her. She'd been so focused and she still hadn't seen him move.

The idea that he was so much stronger than her, that even in his weakened state he could beat her if he needed to, sent a chill to her heart. Other vampires would be coming to find him. What if his lord came? How could she expect to fight someone more powerful than Lincoln and win?

How could Lincoln expect her to protect him, when he was more capable of protecting himself?

She'd never felt so weak.

The walk back into the mansion was spent lost in her thoughts, mulling over the moment Lincoln had struck. She trudged into the building and looked around at the gathered people. The looks they gave her were nothing short of mistrustful. She kept her hand away from her neck, not wanting to draw anyone's attention there. It was nothing more than a scratch. Anything could have caused it.

She followed some female hunters into the cafeteria and then frowned when she saw the group of young male hunters that had always had it in for Lincoln ever since he'd arrived.

Her eyes widened when some people moved out of the way and she saw who they were looking at.

Lincoln.

They all grinned and started muttering things amongst themselves before the usual ringleader stepped forwards. She knew better than to step in straight away, even when she was growing tired of their taunting sessions. She had to let Lincoln stand his ground, regardless of her own feelings. He would be angry with her if he lost face.

She didn't know how he could remain so controlled. He couldn't go anywhere in the compound without that group finding him and provoking him. She listened to their barbs, their hurtled comments. They goaded him into changing, telling him they wanted to see his inner demon. They wanted to see the face of a killer, of the bastard that had taken so many lives. If they thought he was toothless and unlikely to kill them in their own compound, then they were completely wrong. Now that she knew him better, she knew how incredibly hard it was for him to stop himself from reacting to the hunters. To him, they were nothing but food, they were below him and he was far superior. As much as she hated to admit it, she thought he was right. He was high within his family, centuries old and powerful. He deserved more respect.

She shook her head to clear it of such thoughts. The hunters weren't backing down tonight and Lincoln was beginning to look tired of their game. Her earlier outburst had probably worn his restraint down. She didn't want this night to be the one that saw him snap and turn the canteen into blood bath.

Yet she couldn't bring herself to do anything about it. She didn't have the courage to stop them, to do something that would make her changing feelings towards Lincoln clear. There were already so many rumours about them. She didn't need to add fuel to that fire.

A blur caught her eye and her patience snapped as she saw the stake thud harmlessly into the wall. She was storming towards the group before she'd even thought about what she was doing. By the time she reached them, Lincoln was leaving.

Her gaze ran down his back to his hands. They were tight fists, trembling with his restraint. They told her how hard it had been for him to hold back and withstand tonight's attack on him.

"If I see you treat him like that again, if I hear one word that you've been out of place and mistreating our client, I will have you thrown into the cells and starved." She stood over the men and their cocksure looks faded as she stared at them all, looking into their eyes in turn. "You should all start respecting him, before his patience breaks along with the promise he made me and you all die."

Their eyes widened, a stunned expression settling on their faces.

She glowered, her hands on her hips. "I'd like to see you try to defeat him."

With that, she turned her back on them, no longer willing to intervene if they pushed Lincoln too far. They would get what they deserved. This wasn't a game. Hunting vampires wasn't something to be taken lightly.

The moment you lost respect for their superior abilities was the moment you died. Lincoln had proven that to her tonight.

She raced to catch up with him and skidded to a halt when she barged through the front doors and out into the crisp night air. He stood just in front of her.

“Where do you think you’re going?” she panted, a little out of breath from having to run.

He didn’t turn to look at her. His eyes remained fixed on the heavens. She looked there too, seeing the moon veiled by thin clouds, the edge of its full disc blurred by them.

“What would you like to hear?” he said, a note of resignation in his voice. “That I am nipping out to the bloody twenty-four hour petrol station for some snacks or maybe that I am going to a nightclub to pick myself up a quick fuck and some booze... what is acceptable?”

His words stung her and she’d flinched at the sexual reference. For some reason the idea of him having sex with someone disturbed her and she closed her eyes against the image of it.

“What would make you satisfied?” His breath was cool against her face. She could sense how close he was without even trying. Every nerve in her body was screaming in response to the proximity of his.

She didn’t know what to say.

Would she rather he said he was going out to kill? It’s what she did on a nightly basis wasn’t it? She went out

and killed his kind. He went out and killed hers. Only his had a true purpose. He needed to kill in order to survive.

“I am not human,” he whispered into her ear and she lowered her head away from him, not even considering that she was exposing her neck. His breath tickled her throat, sent a shiver of pleasure through her. She opened her eyes and stared at his boots. The toe of his right boot was against the inside of her left. He could easily tip her off balance and kill her. She had to move, only she couldn't. Her heart was beating steadily, telling her to remain where she was, where she wanted to be. Close to him. “I am not going to lie to placate you. I am going out to kill someone, before I kill those little bastards.”

He stepped back and no relief filled her, only regret.

“What, are you not going to stop me?” he said and she looked at him. He cocked his head to one side, face shadowed. His dark eyes locked with hers, intent and deadly. He wanted to provoke her. He was trying to draw something out of her. She shut everything down, closing her mind against the insane thoughts that kept her awake each day. “You are not going to threaten me like they do or tell me that it is wrong to eat to live, like you do? How many animals have you eaten, Lilith?”

“You eat people, not animals.”

He laughed, deep and loud, and she saw a glint of fangs in the low light from the house. It thrilled her to think he'd again been so close to her in his vampire guise.

He stepped up to her, staring right down into her eyes with his red ones.

“You’re all animals!”

He turned and walked away, leaving her watching his retreating back and shivering with the anger she’d felt in his words.

“What’re you then?” she whispered into the night.

He laughed in the distance.

“The Devil’s child.”

Chapter 8

Lincoln stared at the cloud-scattered sky. The moon was edging lower, enormous against its black velvet backdrop. Bright stars stood out amongst the rest, planets he'd once studied cutting through constellations he knew so well. Eternity could grant you so much for such a small price. Had he been given the choice, he would have chosen this life for himself, regardless of the peril he now found himself in. It was worth it, as long as he continued to live. It was worth any sum to sit like this and watch the forces of nature make themselves felt. He'd stood in awe of the power of the universe, his eyes reflecting a thousand falling stars. He'd voyaged far on the tall ships of old, marvelling at the enormity of the sea and her strength. He'd stared in fascination, captured by the immense beauty of the mountains and the treacherous avalanches that thundered down their cragged faces.

All this he'd seen only because he was immortal.

If he'd remained human, he would have lived and died in London, never venturing forth into the world to take in her delights, and never feeling the power he commanded now.

Yet there was one thing he had never been able to retain. It had always cheated him, giving him a moment's glimpse of it and then slipping through his fingers.

Love.

He traced the mark on his palm with the fingers of his other hand.

Centuries of life and he'd been unable to grasp hold of love and keep it. His one love as an immortal had turned her back on him in favour of another. He'd thought she had taken his heart with her, and shattered all hope of finding this elusive feeling again.

He dragged in a breath and sighed it out.

Then things had changed.

Standing on the very brink of death, backed into a corner and forced to go against his nature, he had found himself face to face with one who stirred feelings he'd long forgotten existed.

Lilith.

Her name was a bittersweet word, one that tasted like honey to his heart and poisoned his mind. The laws forbade it. His instincts rebelled against it. Yet his heart held out and stood firm. He wanted her.

Whether it was love or not, he couldn't tell.

He wanted her though. Not to possess her like a doll, but to stand at her side until Hell swallowed them both for eternity. It was a dangerous feeling and one he had to shun. He couldn't allow it, and she would never consider it.

A fast heartbeat caught his attention. He looked up from his seat on the wall of the cemetery and scanned the street in both directions. In the distance was a woman. He sniffed. She wasn't drunk so her heart wasn't racing for that reason. Perhaps she was in a hurry. As she neared, he caught a better whiff of her scent. Fear.

He hopped down from the wall and leaned against it in a casual manner. She was getting close now. Her heart skipped a beat. She'd noticed him.

She lowered her head and hunched up, wrapping her arms across her chest in a protective gesture. Her eyes remained downcast as she approached, as though if she didn't see him, he wasn't there.

He let her pass him and then took a step away from the wall.

"Is something wrong?" he said and she stopped dead, her shoulders tensing. "Are you in trouble?"

She looked over her shoulder at him. Her gaze flickered to the street behind him and then back again.

"Is someone following you?" he said and glanced down the road in the direction she'd looked. "Shall I call the police?"

She shook her head. Good girl. A woman didn't like to feel weak. His teeth itched.

"Are you sure you are alright?"

She nodded this time, unfolded her arms and pushed her short dark hair from her face. "I just got spooked by a cat or something... that's all. Ridiculous, huh?"

He stepped under the streetlight so she could see him better and smiled broadly at her.

"Not at all," he said, putting on the charm and increasing his smile. She was staring now. Good looks were always a bonus when hunting. "A beautiful woman like you should not be out alone at so late an hour."

She blushed. He could almost feel the heat of her blood warming him already. He took another step in her direction.

“Could I call you a cab?”

“No,” she said a little too quickly. “I mean, I only live around the corner.”

“I see.” He looked back along the street. “Well, good night then.”

He started to walk away, counting the seconds that passed.

“Wait!”

He grinned in the darkness and walked backwards until he was under a streetlight again. He spun on his heel to face her.

“Yes?” he said, giving her another innocent but seductive look.

“I... thank you.”

“Thank me?” He went for confused this time. Girls always fell for the handsome and helpful stranger routine. It added a little fun to his hunt to play with them.

“For even asking. No one asks anymore... everyone just cares about themselves.”

He looked shocked. It was a hard face to pull considering he had to open his mouth and his teeth were already easing into their sharpened state.

He forced a sigh and switched to a thoughtful face. "It's true I suppose."

His senses reached out in all directions, searching for anyone else nearby. He detected one other signature. That one didn't concern him.

Before the woman could say another word, he had covered her mouth, moved around behind her and dragged her into the shadows. He pulled her head back and to the side to give him access to her throat and sunk his teeth into her. The warm rush of blood that filled his mouth was too much. It felt like years since he'd killed.

The woman jerked against him, struggling now even though it was pointless. He wasn't going to let her go. He bit down harder and dug his claws into her side where he had his arm wrapped around her waist. His eyes slipped shut as the blood in his veins warmed, revitalised by hers. He felt a little giddy as he drank deeper, eager for more.

Only he couldn't taste her blood, not after the initial mouthful.

His senses were full of the sweet taste of Lilith's blood and the desire that tiny trace he'd taken from her had stirred. He growled and lost control, tightening his grip on the woman until she began to choke. Her heart faltered. He didn't stop. He sucked harder, desperate for more, hungry for Lilith's blood.

The moment the woman's heart stopped, he released her. Leaning his head back, he kept his eyes closed, relishing the new warmth in his body and the heady sensations stirred by her blood.

Lilith's blood.

Warm liquid oozed down his chin to his jaw, trickling onto his neck. His tongue swept along his lips, capturing all that he could. There was nothing as fulfilling as feeding. It stirred passion in his veins in a way nothing else could. It made him feel the strength inherent to his kind. It made him feel alive.

He wanted more.

His eyes opened and he looked at the body lying crumpled and discarded on the floor.

She hadn't been enough to sate this need, to slake his thirst. It had to be Lilith's blood.

She was watching.

He could feel her.

Was she disgusted by what he'd done? Didn't it bother her?

He'd taken a life and she wasn't attacking him.

She was motionless, her breathing steady and her heart only a little faster than normal.

He turned and waited, staring up the quiet street. The trees swayed and swished in the light breeze. It was cool against his skin. Small clouds swept across the sky, pale and silvery in the moonlight. A distant sound of cars carried on the air.

Lilith stepped out onto the path in front of him twenty metres away.

She stared at him, her silence oppressive and meaningful.

She didn't need to say anything to let him know her feelings. He'd upset her with his spiteful words earlier tonight and the killing of the woman. In reality, he'd done that to spite her too. She'd needed a reminder of what he was and he'd been all too happy to give her one.

Another signature pricked his senses. It was close. He frowned at Lilith.

His instinct screamed.

“Run!”

She gave him a startled look and he knew she'd felt it too. She wasn't moving. Her eyes were so wide as she stared at him, full of fear that kept her immobile. He ran at her, past her, and looked straight into the eyes of the vampire not five foot behind her.

His teeth and claws extended instantaneously, his eyes switching to reveal his true face. He lunged at the guard, knocking him flying and sending them both crashing to the pavement.

There was nothing else on his senses. Just one guard? He must be good.

Lincoln tried to catch a glimpse of his face as he fought to protect himself. The guard hit him hard in the stomach, forcing blood up into his mouth. Lincoln spat it at him. It was never wise to fight on a full stomach. The guard growled and Lincoln slashed across his face.

He couldn't sense Lilith. He hoped to the Devil that she had the good sense to keep out of this fight. There was nothing she could do in this one. She would only prove a distraction and get herself hurt.

Determined to make sure she was safe, he scraped his claws down the guard's chest, leaving ragged marks in the material of his uniform, and then sprang to his feet and ran a short distance into the graveyard. The guard followed. Duty was of utmost importance to the guards. Lincoln ran deeper into the headstones, luring the vampire away from Lilith. This guard had a mission—capture him.

That mission would be his downfall.

The order to bring him back alive would weaken his attacks and leave him open. Whatever this pact was, it was important enough that Mikael was sending his best guards to retrieve him.

He turned and faced the guard, wishing he had a weapon with him now. He hated fighting bare-fist. It was hardly worthy of his standing. It made him feel like a weakling—unrefined, common and happy to fight with fists and fangs.

He roared at the guard, satisfied when the man flinched and began to circle cautiously. He could look for weak spots all he wanted. Lincoln wasn't going to let him take him back there. It was a death sentence. He should never have gone looking. It was a foolish mistake to make and the vision of darkness and flame haunted his every waking step and sleepless day.

He couldn't go back there.

He wouldn't.

Another signature stirred his senses and he knew without looking that Lilith had joined them. Stupid girl.

"Stay out of this!" he said and glanced at her, only taking his eyes off the guard long enough to see her stop around thirty metres from them.

She was too close.

The guard smirked. Lincoln attacked before he had a chance to go through with the thought he'd seen cross his mind. He punched the guard solidly across the jaw, grabbed his long dark hair and brought his head down hard on his knee. The guard growled and stumbled backwards. He recovered quickly.

Lincoln moved fast to block his attack, wanting to lure the guard away from Lilith again. The guard attacked, swift and hard. Lincoln deflected the first two punches. The third caught him across the cheek and sent his mind reeling. He roared again, intimidating the guard with his increasing anger. Giving himself over to his instinct, he slashed repeatedly at the guard, his lust for violence growing inside him until he was oblivious to any strikes that connected with him.

He growled and grabbed the guard's throat, ignoring every punch and kick to his stomach. Dragging the guard towards him, he bit his neck and gave a sharp pull on his blood. Images flooded his mind and he drank deeper, both to get them into some semblance of order and to weaken his attacker.

The guard roared and clawed at him, cutting his shoulder and neck. Lincoln withdrew his fangs and

caught one of the guard's arms to stop him from inflicting so much damage. A clear set of memories came to him. Mikael. The guard's orders were to capture him and bring him back to London. Mikael was coming.

Someone screamed.

Lilith.

He saw the guard had wrestled free of his grasp while he'd been lost in his blood's memories. Lilith was fighting him, as fierce and hard as she could. Her speed was no match for the guard's, her strength nothing more than a child's when compared with his.

Before Lincoln could reach her, the guard had slashed down her arm, cutting her flesh to ribbons. Lincoln tackled the man, growling at Lilith to tell her to keep out of it. He was surprised when she backed off a step as though she'd understood the command. She clutched her shoulder. His momentary distraction in checking her cost him dearly. The guard shoved his claws deep into his side and caught the wound that the aleaeries had inflicted. It reopened, spilling blood.

There was a blur and the guard was gone.

Horror filled Lincoln as he turned, the rich smell of blood telling him what had happened. She hadn't screamed. She was standing with her hand to her bloodied chest, her face ashen and full of shock. The guard was beside her, his claws still red with her blood. He turned to attack again. Lincoln lost all control.

Launching himself at the guard, he grabbed his neck and threw him to the ground. He pinned him there, anger fuelling his movements as his senses remained locked on

Lilith, monitoring her vitals. She collapsed to the ground. She was fading. There was no way she could survive such a mortal wound. He snarled and dug his claws into the guard's cheeks, puncturing them. The guard cried out in pain. It wasn't enough. He wanted more. He wanted the man to suffer for what he'd done to Lilith.

There wasn't time. A quiet voice told him to hurry, to go to her, to try to save her.

He twisted the guard's neck with such force his head tore clean from his body.

Lincoln breathed hard, anger still coursing through his veins and violence whispering her seductive words to his heart. He wanted more. He needed more. He tensed his jaw and pulled his fist back. With a roar, he punched a hole in the guard's chest and ripped out his heart.

He stared at it, hearing the faltering beat of Lilith's.

It shocked him into moving.

It filled him with an urgent need to save her at all costs.

Rushing to her, he picked her up off the dirt and cradled her close. Blood spilled from the wound on her chest. He stared at it, both intoxicated and sickened by the scent. He could smell death.

"Keep your hand on it, Lilith," he whispered close to her ear, his brow furrowed as he held her to him and started to walk. "Press down hard and breathe slow."

She muttered something. The pain in her was so intense that he could sense it. He could sense her life ebbing away. He blinked to clear his vision, cursing the tears

that fell and the despair that had caused them. He was losing her.

He looked down at her hand where it pressed against her chest in a desperate attempt to stem the flow of blood. It pumped out from between her fingers, spilling onto her chest and drenching her black top and jacket. What had she been thinking? He'd told her to stay out of it, had tried to protect her from the fight. Hadn't she listened to him earlier? She had no chance against one as powerful as him.

She shivered and moaned, her face screwing up in pain. He held her closer.

"Hold on, Lilith," he whispered into her ear and she groaned again. He doubled his pace, gaze searching for somewhere safe. There was a row of old crypts in the distance. One of those would have to do. He didn't have time to get her back to the compound. "Hold on."

He growled, angry with himself for not stopping her from stepping in. He should have lured the guard away again the second he'd realised she'd followed him. He shouldn't have let this happen.

He kicked the door to the biggest crypt in and hurried inside, taking her far into the shadows. His heightened vision helped him see in the dark and find a clear spot where he could lay her down. Satisfied with his distance from the door, he knelt and carefully lowered Lilith to the ground. She shivered and winced. He listened, fearing the worst. Her heart was struggling. There was no time to lose.

Racing back to the door, he closed it and used one of the stone lids of the four sarcophagi contained in the room to barricade it.

He was back by Lilith's side in the blink of an eye, his hand covering hers and his chest aching as she looked at him with so much fear. Perhaps humans did fear death after all.

Blood spotted her pale face. He touched her cheek with his free hand and smiled, hoping it would reassure her and help her remain calm.

"I need to take a look," he said and removed her jacket, careful not to jostle or hurt her. The wound on her shoulder was superficial and would be easily closed. His gaze flicked to the three marks across her chest and their joined bloodied hands. It would be a miracle if he could fix that one. He had to try though. He couldn't let her go without a fight.

Rolling her jacket up, he placed it under her head. The floor was cold but he had no way of getting her off it. He didn't have time to start a fire to keep her warm and it would arouse too much suspicion. There could be other vampires in the area looking for him. He couldn't risk an attack while he was occupied with saving her.

"Keep calm, Lilith, and do not let go," he whispered. "I can fix this for you if you will allow me to."

She looked at him with enormous fear-filled eyes. There was so much pain in them. He wanted to take it all away for her, and even if he failed to save her there was a way to do that. She would hate him though. His life wasn't for her. He had to keep her alive and successfully

heal her, if only to stop himself from breaking down and turning her.

He ran his fingers over her forehead and looked deep into her eyes.

“Try to relax and focus on your breathing.”

She nodded and tears slipped down her cheeks. He wiped them away, knowing she wouldn't want to look weak in front of him. He ached for her, his anger pressed deep down inside and coiled like a snake waiting to strike. He held it back, restrained it, and focused on her. A part of him said it was wrong to save her. The rest said he had to, regardless of how selfish it made him feel. He needed her.

The smell of her blood was intoxicating, speaking to him on so many levels, saying so much, all the things she couldn't.

He leaned over her, hesitated a moment before touching his tongue to her chest. She whimpered and tensed. He took hold of her hand and held it, surprised when her fingers wrapped tightly around his. He wanted to tell her that everything was going to be all right. Instead, he focused on cleaning the cuts. He didn't have time to speak, not even to reassure her. He had to work fast if he was going to seal her wounds.

She had such strong blood. It was different to any humans' he'd ever tasted. It piqued his curiosity. He pushed it to the back of his mind with his anger and fear. Once he'd ensured she would live, he could plan his revenge on Mikael and he could ponder why Lilith was so different to every human he'd met in his long life.

He cleaned the first of the cuts on her chest. It was deep and ragged. The bleeding slowed after the first pass, his saliva working quickly to seal the blood vessels and stem the flow. He began to clean the second. Lilith jerked up, crying out in pain and squeezing his hand so hard it actually hurt.

“Stop!” she screamed and he held her head down with his other hand, restraining her. “Let me die... please?”

He looked at her, at the defeat in her eyes.

He refused to let her die.

He couldn't.

Closing his eyes, he kept her head held down against her jacket to stop her from moving and began cleaning the second wound again. It was slow work. He monitored her heartbeat, her laboured breathing deafening him. He had to save her.

He lapped at the end of the second cut and moved onto the third. It was the lowest on her chest. He noticed the guard's claw had gone straight through the thin strap of her black top and cut it. He lowered the top a little, keeping her breast covered as best he could. The wound grazed the smooth curve of it. He shifted position and licked the end of the cut, working his way down until he reached her breast. His eyes closed and he breathed deep, an ache stirring inside of him as he ran his tongue over her left breast. She shuddered beneath him, a moan of pain escaping her. He held her hand tighter, showing her that he was still there for her.

When he'd reached the end of the wound, he went back and cleaned it again. Her skin was soft beneath his

touch, warm and alluring with its sweet fragrance. He brushed her side with the thumb of his hand holding hers, found pleasure in caressing and tasting her. Her breathing was shallow, in control, and her heart was beating steady but too slow for his liking. He licked her harder, tasting her flesh, compelled by her blood.

Tearing himself away, he moved to the next cut, his eyes opening and looking at her face, never leaving her as he made sure she would survive. A growl, low and commanding, escaped him when she tried to move again. She whispered something, incoherent things that didn't make sense. Her voice was strained, hoarse. Her heart picked up speed.

"Save your breath," he said and held her down. "Focus."

He shifted so he was above her, his hands either side of her arms. Lowering his head, he licked the first cut on her shoulder, working slowly to seal each one. Her blood was so strong. Too intoxicating. His head spun and he licked harder, desperate for more. A glance at her chest had him stirring painfully in his jeans and, no matter how hard he fought, he couldn't contain his desire. He moved back to her chest, rougher this time, hungry for her. He wanted to taste her. He wanted her, even when it made no sense. He didn't care if he hurt her. He had to taste her.

His tongue lapped the wounds, laved her skin. Intoxicated by her blood, he kept going, losing all restraint. It spoke to him. It begged him to touch her. Pain made his fingers tense, his claws scraping the concrete floor of the crypt. He ignored it, tried to shut it away with the rest of his feelings. It wouldn't go away. It was too strong, making his instinct drive him. He was

delirious with the pleasure of her blood and the pain burning inside of him.

Tracing his fingers across her chest, he eased her top lower until the material barely covered her nipple. He kissed the curve of her breast, absorbing her softness and her scent.

She breathed faster.

He licked the deepest wound on her chest, capturing the stray drops of blood that had broken to the surface, and then followed the trail of them to her neck. His whole body burned with need. Flicking his tongue out, he lapped up the blood that had settled in the notch between her collarbones. She moved and he could feel her watching him.

He drew back and looked at her.

Her eyes were half-open, fixed on his. She raised a hand and touched his lips. A shiver coursed through him, making him want to growl at the sensations stirred by such a barely-there caress.

She said nothing. She didn't need words to tell him what she was thinking and feeling. It was all there in her eyes. She could feel this connection between them as keenly as he could. The attraction was mutual.

His heart clenched and his eyes half closed. His lip tingled where she continued to touch it, fingers resting lightly against it. Regardless of the blood staining it and the things he'd done tonight, she had looked at him with eyes that expressed something incredible, something that stirred his blood more than anything else.

He looked into her eyes, his mind quiet and focused, his thoughts wholly with her.

“Esto perpetua,” he whispered, husky and low.

“Always,” she said and closed her eyes.

He rolled onto his back beside her, tired, drowsy with pain and buzzing from the taste of her. His eyes refused to focus on the ceiling above. They swam out of focus as his head began to throb and ache. His eyelids felt heavy, too heavy to keep open. He locked his senses on her, making sure she was going to be all right, and then slipped away.

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About the Author:

Felicity Heaton is a romance author writing as both Felicity Heaton and F E Heaton. She is passionate about penning paranormal tales full of vampires, witches, werewolves, angels and shape-shifters, and has been interested in all things preternatural and fantastical since she was just a child. Her other passion is science-fiction and she likes nothing more than to immerse herself in a whole new universe and the amazing species therein. She used to while away days at school and college dreaming of vampires, werewolves and witches, or being lost in space, and used to while away evenings watching movies about them or reading gothic horror stories, science-fiction and romances.

Having tried her hand at various romance genres, it was only natural for her to turn her focus back to the paranormal, fantasy and science-fiction worlds she enjoys so much. She loves to write seductive, sexy and strong vampires, werewolves, witches, angels and alien species. The worlds she often dreams up for them are vicious, dark and dangerous, reflecting aspects of the heroines and heroes, but her characters also love deeply, laugh, cry and feel every emotion as keenly as anyone does. She makes no excuses for the darkness surrounding them, especially the paranormal creatures, and says that this is their world. She's just honoured to write down their adventures.

To see her other novels, visit: <http://www.felicityheaton.co.uk>

To read more about the Vampires Realm series, visit:
<http://www.vampiresrealm.com>

If you have enjoyed this story, please take a moment to contact the author at author@felicityheaton.co.uk or to post a review of the book online

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Other stories in the Vampires Realm series:

Prophecy: Child of Light [book 1]

A girl unlike any other girl, a vampire unlike any other vampire, Prophecy lives life in the dark until the night she breaks the rules. Leaving the family mansion to hunt for the first time, she encounters Valentine, a vampire from her family's enemy and a man who will change her life forever.

Suddenly at the centre of a prophecy, she is kidnapped by Valentine, the man who should have been her executioner, and forced to run with him in order to save herself. Required to work together, the tension between them builds as a dark evil threatens to destroy the world, their families and the Law Keepers attempt hunt them down, and Prophecy discovers that her feelings for Valentine control her new found power.

When the truth about her is revealed, will Prophecy be strong enough? Will they discover a way to save the world from Hell? And will they finally see past the hatred bred into them by their families and surrender to their love?

The first of the Vampires Realm novels being written by five star author F E Heaton, *Prophecy: Child of Light*, is part one in an epic tale of love and war that is sure to capture your heart and leave you craving more.

Prophecy: Caelestis & Aurorea [book 2]

The final battle draws closer. Prophecy's world becomes darker and more dangerous, pushing her to the limit and testing her strength and her heart, almost breaking her. Old friends turn their backs, leaving her to fight with the help of an unlikely ally and forcing her to call on the devastatingly seductive and powerful Lord Hyperion for assistance.

Struggling to rescue Valentine from the malicious hands of her blood brother, Arkalus and the lord of Aurorea, Kalinor, Prophecy discovers just how powerful she is and how far people will go to stop her from fulfilling her destiny. Lives are lost, battles are won, and the scroll foretelling the prophecy is finally completed, but nothing can prepare them for what lies ahead.

When her visions show her the path that must be taken, will Prophecy be able to do what is necessary? Are Prophecy and Valentine ready to command the power they'd never thought would be theirs? And are they strong enough to fight the evil of their true enemy?

Following on from *Prophecy: Child of Light*, the tension rises and love grows in *Prophecy: Caelestis & Aurorea*, a thrilling second part to this story that draws you into a dark, dangerous world of vampires, magic and the war to end all wars.

Prophecy: Dark Moon Rising [book 3]

An enemy with unimaginable power and bloodlines with centuries of hatred bred into them, two things that threaten to tear Prophecy and Valentine apart as they fight for their lives and their future together. Their vain attempt to join their houses into one army drains the last of their strength, leaving them more vulnerable than they've ever been. The tension escalates between the bloodlines, and, more dangerously, between Valentine, Prophecy and Venturi.

As everything crumbles around them, defeat seems inevitable. In one decisive move, their enemy turns the tables against them, taking what is most important to Prophecy and leaving her to fear that the terrifying visions she's been having are coming true. An enemy becomes a friend, guiding her in her time of need, and a friend becomes an enemy. Death, destruction and danger surround her, but the help of an old ally brings her the army she needs and the dark moon brings her the power to fight the legions of Hell.

When the time comes, will Prophecy be able to do what's necessary or will the sacrifice she must make be too painful to go through with? Does she have the strength to stop Hell from being unleashed into the world and save the ones she loves at the same time?

The dramatic conclusion to the *Prophecy* story, *Prophecy: Dark Moon Rising* is a gripping tale of love and war that will take hold of you, set your heart racing and not let you go until the very last page.

Winter's Kiss

The tales of the mansion near Nika's remote Russian village say that its lord drinks blood to live and that the guards are dead men walking, but that doesn't stop Nika from falling for one of them—a man who seemingly hasn't changed in twenty years, a man she wishes would be hers. One snowy spring night, her world and his collide when she is attacked by wolves and he rides in on a black horse to rescue her. But her knight in shining armour is far from saintly. He is a vampire, and she is becoming a werewolf, and love between such species is forbidden—the penalty death.

Winter is a commander of the Validus, the most powerful vampire bloodline in Europe. Faithful to his family and his lord since his turning one thousand years ago, he follows the law to the letter and places duty above all else, but his resolve is about to be tested in the most painful way and his world shaken beyond salvation. The girl he watched grow into a woman, a woman who has stolen his heart, is now a werewolf and his dream of making her his has been shattered. Only vengeance can be his now or the Law Keepers will hunt him down and kill both him and Nika.

But Winter's plan to take Nika home to her family only leads to her witnessing the destruction of her village and the death of her father at the hands of the werewolf trying to claim her, and Winter finds that he can't leave her. His heart demands that he protects Nika from the werewolf, Willem, by killing him and that he finds her a new home, somewhere she will be safe without him, for he must even protect her from himself. But Nika tempts him more than he can bear and it isn't long before he finds himself treading the knife's edge between upholding the law and succumbing to desire.

Nika does everything in her power to convince Winter to stay with her, to go against the laws and risk death, but in the end will she have done enough? When they reach the last bastion of the werewolves, will Winter leave her with her kin? Will the nights they spend together change his heart and his mind, or will she spend eternity dreaming of Winter's kiss?