

Chapter One

There was nothing particularly interesting about the wall my eyes were glued to. Well, I guess that wasn't entirely true. The wall was a moving ocean—and quite amazing to watch under normal circumstances—but I was staring more in its direction than at it. For two weeks I had been like this, just lying in bed and trying to keep my mind as blank as possible, which was a hard thing to do given my current situation.

Every man I had ever loved was away from me, except for the one I couldn't have. Wylen was off being a King to his species. Clifton was probably just as down in the dumps as I was back in Kortis. Kafkus was still somewhere between life and death from a werewolf attack that, if he lived, might have changed him forever. And then there was Kyle, who was probably somewhere in my house with his new girlfriend Kate. I knew he would dump her for me in a heartbeat, but things were far more complicated in that area. Kate's brother, Daryl—who I had recently found out was a werewolf—was currently living in my home until we knew how Kafkus would fare from his bite. They both thought that Kyle was my brother and not one of my fated loves like he really was. So being in the same room with any of them was extremely uncomfortable. This was the main reason why I had made few attempts to leave my bed lately. I thought it best to distance myself from all of them to keep from giving away the real feelings between Kyle and myself. That would have bad and strange repercussions if either Kate or Daryl found out.

So, I locked myself away in my room, perhaps to my own detriment. In doing so, I had dug myself into a hole of depression so deep I didn't think it would ever end. Being alone with my thoughts was probably the last thing I needed. Though I knew that it had been only two weeks, my brain thought it at least a year since I had seen Kafkus, or Clifton, or Wylen. I missed them all so much I felt I would surely die. But no release from the torment ever came. I felt trapped and I kind of was, trapped in my mind as I wallowed in the sorrow that consumed me.

Kyle came in a couple times a day to bring me food—that I pretty much just pushed around—and tried unsuccessfully to cheer me up. But I hadn't talked to him in about a week now, despite his frequent visits. Worst of all was when Kate would try to keep me company because (a) she got to spend time with Kyle when I couldn't and (b) she was such an upbeat and peppy person that she downright irritated me in my current state of self-loathing. Daryl, on the other hand, actually let me be. He at least understood that I would come out when I was damn well ready.

Knock, knock

I didn't answer, but I didn't think he had expected me to either. Kyle just opened the door and said my name softly but I gave him no attention. "Tess?" he said again but I didn't move. "I just wanted to say happy birthday."

It felt like I had gained a hundred pounds with the effort it took to roll over. In one of Kyle's hands was a chocolate cake that he had obviously made himself (because it was a little lopsided) and in the other a package wrapped in glossy blue paper. "How did you know that it

was my birthday?" I asked without emotion. Even *I'd* forgotten.

He placed the items on the bed and sat down next to me. "Violet told me. She wanted to make sure that someone here knew. She seemed to think that you could use some cheer, and I definitely agree." He made a gesture to the cake. "Go on, make a wish."

I just stared at it. Wouldn't it be so nice if it could be that simple? Just make a wish and everything would magically change into what you wanted it to be? I knew better than that. It would take more than a "wish" to fix my life.

"Come on."

"I'll just let it burn."

"I don't feel like eating wax so at least blow out the candles."

The air in my lungs seemed minimal at best and it took me a few attempts to blow out all twenty-four candles. Another year older, but not wiser or happier and I doubted that it was going to be any better than twenty-three. Something told me it was going to be worse. I had become quite a pessimist in my depression.

Kate's perky voice came from the doorway. "Happy birthday, Tess."

"Thanks," I said dryly without looking at her, hoping that she would leave. Her cheerful attitude wasn't what I needed right now. She was the kind of person who was fun to be around when you were in a good mood, but downright annoying when you weren't.

Kate, not taking the hint, sat down on my other side and started messing with my hair which was in dire need of a wash. "We should do something for your birthday. Let's go out."

"I would rather just stay in."

"Nonsense, you haven't left the house in the last two weeks." I opened my mouth to protest but she cut me off before I could even get a word out. "I'm not taking no for an answer. We can go to that new club that just opened up. I'll help you get ready."

I would have loved to argue, but her face was set and I just didn't have the energy. "Fine, but I'm not having fun, and I am spending the entire night at the bar."

"Oh I'll get you moving if I have to drag you onto the dance floor myself. Someone needs to wake you up from this funk you've settled into. You have been such a downer lately."

"I'm sorry to hear that *my* depression has been such a burden to *you*."

She ignored my comment, grabbed a brush and went to work on my hair. I just groaned.

Kyle pushed the shiny blue package closer to me. "Go on, open it."

I slowly peeled back the paper to reveal a box containing Dance Dance Revolution, complete with dance pad, for the system Kyle had bought when we had first moved in. He was far more of a video game nerd than I was, but it was the thought behind the game that caused tears to form in my eyes. I remembered that night of fun we'd had in the arcade before going to fight Lynth. It was a fond memory.

"Uh, I didn't mean to make you cry. You can take it back if you want."

I placed my hand on his thigh and ignored the feelings that followed the touch. "You get me more than anyone."

He smiled. "I know you're probably not in the mood to play it anytime soon, but I

thought you'd like it."

"I love it," I said but I really meant "I love you," something I could tell he picked up on because he sprung to his feet and cleared his throat, his eyes purposely avoiding mine.

"Yes, well, I'm going to go get ready," he said and he left quick. Kate finished brushing my hair but too left when she was satisfied with her work.

Forcing myself to move, when I wanted to do nothing more than lay in bed, proved to be quite a challenge. If I was going out I needed a shower, bad. My personal hygiene had been a bit lacking since I had no one to impress. The shower was nice and I even forced myself to shave my legs, they had been worse than I thought.

When I returned to the bedroom I dropped the towel before realizing that Daryl was waiting for me by the door. He blushed and averted his eyes, but I just didn't have it in me to be embarrassed. I did have the energy to sigh though. "What do you want, Daryl?" If it was more werewolf crap I didn't want to know.

We hadn't talked much since that first night he had come here, except for one conversation where I explained about what I was and where I had come from. I had gone into quite a lot of detail to keep the later questions at a minimal quantity.

His eyes stayed on the opposite wall. "Are you going to put your towel back on?"

"What is the point? You have already seen all there is to see."

"Yes, but it's hard to talk to you when you're not wearing anything."

I sighed again, walked over to the closet and pulled out a low-backed floral dress to cover myself.

I had tried to make it so that I could wear normal clothes with my newly acquired wings, but it seemed impossible. Though you couldn't see them, they were there, and I still hadn't gone shopping for clothes to accommodate them. I could make things appear and feel real, but I couldn't take away the feel of things that remained. No more sleeping on my back for me. That fact was annoying as that was my usual position.

"There," I said when I was fully covered.

"You are decent?" His eyes took a little peak as if to make sure I wasn't lying. And when he saw that I was dressed he moved further into the room.

"What do you want?"

"I just wanted to wish you a happy birthday. I would have gotten you something if I knew what you liked." He was sincere, a quality I knew him to possess even with our brief encounters.

"That's alright, Daryl, and thanks."

"So..." He clapped his hands together like it was time to get down to business. "I hear that you guys are going out tonight?"

"You heard right, though it was hardly my idea. That sister of yours can be very pushy when she wants to be."

He laughed. "Yeah, but I already knew that. Where are you guys going?"

"I don't know, some club Kate wants to go to."

“Sounds like fun.”

“Not really, but Kate will drag me out of the house by my hair if I don’t go willingly.”

“When are you leaving?”

There was something behind his prodding that I finally understood. It took me much longer than normal since my brain was still kind of hibernating. “Daryl, did you want to join us?”

He looked thoroughly embarrassed and his cheeks reddened a little. “I didn’t mean to just invite myself along.”

“No, it would be nice to have someone to talk to because I bet Kate’s going to have Kyle on the dance floor for the entire evening. I would like to have someone to keep her from dragging me out there as well.” A small smile permeated my lips at the thought because I had seen Kyle dance before and it was *far* from public quality. But my smile vanished as another thought occurred to me. “Wait, you don’t just want to go to keep an eye on the two of them, do you?” And...back to depressed.

He looked exasperated and maybe even a little angry. “Not everything revolves around my sister, no matter how much she likes to think it does. The werewolves will still be coming after you, and I think that a crowded nightclub would be the perfect environment to abduct you without anyone noticing.”

“*Great*, so you only want to go to be my—” I threw up some air quotes “—bodyguard?”

“Damn it, Quart, why are you so closed off? All I want is to get to know you, since I’m living in your house and all, and you treat me like a disease when I try to protect you. Why won’t you let me in?”

His new nickname for me made my eye twitch. I had gone by Quartessa, Tessa and Kyle called me Tess (which Kate had also adopted) but Quart just felt weird. I wasn’t a damn form of measurement, but I focused on his question rather than the nickname.

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe because I have lost more than you could possibly imagine. And maybe I find it incredibly tiresome when someone consistently wants to protect me when I can take care of myself?” I had killed Lynth, wiped out the Boru, and killed the Yaro Princess who was supposedly immortal. So it was *really* annoying that he thought I needed his protection.

“So, you don’t want me to go?”

I got right in his face, nipping at him with my words. “No, you can go, and if anyone tries to abduct me, you can *watch* me defend myself.”

If I talked to Kafkus like this he would have stared me down until I gave in, but Daryl just hung his head and left and I felt a little cheated because of it. This was the most emotion I’d had in weeks and I was just itching for more. It was like waking up from a coma. My mood had slightly improved, where I used to feel dead I now felt only half.

Kate amused herself with doing my hair and makeup and I actually didn’t mind letting her, though I wasn’t much for makeup. I had to admit that she knew what she was doing. Kate had curled my fake-brown hair and pinned it up at the back of my head, letting the curls fall in

ringlets to my shoulders. She had used a soft purple shade of eye shadow and black eyeliner which made my luminous blue eyes stand out. The lipstick she picked was a dark shade of red with a burgundy feel and those lips smirked when I saw my reflection. I looked hot on the outside, if only my interior matched.

Kate got all dolled up herself and I let her borrow a cute cami top and black leather skirt from my closet that fit her petite frame well. Her makeup was far more pronounced than she had done on me, drawing focus to her soft green-blue eyes. Her strawberry blonde and slightly wavy hair was far springier than normal with the amount of mousse she had used.

Kyle, who apparently had no idea that we were going to a club rather than church, was actually wearing a tie over his powder-blue dress shirt and black slacks. It was a weird look on him as he usually wore faded jeans and rock band t-shirts. He had obviously never been to a club before. His hair was still the same though, reddish blonde and spiked up with jell. Kate didn't comment but pulled the tie off and undid a few shirt buttons. While she did he flashed me a huge grin. I smirked and shook my head. He had just been screwing with us.

Now, Daryl knew how to dress for the club scene. His burgundy, silk button-up shirt proved that along with his tight black jeans. I hoped he could breathe in those pants. His golden-brown feathered hair framed his face, setting off his soft brown eyes with flecks of gold. He was looking mighty sexy, something I had failed to notice about him before.

He caught me admiring him and smiled. "Are we ready to go?"

"You clean up nice," I said, poorly concealing the smile gracing my lips.

Something was brewing in his mind. I could tell that much. But he didn't feel the need to verbalize it, whatever it was.

The club we went to: Blaze, was extremely crowded since it was a Friday, and just like I had predicted, Kate dragged Kyle out onto the dance floor where he proceeded to make a fool of himself for all eyes to see. To his credit, Kyle didn't care what others thought of him, a quality I wished I possessed. I can't help but care, especially since I want them to see me as one of them: human. Kyle stuck out more than I did here, though my made-over appearance was drawing a fair bit of glances from the men in the room. I stuck close to Daryl to create the illusion that I wasn't alone. I didn't want attention from any of them.

Daryl and I took a seat at the bar and I ordered a beer for both of us. He didn't appear to like me paying, and I didn't just think that was because it was my birthday. But he held in his feelings on the subject as he gulped his beer.

"I would ask you to dance, but I'm afraid that I've got worse rhythm than Kyle."

"Oh come on, *no one* has worse rhythm than Kyle."

"A nurse once asked me if I needed to go to the hospital because she saw me dancing. I don't know what she thought was wrong with me, but that was the last time I danced in public."

I laughed for the first time in weeks. "You know, I think I would like to see that."

He glanced around at all of the eyes in the crowded room. "I'll give you a private show if you want, but there is *no way* I'm doing it here."

"I'm gonna hold you to that."

“I’d still like to get you something for your birthday. What do you like?”

“I don’t know. I’m not much of a materialistic person.”

“Come on, there’s got to be something you want.”

I contemplated over what I really wanted but the thought didn’t help my mood. I wanted Kafkus back. I wanted Clifton back, but only if he wanted to be. I wanted Wylen to not be a King so he could come to live with me as the others had. I wanted to feel like my life was in my control. I wanted peace. My head drooped at the demanding and unrealistic wish list. “To be happy, truly happy.”

“That’s a rather large order.” He looked a bit overwhelmed which wasn’t surprising in the least. “I was thinking in the area of something they sell in stores. Shoes maybe? Don’t all women want more shoes?”

“I’m afraid the only things I want are intangible, or impossible. But I appreciate the thought.”

He placed a comforting hand on my knee and my chin rose, but not my eyes. “I would love to make you happy. If you’d let me.”

My body pulled back though I didn’t move. “Are you coming on to me? Because if you are...”

“I’m not coming on to you. I just prefer the playful Quart that I remember chasing after to the gloomy version sitting next to me now.” He lifted my chin higher so that I had no choice but to meet his gaze. “If there is anything I can do to coax out that woman, you let me know.”

I kind of half-smiled half-frowned at him. Daryl could be sweet when he wasn’t trying to be all protective over me. “Dance.”

“What?”

“You said that you would do anything to make me happy and I bet watching you dance would be good for a laugh. Now dance for me.”

He was hesitant to oblige and glanced around the room with nervous eyes. “I am sure that my moves would make you laugh, but do I really have to do it here? Someone will have a video up on YouTube within the hour.”

I took a casual swig of my beer. “I thought you would do anything to make me happy.”

“I would but—”

“Maybe you and Kyle could do a routine together. That would be very interesting to watch.”

Beads of sweat started forming on his brow and he almost stood up when I grabbed his arm and pulled him back down.

“You were going to do it, weren’t you?”

“You asked me to.”

I laughed. “I was just screwing with you. I’m not that mean.”

His look of anxiety melted away. “So you’re not going to make me dance?”

“Oh I’m going to make you dance, just not here.” I cast him a wide, devious smile which he returned, but his looked pained once he glanced past me. “What’s wrong? I thought we were

having a good time.”

He jerked his head in the direction he was now staring. “Your friend is here.”

When I turned around, I had no idea who I was expecting to see, but there he was, standing at the other side of the room staring at me. And the emotion I would have expected to feel, anger, was the furthest one from my mind at the moment. The sight of James made my heart flutter rather than run cold. Why, I couldn’t explain, but I didn’t like it either.

James, a cop I had met in the past, was also a soul stealing demon, which I had only found out rather recently. He also happened to know my secret. Our last encounter hadn’t ended very well and I was surprised at the fact that I was intrigued, rather than appalled, by his appearance.

“I will be right back,” I said to Daryl who just gave me a disapproving grunt.

James didn’t take his eyes off of me as I made my way across the room and everything seemed to slow down around me. He was looking really nice, decked out in all black and topped off in a black leather trench coat, an outfit I could have never pictured on the old James, the one I thought I knew. His jet black hair wasn’t parted off to the side as it usually was, it was now slicked back. The closer I got, the more intense his golden brown eyes grew, and by the time I reached him it felt as if they were burning through me.

“Shouldn’t you get back to the matrix?”

He smiled. “Leather is timeless.”

“So, James, I can’t help but feel like you are stalking me, especially since this doesn’t seem like the kind of place you would hang out at.”

James glanced around the room. “This is *exactly* where I would hang out if you thought about it for a moment. A lot of sins go on in here.” He pointed to a pair of girls who quickly darted into the bathroom. “Drugs.” He pointed to a couple who were dancing, though it looked more like dry humping to me. “Lust.” He pointed to two men arguing over what appeared to be a woman. “Intoxicated wrath.” His hand pulled my face back to his. “But this is not a place I would expect to find *you*.”

His eyes burnt mine but I couldn’t look away. “It wasn’t my idea to come here. Kate, Kyle’s girlfriend, dragged me here. She wouldn’t let me stay in on my birthday.”

“Birthday, huh? And how old are you now?”

“Twenty-four, but with all the crap I have been through in the last few months I feel like I just turned a thousand.”

He gave my attractive exterior a once over. “You look far from ancient.”

“Are you stalking me?”

His smile widened. “You give me very little to stalk when you don’t leave the house for weeks at a time. But no, I wouldn’t call it stalking.”

“Then what would *you* call it?”

His hips shifted towards me but I didn’t back away. “More like observing. I wasn’t sure how you would react if I just came to your house after the way we left things. I assumed a chance meeting would be more tolerable for you.”

“It’s only a chance meeting if you don’t tell me that you followed me here.”

He shrugged. “I do not wish to lie to you. I hope that you will see it as one of my good qualities.”

“Demons have good qualities?” My voice came off as a bit mocking, but I didn’t apologize.

“A few. I take it by your pleasant demeanor that you are not dissatisfied by my appearance.”

“I know that I should probably be furious that you are following me around. But no, I’m not.”

“Good.” He held his arm out to me. “Would you care to dance?”

I took his arm and let him guide me onto the dance floor where he pulled my body firmly against his. My brain seemed to be growing fuzzier the longer I gazed into his eyes. He held me closer, his hands making a trail down my back to rest on my butt, but I didn’t comment or push them off. His heart felt weird against mine, ten beats of my own for every one of his.

The way he was dancing was so sexual, but it didn’t bother me for some reason which I couldn’t explain. I couldn’t take my eyes off his either, my lips stuck in a wide smile. I was having fun, a feeling I hadn’t experienced in so long. James was like a drug and I wanted more, not caring about anything else.

He barely leaned in, but I took the opportunity. I pulled his mouth to mine and his kiss was so strong, much stronger than our last one. It didn’t even bother me that Daryl was staring a hole into the back of my head. Parts of James were rubbing hard against mine in just the right places. And, if we weren’t surrounded by people, James would have had me naked by now. It took a lot of restraint to not act on the pure and powerful lust that I now felt, and I actually had to pull away from him to accomplish it.

“What?” he asked in his slyest voice ever.

“If we keep doing that, I am going to lose my self-respect when I let you take me right here.”

He pulled me back to him, licking from the base of my neck to my ear and I shuddered from it, but not in a bad way. “Then let’s go somewhere where we can be alone.”

“Let me tell them I’m leaving,” I said and I couldn’t have accomplished it any faster. My words rambled together so bad that I doubted he understood me properly.

Daryl was less than happy that I was leaving with James, but Kyle and Kate—who knew nothing about what James was—were happy to see me in a better mood. Though, Kyle did look a little torn up about me leaving with another man, but he hid it well in Kate’s presence.

When you are fully aroused, waiting is your worst enemy. We both had a one track mind: to get back to James’ house as fast as possible. James had a black Jaguar which was much too ritzy for my taste. But my mind was focused on other things when he helped me into the passenger seat.

“What are you thinking about?” I asked him as he drove, but it wasn’t really necessary. It was pretty obvious.

“What you look like naked.” It was a blunt and honest response. He really wasn’t going to lie to me, definitely a good quality in a man, or demon.

James’ house wasn’t so much a house as it was a mini-mansion. It looked to be three stories by the sets of windows and pillars lined the front porch. Both car and home were not paid for by his law enforcement job. I knew that. But it wasn’t something I was too concerned about at the moment.

As soon as he opened the car door for me, I leapt onto him, kissing him with every inch of my mouth as his arms supported my weight. Before I knew it, we were inside and my back was pressed up against a wall so hard I was sure I was denting it. His breath was hot on my neck, his teeth grazing my skin in a way that made me moan.

“I want you so bad,” I panted, digging my nails into his back with more force than a person should be able to stand. Being that he wasn’t human, he didn’t complain and it only seemed to make him more excited. He must have carried me into the bedroom, but I didn’t even notice until I felt the soft fabric against my back, and I spread my wings to make it less awkward feeling.

“Drop your illusion,” he demanded and without thought I did as he asked and released my false image as he slipped off my dress. His gaze traced over every inch of me and I pulled him on top of me, ripping off his clothes without any care to keep the material re-wearable. His heart was pounding hard against mine, but it still didn’t feel right, like the echo of a heartbeat versus the real thing. Though his touch was rough, digging into my flesh instead of caressing it, I loved the feeling, melting beneath him.

His lips left mine and found my neck. “May I?” he asked and I screamed “Do it!” before he bit down hard, much harder than the last time. And, as before, it felt like there were a hundred hands tracing over my body. My legs clamped down on his waist as the combined pleasure grew strong, too strong.

I remember panting and trying to catch my breath before my eyes closed and my brain ceased to function.

Waking up the following morning was harder than usual. It was like waking up from a night of binge drinking, or at least what I had heard that would feel like. My brain was sluggish and it took me a few minutes to realize where I was. It was like coming off an incredible high where my body felt dried up and used. I could vividly remember the night before, but it hardly seemed like I was the one in control of me, like something else had taken me over entirely. It hadn’t been me, but I had to take the responsibility of what my body had done.

The bedroom door swung open and I jerked the covers up to my neck as James entered holding two cups of coffee.

“Did you sleep well?” he asked, handing me a mug.

“I, I think so. Last night is kind of a blur.”

He kissed me lightly on the lips but mine didn’t return the gesture. “I enjoyed last night.”

“I did too...I think.”

He stared at me and though he looked hurt he hadn't quite pulled it off. "Well I'm glad to hear that."

"I'm sorry James, it's not you. Something just feels weird about it."

"I did not trick you if that is what you are implying."

"I didn't mean that, James." My head did feel tricked though.

He sat down next to me and stared into my eyes. "Do you regret it?"

"I just wish I felt like it was me who did it." My lame words matched my lame mood.

He smiled. "I assure you that you were very much there. How much did you have to drink?"

Drinking had very little effect on my kind, so I knew I wasn't drunk when I had made the choice to sleep over at James' home. I had never been drunk in my life, though I had tried.

"What time is it?" I asked, finally getting a grip on reality. *What Kyle and Daryl must think of me.*

"Almost eight, I have to be at the station in an hour but you are more than welcome to stay here and have breakfast and take a shower." His smile widened all the way to his eyes. "I also wouldn't mind if you were still here when I returned either."

"Thanks, but I should get home." I grabbed my dress and threw it on in a hurry before climbing out of bed.

"Tessa, just stay and relax. You seem so on edge."

The tears began to form with my ever deepening regret. I fumbled with my shoes in my haste, knowing that to get out of this house would somehow make me forget what I had done. He said he hadn't tricked me, but I knew that I hadn't been the one who had agreed to be with him intimately. Something was wrong here...very wrong.

He grabbed me and stared into my eyes before planting a gentle kiss on my lips that gave me a calming, warming sensation. Like his lips were coated in Xanax.

"Better?"

I did feel better, but I questioned why his kiss had done that to me. "But I still need to get home."

He smiled. "Then you can at least let me drop you off on my way to work."

"I guess that would be ok."