



BOOK THREE

PREY FOR
Mercy

AE Rought

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TEASER!

PREY FOR MERCY

AE Rought

~PASSION FOR PAIN~

*There is a desire
Smoldering in my blood,
A passion set ablaze
By temptation,
A hunger satiated
Not merely by flesh.
Pursuit is enticing,
Sweet in itself,
But it only delays the inevitable.*

*In the velvet shadows,
Beneath a limpid moon,
Lips will touch your skin,
Tender and soft,
Teasing until you succumb
And invite my attentions.*

*The pleasures I bring
Are consuming and cruel—
Passion for pain,
An equitable trade.
Your blood was my sustenance,
It was your fear that I craved.
A cry rings out,
But the end is the same—
You were only a victim
In this vampire's game.*

~AE Rought

Prologue

Maine, 1807

Killing is easy, almost better than sex.

I learned that lesson the night I became a vampire.

Snow fell on All Hallow's Eve, and I hung limp, dripping blood from a vampire's embrace. He was dark and handsome, sophisticated; everything I thought I wanted and nothing I needed. His promises were as thin as the snow melting in my blood. Thoughts of betrayal mixed with the pain as Ambrose's arms opened and I spilled from his embrace, an empty sack of the woman he'd wooed and drained. I lay without dignity, hardly a stitch of clothing covering my body, as life left me on a pile of autumn leaves.

Immortality blossomed like a bloody rose within, but its beauty was squandered on me. Ambrose's parting kiss sweetened my first immortal breath, but vengeance was my only thought.

I stood, and vertigo spun within me. The steadfast trunk of a maple became my only support as a killer was born beneath my skin. Tears bled from my eyes and my jaws ached, cracking with the force of emerging fangs. Voices from every dwelling rang in my ears, my vision became painfully acute, and my heart

thumped erratically, a stilted echo of the other creatures around the village square. Air passed in greedy gulps through my throat and I wrapped my arms around the old tree until the dizziness faded.

My senses honed in on one target, one victim.

Barefoot on the cobblestone streets, I trailed Ambrose, following the scent of his arrogance. A thick holly hedge absorbed any noise, and its mild scent shielded me from Ambrose's senses as I watched my lover, my killer, on a moonlight promenade. My fingers wound among the branches, fingernails cutting through the twigs and my chin brushing the veil of October snow that dusted the leaves. He strolled with his precious human wife Celeste, while I, his scorned mistress, took to the shadows behind them.

Her heartbeat echoed in my ears, drummed on my vengeful soul. Her veins glowed with an ethereal light through her skin, a visible network of lovely lace pathways. My jaws ached to clamp against her flesh; saliva bubbled up, churning behind the cage of my new fangs.

In a noiseless leap, I cleared the bushes and landed cat-like on the ground before the couple.

The color drained from her face. Her blue eyes widened and Celeste's hand clenched tighter around Ambrose's arm. Those cerulean irises traced every move I made. "Darling." Her fingernails dug into his forearm. "I thought I asked you to kill her."

"I... I could not." Ambrose's aristocratic composure faltered. His eyes dropped from mine, and in that moment when he turned toward his wife, I lunged. Heel to her chest, I crushed Celeste to the ground, back-kicking her in the gut before launching at Ambrose's throat. He shifted his weight back, and flung his arms up in defense.

Ambrose was a lover, not a fighter, and I clawed my way through his outstretched hands. Within his defensive guard, time froze. Eminent death yielded a bouquet of scents. Her rage and his fear mingled with my euphoria. His pupils widened, that bottom lip dropped. Perspiration slicked his skin. In a flurry, I

slammed into his chest, crushing him back against a brick wall. Ambrose circled his hands around my throat, but I drove my thumbs into his eyes, and jabbed my long canines—his parting gifts—into his neck.

I did not drain him; I did not drink. I bit into his flesh and ripped the mouthful free. I spat his meat into Celeste's horrified face, and her scream danced in my veins, a dark bliss akin to orgasm. His body flopped beneath mine, sliding down the wall as his arms flailed and feet kicked. I straddled his hips, as I'd often done in clandestine corners, unbuttoned his jacket and blouse. Rather than stroking his pale skin, I dug my hands into his chest cavity and wrapped my fingers around his beating monster heart. His eyes rolled when I squeezed and blood gushed between my knuckles. A black grin stained my face as I wrenched the organ from his chest.

I found joy in his death, but her simpering voice fouled that thrill. "He should have killed you instead of giving you... giving you—"

"The gift that he refused to give you?" I finished her sentence and circled her, a wolf circling prey.

Celeste refused to answer, but the hollow expression in her eyes spoke volumes. A tear welled, trickled down to her painted lips. I added to her pain, which added to my pleasure. "One day, it will be your heart that is broken, but I will save you from an eternity of suffering with it. For now, you can wallow in your role as widow."

I left her then, a widow, a woman rejected by both her lover and his mistress.

Chapter 1

Maine, Present Day

Taking life was easier than living it. Since the night of my dark birth, I've reveled in my intimate relationship with death. The past two centuries are a blur of hunting in alleyways, war zones and high society for the climax of the kill. I've nestled my lips against the skin of princes and paupers, embraced the willing and the resentful. Palaces and frontier shacks have sheltered me.

I hate to admit that something is missing from my immortality, but it is.

A cold emptiness gnaws in my chest, a constant nettled pain that I cannot escape. Lovers have passed through my life, but none have warmed my heart quite the way their bodies warmed my bed. The black night provides little companionship. And worse yet, hackles long slack against my neck have begun to prickle and rise.

Someone impossibly darker than myself has taken to the shadows behind me.

For over ten years she has appeared and faded from my life, a jasmine-scented tide crashing on the shores of my slaughtering ground.

Her floral stench accosted my nose shortly after I settled in a coastal town to the north, one of my favorite human game preserves. Moonlight tainted the snow

an eerie blue as the January ice floats drifted offshore, entrancing as they rode the ebb and flow of the moonlit waters. I sat on a weathered bench halfway down the dock, plumes of breath rose before my eyes, my hands shook from the cold. The sleeves of my jacket were stiff, but warmed my hands. I curled my feet beneath me as I watched the slow dance between the bergs and waves. The chill finally seeped through my long overcoat, but the heat of another's glare warmed my back.

Not again.

My scalp crawled, my jaw muscles clenched. My fists curled into knots of frustration. And then, I drew in a deep, cold cleansing breath and shrugged off the uneasy feeling. No one had a right to unsettle my frame of mind. No one.

I decided to indulge in a little prowl—slaughter has always elevated my mood.

Eager to hunt, I jumped from the bench. My boots hit the slats of the dock, and there I hesitated, yards from shore and alone. I glanced around, searching for someone, anyone who would wear that floral poison. After a decade of following me she still hadn't the nerve to present herself, to attack me, to even confess her purpose.

The simple fact that she stalked me proved she was out of her mind.

No one was visible. But the oppressive sensation did not leave. She was a virus under my skin, invisible, and no amount of bloodletting purged her from my veins. A low growl escaped the barrier of my teeth, and then I walked off the pier with my coat open and flapping behind me in my haste for bed sports and bloodshed.

The street leading to my apartment snaked its way into the heart of town, but I made a path to Merchant's Row. Dingy little buildings squatted in a jagged line along the wharf, full of easy meals. My favorite flavor usually staggered from *The Weathered Vane*, a brightly lit tavern that belched loud music out of its windows and served liquor until well into the night. The patrons were of a different sort, usually the younger, hip crowd, whose sass and irreverence spiced their blood...and my meals.

I paused with the pitted brass door knob in my hand, wrapping my fingers

around it and opening my mind. So many people had passed through the door this night that I struggled for a clear vision of who might be inside. Hazy faces swum in my mind, a flash of blue eyes, a streak of dark hair. Impressions only, nothing clear.

Releasing the door knob, I entered the building to see what I could hunt up. In the coatroom, I freed my hair from its clip. The waves poured down my back, and a few ebony strands fell before my eyes. With the drop of a shoulder, my overcoat fell from my body, exposing my hunting clothes—tight, low rise denims, and a black leather bodice. From the pocket of my coat I withdrew a necklace and hung it so the pendant dusted my cleavage, winking like a beacon.

Heartbeats and half-heard thoughts bombarded me when I opened the swinging door into the tavern. Tables and chairs littered the floor between the door and the bar, as haphazard as the myriad images clogging my mind. The small dance floor opposite the bar was filled with clinched couples grinding against each other and the music. Sarcastic laughter bubbled up. These locals had no clue how to use rhythm.

But an intriguing energy flashed and waned on the far side of the bar, baiting me in toward the billiards tables.

Smoke and cologne hung heavy in the air, clogging my predator senses as I wound my way between tables toward the bar. The polished oak was smooth and warm against my stomach, a comfort in the chaos of sounds and smells. I ordered a double shot of bourbon and tossed the amber liquid back to burn down my throat. I raised my hand, signaled for a second, holding it while I leaned back against the bar and scoped the crowd for prey.

A young man, most likely in his late twenties, leaned over a pool table, lining up the eight ball shot. He was handsome with dark, intentionally mussed hair and snappy brown eyes. His jaw line was strong and square. When he smiled at his friend's joke, his teeth were smooth and square.

Mmm. Perfect target for my attentions.

The second glass of bourbon burned less and tasted better as I swallowed, and

then I set the empty tumbler on the bar. I licked the firewater from my fangs and sashayed toward the handsome man now leaving the billiard tables. But on the corner of the dance floor, that damned jasmine tide crashed on the shore of my tingling sinuses.

The come-and-go shadow which had followed me for a decade was here, in this bar—in *my* bar. The bottom dropped out of my gut, replaced with a savage, territorial blaze.

She dared to come here? Did she have any idea who she'd been following, or the bad things I could do to her? My nose followed the flowered scent of my stalker, but my gaze followed my target. He strolled with casual confidence up to a platinum blonde girl—every bit as beautiful as he was handsome, and reeking of jasmine perfume. Her ethereal features would lead some to confuse her for a creature heaven-sent, until they looked at her eyes. Her beauty skirted those eyes; hard and uncompromising, like polar ice.

Her face was somehow very familiar.

I parked my rear in a nearby seat, watching her fumble every attempt at stealing a kiss from him as I sought her face in my mind. After two centuries, the casualties of my bloody quest had blurred into a one expanse of flesh with hollow eyes.

But this girl's eyes were not hollow. When she turned and glared at me for my blatant voyeurism, those eyes were brilliant and blue—blue as the sky, blue as irises surrounding the fixed and dilated pupils of one of my victims ten years past. A smile flittered over my lips, and then died. He'd been a handsome, Cajun-flavored blonde from the bayous of Louisiana. He also had a young sister who'd watched from the shadows of a closet as I rode her brother like a prized stallion and then bled him dry.

Realization struck.

The person haunting me was the sister of that hot young Southern boy, and might well be Celeste, reborn to take another attempt at making me miserable.

Vengeance is a bitch!

The young man rebuffed her again, pushing her from him and picking up his pool cue for another game with his friend. He stopped, face to face with the harpy. “I told you, the engagement is off.”

The blonde snatched up her purse and stormed away from the table. The predatory poison—Ambrose’s vampire venom—churned in my veins, goading me to confront the weaker female. I stood as she approached, blocking her path. Stopping her mad rush inches from me, she glared, her narrow irises rings of arctic blue. I contemplated remaining quiet, but the whiskey in my gut had other plans. “Aren’t you going to stay and watch the show?”

The ice from her glare poured out through her mouth. “I’ve watched enough of your brand of entertainment.” Her eyelids lowered a fraction, and her fine brows pinched together. “Your final curtain call is coming.”

If there was a doubt about her connection to Celeste, it died with those words. Her voice, her icy demeanor smacked of Ambrose’s bitter bride. That concept added to my delight. “Oh, come now, kitten, you should veil your threats. You don’t have what it takes to back up that one.”

She leaned closer, her jasmine perfume gagging me. “Don’t call me kitten. My name is Angel. And never underestimate a woman scorned.”

I swallowed a laugh. “What, no original retort? Run along little angel. I’ll tell you when you’ve reached womanhood.”

Her thin pink lips snapped shut. In one fluid motion, I sidestepped her and smacked her ass as I walked past. She spun around, eyes wide and hair flying out like a banshee’s. Her mouth moved, as if chewing on words, but nothing came out. I smiled, waved a farewell, and strolled to the billiards table where her man was drawing back on a solid ball. Her glare followed my hand, watching me reach into my pocket and pull out quarters to slap on the table.

“I get the winner.”

Her jaw dropped, but his rose in a grin. He winked. “We’ll see about that.”

Ooh, playful banter? My soul sang with his implied challenge. He was an

excellent choice of prey. I batted my eyelashes and leaned forward to allow him a generous peek down my top while I studied the shot he was lining up. His line of sight traveled from the cue ball, across the green felt to the flesh I exposed. I inhaled an exaggerated sigh, thrusting my breasts all but out of my top.

Take the bait, pretty boy.

He took a long look, then allowed his gaze to roam my body and face. The blonde, who still stood feet away, reached a boil. “Chase Rogers! Quit looking at that bitch!”

He threw her a silencing glare, and then looked back to me, a hint of mischief sparkling in his eyes. “So...” He sidestepped his pool cue, and leaned close enough for the warmth of his cheek to penetrate mine. “Do you have a name, or will ‘bitch’ do?”

“Call me Mercy.” I closed the distance between us, brushing my lips against his cheek and my breast against his arm.

Time froze. I lived within his heart beat, my mind and soul whirring. A feminine voice within argued against the monster in my blood. Chase’s body by mine, warm and alive, pumping precious blood through his veins. I should have craved his flesh, desired to cut open his vein and drink, but I was bewitched. He was handsome, engaging, spirited enough to ignore the shrew and flirt with me. Perhaps bed sports would be better than bloodshed?

“Mercy me...” Chase’s voice rang in my ears, but it was his touch that broke the spell. His fingers traced a warm path along my cheek bone.

“If you’re lucky.”

Chase’s eyes remained locked on mine but his hand dropped from my jaw, brushing against my breasts on the way back to his pool cue. He diverted his gaze to the white ball, drawing the stick in his hands back before striking the ball. Blue chalk scattered from the force of contact. The cue ball rocketed forward, clipping a solid orange ball on the side and sending it into the side pocket with a snap.

“Nice shot.” His friend’s shoulders sagged. “I didn’t think you’d make it.”

“I have to win.” Chase shot a glance at his friend, and then winked at me. “Because Mercy gets the winner.”

Good answer!

Angel, who had been crossing and uncrossing her arms to the rhythm of her tapping foot, finally lost control. Sudden tears bled from her eyes, and she sputtered a string of expletives before she spun on her heel and stormed out.

Bye-bye, Celeste...

A wicked smile cut my cheeks, and I struggled to keep my fangs contained. Forays into public always held a risk of discovery, and I thought for a moment that Chase saw what I struggled to conceal. His eyes were wide with a dazed, “Did I really see that?” expression, but then he smiled.

There was little give-and-take between the two men. Chase damned near ran the table. His friend, whose name was Peter, only managed two shots, and one of them was a scratch. Peter retreated to the bar but returned with three beers. He handed one to Chase, kept one for himself, and offered one to me.

I shook my head. “Sorry, Peter, but I’m not fond of beer.”

Chase cocked an eyebrow. “Are you saying you don’t drink?”

Blood, yes, I thought, but beer, no. “I’m spoiled.” I sidled up to Chase, running my fingers up his arm, leaving a fingertip on his pulse point. “Bourbon’s about all I drink.”

“Ooh.” Chase’s eyes smoldered. “Sexy as hell and drinks the hard stuff. Where’ve you been all my life?”

Warmth from his lips bathed mine. His breath was my breath. “I could ask the same of you.”

“You keep that up...” His hand traced the curve of my ass. “And you’ll never get me to play pool.”

I purred and nipped his ear. Despite Pete’s prying eyes I slid my hand down the fly of his jeans. “Oh, I’ll get to play with you.” I batted my bedroom eyes at him. “Don’t worry about that.”

Pete's gasp was audible, even at the pool table. Chase just smiled, and wrapped his fingers around my wrist. He brought my hand to his face, ran a fingertip along his bottom lip, and then kissed the back of my hand. "Your hands are cold, Mercy."

I pulled him tight to me, the pulse through the major arteries of his hips thumping against my pelvis. His scent enveloped me, his blood sang a siren's call. "How about you come back to my place and warm them up?"

"And not play pool?"

"I'm sure..." I kissed his lips. "We could find better forms of entertainment."

The pool cue clattered to the floor, the tip snapped off and rolled beneath a table but his gaze never left mine. "Pete, I'm taking off for the night."

Peter shrugged his shoulders, and sucked down half his beer. "It's better than me telling you two to get a room!"

Chase pulled away from me, his gaze shooting to the table and his friend. "You're all right with this? I mean... I don't want to ditch you."

Pete sucked down the rest of the beer. In a display of his obvious lack of manners, he belched loudly before pulling on his jacket, which sat rumpled on his seat. "Hell, if I had a beauty like that pressed up against me, I wouldn't be sticking around, either."

Peter smacked Chase's shoulder and then disappeared into the crowd. He stuck a hand up, and waved. "See ya around, Chase!"

Chase turned his dark eyes on me. "So, where do you live?"

I ran my fingers down his arm, and then ensnared his in mine, my fingernails tickling his palm. "Not far."

Winding through the empty spaces in the crowd I led Chase back to the coatroom. I turned in my ticket and retrieved my coat. Yet when I turned to put it on, he took it and helped me into it. "Here, let me."

Such a gentleman! When's the last time I had one of those? Men weren't men anymore, not the way they used to be. Chivalry was dead. Men were boys, and I

had grown tired of dealing with children. Chase reinforced my quiet awe when he held the door open for me, too.

I think I could keep this one. My gaze ran over him like I wished my hands could. He caught my stare, and I smiled. Chase blushed, and the beast in my blood roared at the sight; he wouldn't be able to blush for long. I traced a finger across the pink expanse of his cheek, savoring the warmth. The twitch was slight, but I felt it.

His eyebrows narrowed. "Are you cold?"

"Always."

He ran a finger through the strands of my hair. "Maybe we can fix that."

A stilted rhythm threatened my heart beat. In earlier years I might have considered it to be hope. It softened my resolve, and I squeezed his fingers. "That would be nice."

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