

Broken Ties

Amelia Elias

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Chapter One

Hungry, horny, and pissed-off -- that pretty much summed up his mood tonight.

And now this little problem. Gregori scowled at the trembling Associate kneeling before him, briefly debating whether the enjoyment of seeing him burst into flames would be worth the trouble of training a replacement. He sighed and reluctantly decided against it.

It was a cliché, but good help truly was hard to find.

Not that this one was particularly valuable. Like all Associates, Barrett was human -- weak and flawed like all his kind, yet occasionally useful. He could feel the Associate's emotions and took a moment to savor them -- fear, anxiety, and overriding it all was the thought that these might be his last moments.

And the pitiful man just might be right about that.

Gregori rested his elbows on his desk and laced his fingers together, never taking his eyes off the Associate. "Tell me again," he said, his voice soft and gentle, "exactly why you think I should care about this... visitor."

Barrett spoke in a rush, clearly hoping to defuse his boss's ire. "She requests sanctuary from her sire. She promised that, were you to grant her an audience, she could persuade you to --"

Gregori waved a hand and the Associate fell silent. His anxiety cranked up to a delicious level. "So you take the word of a runaway Fledgling and disturb me."

Barrett swallowed audibly. "Forgive me, Master, but I thought --"

"Yes. Yes, you thought. I'd assumed your latest failure would have taught you the folly of that particular action." He drummed his fingers on the desk blotter and ignored the Associate's deep bow of contrition.

Hungry, horny, pissed-off... and bored. Perhaps this Fledgling might be good for something after all.

"Very well, then," Gregori said, sitting back abruptly. "Bring her to me, since you *thought* I'd be so interested. If she amuses me, well, you will live to see another dawn. If not... well, you have served me adequately. I will allow you the honor of taking your own life."

Barrett paled. "Y-yes, Master. Thank you." He backed from the room and closed the door gently behind him.

Gregori stood and paced to the window as soon as the Associate was gone, barely seeing the nearly-full moon or the rainy street outside. Below him, almost imperceptible through the soundproofed walls of his office, the hard-pumping bass rhythms of Club Nighthawk drove mortals into an adrenalized frenzy. His vampires walked among them, enticing them into feasts of blood and sex, orgies of wild feeding the likes of which they hadn't known since the height of Rome's decadence.

Headquartering his Clan above -- and below -- Club Nighthawk had been a stroke of brilliance, if he did say so himself. In this part of Chicago, any mortal foolish enough to lose his head to drink and dance knew he took his life in his hands. The occasional missing mortal didn't draw much attention from the authorities -- at least none that wouldn't disappear with the right amount of cash. And the club itself, with its dim corners, loud music, and blood-colored lights, was the perfect hunting ground.

The humans his Clan fed upon never knew what hit them.

Abruptly he drew the drapes and blocked out the street. The single candle he'd lit on the shelf behind his desk didn't throw out much light, which was how he liked it. A step back brought his shoulder against the corner just as a hesitant knock sounded at the door.

He ignored it. Let the Fledgling's desperation grow.

A second knock, this time firmer. Gregori almost smiled. With his entirely deserved reputation, few vampires would knock twice at his door. Either this Fledgling was stupid or brave.

A full ten breaths passed before he saw the door knob turn.

Entering a Clan Master's domain uninvited? This wasn't brave. It wasn't even stupid, for any Fledgling would've learned to respect an Elder.

This... this was a death wish.

He watched her enter, her footsteps silent, and look around the room. Twice her gaze passed over him without pausing. He almost smiled. In this shadowed corner, his dark skin and black clothing were next to invisible to a Fledgling's eyes.

She took another step, further into his office. He let his gaze roam over her -- at his age, darkness was no obstacle at all. She was tall, this young one, with a cinnamon-tan that hadn't yet begun to fade. The warm tone revealed just how newly made she was. Her hair was an unkempt mass of black curls. The candle's flame reflected briefly in her green eyes as she scanned the room again. The loose blouse and jeans she wore couldn't disguise the sweep of her hips or the full curve of her breasts.

A breath of power slammed the door behind her. "You know, the human legend that vampires cannot enter unless invited has a basis in truth. It is very unwise to walk uninvited into my inner sanctum. None have yet survived it." His voice, dark and smooth, still held the promise of violence. Gregori fully expected the Fledgling to run screaming from the room.

His cock stirred a little at the thought. It would be fun to catch her.

But instead of running, she deliberately took a step further into the room. "You're Gregori?"

He didn't answer. It was bloody obvious who he was, and after a thousand years, small-talk had lost its charm.

She nodded once, as if his silence were all the confirmation she needed. "My name is Helene."

"I really don't care."

"Don't you want to know the name of the Fledgling you'll be sheltering?"

Her bravado made him chuckle. "I rarely name my dinner."

She smiled and turned toward his voice. Her gaze was fixed a little past his left shoulder. "Come on, now. I'm not Little Red Riding Hood and you're certainly not the Big Bad Wolf. You might have big teeth, but you won't eat me."

Gregori stepped out of the shadows, stalking her into the circle of light cast by the lone candle. She backed up until her butt hit his desk, but she never flinched. "Sunshine," he growled, giving the nickname all the sarcasm it deserved, "you have no idea what I want. If I want to eat you, you'll lie down on the table and wish me *bon appetit*. You became my property the moment you set foot through that door."

"So that means you *are* offering me sanctuary."

He couldn't believe this Fledgling's nerve. Here he was, Master of the most powerful vampire Clan on the continent, formidable and rightly feared, and she was making demands of him? He should scare the life out of her for taking him so lightly... and he meant that literally.

But it had been a century and more since any female had held his gaze without fear. She had courage, he had to give her that, but courage was a quality he admired only when it served his purposes.

He stared at her a little longer, not blinking, waiting for fear to cloud those emerald eyes. When it didn't, he leaned closer, invading her space, crowding her between his body and the desk. She was forced to lean back. The position bared her throat to him. Gregori bent and ran his tongue along her pulse, following with his fangs. The softness of her skin was a treat to be savored and he took his time, enjoying the jump of her heartbeat beneath his mouth and the impossible-to-hide scent of her arousal.

Oh, yes, this young one just might relieve his boredom for an hour or two.

"What I offer you," he whispered against her skin, "is a chance to persuade me not to drink you dry and toss you out on your pretty ass. What's in it for me, Sunshine?"

Chapter Two

Her breath caught as his lips caressed her skin. Good Lord, after all the horrible tales she'd heard about Gregori, she'd expected a monster, not this dark and sensual Adonis. Threats or not, this ancient vampire was the sexiest thing she'd ever seen.

He nipped her throat and a shiver raced down her spine. If she was ever to be free of the bitch who'd turned her, she had to convince the Nighthawks to let her stay. Unfortunately, the only card she held might be worthless. "I have information," she gasped, trying to gather her wits. "I'll trade information for sanctuary."

Gambling her life on a rumor had seemed a lot more plausible twenty-four hours ago.

Gregori's laugh was a dark and dangerous rumble. "Little girl, what could you possibly know that I haven't learned ages ago?"

He pressed harder against her, bending her back over the desk and throwing her further off-balance. She shivered at the heat of his thick cock against her thigh. Tall as she was, few men had ever been able to physically dominate her like this. And never had that dominance made her this hot.

Her own sexual hunger rose and demanded more. What if she was going about this all wrong? What if the way to safety lay not in information but in a much more enjoyable pastime?

No. She had to stick with the plan. A vampire didn't survive as long as Gregori had if he let his dick make the rules. Time to find out if she had any chance of survival. "I escaped from the Wolfbane Clan," she said, trying to keep the tremor of arousal from her voice.

She was pretty sure she failed.

His weight shifted a moment before she heard him clear his desk with a sweep of his arm. The crash of something shattering on the floor didn't seem to concern him at all. Helene reached for his shoulders as he forced her flat on her back atop the desk, but he captured her hands and pinned them above her head. She felt the buttons of her blouse sliding free one by one, even though he didn't touch them, and shuddered with the intoxicating blend of danger and arousal radiating from the ancient vampire.

He nipped her lower lip hard enough to draw a drop of blood. "Keep talking, Sunshine. So far you haven't convinced me you're anything but dinner and entertainment."

His reaction to the clan name wasn't what she'd expected. Some of the fog cleared from Helene's mind as alarm started to override desire. What if her information was wrong? If she was mistaken about Nora and Gregori's past, she'd just signed her own death warrant by walking in here.

But she'd known she was taking her life in her hands from the start. The only thing to do was press on. "The Wolfbane Master has chosen a new mate. She mocks you for not doing the same."

Gregori's eyes flared red as he snarled. "I have killed vampires for less insult than that, Fledgling," he growled.

Despite his fury, relief rushed through her. He wouldn't react this strongly if she was mistaken. "If you kill me, I won't be able to deliver her mate to you," Helene said, praying that she could indeed do what she promised. "I offer you the chance to wound her to the heart, and all I ask in exchange is safe haven. Do we have an accord?"

Gregori laughed. Not a good sign. "So," he drawled, "a Fledgling is going to give the Master's mate to me. You'll forgive my disbelief."

"I can," she insisted. The last button of her blouse fell open, distracting her, but she forced herself to concentrate. Her life depended on it. "I can get you or your hunters close. Inside his house, even. I can lure him out, to any place you choose. I --"

He released her wrists to cup her breasts, and the shock of the sudden caress stole her voice. "You promise much, little girl. Tell me how you plan to deliver this miracle."

She took a deep breath to steady her nerves and shivered as the movement pressed her breasts more firmly against his palms. "I'll tell you, after you swear to give me sanctuary."

Suddenly she was staring up at the ceiling. He was gone. It took Helene a moment to gather her wits enough to sit up. Pulling her blouse closed, she took a shaking breath of mingled relief at the momentary reprieve and dread at the uncertainty of what was coming next. If there was one thing Gregori's reputation made abundantly clear, it was that letting down one's guard in his presence was often fatal.

"I didn't say you could dress."

His voice behind her made her jump and spin around. Gregori reclined in his overstuffed leather desk chair, watching her like a hawk.

She lifted her chin, determined to hold onto her bravado. "I didn't ask."

The air abruptly vanished from the room. She gasped and clutched her throat, trying to get enough for a breath. Gregori watched her dispassionately as she struggled to breathe. Just when she was certain she'd pass out from lack of oxygen, the blockage in her throat vanished and sweet air rushed back into her lungs.

He sat back and laced his fingers over his stomach. "I've been unusually patient with you. Gentle, even. But now you try my patience, Fledgling. Tell me what I want to hear or your time with me will come to an end."

Helene shuddered, still sucking in deep breaths and lightheaded from lack of oxygen. No more dissembling, then. Surely once he heard what she had to say, he'd be honor-bound to help her. She'd have to give up her information without his promise or take it with her to her grave.

And that wasn't an option, not after all she'd been through, everything she'd done to get here. Hoping she wouldn't regret it, she spoke. "Nora's new mate is my brother."

His face betrayed no emotion, neither interest nor surprise. "And you'd sell him to me. Any particular reason?"

"He made Nora do this to me," Helene said, waving a hand at her chest. "The vampire thing. He --"

She fell silent when Gregori abruptly sat forward. "Nora is your sire, then?" She nodded. Finally he smiled, baring his long fangs with brutal amusement. "Ahh, now this is worth my time. I'll slay her mate and her offspring."

The bottom fell out of her world. "S-slay?" Her voice was high-pitched, nothing like the cool and collected image she'd tried so hard to portray since entering Club Nighthawk. "But you said -- I offered this in exchange for sanctuary!"

His smile didn't change. "An offer I never accepted. Why should I deal when I can simply take?" He hit a button on the arm of his chair. "Barrett, come take the Fledgling and put her in the secure suite until I am ready to deal with her."

"But you don't know everything yet," she protested as the door opened behind her.

"I know all I need to."

Although her stomach clenched with dread at his certainty, she didn't offer to barter again. She'd learned that lesson well. Let his ignorance bite him on the ass later -- she wouldn't volunteer anything else. The human took her elbow in a tight grip, but she didn't bother struggling free. She was deep in the Nighthawk Clan's headquarters. Escaping one human wouldn't gain her anything.

She met Gregori's dark eyes and didn't care if her disappointment and contempt showed in her gaze. "You are as cold as they all say."

He inclined his head in a mocking bow. "Nice to know I am living up to my reputation."

She held his gaze one more moment before allowing the human to pull her toward the door, away from the vampire she'd pinned all her hopes on and risked her life to see. "Yes, you are. I guess I hoped you'd be more than what they said." She followed the human out, her head held high.

* * *

Gregori stared at the closed door in silence. The elation he'd felt at the Fledgling's revelation had faded as fast as it had appeared, leaving him empty again.

He couldn't understand it. Wasn't this what he'd hungered for all these centuries, the opportunity to hurt Nora as she'd hurt him at last? To take his revenge and prove to the world that no one cheated on Gregori Nighthawk, and no one left before he released them?

I guess I hoped you'd be more than what they said.

He snarled at the ghost of the Fledgling's words and the disappointment in her vivid eyes. They mocked his strength and the fierce reputation he'd worked so many long years to build. How dare a mere Fledgling judge him and find him lacking?

The memory of her bravery taunted him, the way she'd held his gaze without fear, the honest arousal he'd scented in the air as he'd teased her atop his desk. Every reaction, every emotion he'd sensed from her had been the genuine article. She'd faked nothing.

Not her desire. And not her disappointment.

"She is nothing," he snarled. "Nothing!" All she could ever be was a vehicle for his revenge.

And if the thought of that revenge didn't bring the sense of satisfaction he'd expected? Well, that only meant he'd truly moved on, truly killed every emotion he'd so foolishly lavished on Nora when they'd mated so very long ago. That was all.

And he didn't give a damn what that foolish Fledgling thought of him.

Chapter Three

Gregori let a day and most of a night pass before he visited the Fledgling. He arrived well-fed, knowing she'd be hungry and that the scent of blood would distract her, put her at a disadvantage. Most new vampires couldn't control their reactions to the bloodlust for months, if not longer. He looked forward to seeing how she'd respond to it.

Although the shackles on the wall would have her feeling out of control enough. Manacled for thirty hours, unable to lower her arms or relax her legs, she'd be exhausted and hurting as well as hungry. He hoped she'd used the time to survey the rest of the delights the secure suite held. Fear was a delicious spice, especially when combined with bloodlust.

The first thing that hit him when he opened the secure suite's door was the scent of -- raw steak? That wasn't right. Who would have fed her, and why that? *What the hell*

--

The second thing that hit him was Helene's fist.

Her punch packed enough force to send him reeling, but no vampire survived as long as he had without razor-sharp reflexes. Her second punch earned her nothing more than bruised knuckles as he ducked and her fist slammed into the doorframe. He dove for her, intending to tackle her to the floor, and grabbed only air. She kicked the back of his head, and despite her bare foot, she packed enough force into that kick to slam his face into the floor.

That was it. Gregori leapt to his feet, roaring with fury and outrage, intending to tear the fucking Fledgling limb from limb for this.

Only the *Fledgling* roared right back with a voice that no human or vampire could possibly create. He checked his blind leap and looked, truly looked at his adversary for the first time.

And she was like no Fledgling he'd ever seen. Hell, like nothing he'd ever seen, period. Helene had impossibly grown taller, standing even to his own height, and her larger frame rippled with tight muscles. Her elongated, pointed ears lay flat against the side of her head in an aggressive expression impossible to mistake. She snarled again, lips peeling back from wide jaws packed with sharp teeth and crowned with the largest fangs he'd ever seen.

His thoughts whirled as he tried to figure out just what had happened here. She didn't give him much of a reprieve to think. Never relaxing her hostile stance, she stalked him. They circled the room, neither blinking, only stopping when Gregori's foot hit something dense and slightly yielding.

He didn't look down, but he didn't need to. Another sniff confirmed that the scent in the room wasn't raw steak, but one of his best fighters.

Helene smiled at his realization. "He thought he'd have a piece of me," she growled, her voice a full octave lower than it had been. "I thought I'd have a little piece of him instead. I might've gotten a bit carried away. Want to try your luck?"

"I'd rather know what the fuck you are."

Their circling had brought her close to the door. Gregori didn't bother trying to block it. She wouldn't get out of Club Nighthawk, and despite her bravado, he was certain she knew it. Otherwise she'd have tried to run before he'd arrived.

"I told you that you didn't know everything. Are you ready to deal now?"

His jaw ached from her punch, as did his forehead from its impact with the floor. It had been centuries since anyone had dared to strike him and lived. Every aggressive vampire instinct snarled for revenge.

But the cunning intellect that had guided him for so long didn't listen to that demand. Whatever she was, Helene was one hell of a weapon. He needed to know what

he was up against and whether Nora had created more creatures like Helene. That, at least temporarily, outweighed the momentary pleasure he'd get from killing her.

So deal he would. "Tell me something worth knowing, and you have my personal word that the Nighthawk Clan will shelter you."

She shook her head. "Not good enough. Your personal word doesn't bind the Clan."

A grudging respect for her rose in him. She'd been fooled once, but clearly she understood the rules better now. "Fine. Tell me, and I'll give my word as Clan Master that you won't be harmed."

"Again, not good enough," she said. "I volunteered information once. This time I need your word as Master that the Nighthawk Clan will adopt me as their own, with full rights of sanctuary and protection, and pursue no revenge for the death of that bastard at your feet. After I get that pledge, I'll tell you something worth knowing."

Damn it. He shouldn't have double-crossed her that first time. Well, where trickery failed, outright lies often worked, and he had no qualms about saying whatever she needed to hear to get what he wanted. Vows no longer meant much to him anyway.

Besides, every Nighthawk knew their lives were subject to Gregori's pleasure. Adopting her didn't bind him nearly as much as she apparently thought.

"Agreed. As Master of Clan Nighthawk, I formally adopt you into my Clan and offer you all rights and privileges of any born Clan member. I will allow none to pursue revenge for the death of this one vampire. Now that you've gotten what you want, this had better be fucking good."

Helene relaxed her fighting stance, but he wasn't foolish enough to do the same. She'd already proven that she could move faster than he, a feat in itself. "Nora named her clan Wolfbane for a reason. The territory she claimed already belonged to my people. Werewolves controlled that area for centuries before vampires ever set foot in America. You wonder why she didn't start a full-out war on the Nighthawks when she left you? It's because my people kept her too busy to bother much with you."

He ignored that last part. The Nighthawks and Wolfbanes had battled plenty, whether Helene wanted to call it war or not. "You're a werewolf?"

"I was. Now I'm something else." She sounded sad as she looked down at her powerful body. "I was a black wolf. I thought I'd become that wolf again when the full moon rose tonight. Instead, I'm... this."

"Sunshine, I'd have torn the head off your pretty black wolf in a heartbeat. Maybe you shouldn't be so quick to despise this new form," Gregori said, unsure why he bothered. It certainly didn't serve him to let her know just how formidable she was now. He could take her down, there was no question of that, but he'd have to work for it. And he wasn't in the mood for a work-out tonight.

She shrugged off his comment, then glanced over her shoulder at the door. "I need to feed," she said, changing the subject away from her strange new body. "I was weak when I arrived, and your... hospitality... hasn't helped me any."

"Looks to me like you already cleaned your plate." He nodded toward the exsanguinated body on the floor.

She ignored that. "As a Nighthawk, I have hunting privileges in the club, right?"

He crossed the room and put a hand on the doorknob, ostensibly to open it for her. Then he abruptly spun and put his back to the wood. "Actually, there might be a little problem with that. We should probably wait a few nights before you meet the others."

Helene's eyes narrowed and he didn't miss the way she shifted her weight as if preparing to pounce. "You're the Master. Make the *little problem* go away."

"Now, now, let's not get cranky. I can get rid of the leftovers, but you reek of his blood. Don't you think your new Clanmates will put the pieces together when you arrive stinking of Marcel, and he doesn't show up at all?"

"I have your blessing now. That should be enough to shut them up. Besides, all I want is to feed and get away from them. I never could stand vampires."

He smiled. "And now you are one. The irony is delicious."

Helene didn't look amused. "Yeah, but it does nothing for my hunger. So how about you stand aside and let me get what I need?"

"Can't do it." Knowing he'd have only an instant to get out before Helene attacked, Gregori shot a mental imperative at her that momentarily froze her muscles. An instant later, the thick, steel-bound wood separated him from a very pissed off were-vamp. He was still smiling as he threw the locks. "Don't worry, Sunshine. I'll bring you a human in a day or two. You won't starve."

Her snarl shook the very walls. "You adopted me into your Clan!" she roared. "You gave me all the privileges of a born Nighthawk!"

He shook his head even though she couldn't see the gesture. "I lied, Sunshine. It's what I do. Now stop the theatrics before you hurt yourself. You can't break out of there. Stronger vampires have tried and --"

The sound of the window shattering interrupted his gloat and Gregori cursed. That was bulletproof glass, supposedly unbreakable. Clearly he'd underestimated Helene's hybrid strength.

Not that breaking out would do her any good. She'd become his property the instant she set foot in Club Nighthawk, and he didn't release anything that was his. He savored the smooth glide of his fangs as he threw open the door just in time to catch a glimpse of Helene leaping through the demolished window. He sprinted across the room and followed.

He'd thought once that it would be fun to chase her.

She might not share that opinion once he caught her, however.

Chapter Four

Helene pushed her new body to its limits, knowing Gregori was right on her heels. She might mourn the loss of her beautiful black wolf form, but there was no denying that she was exponentially stronger and faster now. Hating what she'd become didn't mean she was ready to let Gregori catch her and end her life. She'd use whatever advantages she could get.

Gregori. Just the thought of his name made her snarl. The damned vampire was everything she'd been warned he would be -- selfish, deceitful, and totally without honor. She knew now that she'd been wrong to come to him. Worse than wrong, she'd been foolish. Yes, she wanted to punish Steve for his part in turning her into this hybrid monstrosity, but not at the expense of her own life or freedom.

Her newfound speed was incredible. It was a good thing that the late hour meant the sidewalks were empty, or she wouldn't have been able to avoid running people down. As it was, she had to constantly be alert to keep from plowing into obstacles. She couldn't afford to trip and let Gregori close the gap between them.

Even though she maintained her lead, she wasn't pulling away from him. Running headlong down the street clearly wasn't going to gain her anything. Catching a glimpse of trees ahead, she sprinted toward the gated park entrance. Hopefully the trees would be thick enough to hide her. If she could just get out of his line of sight for a few minutes, she might be able to double back and lose him.

The closer she got, the less faith she put in her plan. It wasn't much of a park. A few trees, a dry fountain, and a struggling flower bed filled the small space. Despite its shabbiness, the chain-link fence was locked by a tall gate of sturdy iron bars. This wasn't a part of Chicago where it paid to leave anything accessible at night. Rather than

waste time trying to wrench the gates open, Helene took a chance that she'd be able to leap them and jumped.

She cleared the high gates with ease. Her elation didn't last long though. She cursed herself for not slowing and aiming her leap a bit better when she flew straight into the tangled branches of an oak tree instead of landing on the meandering concrete pathway.

The first branch caught her in the stomach, knocking the wind out of her. She grabbed blindly, missed, and fell hard. As she tumbled from branch to branch, knocking her head and back mercilessly, she stripped leaves and twigs in her desperate struggle to find purchase. When she finally caught hold of a branch, it held only a moment before snapping. The tree, while tall enough to intercept her, wasn't big enough to hold her weight. She landed hard on her ass.

A glance showed Gregori making a leap of his own, and she scrambled to her feet, gasping for air. She only managed to run a few yards before he tackled her.

The impact with the ground drove the air from her lungs all over again. The adrenaline pumping through her veins fired her struggles, but no matter how she twisted or bucked, she couldn't dislodge him. He laughed, the bastard, and flipped her onto her back. The weight of his body pinned her legs as his long dreadlocks fell around them. He shackled her wrists in an unbreakable grip. "Gotcha, Sunshine," he said, and he wasn't even out of breath.

Unable to kick, unable to punch, and every breath only heightening her awareness of his hard body on hers, Helene snarled and head-butted at him. He anticipated her move and dodged easily. She tried again, this time biting at his throat, with similar results. Finally, frustrated and enraged, she bucked with all her might.

His eyes gleamed in the moonlight when she finally gave up and went limp beneath him. "Sure you're done, Sunshine?" he purred, his voice a velvet caress. "I was just starting to enjoy that."

He rocked his hips against her belly, rubbing his erection in teasing circles. How had she not noticed his arousal before? His cock was rock hard, hot, and she couldn't

help but imagine what it would feel like if he did that while buried deep inside her. Her own desire rose with shocking speed as heat pooled between her thighs.

Gregori must have sensed her response because his lips curved in sensual invitation. "Positive you don't want to fight a little more? I truly don't mind a bit."

Striking with the speed of a cobra, Helene snapped at him again. This time he wasn't quite as fast in dodging her. Instead of sinking her fangs into his throat, she nipped his ear, drawing no more than a drop of blood.

The rich scent of his ancient and powerful blood filled her senses. When he moved away, she followed, tracing the tiny wound with the tip of her tongue. The taste exploded on her tongue -- dark, sensual, as dangerous as the man himself. It woke a need in her veins that had nothing to do with hunger or bloodlust. "More," she demanded huskily when the single crimson drop was gone.

A low growl rumbled in Gregori's chest a bare second before his mouth roughly covered hers.

Helene moaned at his fierce possession, his tongue thrusting into her mouth as if he owned her. In an instant, all her fear and anger morphed into lust, and she gladly followed where he led. She traced his fangs with her tongue and hissed in pleasure when he returned the favor. This time, when he thrust against her belly, she raised her hips in welcome.

Gregori didn't wait for any further invitation. Switching his grip to pin her wrists to the grass with one hand, he lifted his body just enough to tear her blouse open. Buttons popped and flew. Her bra fared no better, ripping with one tug, and then his lips were there. She cried out as he sucked her nipple deep into his mouth.

He nipped, soothed the sting with a swirl of his tongue, suckled and teased, and every motion of his expert mouth sent a new wave of cream to her pussy. When he pinched her other nipple and rolled it between his fingers, she could hardly stand the intense pleasure. "Gregori!"

He growled something unintelligible against her skin and switched to tormenting her other breast. She arched her back as much as she could, offering him total access to her body. Everything she offered, he took.

Suddenly she felt the button of her jeans unsnap. Remembering how he'd unbuttoned her blouse without touching it the first night she'd met him, she shivered with anticipation. Her zipper slid down as he continued tormenting her nipples. She raised her hips, wiggling as he used his powers to ease her jeans down her thighs, trying to help as much as possible. He released her breast to draw a shuddering breath as the movement rubbed her hips against his.

The feel of his rigid cock was enough to wipe every concern from her mind. Had she ever been this hot, wanted a man so desperately that nothing else mattered? She didn't care that they were in a public park, that he was using her for revenge just as much as she was using him. It didn't matter. At this moment, getting his cock buried deep inside her pussy and riding him to ecstasy was her only goal in life.

When he groaned, she belatedly sensed his presence in her mind and realized he'd picked up on that thought. Burning alive with desire, she imagined him naked above her, his skin gleaming like dark chocolate in the light of the full moon, a stark contrast to her paler body spread beneath him. She imagined watching his cock gliding in and out of her, long and thick, filling her to the brim with pleasure as he stuffed her full of him. His shiver delighted her, confirming that he'd read each and every thought.

"Vixen," he growled.

"A vixen is a fox." Her words were every bit as breathless as his. "I'm a wolf."

"You're a temptress," he breathed, but it didn't sound like a complaint. He traced a blazing path between her breasts with his tongue as her jeans finally fell free of her legs.

She immediately wrapped her legs around his waist in a silent demand, but the movement reminded her that she still wore her panties. Her inarticulate sound of protest made him raise his head, and she shivered at his wicked smile.

This time, instead of a formless wave of power, she felt invisible fingers trace a pattern over her hips before curling around the thin elastic band. Her deep moan was captured in his mouth as he kissed her again. His mouth was hot and demanding in contrast to the soft, teasing path of the phantom hands over her skin, drawing her panties slowly down.

Gregori eased her panties past her knees, never stopping his dominating kiss or releasing her wrists from his grip. His free hand slid down and cupped her ass. When he guided her in a slow rocking rhythm against his denim-covered hard-on, she whimpered with the bursts of intense pleasure. The contrast of the rough material abrading her softest skin was erotic as hell, but it wasn't enough. It wasn't anywhere near enough.

Unfortunately, he seemed to be in no hurry to give her anything more. She tore her mouth from his and glared up at him. "Damn it, Gregori, enough foreplay. Fuck me already!"

He laughed, a wicked, dark rumble in the night. "I don't normally take orders, Sunshine, but this once, I'll make an exception."

Finally, *finally*, he reached down and unfastened his own jeans. She was practically writhing with impatience, her mind full of erotic images and fantasies. She couldn't tell whose fantasies they were anymore and she didn't care. As long as he fulfilled at least *one* of them, she could savor the rest in memories and plan for their use in the future.

When the head of his cock nudged her clit, Helene almost came right then and there. He laughed again at her wordless cries of pleasure as he teased her, bathing his cock in her wetness. Gripping his shaft in one hand, he balanced on his other elbow and drew little circles around her clit, driving her crazy without ever pushing her over the edge.

But his shift of balance forced him to ease his grip on her wrists. Helene wasted no time yanking her hands free from their confinement. She grabbed a fistful of his

dreadlocks in one hand and slid her other between them to cup his balls. "Fuck me now or I swear I'll make you hurt," she growled, then kissed him hard.

He groaned and filled her with one hard thrust. The sudden plunge stretched her to her limit and she would've screamed with the fierce pleasure if her mouth had been free. He didn't stop to let her adjust, didn't take it slow or easy. Drawing almost all the way out of her, he plunged deep again, and again, until all she could do was grab his shoulders and hold on tight for the ride of her life. The rip of fabric barely pierced her thoughts. Only when his bare chest touched her breasts did she realize she'd torn his shirt away.

Her first orgasm made her entire body quake. Never in her life had she come so hard. Gregori didn't even slow. He growled against her lips and thrust faster, cupping her ass in both hands to lift her into each thrust, driving into her pussy like a man possessed. Helene came again, an explosion of pleasure so intense that she almost forgot to breathe. Her loud cries of ecstasy echoed through the deserted park.

Suddenly he pulled away, but before she could protest, he flipped her over and pulled her to her knees. "Put your hands on the tree," he growled, grabbing her hips again. "I want deeper inside that tight pussy, Sunshine." When she complied, he slid back inside her, and this position filled her so deep she was certain he must be touching her navel. She pressed back, meeting every surge of his cock, and he groaned. "Just like that, baby. Oh damn, that's it, fuck me back just like that."

When her third orgasm hit, Helene threw her head back and howled to the heavens like the wolf she was. Gregori snarled an instant before sinking his fangs into her shoulder. His thrusts became shorter, faster, and when he came inside her, his erotic triumph filled her mind. She collapsed on the grass beneath him, limp with complete satisfaction.

When he withdrew his mental link, she felt the loss acutely. "Damn, vampire," she panted, reaching down to twine her fingers through his to reestablish a connection. "You have to do me like that again sometime."

He chuckled and pressed a kiss to the back of her neck. "Maybe I will, Sunshine. Maybe I will."

Chapter Five

Gregori closed his eyes and breathed deep, savoring the clean night air and the rich musk of sex on their skin. God damn, he'd never imagined she'd be this hot. If he had, no way would he have stopped his teasing the night she'd barged uninvited into his office. The thought of the time he'd wasted, locking her up and avoiding her instead of fucking her silly, made him want to spread her thighs and do her again right now.

And she'd let him, too. Would welcome him eagerly. Her mind was an open book and he'd taken full advantage of it to search her thoughts. She hadn't screwed him because she wanted something, or hoped to drink his powerful blood. She hadn't been thinking of him as Master of the Nighthawk Clan at all.

Helene had given her body to him for no reason other than she'd wanted *him*, Gregori, with an all-consuming passion.

He closed his eyes and turned the unfamiliar feeling over in his mind. Sex was a need like any other, and he satisfied it with the nearest willing female when the urge hit. If the time or place was inconvenient, he simply pushed the urge to the background until he could sate it at his leisure.

Tonight, though? His lust for Helene had blindsided him. It was inconvenient and unplanned, and he hadn't even thought about leisure, much less resisting. The moment she'd stopped fighting and her body had gone so deliciously soft and pliant beneath his, he'd *needed* to get inside her.

And when he had, she'd totally rocked his world. He couldn't wait to do it again, this time in his bed where he could explore every inch of this unexpectedly fascinating Fledgling and keep her as long as he wanted.

His thoughts stuttered to a stop and his eyes flew open in shock. What was this madness? *Keep* her? There was no way in hell he'd keep her. The only reason he'd chased her down in the first place was so he could send her back to Nora.

In many little pieces.

Helene stirred beneath him, snuggling closer. Abruptly realizing that he was actually *cuddling* with her -- even holding hands, for Christ's sake! -- Gregori released her as if burned and shot to his feet. "Get up," he commanded roughly as he fastened his jeans. "Dawn isn't far off. You better get your ass back to the club before it catches fire."

She stretched blissfully, either unaware or ignoring his change of mood. The moon must've set during their encounter and she was all woman now, without a trace of either vampiric or were traits. The sight of her mostly-naked body, rosy and practically glowing with sexual satisfaction, made his cock stir again. That pissed him off and he started to kick her. He ended up merely nudging her thigh with his foot, and that pissed him off even more. "Get *up*, I said!"

She smiled at him and sat up as if she had all the time in the world. "I'd say I'm coming, but I already did that."

He scowled in silence as she pulled her jeans on. Her shirt and bra were demolished. He could use his powers to repair them for her but wasn't inclined to do so. She didn't ask, instead dropping her tattered bra in the grass and tying the torn edges of her blouse in a knot between her breasts. The simple solution accentuated her gorgeous breasts and left her stomach bare down to her low-riding jeans. She looked thoroughly debauched, sexy as hell, and Gregori had to grit his teeth to keep from reaching for her again.

His shirt was nowhere to be found, and he didn't much care to waste time looking. She returned to his side and took his hand. "I'm ready."

He snarled at her and snatched his hand away. "In case you hadn't noticed, I'm not the warm and cuddly type," he snapped. "So keep your fucking hands to yourself."

She just smiled and shrugged. "You really need to practice your after-sex routine," she said, not trying to reclaim his hand. "Luckily, my afterglow is bulletproof, so you won't ruin it for me. Let's go, Master Cranky."

What the hell was with her? Just because he fucked her didn't mean she had a free pass to insult and tease him. Gregori looked forward to setting her straight -- possibly turning her over his knee to do it -- but dawn was nearing and they needed to get back to the club. "Come on," he growled, turning his back on her and striding toward the gate.

Helene followed in silence, but he could practically feel her gaze resting on his bare back. The heat of her stare made him hyperaware of the rough slide of his dreadlocks on his shoulders and the cool morning breeze teasing his skin. He ground his teeth and pushed her from his mind.

How could one simple fuck leave him so scattered?

He leapt the gate with ease and was halfway down the block when he realized she wasn't behind him. Glancing back over his shoulder, he saw her climbing the smooth iron bars. "Problem, Sunshine?"

She reached up, grabbed the top bar, and hauled her body over the gate in a one-armed chin-up pull that would've made any Marine proud. "Not a bit," she replied, smiling at him from the top before jumping lightly down. "Maybe I just don't need to show off and leap tall gates in a single bound."

"Or maybe you're weak as a helpless puppy when the moon goes down."

She shrugged and caught up to him at a trot. Her continued refusal to take offense at his taunts was really starting to piss him off. "Weaker, yes. Helpless?" She winked at him. "Well, you've clearly never met a werewolf pup. I've seen a six-week-old pup run down a vampire and tear its throat out. Wanna race?"

Helene was off like a shot before he could reply. Gregori growled in frustration and gave chase as her laughter filled the pre-dawn air.

He passed her half a block before they reached the Nighthawk club and blocked the door with his body. She laughed again and danced past him, ignoring the door and

instead jumping straight up into the air. Grabbing the thin ledge five feet over her head, she pulled herself up with the ease of a cat burglar, then shinnied up a drainpipe to reach the window she'd shattered to escape and slipped inside.

He made the same journey in a single jump and found her waiting for him, back to the steel-bound door, eyes bright and chest heaving. Gregori was across the room and pinning her to the door before he could even think of resisting. She received him with open arms and met his kiss with the same passion they'd shared in the park.

God, there was nothing like a chase to get his adrenaline flowing, and his body remembered too well what they'd just shared. The kiss deepened, becoming even more intense. He tangled his hands in her hair to hold her just where he wanted her. The softness of her hands gliding up his back sent a shiver all the way to his toes. He thrust his tongue deep, wanting to get inside her again so bad he could taste it, willing to give up just about anything to get it.

And that thought shattered his arousal as effectively as a bucket of ice water. The Master of the Nighthawk Clan did not *give* anything for a piece of ass. If he wanted it, he took it, and that was all.

He released her so abruptly that she stumbled and grabbed the doorframe for balance. He gestured at the broken window and the shattered glass reassembled silently, closing off her escape. No more runs in the moonlight for her. Her smile finally vanished at this demonstration of his power, but her eyes were luminous with desire and so welcoming that he almost reached for her again.

He bared his fangs at her instead. "You won't lead me by the dick, Fledgling."

"I wasn't trying to."

He scoffed at that. Of course she was. All women did, giving up pussy or withholding it when it suited their plans. "Nothing's changed, Sunshine. Just because I fucked you doesn't mean you have a place in my Clan. Is that clear?"

She sighed and shook her head, but it wasn't in frustration. He could have sworn she felt sorry for him. "I know Nora hurt you," she began, and the confirmation of her sympathy was the last straw.

Anger, he would welcome. Disgust, he was used to. But pity from this hybrid freak? That was absolutely unacceptable. Gregori shoved her away from the door, not bothering to rein in his great strength. She stumbled over Marcel's body but managed to catch her balance against the wall, sending the twisted and broken shackles swinging. "Don't presume to analyze me, and don't you *ever* fucking pity me," he growled, then wrenched the door open and was gone.

* * *

Helene felt the sun slip below the horizon hours later and stretched. Her neck and back were a mass of kinks from sleeping on the bare concrete floor. The secure suite, as the Nighthawks euphemistically called it, wasn't set up for comfort.

It was a torture chamber.

The shackles she'd broken were the gentlest of the room's charms. An ancient iron maiden was bolted to one corner, the metal rusty and stained with what was almost certainly not ancient blood. One entire wall was given over to shelves of cruel and well-used instruments, some she could identify, others whose uses she didn't even want to imagine. There was a rack to stretch and break a prisoner's joints, a sturdy pulley in the ceiling to suspend the victim in midair, a small charcoal brazier with notches to rest the metal implements upon as they heated to red-hot.

She'd had ample time to study it all during the day and night she'd spent chained to the wall. Time to wonder just how Gregori planned to break her.

She never thought he'd do it with sex.

All right, yes, she'd wondered if he'd rape her. She had no illusions about herself -- she was curvy and striking, and her jet-black hair and green eyes had drawn more than her fair share of male attention. She'd considered the possibility of sexual assault before coming here and decided the chance to pay Steve back for what he'd done to her was worth the risk.

But Gregori hadn't raped her. Far from it -- she'd begged him to screw her.

And she'd loved every second of it. Gregori was dominant to the bone, but he wasn't a brutal lover. He'd taken her like he owned her, yes, but he'd made sure she

was just as turned-on as himself. Gave her three orgasms before reaching his own peak and even held her in the aftermath -- at least until he'd realized what he was doing.

His attempts to distance himself from her after that earth-shattering sex only made her acutely aware of how deeply Nora must've hurt him. When vampires mated, they did it for eternity. The commitment was stronger than any form of human marriage, stronger even than other supernatural unions. Vampires had no concept of divorce. If a mate severed the bond, they did it at their own peril.

Yet not only had Nora left Gregori, she'd survived his wrath. More than that, she'd thrived. Gregori was powerful. Sharing his blood would have strengthened Nora immensely. Helene had even heard rumors that Nora had used the sacred mating bond solely for that purpose, to build her strength so she could found her own Clan and rule alone.

It was the ultimate betrayal.

No wonder Gregori hadn't taken another mate. She couldn't stop her stomach from twisting with genuine sympathy for him. What would it take to make such a man whole again?

"Oh, you are a fool," she whispered to herself, halting her train of thought. Was she really thinking of trying to redeem him? Gregori was beyond redemption. He was vicious, nearly feral. He led the Nighthawks, but only because it suited his purposes. She had no doubt that he'd leave them all to hang if it benefited him.

Besides, during that erotic mind-meld they'd shared in the park, she'd picked up a few of his plans for her, and most of them involved this room. He had spent centuries aching to strike at Nora, to hurt her as she'd hurt him. Now he had Nora's Fledgling, and that bond could only be severed by death. The loss of a newly turned Fledgling was a strike at her strength that she couldn't ignore. Nora and Steve would have to take revenge or risk appearing weak. Helene knew her death would certainly bring the pack out to avenge her. Helene held no illusions about her future here... or lack thereof.

Not that she'd ever planned to stay here. After Gregori took care of Steve, she fully intended to return to her pack.

A hollow ache clenched in her chest at the thought of her pack. God, she missed them. More than family, the wolves were her entire world. When Steve left them to join Nora, she'd been unable to believe he'd really betrayed them. Her brother, her only surviving littermate, couldn't turn his back on them all. She couldn't fathom it. The very thought was anathema.

She followed him all the way to the Wolfbane stronghold, certain Steve hadn't left the pack willingly. He met her outside the fortified mansion that housed the vampire clan. Helene closed her eyes at the memory. Her brother told her everything she'd expected to hear -- Nora had tricked him, then forced him to become her thrall. Outraged, Helene was ready to attack the ancient vampiress right then and there, to claim vengeance for what she'd done to Steve.

When Nora stepped out of the shadows, Helene leapt for her without thinking. Expecting Steve to cover her flank, she didn't give a thought to anything but tearing the vampiress limb from limb. When the needle pierced her side, injecting a sedative and stealing her strength, it took her several stunned moments to realize her own brother had wielded the syringe.

Waking up in a suite much like this one, Helene endured the worst torture of all... the final proof of Steve's betrayal. He and Nora discussed her like she was a science experiment. Something to be used. Nora didn't dare risk a blood exchange with Steve until they knew what vampire blood would do to a werewolf. As far as anyone knew, such a thing had never before been attempted.

Helene, drugged and bound, couldn't stop Nora from biting her. Steve held her mouth open and helped the vampire force her blood down Helene's throat. She wept afterward, sick with the change and heartbroken at the violation.

And then she'd been stupid again by coming to the Nighthawks with her plans for revenge. When would she learn that vampires fouled everything they touched? Gregori had proven that he'd earned every bit of his wicked reputation.

That didn't mean she was resigned to her fate, however. Last night had also shown her there was something more to Gregori, something he didn't show the world.

She stretched once more, wincing as her back popped in several places and savoring the soreness between her thighs. If he'd allowed her to feed last night, she would've healed in her sleep, but for now she didn't mind. That twinge of discomfort only reminded her how incredible he'd felt inside her.

Well, if Gregori had plans for her, she'd just have to find a compelling reason for him to delay carrying them out. Maybe he wasn't a man she could 'lead by his dick,' as he'd put it, but at least she might put off the inevitable.

Chapter Six

Hungry, horny, and pissed-off. Again.

Gregori woke up hard and thinking of Helene. He took matters into his own hands, but the momentary relief didn't last. His mood only got blacker. Still, he hadn't even considered going to her. He didn't understand the problem. He wanted her -- why not just go fuck her?

Reason had nothing to do with it. He refused to go to her, horny or not.

Instead, he'd barked orders to one of his vampires, a beefy man whose name Gregori didn't even try to recall, and five minutes later he'd delivered a pair of luscious twin sisters to the Master's study. Petite, blonde, with surgically perfect tits practically spilling out of their skimpy tops, they'd begged him to do whatever he wanted with them. So he'd fed, drinking deeply from one while the other sucked his cock. The pleasure of that was normally enough to wipe every thought from his mind.

But when he came, it wasn't anywhere near as good as it had felt to come inside Helene's sweet pussy. His cock stayed hard as ever. His ire rose to new heights and he zipped his jeans furiously, ignoring the twins' protests as he pushed them both roughly from the room.

Apparently, blood was the only satisfaction he'd get from them tonight.

He thrown himself into work after that, trying to lose himself in the mundane details of running Club Nighthawk. Bill-paying and liquor orders were no substitute for mind-blowing sex, but right now he'd take what he could get. At least his vampires had picked up on his mood. He could sense their wariness as they avoided coming anywhere near his office. No one wanted to draw the Master's attention tonight.

When his door swung open an hour later, he knew without looking that it was Helene. No one else ever entered uninvited, and none of his Clan would be so foolish as

to try it tonight. "You must enjoy taking your life in your hands, Sunshine," he growled, keeping his gaze fixed on his paperwork. "How'd you get out?"

"Your snacks had weak minds. They were easily persuaded to open the door."

She closed the door and walked toward him, her footsteps never hesitating despite the glare he leveled at her. When she moved behind him and rested her hands on his shoulders, he gripped his pen so tight it shattered in his hand. He dropped the pieces and wondered why he hadn't broken her fingers instead. No one touched him uninvited. No one. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Her fingers began kneading his tense muscles. "You're broadcasting your stress loud and clear through the entire club," she murmured, ignoring his clenched fists on the desk. "You're chasing humans off before they get within a block. I thought you might need a little massage to chill you out before you run off tonight's buffet."

He captured one of her hands and stilled it against his shoulder. Despite his anger at her, he didn't squeeze, didn't twist, didn't attempt to punish her for her audacity. Hurting her held no appeal. "That's not what I need."

She tugged her hand free and spun his chair around. He found himself at eye-level with her barely covered breasts and his already-aching cock hardened even more. Helene cupped his face in her palms and leaned forward. "You can have anything you want."

Why are you doing this? What's in it for you? But he didn't say the words aloud. He wanted to take her up on the offer so bad, he didn't care what she'd eventually ask for in return. When she straddled his lap and kissed him, Gregori untied her torn shirt and stopped thinking altogether.

Helene sighed into his mouth as he cupped her breasts. Her nipples were already hard little peaks and he rolled them against his palms. Her whimper urged him on, but hot as he was, he didn't rush this time. Didn't devour her as he had last night in the grass.

Her hunger teased his heightened senses, but she stroked his neck and shoulders, letting him set the pace. It was strange enough to make him pause, despite

his desire. He never had sent a human to her, or even provided a bag of donated blood. She was a very new Fledgling -- even after draining Marcel dry last night, she was ravenous. Newly turned vampires needed to feed at least nightly, and more often when they were as active as she'd been last night. Not to mention that he'd drunk from her in the park.

Still, although he could feel her hunger, she was in control of it. Incredible. "Why aren't you feral with bloodlust, Sunshine? How are you doing this?"

She arched, allowing him full access. Her words were breathless. "Should I be?"

"Oh, definitely." He licked his way down her neck, savoring the little shiver that chased along the path.

"Maybe it's --" She broke off with a gasp when he flicked his tongue over her nipple. "Maybe it's because I'm -- oh! -- used to controlling my werewolf instincts?"

He nibbled the curve of her breasts, then rubbed his rough cheek over the sensitive flesh. Her hunger would heighten everything he could make her feel, but satisfying it at the right moment would take her even higher. "Well, baby, if you're very, *very* good, I might just give you a little snack as a reward." It was an offer he made so rarely that he couldn't remember the last time he'd done so, and he didn't let himself examine his reasons for doing it now too closely.

He hadn't attained his current level of power by sharing it often, and he had no reason to strengthen his prisoner. Yet he didn't withdraw the offer.

A tug at his dreadlocks made him stop what he was doing and look up. Helene shook her head, holding his gaze steadily. "I'm not doing this for your blood, Gregori," she said, and rose from his lap. "It might be the most powerful thing I'll ever taste, but I'm not fucking you for it."

Oh, hell no. No way was she stopping now. But instead of retreating, she unbuttoned her jeans and pushed them slowly down her legs. "I'm doing this because I want you," she continued, giving him a sexy smile that sent heat rushing to his groin. "I want your cock inside me again. I want to come as hard as I did last night, and that's the only reason I'm here. Not for favors. Understand?"

She ignored his lack of reply and pushed his chair away from the desk with her foot, then perched atop the desk blotter. "I think we've been here once before," she said, leaning back. "Care to try for a different ending this time?"

"Oh, hell yeah."

Gregori couldn't get his clothes off fast enough. All desire to slow down and savor went flying out the window at the sight of her bare body stretched atop his desk. He didn't care if she meant what she'd just said, refused to enter her mind to check. She was here, she was hot and willing, and that was more than enough.

His shirt went one way and his jeans the other, and when he was as nude as she, he covered her body with his and kissed her hard. Helene wrapped her legs around his waist in invitation. Pressing against her, her slick wetness coating his cock, he thrust home in one smooth plunge. The tight clasp of her pussy triggered such a fierce wave of pleasure that he groaned her name aloud.

"God, more, please!" she moaned, raising her hips to meet his thrusts, pulling him closer with her strong legs. He bent and sucked one nipple between his teeth, worrying it with his fangs without breaking the skin. Her cries intensified and he growled at the ripple of her inner muscles as her orgasm claimed her. Nothing had ever felt so good.

Helene reached over her head and gripped the far edge of the desk, hard. The movement thrust her breasts up and he feasted on them. Her moans and gasps of pleasure made him drunk. Wrapping one arm around her waist, pulling her hips almost completely off the desk, he surged into her again and again, nearly mindless with ecstasy.

And when she came again and that erotic inner massage gripped his cock, Gregori stifled his own shout of pleasure by sinking his fangs into the curve of her breast as he came in a seemingly endless wave of heat.

Her blood spilled over his tongue, a delicious cocktail of adrenaline and sex and no-holds-barred passion. God damn, she tasted incredible, intoxicating. Addictive in

the extreme. She tightened her pussy around him and he sucked harder, wanting more blood, more connection.

More of Helene, who gave without taking and didn't fear him.

And that almost desperate desire jolted him out of his haze. Gregori drew back to heal the twin punctures on her breast, and it wasn't out of any soft-hearted urge to spare her their discomfort. No, he didn't want her to think he was marking her, making her his property, his territory.

She wasn't his, and he didn't want her to have any illusions about it.

But as before, she showed no signs of offense at his withdrawal, physically or mentally. Helene simply smiled at him, a sensual, satisfied curve of her lips that had him wishing he was back inside her again. "I wish you'd get frustrated more often," she teased, still spread over his desk, absolutely at home in her nudity. "I rather like your method of unwinding. Can I piss you off so we'll have to do that again?"

His lips twitched despite himself. She was absolutely incorrigible. He shook his head at her and glanced around his office, locating his jeans hanging off the curtain rod. His turtleneck dangled from the third shelf of his bookshelf. By the time he'd retrieved them and pulled his jeans on, Helene had donned her own pants again.

Her shirt, however, was definitely worse for its recent treatment. She lifted the tattered garment in one hand. "I know you're not really the giving type, but maybe you could make a little exception and hook me up with a shirt? Seeing how you're the reason this one is trashed and all."

Without thinking, he tossed his turtleneck to her.

Her eyes widened as she caught it. Holding it before her like she expected him to snatch it away, she glanced from him to it and back again. "You really want me to wear your shirt?" she asked, clearly incredulous. "I mean, won't your Clan think I'm something other than your prisoner if I do that?"

Yeah, they would, damn it. What the hell was he thinking? He scowled and bent down to right his chair, which had toppled over at some point. "Wear it or wear that rag. I don't give a shit. Just do it without the commentary."

When he straightened, Helene was rolling up the sleeves of his turtleneck. It practically swallowed her whole, falling to the middle of her thighs. The neck was loose enough to resemble a cowl. She should've looked ridiculous.

She looked edible. Adorable. And somehow, exactly right.

And when she finished cuffing the sleeves and smiled at him again, Gregori wondered why a simple shirt seemed so much more telling than the punctures he'd erased from her breast. She was right -- none of his Clan would touch her once she walked out of here wearing his shirt and his scent. They wouldn't dare raise a hand against the Master's woman.

The thought didn't piss him off the way it really should have. Neither did it prompt him to take the shirt back or stop her when she let herself out.

Which were not good signs at all.

He narrowed his eyes at her back. This couldn't be allowed to continue.

Chapter Seven

Helene didn't make it to the stairs before Gregori appeared in front of her, blocking her path. Well, she hadn't really expected he'd make this easy. Just because she'd managed to get out of the secure suite didn't mean her situation here had improved or that she'd be allowed to roam freely. Why shouldn't he keep her hungry, weak? Especially since the moon would be rising soon and triggering her change again. He had no reason to feed her and every reason to prevent it.

But he didn't order her back to the secure suite. Instead, he stopped her with a surprisingly gentle hand on her arm and gestured to a new door. "Wait in there," he said as the door opened at his mental command.

She thought about balking. Considered seeing what would happen if she reached for her other form, tried to force the change and push past him. In the end, she went into the room he'd indicated without doing either. It wasn't like she could escape him, no matter what she tried, and staying on his good side had become important to her in ways that had nothing to do with his possible role in her revenge.

And if that wasn't the ultimate foolishness, nothing was.

This new room was as different from the secure suite as night from day. Small but perfectly clean, a double bed took up most of the floor space between the door and a small bathroom. The pillows were fat and the comforter thick and plush. Soft carpet caressed her bare feet.

This wasn't a cell for a prisoner. This was a room for guests.

Did she dare hope she'd be allowed to stay here long enough to use that shower?

Gregori returned before she could get the water running, and he'd brought company. The human Associate she'd seen the first night she'd arrived followed Gregori into the room, leading a stoned-looking woman by the arm.

Hunger, vicious and sharp, clawed her stomach. God, she wanted to bite one of those humans so bad, sate this horrible craving. Was Gregori really going to feed her at last?

Gregori stepped aside and nodded toward the woman. "Dinner is served, Sunshine. Enjoy."

Her fangs elongated and throbbed. The cramping of her veins, repressed by sheer will alone when she'd been in Gregori's office, redoubled in a wave of fire. Eyes watering with the rush of pain, still she hesitated.

"She's high," she said, the words slurred due to her fangs and her desperate thirst.

Gregori shrugged, and far gone as she was, her breath still caught at the sight of the smooth ripple of muscle across his bare chest with the movement. "Nothing that will harm you," he promised. "You'll probably get a little buzz, but the sober ones are harder for Fledglings to control."

Helene didn't wait for more explanation. The woman didn't struggle when she grabbed her hair and exposed her throat, and instinct took over from there.

The first rush of blood was electric, intoxicating as a shot of absinthe. She growled and drank deep, tasting the bitter edge of whatever drug the human had taken but too ravenous to care. As the blood rushed through her, calming the craving, easing her pain, Helene finally managed to leash the bloodlust again. She rode the fire instead of being driven before it.

As her mind cleared, she thought about what Gregori had done. Bringing her a human, one who would pose no physical threat to her and whose mind was numbed by drugs so she'd have no mental challenges either. He'd even brought his Associate to help control the woman...

And how unlike Gregori was that?

As if her thoughts triggered the drug's effect, her limbs went leaden. Helene released the human and spat out the last mouthful of blood, too late. The damage was done.

She snarled at Gregori but the sound lacked strength. "What did you do to me?" she demanded, trying with increasing difficulty to focus. It was damned hard to glare threateningly at someone who kept swaying and blurring. "What the hell did you give me?"

"Wolfbane," Gregori said, as though giving that highly toxic plant to a werewolf was nothing. "Sleep well, Sunshine."

And despite all her efforts to resist, Helene fell back onto that plush bed, cursing him viciously even as the room went black and collapsed in on her.

* * *

Roughness abraded her back, but the discomfort was nothing compared to the burn of her shoulders and wrists.

Helene groaned and tried to lift her head, succeeding only for a moment. It wasn't enough to get a really good look at her surroundings. All she got was a glimpse of shadowy trees, the waning moon which told her she'd been out twenty-four hours or more, and a whole lot of nobody around.

A tree. That was what scratched her back -- tree bark. She was chained to a fucking tree, strung up like a witch about to be burned at the stake, her arms taking her weight with her toes barely touching the ground. Pure fury burned the last of the wolfbane-induced fog away and she tried to look up again.

This time she managed it a bit better. The clearing wasn't familiar to her, but her instincts told her she was much closer to home than she'd been when Gregori had pulled his little stunt. If she wasn't actually within her pack's home territory, she was damn close.

Which meant she was bait, and Gregori had to be nearby to spring the trap when his chosen prey showed.

"Come out so I can see you, you motherfucking bastard," she growled to the clearing. "Or are you too much of a coward to face me?"

A chuckle answered her, but it wasn't Gregori's laughter. She tensed, trying to break free of her bonds without much hope that she'd succeed. The underbrush rustled behind her as she caught the first whiff of werewolf.

Relief sang through her veins. She knew that scent as well as she knew her own. "Travis! Oh, thank God. Get me down from here, will you?"

The tall werewolf came into view, leading most of the pack behind him. That gave her pause for a moment -- when she'd last been home, Sterling had been the Regis, but she didn't see the older were in this group. Nor, she realized as she looked again, were any of his bloodline present.

A bloodline she and Steve shared.

Helene began to get a very bad feeling about this. Of all the weres to take Sterling's place, did it *have* to be Travis, the most bloodthirsty and least forgiving of the pack?

She met Travis's cold blue eyes and was surprised to feel... nothing. No intimidation, no fear. Whatever might've happened to change the power structure of the pack, Travis just couldn't compare to Gregori's sheer menace. If she hadn't let the vampire stare her down, this upstart werewolf didn't stand a chance of making her cower.

When the dozen or so other weres stood behind him, Travis finally broke the silence. "Didn't expect to find you here, Helene. I must say, you're looking a bit strung out. Or maybe strung up?"

She had to fight not to roll her eyes. "I take it you're not planning on letting me down."

He shook his head. "No, traitor, we're not."

Traitor? Now that was a twist she hadn't expected. "You want to explain that remark?" she growled, all her wolf instincts snarling with offense. Her pack was her life. She would gladly die for any of them and had always known they'd do the same for her. They lived as a cohesive unit, hunted as one, loved and lived and died together. Never in a thousand years would she betray her people.

The look he gave her was all disdain. "You and Steve, you're just the same. Mixing with the fucking vampires. We'd heard that he'd let that bitch infect him, but I expected better of you, Helene."

"Yeah, your disappointment breaks my heart." How dare they judge her for becoming a hybrid against her will? She ached to argue, to tell what had really happened to her, but held it in. Travis didn't have the reputation as an open-minded kind of guy. His mind was made up and she had no intention of amusing him with her protests of innocence.

A muffled thud sounded from across the clearing, soon followed by another, lighter thump, as if two large beasts had landed. Travis glanced over his shoulder and smiled. "Speak of the devil," he growled. "Come to save your little sister, Steve?"

The gathered weres parted just enough for Helene to glimpse her brother at the far tree line. A gorgeous woman stood beside him, delicate and haughty and fierce. Nora. Really, Helene thought, she should be flattered. If she was bait, at least she was good bait. Apparently all the fish in this little pond wanted a piece of her.

Unfortunately, the aggression swirling through the tense air suggested they might decide to tear her apart and make sure everyone got one.

Chapter Eight

“Well, this is interesting. I have to say I didn’t expect such a turnout at this party.”

Gregori’s voice in her ear, echoing her thoughts, made her jump. The movement jerked her already aching shoulders and she snarled at him. “Let me down, you bastard.”

He stepped into her line of sight and traced the line of her jaw. The little caress sent an unwelcome shiver down her spine, but she didn’t pull away. Refused to let him know how she reacted to his touch despite what he’d done to her.

He smiled as if sensing her thoughts. “Charming as always.”

Movement pulled her gaze from Gregori and she watched as Travis rolled his shoulders. She’d seen him do the same thing a hundred times before he changed. Gregori followed her gaze and opened his mouth, but Travis spoke before the vampire could say anything.

“Kill the abominations,” he growled, his voice deep and rasping as the change began. “Leave the bloodsuckers for last.”

Helene had only the briefest glimpse of her brother’s hated face blanching, then changing into the same hybrid monstrosity she’d become during the full moon. Nora hissed and bared her fangs at the weres as they closed around the pair.

Then the pack pounced as one, ignoring Nora’s attacks, converging on Steve until he was lost in a tangled frenzy of fur and blood.

Helene couldn’t look away. This was what she’d wanted, right? Her brother had betrayed them all, turned her into something she’d never imagined and certainly hadn’t chosen. He fought like a man possessed, felling three wolves before their sheer numbers bore him to the ground. His howls stopped within seconds as the pack overwhelmed

him, but Nora kept on screaming, clawing at them, sending wolves flying and ignoring her own injuries as she fought to get to her lover.

Gregori made a strangled sound that was half laughter, half moan, and she tore her eyes from the gruesome scene to look at him.

He stared at Nora, but his face was totally unreadable. Only his eyes burned. The intensity of his emotions sharpened his dark gaze to a vicious intensity. She winced at the sight of him.

There was nothing she recognized in his face, nothing of the man she'd made love to in those eyes. This was the face of the brutal Master she'd heard about, and in this moment, tied up by his hand and used to bring about death and revenge, she felt utterly stupid for ever imagining there was any other side to him.

She'd actually wanted to save him. Had considered giving up her own quest for revenge to try. If she wasn't about to get torn to shreds by her family, Helene thought, that would really hurt her feelings.

When the pack finally parted and let Nora through, she fell to her knees beside Steve's mangled body and shrieked. The werewolves ignored her, deftly sidestepping her when she slashed out at them, and turned to face Helene. One wolf snarled at Nora when she bit him on the flank, but despite being laid open nearly to the bone, he refused to engage.

Instead, the entire pack turned on her, a single mass of bloodstained fury. Her death shone in their eyes.

"Shit. This is... so very not good," she whispered, her breath coming in fast pants of panic. "Oh, not good. Shit."

Out of nowhere, she wondered why Gregori wasn't finishing Nora off. She was as off-guard as she'd ever be, totally fixated on the pack and her lover's brutal death. He would never get a better chance than this.

Yet he stood frozen beside her, not even blinking.

Travis met her gaze as he licked the blood from his chops. The movement exposed jaws packed with deadly teeth, razor-sharp and gleaming. She couldn't look

away. Her life would likely end in those jaws, and she had the sudden intuition that Travis had no intention of making her death as fast as Steve's had been. His muscles twitched an instant before he leapt for her.

And suddenly the view of her impending death was cut off, blocked by broad shoulders and waist-length dreadlocks. Travis's snarl ended in a startled yelp as Gregori intercepted his strike. The wolf's deflected momentum sent him crashing face-first to the ground.

Travis quivered there for a moment, clearly stunned, and the chains holding Helene to the tree unexpectedly loosened and dropped her to the ground. She landed on her ass with a grunt. She bit her tongue hard with the impact, and the pain and taste of blood provoked the change she'd been unable to manage minutes ago.

Another snarling wolf flew past her as she tried to figure out just what the hell was going on. When Gregori kicked another in the head with a movement almost too fast to see, she decided she didn't really care about why he was saving her life. His reasons could wait until later. Right now, she felt a serious urge to haul ass and make sure she was around for that *later*.

Without waiting to see any more of the surreal battle, she bolted through the trees, no destination in mind. Distance was the goal -- destination wasn't important.

Less than a minute passed before she felt a presence at her back. Helene whirled around, bracing for a fight, and almost collided with Gregori. "What the hell are you doing here?"

He grinned at her -- actually *grinned*, like a kid playing a game. "You're welcome. Now get that sweet ass in gear, Sunshine. We haven't outrun your relatives yet."

Confused as she was, that was all it took to get her back in motion. She ran until her legs ached and her heart pumped in a frantic rhythm that would likely have killed her before the infusion of vampire blood. She ran until she couldn't sense her pack territory boundaries anymore, and ran a little more just to make sure. She ran until her legs gave out beneath her and she collapsed onto the ground, stars bursting behind her eyes and not entirely sure she wasn't going to puke her guts up.

Gregori threw himself to the ground beside her, barely out of breath and still grinning. "That was fun. Want to do it again?"

Helene stopped concentrating on not puking and started wondering if he'd lost what little sanity he might've had left. And if puking on him might make her feel better, too. "Are you crazy?" she gasped, holding her side where a vicious stitch stabbed her.

"Yeah, probably," he said agreeably. "Trust me, no matter how shocked you are at what I just did, it's nothing compared to how I feel. So catch your breath so I can take you home and fuck you senseless."

"What?"

He propped himself up on an elbow and met her eyes at last. His grin faded, and when he spoke again, the flippancy had vanished from his voice. "I could've killed her tonight, you know. This was my moment. You delivered and I didn't follow through. That's probably going to drive me to drink."

Her oxygen-deprived brain was having a hard time keeping up with him. "Vampires can't get drunk."

"Oh, I don't know about that." He cupped her cheek in his palm. "Do you know why I let her live, Sunshine?"

The stitch was loosening as she finally caught her breath. "I can honestly say I have no clue."

"Two reasons. One, I think she really loved your brother. I like to think of her suffering that broken heart for a long, long time. It amuses me to imagine her bitter and alone."

Helene snorted. Well, really, what had she expected? Some declaration of how he'd changed, maybe that he'd realized revenge wouldn't solve anything? That it wouldn't undo all the pain Nora had caused him? Yeah, right. Maybe next he'd redecorate his club in pastels and put together support groups where vampires could discuss their feelings.

"The second reason," he said, narrowing his eyes a little at her snort, "is that those wolves would've turned you into hamburger the second I left your side. And I didn't want that to happen."

Suddenly, Helene was breathless all over again. All right, it wasn't a declaration of undying love. For Gregori, however, it was damn close. "You what?"

He rolled his eyes and she smiled a little. Her conversation hadn't been exactly scintillating tonight. She tried again. "I mean, you really gave up your chance to kill Nora for me? Gregori, I don't know what to say."

"Well, you could thank me."

She laughed, a short bark that startled her. Just minutes ago she'd wondered how she could ever have thought there was more to Gregori than the ruthless killer. Now she marveled that she hadn't managed to see the struggle going on beneath the surface when he'd stared at Nora. The battle between love and hate had clearly been brutal, and she could only thank whatever gods were watching that he'd come to the decision he had. "All right, then. Thank you."

He sighed and shook his head. "Pitiful. You need to work on the proper way to show gratitude, Fledgling."

Helene reached up and laced her hands behind his neck. "Are you volunteering to teach me?"

He hesitated only a moment before letting her draw him closer. "Actually, I think I am," he said, and he sounded as surprised to hear the words as she was. A flash of something lit his eyes for just a moment, tenderness or vulnerability, perhaps some combination of the two, and was just as quickly hidden.

But brief as that glimpse was, it was enough. Gregori had given up much for her tonight. He'd come a long way in the days since meeting her. With time, she might crack that wall of reserve all the way open, might get to know this other side of him.

And if there was one thing she had in abundance, it was time.

"Good," she said, smiling up at him. "Because I'm accepting."

His relieved smile was absolutely gorgeous in the moonlight. "You know, sometime we should really try fucking in bed. But right now isn't it." And he captured her laughter with his kiss.

Amelia Elias

Amelia Elias is the nom de plume of a Central Texas home health nurse and mother of ten - six cats, two dogs, and two monkeys who insist they're really boys. Amie was introduced to romances at the tender age of twelve by her late grandmother, who always packed a paperback for her to read during Bingo. After the last number was called, Amie would stay up late and, armed with a notepad and pencil, try to fill in those frustrating blank spots in the story when the characters closed the bedroom door. And yes, she still has those first clumsy attempts at writing the good stuff. Hopefully she's learned a thing or two since then. Learn more about Amelia by visiting her website at www.AmeliaElias.com.