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VAMPIRES AT HEART

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MUCH MORE THAN BLOOD

KATE HILL

Prologue

Rosa Ferrer yawned, her eyes half closed as she studied the gym full of handsome males grunting and sweating, their muscles straining, as they trained.

All were at her disposal: blonds, redheads, lean, bulky, old, and young. The gym was Rosa's private stable of fresh stallions all waiting to please her. She owned the finest fighting rings for vampires. Hybrids and Immaculates alike could sharpen their skills, challenge one another, and earn some quick cash.

Of course, Rosa had more fun with her ring years ago, when the fighting had existed only in the vampire underground. Those were the days! Vampires would fight to the death for her pleasure. Then the Network had discovered the ring and chased her into hiding. Her only chance to continue the matches was to join the Network and make her business legitimate. Of course that meant rules and regulations previously unheard of. Silly things, such as no intentional killing and a five percent tax to be used for scientific research for their kind. Still, being Network approved had some perks. She was no longer on the run and was well known throughout the vampiric world as the best producer of fights her kind enjoyed as much as humans loved the Olympics.

Some of the fighters still remained problematic, however. Many of the males considered Rosa herself a fringe benefit of the matches, an annoyance she alleviated by employing several Immaculates – those born, not made by bite – as her personal guards.

No matter how a man might hope, Rosa only bedded those who, by sight alone, made her pulse quicken and her clit tingle. Some of those fools even fell in love with her. She'd laugh and spit them out like chewed rind on an undercooked roast.

Rosa sighed, stepping out of the gym and into her office where she kicked off her heels and flopped on the cushioned chair behind her desk. She poured a brandy and took a long sip, closing her eyes as she swallowed. She didn't know how it had happened, but vampire males bored her. She was tired of them trying to impress her with their fangs and cocks that stayed hard all night. The old ones were the worst. All their experience made them think they were God's gift to vampirism. Most of them had learned their carnal skills in the dark ages when women were little more than immobile flesh holes for their mighty cocks to ram.

Yes, Rosa needed a diversion - something new and exciting - and she needed it fast. She needed the thrill and the terror, like in the early days when the evil, redheaded vampire, Edrik, had sucked her life's essence and fed her with his own spicy blood. Edrik was long dead, and with him perished the excitement, the horror, and the purest form of bloodlust she'd ever known. The only way to attain it again would be to...create another!

Yes! Create another! She'd never considered it and wasn't even sure if she had the ability. Not all vamps could, and there was something about the vampire and mortal having to be physically compatible for the change to work. An esteemed vampire physician had created a test that allowed a couple to check their compatibility, so as not to risk the mortal's life. Rosa loathed the idea of the test. Their kind were elemental creatures, guided by instinct. To hell with science, intellect, and concern for mortal welfare. Vampires were meant to sweep humans into their unbreakable embraces and take what they desired.

"Fuck it!" Rosa stood and gulped down the last of the brandy. She unwound her thick, black hair from its braid and ran her fingers through the soft tendrils as she slipped her feet back into her shoes. "Now the trick will be finding a man worthy of the change."

He'd need to be impulsive – one too careful would make a boring hybrid. Intelligence was preferred, though not necessary. Attitude and physical power mattered most. She hoped to find a human so incredibly masculine and confident that even without fangs, he'd sweep her off her feet. Rosa laughed at *that* desire. She'd only met one or two vampires who affected her in that way, so there was no hope of finding a human with such qualities. She needed to concentrate on what he could become *after* the change.

Potential, Rosa thought as she glanced in the mirror at the far corner of the office and applied fresh red lipstick to her full lips. She stared into her own large, blue eyes fringed with dark lashes. The task was to find a human male with the potential to justly reflect the true nature of vampirism. Unfortunately, that could take centuries, and Rosa wanted him between her legs that night.

Oh well, she'd have to console herself with the flesh and blood of someone less worthy, until she found *him*. The human who would become her lover and first son in vampirism.

Chapter One

Amidst the sound of clinking glasses, laughter, and conversation, Alik Lennox stared at his reflection in the tinted glass window of the pub. The six foot two and a half inch, black-haired, blue-eyed man thought what a sick joke it was that he still looked like he had a week ago: a sleekly-muscled, tough-as-nails, thirty-two-year Royal Marine Commando.

A week ago he'd been among his country's elite. Nothing meant more to him than his career. He had the heart of a warrior. Or so he'd thought.

Not even his rigorous training and military experience had prepared him for *this*.

"Enjoying the view?" Pierce, the bartender, approached, placing one of his fleshy hands on the countertop.

Alik shrugged, sliding his empty mug towards his friend. "One more."

Pierce lifted an eyebrow. "Sure you haven't had enough? Maybe you shouldn't be drinking so much now."

"Funny you don't look like my mother," Alik snarled.

"I just thought that -"

"I know what you thought, but whether I have a few drinks or not won't matter much in my current situation."

Alik ignored the look of sympathy in Pierce's eyes. It was a look he'd gotten too often of late from friends and family. That was his reason for planning the upcoming trip. Of course he'd been advised otherwise. The implication had been any trip he took would probably be his last, but that was his point.

All he wanted was to see places he'd loved and mingle with people who didn't know about him or his problems. In truth that wasn't *all* he wanted. His preference would be to return to his career and do what he'd been trained to do. He didn't belong wandering in an aimless, dull, useless civilian life. He –

Alik's thoughts shattered as the woman stepped through the door, brushing tendrils of rain-soaked black hair from her lovely, olive-skinned face. Slipping off her coat and revealing a curvaceous body poured into a clinging black knit top and matching skirt, she approached the bar. Her magnificent blue gaze swept him once before she focused her attention on the bartender.

"I'll have my usual, Pierce," she said, her English flavored with a slight Hispanic accent.

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Her usual? Alik raised an eyebrow. If she frequented the pub, how had he missed her? Of course he'd only returned to town two days ago...

"Coming up, Rosa." Pierce winked at her and she flashed a lovely smile. It must have been the contrast of the red lipstick she wore, but she appeared to have the whitest teeth Alik had ever seen.

After a moment, she turned to him. Alik felt swallowed by eyes so intense they seemed to glow.

"What are you staring at?" she demanded, the stroking of her long, slender fingertips against her throat at odds with her cool tone.

Alik shrugged and took a sip from his mug. "I could give you a stupid comeon and say something like I'm looking at the most beautiful woman I've seen in years, but you look too smart to be taken in by that."

"That was the worst line I've ever heard."

Alik smiled. "I always do my best to disappoint a lady."

"I think I like that one better. And you don't look disappointing."

"No?"

Pierce placed a brandy in front of her. She ran her fingertip over the rim of the glass, her gaze still fixed on Alik. "You have a cute accent."

"Hon, you're in Scotland." He grinned. "I'm not the one with the accent."

She took a sip of her drink and ran the tip of her tongue over her glossy lips. Alik changed his position slightly on the stool as he imagined that tongue and those lips on his – or better yet, on his cock. Shit. He should act on impulse while he still had the desire.

"What's your name?" she asked then held up her hand before he could answer. "Wait. Let me guess."

Her lovely eyes slipped shut and her brow furrowed in concentration. Shit. It figured when he decided to bed a woman down she'd be one of those new-age weirdoes. Now she was going to pretend she was psychic or something and try to guess his –

"Al...Alik." She opened one eye in question.

A master at hiding his emotions, he doubted his surprise shone on his face. "Good guess."

"Just a talent I have."

"If you expect me to guess your name, this time I will be a disappointment."

"Rosa."

"It suits you."

"Does it?"

He edged his stool closer to hers, and her lips parted slightly as she crossed her legs so her foot brushed his calf. At least she hadn't moved away. That was a good sign.

"So, Rosa, are you just visiting?"

"Sort of. I'm on business."

"What kind of business?"

"I train fighters."

Alik laughed. "Do you really."

"Yes." She didn't keep the irritation from her voice. "You think it's funny because I'm a woman."

"You want the truth?"

Her lip curled and her eyes blazed. "Yes."

"Then the truth is I don't care about political correctness."

"So you're saying you have a problem with women fighters?"

"Depends."

"On?"

"On whether or not it's wrestling between the sheets we're talking about."

"Amazing that a man so young has such archaic thoughts."

"Young? Thanks."

Rosa finished her brandy, paid, and slipped on her coat as she left the bar.

Alik handed Pierce money for his drinks and hurried outside. Rosa's small, dark form strode down the path toward the street. His heart pounding, Alik jogged after her and fell into step alongside her.

"Well you asked for the truth, " he said.

"I'll give you the truth. Being gorgeous doesn't give you the right to be stupid and obnoxious."

He grinned. "*I* didn't ask for the truth. I prefer lies when it comes to some things, Rosa."

"Figures. You're probably the type who wants a woman to fake her orgasms."

"I guarantee you no woman has ever had to fake anything in *my* bed."

"Amazing. You're arrogant as hell and you don't even have fangs to flash."

"Fangs? Haven't got those, but I give a hell of a love bite."

She stopped suddenly, her hands on her hips as she tilted her face up to his. "Oh really? Care to back that up, loverboy?"

His heart throbbed and his cock stirred at the thought of wrapping his arms around her luscious curves and plunging into her heated pussy. The scent of her perfume practically made his eyes cross with desire, as did the formation of her pretty lips when she spoke.

He took a step towards her. Slipping an arm around her waist and burying a hand in the thick, satiny hair at her nape, he bent and kissed her. Her lips felt as soft and moist as they looked, and he resisted the urge to groan with pleasure when they opened beneath his gently probing tongue. God, if anyone could help him bury his troubles for an hour or so, it was this woman. Still, by agreeing to sleep with him so fast, she was probably not as careful as she should be regarding her personal safety, let alone the potential for contracting diseases. He had few worries, however. It wasn't as if he could die from a sexually transmitted disease. Hell, if he'd known years ago what he found out last week, he would have spent a lot more of his leave time fucking. Or maybe not. Though Alik's sexual appetite had always been as fierce as any healthy man at the peak of physical fitness, his emotions had run deeper. He generally preferred sleeping with women who excited him mentally and emotionally as well as physically. Something about Rosa's flirtatious, quick-tempered personality lured him. Had things been different, he might have contemplated a relationship with her. Pushing such thoughts from his mind, he slipped his hands under her coat and caressed her waist and ribs. She shivered, and he realized how damp the night had become.

"I rented a cottage just down the road," she said, her voice husky. Her hand slipped between them and stroked his cock through his jeans.

Alik brushed his cheek against hers and traced the shape of her ear with the tip of his tongue. He grasped her hand as they continued down the road.

* * * * *

Desire stirred Rosa's belly, made her clit throb, and brought pleased laughter to her throat. Truly the last place she expected to find just the sort of man she'd been looking for was in a bar. She'd hung around enough bars – even owned a few – to know the sort of men generally found there wouldn't be the kind she'd want to make immortal. Usually she considered shortening their pathetic lives rather than lengthening them.

She'd only stopped at the pub to get out of the rain and enjoy a drink before heading for a more populated town or city where she'd have a variety of men to look over. After all, she'd been visiting her Scottish training hall for the past month and knew just about everyone in town. She wondered how she could have possibly missed Alik.

One look at the man's cornflower blue eyes made her pulse race. His eyes had been almost vampiric in their intensity – a quality rare in mortals. The rest of him hadn't been hard to take, either. His nose was on the long side, but well-shaped, his lips firm, and his teeth even. Rather than sharp cheekbones and the square jaw that usually appealed to her, his face was full, giving him a look of boyish innocence – an intriguing contrast to those bedroom eyes.

His build had nearly blown her away. Tall and lean with broad shoulders and long legs of hard, curved muscle, he looked made to fuck. The rolled up sleeves of his gray sweatshirt revealed solid, hair-dusted forearms boasting several prominent veins. A silver bracelet adorned one strong wrist, the understated piece of jewelry appearing oddly erotic.

When he talked, his deep voice with its thick accent, choppy in places but with delightfully rolling Rs, sent a passionate shiver down her spine.

What intrigued her most, however, was his ability to shield his thoughts from her. Usually she liked to tease men by using her psychic skills to read their minds for things like their name, address, phone number, and type of pet. It was a little game she enjoyed playing with mortals, since most of them were blissfully unaware of their own telepathic abilities. When she'd tried accessing Alik's thoughts, it had been nearly impossible, as if a physical barrier blocked his mind from hers. She'd nearly missed reading his name and had decided to stop after that, since she had no desire to look like a fraud or a fool with a rotten pick-up line.

Unfortunately *he* didn't seem to care much about *his* lines. He brought arrogance to new levels for a vampire, let alone a mortal. What kind of man in the twenty-first century still frowned on females possessing fighting skills? And that wrestling in between the sheets comment *had* to go – even though in some secret part of her mind the image of the two of them entwined, naked, made her ache with desire.

When she'd huffed out of the pub, she'd hoped he'd follow, though she couldn't be sure. She smelled his attraction to her, but a man like him might not act on impulse. Apparently, she'd jumped to conclusions, because his body now warmed hers as she stood in front of her cottage, unlocking the door.

After switching on the light for his sake, she slipped off her coat and tossed it on a chair. She held out her hand for his jacket.

Glancing around the small but pleasantly-decorated room, he shrugged off his brown bomber jacket which she took and tossed atop hers.

"Would you like a drink?"

He shook his head. "Had enough at the pub. A shower'd be nice, though."

Rosa smiled. "Care for company?"

"I was hoping for it."

He moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue and slid an arm around her waist in a possessive gesture she found most alluring. His mouth covered hers, and she closed her eyes, entangling her fingers in the wavy hair at the back of his head. Even with the short cut it felt incredibly thick but soft, almost silken in texture. His lips opened against hers while his steely arm tightened around her. God, his body was hard for a mortal! He didn't carry extra bulk, but had the sort of body that felt honed by real work and outdoor living.

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His free hand cupped the back of her neck, his callused palm warm against her skin. As the kiss deepened and their tongues met, tasting and teasing, she felt his cock pressing through his jeans and her skirt. Suddenly she couldn't wait to see and feel him naked. She grasped the hem of his sweatshirt and hauled it up his torso. He chuckled and helped her drag it over his head. Several locks of unruly hair stuck up in different directions, and she might have smiled at the disheveled image had she not been transfixed by his torso. His shoulders were broad, the muscles rounded. A mat of curling chestnut hair covered nicelydeveloped pecs and tapered to a darker trail down his ridged abs, disappearing into the waist of his jeans. The sight of his rounded biceps, each with a sexy vein visible over the top, made her want to squirm with lust. This was one fine human male. Oh, God, if after a few nights he continued to be as perfect as she suspected, she'd be making him a hybrid. She nearly shivered as she thought of what a *magnificent* vampire he'd be.

Unable to resist, Rosa placed both of her hands flat on his chest, feeling warm skin and soft hair. His heart thrummed against her palms, and as she closed her eyes, she heard the rush of his blood and smelled his arousal. She ran her hands across his chest, pausing to circle his flat nipples with her index fingers. She traced the shape of his ribs and teased his navel with her thumb. When she gazed up at him, his eyes bore into hers.

"I want you, Rosa," he purred, a deep, masculine sound that made her legs weak in a way she thought she'd become immune to. "Let me see you."

He tugged off her sweater as she'd done with his sweatshirt, only far more gently. His large, warm hands unfastened her bra with little difficulty, freeing her full breasts to his touch. His thumbs carefully circled her mauve nipples. They hardened to sensitive peaks. Cupping one breast in his hand, he bent and kissed the nipple. His tongue circled it, then flicked over the tip. Rosa closed her eyes. Sinking to his knees before her, he pressed soft kisses beneath her breasts and across her belly while his hands slid her skirt over her hips and down her thighs. The silky fabric pooled at her feet, and she kicked it aside as he slid off her underpants.

"You're very beautiful." He tilted his face up to hers, his blue eyes gleaming with desire. His hands stroked her bottom and strayed to the backs of her thighs, then her knees. In a swift motion, he stood, sweeping her into his arms. One of Rosa's arms slipped around his neck while her other hand stroked his chest . "Where's the bathroom?"

"Straight ahead," she replied.

He carried her across the room and through the half-open door. Moonlight shone in through the window, revealing the silhouette of the large, old-fashioned tub. With a lingering kiss, he placed her on her feet. His mouth remained fastened to hers for several moments as they stood, their bare torsos pressed so close their hearts would have beat in sync had hers not been so slow and vampiric and his so fast and human.

Though his excitement aroused her, she found mortals' lack of stamina an annoyance. Hybrid males had terrific staying power, and Immaculates – well they could go on all night. She had to grudgingly admit a hybrid like herself was no match for an Immaculate's longevity. It was a fact of vampiric nature that Immaculates were stronger, faster, and possessed more endurance than even the most physically fit of hybrids. Logical, since they didn't survive off the blood of humans, but off the blood of hybrids. Rosa, like many hybrids, was grateful Immaculates were far less common than vampires made by bite.

"Rosa." Alik's husky murmur broke her thoughts as he released her. He kicked off his boots and discarded his socks and jeans. His back was to her as he turned on the faucets to fill the tub. She sighed with pleasure at the vision of his long, muscular legs and one of the tightest, smoothest male asses she'd ever seen.

On impulse, she smacked his behind, and his head snapped over his shoulder, a roguish grin on his lips. "Not a bad idea," he said, grasping her upper arm and tugging her close. His free hand slapped her ass – not enough to truly hurt, just enough to irritate. For a moment she considered using her strength to put him in his place. Curiosity restrained her. She wanted to see the extent of his arrogance – and his sexual dominance. Would he force her or hurt her? If so, did she want to create a hybrid who had the potential of harming the female of her species?

He held her in front of him, his cock brushing her back and buttocks as he swept her hair over her shoulder and rained kisses on her nape. Sliding his hands beneath her arms, he cupped her breasts and kneaded gently, his fingertips teasing her nipples. One of his hands caressed down her belly and dipped between her legs. He gathered moisture from her pussy and circled her clit with his fingertip.

Rosa uttered a soft, pleased sound and arched against him. Her pulse quickened, and she closed her eyes, her back pressing against his warm, hairy chest, her legs spreading for the hand working between them. He alternated between exploring her pussy and stroking her clit until Rosa panted in his arms. His slick fingertip rubbed the side of her clit, scarcely touching, but creating enough friction to push her to the verge of orgasm - an orgasm she most likely wouldn't attain without the taste of blood. One benefit of being a hybrid was, on rare occasions, they could come without the taking of blood. Immaculates, however, needed blood to attain climax. Still, most of the time hybrids required blood for pleasure. Rosa had never met anyone – vampire or mortal – who excited her enough to make her come without so much as a sniff of fresh blood.

"Rosa," he whispered, kissing and licking the side of her neck while rolling her nipple between his thumb and forefinger. He doubled the speed of his finger on her clit. "Ahh!" she moaned. Her heartbeat echoed in her ears. The scent of his heating flesh and boiling blood drove her closer to fulfillment.

Her eyes still closed, she felt him dragging her across the room. He pushed her back against the wall and kissed her shoulder then covered her mouth with his. Alik's tongue ran over her teeth and tasted every corner of her mouth. She felt his cock, thick and hard, sliding into her slick pussy. He felt so big! He filled her like no mortal she'd ever known! As he began thrusting, she clung to him, feeling the muscles of his sleek, strong back tighten and release as his cock drove into her straining body. His hands slid behind her, cupping her buttocks while one finger gently prodded and caressed the sensitive flesh between her clenching cheeks.

"Oh, Alik!" she cried, her fangs aching for his flesh, though she refrained from biting him. A drop of his blood would hurl her into orgasm, and she had the oddest feeling he was going to make her come without tasting his essence.

"Talk to me, Rosa," he said close to her ear, his voice husky and a bit breathless.

"Alik! Ah! Oh, don't stop! Don't stop!"

He growled, licking her ear and kissing her cheek, then her mouth. His tongue thrust in time with his hips, his speed increasing with the raggedness of her breath. She heard his heartbeat, and when her hands slid up his shoulders to touch his throat, desire stabbed her belly. His neck throbbed, the tendons standing out as he drove her to orgasm while keeping his own at bay.

She probably should have mercy on the mortal by taking a sip of his blood and coming faster. The unfortunate fact was, no matter how long he went on, he probably wouldn't bring her to climax after all. He made good time, though, better than any other mortal she'd been with.

He continued his fast, steady rhythm while kissing her. She felt him tremble when she reached down and squeezed his balls. His cock felt pole hard, and judging by his panting breath and speeding heart, she doubted he'd last much longer.

One of Alik's hands reached between them. He fondled her clit as he pumped his hips. Rosa felt as if she'd burst into flames.

"Oh!" she shrieked, her arms and legs locking around him. Spasms ripped through her. Her pebble-like nipples scraped his hard, hairy chest. "Alik, oh, Alik!"

He groaned, bracing his hands against the wall as he slammed into her with a thrust that ended in eruption. "Rosa! Fucking hell! Rosa!"

Her arms relaxed, dropping over his shoulders as the final shudders of pleasure rippled through his body. For a moment, they leaned heavily against the wall, catching their breath. She could scarcely believe what had happened. A mortal had just given her one of the best orgasms of her life – and she hadn't even tasted a drop of his blood!

"Rosa?" He lifted his head from her shoulder, his blue eyes still a bit hazy from his climax.

"Uh?" she moaned softy.

"Why is the floor wet?"

Her brow furrowed as she looked down, then across the room.

"Shit!" She slipped from his arms and rushed towards the tub. The damn thing had overflowed!

* * * * *

Alik could scarcely keep his eyes off Rosa as she used towels to sop up water on the flooded bathroom floor while he mopped. Neither had bothered dressing as they cleaned up the mess. Rosa's gaze strayed to him as well, and they exchanged lusty smiles.

A short time later, he stepped into the warm tub and held out his hand to her. Winking at him, she stood in front of the mirror and pinned her hair up before approaching the tub. One sleek leg stepped between his, followed by the other. For a moment she stood, a breathing, naked goddess gazing down at him with eyes that seemed to ensnare his very soul. She sank into the water and nestled between his legs, her smooth back pressed against his chest. Alik wrapped his arms around her and closed his eyes, leaning his head against the rim of the tub and enjoying the feeling of the water and the beautiful woman in his arms. After a moment, he reached for a cake of soap and ran it over her shoulders and breasts. She sat up so he could reach her back. A soft moan of pleasure escaped her lips as he gently massaged her neck and arms before soaping her belly. He soaped her inner thighs and, with the utmost tenderness, washed her clit. His warm, wet fingers slipped partway into her pussy, exploring with careful yet arousing circles.

She turned, gripping the soap and rubbing her hands together to create a smooth, scented lather. She washed his shoulders and chest as he had done to her. Small, strong hands caressed his ribs and thighs. He waited, his heart thrumming in anticipation, for her to clean his cock. Warm, soapy hands grasped him and stroked him erect while her mouth covered his. His tongue plunged between her lips and caressed her teeth. Suddenly he felt a slight twinge, as if a needle had pricked his tongue. Damn, her teeth were sharp! She gasped and moaned, her wet body straddling his. Rubbing her clit against his cock, she panted.

Alik found it strange the cut on his tongue hadn't really hurt, but almost felt pleasurable. Perhaps anything would have felt pleasurable at that moment, with a gorgeous woman sliding her heated pussy over his near-painful erection. He

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could scarcely believe he was ready for her again. It must have been another cruel trick, for him to still desire a woman so much and feel such pleasure when, before he knew it, everything would be over. Or maybe it wasn't a trick after all.

He gazed into Rosa's face. Her smooth, dusky skin shone with moisture. Her eyes were closed, her lashes fluttering. She uttered soft, arousing sounds that quickened his pulse. The tips of her lovely white teeth shone in the moonlight. No. What he felt wasn't a cruel trick. It was a gift. He was experiencing absolute sexual perfection.

Rosa's hands grasped his face and she kissed him deeply. She caught his tongue between her teeth and nipped gently then sucked his tongue into her mouth. He felt her pussy tightening on his cock. She sucked and rocked her hips in sync while uttering husky moans of pleasure. Suddenly she came, dragging him with her.

"Ah!" he shouted, his hands clasping her waist as his hips surged upwards, meeting her frenzied movements.

Slowly, their eyes opened and met. Rosa smiled and he licked her ear.

"I haven't enjoyed a man this much in a long time," she said.

What could he tell her? That he'd never had a fuck this good in his entire life? There was no way he was going to admit *that* on a first date.

First date. Stop. He couldn't think that way. Not anymore.

"What's wrong?" she asked, stroking locks of hair from his perspiring forehead. Between the hot water and their lovemaking, he felt pleasantly warm.

"Nothing." He kissed her before standing and reaching for a towel. "I should go."

"Go?" She stepped out of the tub and turned her back to him, accepting the towel he wrapped around her. His large hands briskly rubbed her shoulders and back, then gently used a portion of the terrycloth to dry between her legs and under her breasts. She gazed up at him. "I was rather hoping you'd spend the night."

He paused, his heartbeat quickening again. He almost forgot to breathe as he stared into her eyes. She was such a temptation! Lovely, sensual, and more arousing than any woman he'd ever known. She also liked him. He sensed it, and his feelings were never wrong. She liked him; he liked her. *Go! Get out of this house and never see her again, you fool! Do you want a broken heart on top of everything else?*

"Yeah, I can stay," he said, cursing himself as he spoke the words.

"Good." She grinned, unpinning her hair and allowing it to cascade down her shoulders and back. After discarding their towels, she took his hand and guided him to the upstairs bedroom. The cottage had only four rooms: the bath, the living room, kitchen, and one bedroom. It was a vacationer's cute little dream, nestled in the Scottish countryside. *It* was a dream as *she* was a dream. Here, he could cling to a few precious days of escape.

Upstairs, she opened the shades and allowed moonlight to fill the small, simply-decorated bedroom. There was a dresser with a mirror above it, a tiny, round breakfast table, and a bed with a single night table. Together, he and Rosa slipped beneath the quilt and sheets. He tugged her close, and she rested her cheek against his chest, one leg draped over his.

"Let's play house for a while," she said.

Oh God. He fought for control of his breathing. Play house for a while. Fuck her every night, share meals with her, take walks with her through the crisp autumn mornings...

"I know what you must be thinking." She raised her face to look at him while one of her fingers played with a curling tendril of his chest hair. "Men are always afraid of women sinking their claws in too fast, but I assure you, that's not my intention. I have no interest in permanent ties to a man. I'm looking for pleasure - to give and receive. How does that sound to you, Alik?"

"Good," he stated, stroking her shoulder with his fingertips. "I'll be honest with you, Rosa. In three days, I'm leaving for a trip, but if you want us to spend those days together, I'll do everything I can to make sure neither of us ever forgets it."

She grinned. "That sounds fair. Where are you traveling to?"

"A few different places."

"Business?"

"Pleasure."

"What *is* your business? We still have a lot to learn about each other."

"I'm in the Royal Marines."

"Ohh." She sighed, snuggling closer, her fingertips gripping his chest. "I knew it. Only a military man would have your attitude – and your sinful body."

He wondered if his smile looked as sad as he felt.

"Are you on leave?" she asked.

"Huh?"

"Why aren't you with your troop, or whatever you call them?"

"Unit. And, yes, I'm on leave." If he was going to have the fantasy, why not have it all?

He rolled her onto her back and slipped one of his legs between her satiny ones. Bracing most of his weight on his forearms so as not to crush her, he buried his face in her neck, licking and kissing until she purred and threaded her fingers through his hair.

"You have quite an appetite for a hum..."

He paused, holding her gaze, his brow furrowed. "For a what?"

"For a humorous guy," she said.

Strange. He felt sure she was going to say he had quite an appetite for a human. But what sense would that have made? For a moment, he panicked. Was his mind starting to go? Was this the beginning of...No! Not yet! He still had time! At least three days. Three days of perfection. Three days of Rosa.

"So men with humor aren't supposed to like sex?"

She giggled. "Apparently they do."

"If I'm any indication." He growled and nipped her earlobe. As he reached between them and dipped his fingers into her wet pussy before stroking her clit, she took his cock in her fist. While he rubbed, she pumped, and soon both panted in anticipation of fast approaching ecstasy.

"Oh, Alik!" she murmured in his ear.

"Rosa, beautiful Rosa!"

His cock slid into her pussy as her arms and legs gripped him. Again coherent thoughts left him as he surged into bliss.

Chapter Two

Alik awoke to the aroma of bacon and eggs and the sound of tableware clinking. The fire crackling in the hearth provided the only light in the dim room. Blinking sleep from his eyes, he ran a hand through his hair and glanced at the old fashioned brass clock on the nightstand.

"Shit!" He sat up fast. Too fast. A wave of dizziness swept him, and he waited, his legs dangling over the edge of the bed, for his vision to clear. How much he hated weakness! Still, he'd better get used to it. Of course he could always kill himself before it got too far. No. Suicide wasn't in his nature. He was made of tougher stuff than that.

"Good morning," said a sultry, feminine voice. "Or should I say good evening?"

Alik's heart thumped with memories of the previous night. The beautiful woman he'd met at the pub stood by the table, arranging glasses and plates as she smiled at him. The open front of her black fleece robe revealed her bare breasts and the black satin underpants just concealing the trimmed patch of pubic hair he'd stroked just hours ago.

"I've never slept this late in my life," he said. Normally he arose before dawn.

"We made love almost all night. I don't blame you for being tired."

Not only tired, he realized with horror, but lacking in memory of certain things. Like her name. He knew who she was, but he couldn't grasp her name. His recent episodes of memory loss had prompted the physical exam that led to his recent situation. Fuck! Damn everything to hell! What was her name?

"Are you all right?" she asked, approaching the bed and running her hands through his hair.

"I'm fine." He allowed her to tug his head to her warm, soft breasts and caress his nape. Alik wrapped his arms around her waist and squeezed her tightly. She was so beautiful, so wonderful, so –

"You know, last night when I walked into that pub and saw you, I said to myself, 'Rosa, here is a man who inspires those vacation fantasy romance stories most women love so much.' "

"Rosa," he breathed, holding her at arm's length as he gazed into her face. "Such a beautiful name."

"Are you hungry?"

He nodded. A meal sounded great, but washing up first sounded even better. Giving her bottom an affectionate slap, he headed for the bathroom.

* * * * *

As Rosa brought toast, bacon, fruit, and a plateful of scrambled eggs to the table, she thought how meeting a man had already changed her. It was strange, but in all her life, she'd never met one to whom she felt so close so quickly. Yes, Alik had been an even better lover than she'd expected, but more than that, she *liked* him. Though mortal, he was man enough to make her feel delicate and feminine. Something in the way he looked and the way he was able to control his fragile human body enough to please her – a vampire – made her tingle.

When he underwent the change, he'd become a hybrid such as the world had never known! If he chose, he could be a terror, a magnificent outlaw, flaunting his vampiric power. If he decided to be legit, she didn't doubt he'd climb straight to the top of the vampire Network, maybe even sit on the Jury itself.

She shook her head. *The Jury*. Though the Network had many factions, the Jury made all the major decisions and handled the worst trials. Formed of three women and three men, one of whom was the First Father – the Network's figurehead – the Jury made others of their kind tremble. Not Rosa, however. Though she'd accepted their laws, part of her still believed vampires were rogues at heart and should only abide by their own personal restrictions – or lack thereof.

She wondered how Alik, being a military man, would feel about the Network's laws. Once she decided to change him, she'd have to ask his opinion.

The thought of changing him made her shiver. How should she do it? Her initial plan had been to take him in the midst of lovemaking. If he survived, he survived. If he didn't, he didn't.

Now that she was getting to know him, thoughts of the compatibility test nagged her. Did she want to risk the life of such a magnificent male when she could take precautions to ensure his safety during the change?

"Damn you, Rosa!" she muttered. The test opposed everything she believed in about vampires being spontaneous creatures. If he didn't live, it wasn't meant to be. If he wasn't strong enough – or if she wasn't - then he didn't deserve the change.

The bathroom door opened, and her heart fluttered when she met Alik's blue eyes. He wore boots and jeans, but had left his torso bare. Her gaze raked his sleek arms and chest with its mat of dark curls still glistening with moisture from his bath.

"Food smells good," he said, approaching the table and taking a seat. "Seeing how you're half dressed yourself, I didn't think you'd mind if I left my shirt off." "I like you this way." Rosa approached, running her hands over his chest. He shoved his chair away from the table, grasped her hips, and tugged her between his legs. His tongue trailed between her breasts. Pushing her robe open further, he took one of her nipples between his lips. Rosa sighed, her eyes slipping shut as she looped her arms around his neck, pressing him closer.

"You must be hungry," she sighed, taking a step away, but he held her fast.

"Yeah. For you." His tongue flicked across one nipple, then the other.

"I want to eat dinner," she said. "Then I want to eat you."

Alik stared into her eyes, his expression so full of masculine sexuality that her belly tightened with anticipation of the night to come. He cupped her breasts in his hands, then playfully shoved her aside and reached for the eggs.

Rosa wasn't sure if she wanted to laugh or slap him. She took the seat across from him and snatched a slice of toast, spreading on a thick layer of raspberry jam.

Throughout the meal, they talked about trivial things, then made plans to go for a walk before spending the rest of the night making love. She was glad when he volunteered to dry the dishes while she washed them. Though a man's man in many ways, he apparently didn't consider a woman a domestic pack horse. Another plus for him.

The night was cold, but neither seemed to mind as they walked, hand in hand, around the town.

"So where are these fighters you're training?" Alik asked.

"Oh, no. I don't talk about my work with someone who laughs at it."

"I'm not laughing."

She glanced up at him and raised an eyebrow.

"Really," he said. "How did you get interested in fighting?"

"My father was in the same business. He taught me just about everything I know."

"Do you work with him now?"

"He was killed about eleven years ago."

"You must have been a kid at the time. I'm sorry."

"It's all right. I didn't like him much."

He turned to her with warmth and sympathy in his eyes, and Rosa had the sudden urge to run. It was true her father had taught her just about everything she knew, but she hadn't exactly been a child when he died. She'd been nineteen and hadn't aged a day since. Her father's murderer was her vampiric maker: Edrik. Looking back, it had been surprising how similar the two men were: both completely self centered and violent. From both, Rosa had learned to use people.

Humans and vampires alike were only worth the amusement they provided. Profit and personal pleasure meant everything.

"What about your family?" she asked.

"My parents died when I was nine. My brothers and I lived with our aunt and uncle after that. As soon as I was old enough, I joined the military and liked it enough to stay."

"You enjoy your career. I can tell."

"I love it."

"Tell me about it?"

"I don't really want to talk about it."

Rosa stared at him, surprised by the coldness of his tone.

He paused in walking and tugged her close, trailing a fingertip across her lips. "I'm sorry."

She shrugged, refusing to admit, even to herself, his tone had affected her. "No problem. Want to head back? My appetite's returning." Using their coats and the darkness for concealment, she gave his cock a discreet squeeze through his pants.

"You could kill a man," he said, though the gleam in his eyes revealed his anticipation.

"Complaining?"

"Believe me, there are a hell of a lot worse ways to die," he murmured, his smile fading.

Rosa held his gaze for a long moment, sensing his battling emotions but unable to read his mind. That damn mental barrier of his annoyed her.

Rosa clung to his arm as they turned back toward her cottage. "I want to go to the city tomorrow night."

"Sounds fine to me." He glanced at her from the corner of his eye and smiled. "Are you nocturnal or something?"

"I prefer the night. Do you mind my schedule for the next three days?"

"I'm adaptable." He wrapped his arm around her waist and nearly tugged her off her feet. Rosa's pulse quickened. Already she was wet for him. The man had the masculinity of a bull. She considered going ahead and changing him as soon as they got back to the cottage, then told herself not to be impulsive. In just two more days, if he continued holding her interest, she'd change him before he disappeared on his trip. See if he still wanted to part with her after she made him the most powerful creature on Earth.

* * * * *

"Get your clothes off," Rosa murmured between kisses, her hands tugging at Alik's belt as they stepped into the cottage.

"I want to taste every bit of you, Rosa." He yanked off his coat and jeans. He hurried to unbutton his shirt, but she grasped it, tugging so hard the buttons popped off. Alik didn't bother hiding his surprise as he chuckled, "Hell, woman, you're impatient."

"Sorry," she whispered against his lips, not sounding at all apologetic.

Alik's stomach quivered with desire and his cock stirred. This woman was so incredibly sexy, her eyes seemed to glow with passion.

"Sure you are." He growled playfully, swept her into his arms, and dropped her on the bed. She undressed while he discarded the rest of his clothes, and seconds later, he'd pinned her beneath him. Wrapping his hand in her hair, he gently tugged her neck to the side so he could better reach it with his lips. "You're so sexy and beautiful, Rosa."

"So are you," she breathed as he took one of her nipples between his teeth and flicked it with his tongue. He kissed her smooth belly and licked her inner thighs while she quivered.

Alik positioned himself between her legs and used his tongue to stroke the joining of her hip and thigh. He licked her clit, gently at first, then laved it when she squirmed beneath him.

"Oh, Alik!" she moaned. "Oh, don't stop!"

He grinned and continued licking her hard little nub then caressed the soft folds of moist flesh. Swirling his tongue in her pussy, he kneaded her breasts.

Hell, she had a high tolerance for sensation! It took her so long to come he thought his jaw would lock, but it was worth it when he watched her shake and spasm and heard her gasps and moans of pleasure.

"That was so wonderful," she said, cuddling against him when he stretched out beside her. "Hold me for a minute."

"For as long as you want."

Rosa tilted her face to his and stroked his cheek. He squeezed her, feeling the softness of her curves pressed to his length.

"Not for too long," she breathed, a coquettish look in her eyes. She ran her tongue down his neck, chest, and abdomen until her mouth hovered over his cock. He was already rock hard, but the soft fanning of her breath against the head of his staff made him swell even more. When her full, moist lips closed over the crown and she took him deep into her warm, wet mouth, Alik thought he might leap off the bed with pleasure. She sucked and licked. Her tongue swirled sensual patterns and traced the underside of his cock. One of her small, strong hands clasped his balls while the other wrapped around his shaft.

Kate Hill

"Oh, Rosa!" he panted when he felt something probing his little eye. It must have been her tongue, but it felt cool and smooth. It might have...

Pleasure so intense it nearly hurled him into blackness drove all thoughts from his mind. His muscles tensed, his hips bucked, and he felt as if his heart would burst through his chest.

"Rosa, oh, damn! Ahh!" Alik knew he said other things as well, none of which registered above the pleasure that had him coming longer and harder than he ever imagined possible.

When it was over, he lay still except for his heaving chest and pounding heart. For several long moments, he hadn't the strength or the desire to so much as open his eyes a slit. Finally he became aware of her cheek resting on his chest and her leg draped over his.

"Who are you?" he murmured, stroking her shoulder with his fingertips. "Why couldn't I have met you before this?"

"We've met now," she said. "There's plenty of time."

No. There wasn't. In less than two days, he'd be on a plane to the US, then on another to Australia. If he made it far enough, he might just see parts of the Mediterranean again.

Alik's chest tightened and his throat suddenly burned. He swallowed hard, mentally reprimanding himself for his weakness. God, how much he wanted her! Damn him! He nearly wished she could stay with him until the end. Even if he never saw her again, he knew her beautiful face would be the last thing he'd remember.

Chapter Three

The following night, Rosa and Alik walked along a busy city street on their way to dinner. Earlier that evening, they'd gone to a movie and visited some shops. Though Alik had considerately watched her try on several articles of clothing and commented favorably on every one, he'd left her briefly when she pondered over which pair of shoes she wanted. He hadn't been gone long – not that she blamed him. She might have enjoyed having such a handsome male audience helping her decide which outfit looked best, but hanging around a ladies' clothing shop must have bored him.

"That looks like a nice place to eat." Rosa pointed across the street to a small but cheerfully-decorated restaurant. An elderly gentleman opened the door and stepped outside, wrapping his coat more snugly around him against the chill. Suddenly a tall man rushed at him, shoving him hard against the brick wall. The man sank to the walk, a gash on his head, while his attacker – a stolen wallet in his hand – fled in Alik and Rosa's direction. A waiter rushed to aid the fallen gentleman, and as the thief sprinted past, Alik jumped him.

"Get off me!" the man bellowed, pulling a handgun from the folds of his coat.

Rosa's heart throbbed with fury and concern. If that bastard harmed Alik, she'd have his heart for dinner! She was about to join the fight, but Alik had already disarmed the man and pinned him to the ground as a policeman arrived.

"Are you crazy?" Rosa grasped Alik's arms, glaring into his eyes. "Why did you do that?"

"Is he all right?" Alik, scarcely breathless from the conflict, nodded in the gentleman's direction. Rosa followed as he approached.

"I called for help," the waiter said, pressing a towel to the man's bloody head.

"Thank you so much," the older man said to Alik. "You don't know how much I needed the money in that wallet. It's all I have to live on for the next couple of weeks."

"Don't think about it," Alik said.

"I want to pay you back."

"Just get yourself patched up."

"There's so little integrity left in the world. Nice to see some in a young man."

"Integrity and stupidity." Rosa was still furious. "You could have gotten hurt, or worse! That man had a gun!"

"What's wrong with you?" Alik narrowed his eyes at her.

Shaking her head, she stepped into the restaurant.

"Rosa?"

Folding her arms across her chest, she stared up at him. "I don't understand you. Risking your life for a total stranger's money!"

"It was the right thing to do at the time," he said. "Haven't you ever done the right thing, even if it seems foolish?"

"No," she snapped. A pathetic realization dawned on her, and her anger faded. "No, I guess I haven't."

His beautiful blue eyes narrowed. "You must have at one time or another?"

"No." She dropped into a chair. "Never. My father never... I wasn't raised to value human life – or anyone's life or happiness but my own."

"But that's not really you." He dragged a chair beside her and rested one of his large, warm hands on her knee. "I'm never wrong about people, Rosa. I know what kind of heart you have. I can see it."

"What can you possibly know about me? We've only been together two nights!" Even as she spoke the words, she didn't believe them. Yes, it had only been a short time, but she felt she knew him.

He touched her cheek and traced her lips with his fingertip. "You're not really mad at me, are you?"

The expression in his eyes weakened her, and she offered a gentle smile. "No. I guess not. I'm sorry I'm not what you expected."

"I didn't have any expectations. You are who you are. And it would have been foolish for a woman like you to jump in that guy's way."

Again Rosa's anger stirred. "I've got news for you, I'd have kicked the shit out of him."

The amused smile playing around his mouth made her want to slap him. "Let's just get some dinner, Rosa. Spending time with you makes me hungry - in all ways."

The man was arrogant, reckless, and annoying. One way or another, tomorrow night, he would be a vampire!

* * * * *

"Hi, Pierce." Rosa slid onto the barstool as the bartender placed a glass of wine in front of her.

"Rosa, girl, I was surprised to see you walk in here a few nights ago." Pierce winked. "But I'm not sorry you did."

"Really? How sweet," she replied in a teasing tone before taking a sip from her glass. *Hmm. Very sweet and fairly fresh.* Pierce always seemed to have the best supply of blood-enhanced liquor of any vamp bartender she knew.

"You've been spending time with Alik?"

A smile tugged at her lips. "Spending time. Yes."

"Helluva nice guy, isn't he?"

"Yes. So nice I think I'm going to make him a *hybrid*." She mouthed the last word so mortal customers wouldn't hear.

Pierce's relaxed expression became concerned. "Come in back with me for a minute."

"You know what I said before, Pierce. I love you to bits, but you're not my kind of guy."

"This is serious, Rosa."

Something in his expression worried her, though she wasn't sure why.

"Bill!" he called to a young mortal at the other end of the bar. "Come and watch the counter for a minute."

"What's wrong, Pierce?" Rosa asked as she followed him to the tiny back room that served as an office. He closed the door behind them and bid her to sit.

"I'd rather stand," she said, holding his gaze. "Now tell me what's up?"

"Are you serious about making Alik a hybrid?"

"Very."

"And he agreed to it?"

"He doesn't know yet. " Rosa grinned. "Isn't it wonderful?"

"What do you mean he doesn't know? Aren't you going for the test?"

"We're vampires, Pierce, not laboratory experiments." She took his face in her hands and fondly patted his stubbled cheeks. "We're forces of nature."

"What if you kill him?"

Rosa hated to admit the possibility made her feel sick, but she wasn't about to let it get the better of her. All her life she'd lived as a vampire should – not how so many of the weak, intellectual fools she knew *believed* they should. It would be a cold day in hell when she'd change her lover after some stupid compatibility test!

"So you're just going to take a piece out of him and hope he makes it?" Pierce's dark eyes flashed, and Rosa sensed his anger.

"That's how it's done."

"Maybe for a spoiled brat like you, but don't you care about him in the least?"

Rosa folded her arms across her chest. "Are you in love with him or something? I didn't think men were your preference, but I guess the saying is right. You can't judge a book by its cover."

"This is serious! It's a man's life you're dealing with. Can't you let him enjoy what time he has left?"

She narrowed her eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"He didn't tell you?" Pierce ran a hand through his salt and pepper hair. "Oh, damn it. I should have figured he wouldn't talk about it."

"Talk about what?" Rosa could no longer hide her concern.

"He's dying, Rosa."

"Dying? That's ridiculous. He has plenty of good years left. Believe me, Pierce, no one who makes love like Alik can be dying."

"He found out not even a week ago. It's only a matter of time before he'll be a shadow of the man you know."

Rosa drew a deep breath and turned away, her pulse racing. Dying! Alik? It wasn't possible. He was more vigorous than any mortal – and several of the vampires – she'd ever been with!

"He's got an inoperable tumor, Rosa. If you're serious about changing him – and I hope you are – do him a favor and take the test. Be honest with him." "Be honest?" She wrapped her arms tighter around herself. "Tell him what? Maybe I can make you immortal, but I might just kill you faster? How can I give him false hope like that?"

"It's the situation I've been faced with since he told me his condition."

"You've considered changing him, too?"

"The thought has crossed my mind."

"Why haven't you?"

"I guess for the same reason you mentioned."

"Nice creatures, aren't we?" she murmured. "You haven't got the balls to dangle immortality before him, and all I could think about was my own pleasure instead of his life."

"Look, I'm still trying to come to terms with my own vampirism. I may look fifty, but I've only been a hybrid for seven years."

Rosa scarcely paid attention to Pierce as she formulated a plan. "How about if I get him to take the test without knowing it?"

"How are you going to do that?" Pierce raised an eyebrow. "He'd have to see one of our doctors and have a blood test."

"Tomorrow he's leaving for a trip to the US. Suppose I can talk him into seeing Matthew Winter under the pretext of getting another opinion regarding his tumor?" "He won't do it. He has this crazy idea about not seeing a doctor or hospital unless he's dragged there half dead. He said if he's going, it'll be his way."

"I can convince him. I'm sure of it."

"Even if you can, I thought Dr. Winter hated your guts? When he had those problems years back and fought in your underground ring, you did your best to make his life worse than it already was."

"I know I stand for everything he hates and vice versa. The man is an arrogant, uptight, intellectual snob."

"Still pissed because he wouldn't sleep with you?" Pierce grinned.

Rosa hissed and shoved Pierce into the nearest chair. "I don't know what I ever saw in that oversized bag of brains! I give his wife credit just for tolerating him. Still, he's about the best person I know to help Alik. Even if I can't change Alik, Matthew might be able to treat him. He's an excellent doctor, particularly for humans, though why he wastes his time with them is beyond me."

"Then why are you wasting your time with Alik?"

"He's not just any human! He's courageous, kind, loving. He has so many good qualities one hardly notices his chauvinistic tendencies."

"If I didn't know better, Rosa Ferrer, I'd say you're in love."

"I'm not in love! I just like him, that's all."

"I think you should try your plan."

"I hope it works."

"I also think you should tell him the truth."

"That I want to make him a hybrid vampire? That's more of a show than tell thing, Pierce."

"Doesn't have to be."

"Let me handle this my way."

"I don't doubt you'd do it anyway else."

Rosa headed for the door, but before she left, Pierce touched her arm. "Good luck, Rosa, girl. For both your sakes, I hope everything works out."

* * * * *

"Hey." Alik reached for Rosa and tugged her to his chest as soon as she stepped through the door. "I was just going to look for you."

"Didn't you get my note?"

He shrugged. "I was coming for you anyway. We only have tonight and I want to make sure our goodbyes are done right."

"About that, Alik, I -"

"Rosa, here." He tugged a small box from his jacket pocket and placed it in her hand. "Open it."

"But -"

"Don't worry. I'll hold you to our no-strings bargain. I just want you to have something to remember me by."

She lifted the lid and gazed at the square-cut diamond pendant dangling from a fine gold chain. Touching a fingertip to it, she admired the stone's perfection. Suddenly she realized where he'd gone last night when he left her alone in the clothing shop. "Alik, I can't take this. It must have cost a fortune."

"I want you to have it. What good is money sitting in a bank account, anyway? It's not like you can take it with you when you die." He slipped an arm around her waist and pressed her close to his tall, warm body. His gaze held hers, seeming to grasp her very soul. "Rosa, I want you to know how much the time we've spent together has meant to me. I wish the circumstances were different. I wish -"

"Alik, I know why you think you have to leave."

His brow furrowed. "What?"

"I know about you dying."

He dropped his arms from her and strode across the room, running a hand through his hair and cursing under his breath. "Pierce told you, didn't he? The bastard can never mind his own business!"

"Alik, I'm glad he told me."

"Oh you are?" he snapped. "I'm not! Who the hell does he think he is? I can't even spend three fucking days with my woman without him blabbing my personal business! I wanted this to be perfect. It *was* perfect."

"How can it be perfect when you weren't honest with me?" She paused. Where did that come from? She'd never cared a bit about honesty in her entire life. It was Alik. Already his integrity had infected her. Damn! Was she prepared for such a major lifestyle change? She continued, "Did you consider how I might feel?"

He sighed, closing his eyes momentarily. Her throat constricted at his desolate expression. "I'm sorry, Rosa. I wasn't thinking. I'm sorry."

"Alik," she stepped close to him and took his hand, "you told me you're going to visit the US. Will you come with me to see a doctor I know in Boston?"

"No."

"But –"

"I said no, Rosa! I've had enough doctors, hospitals, and tests! It's over for me. Done. "

"But he's very good. His name is Matthew Winter, a hematologist and oncologist. He has years of experience in -"

"What part of 'no' don't you understand? What we had was great, Rosa. It was incredible, but it's over. We're over."

"If you're dying anyway, what's one more opinion?" she demanded.

"I don't want to waste what time I have left in a hospital, with tubes up my ass, swallowing a pill in applesauce! Don't you understand that?"

"Please, Alik." She didn't bother trying to disguise her tears as she slipped her arms around him and held on tightly. "If he can't help you, then I'll go with you wherever you want."

"No!" His arms tightened around her in spite of his rejection. "I don't want you with me. I want you to remember me like I am now, not like what I'm going to become."

"My God, how shallow do you think I am? I care for you, Alik, don't you get that?" She sank her fingers into his shoulders, barely resisting the urge to shake some sense into him – hard. "I don't want these past three days to be it!"

"What about your fighters? You're here on business. You can't just leave – "

"The hell I can't! Tell me you'll come with me to Boston. Just see Dr. Winter. Please."

He sighed, tightening his arms around her and resting his cheek against the top of her head. "It can't hurt me, that's for sure. I'll go, but his opinion won't be any different from the others."

"You never know."

"Believe me, Rosa. I know."

You don't know anything, she thought. You don't know the power I'm going to give you.

After a moment, he asked quietly, "Do you think you could love me, Rosa?" "I think I do love you, Alik."

"Good, because I thought you might consider me a fool if I said I love you."

She tilted her face up to his and smiled. "You do?"

"I don't know how it's possible. We just met."

"Powerful feelings like love and hate are often felt instantly – instinctively."

"Most people don't realize how important instinct is. A lot of times it's what saves your ass in the field."

"That's a lesson most people never learn. Too often they go with what's sensible and expected."

"In life nothing can be expected."

She grinned. Hold that thought, Alik.

Chapter Four

As soon as Rosa approached the research hospital, she caught the familiar scent of two vampires she knew: Matthew Winter and the stronger scent of another man from her past. Man might not be the proper description. Judah was an Immaculate vampire enhanced with werewolf blood. Quite a fascinating person, if one could get around his quick temper and solemn attitude. He'd once fought in Rosa's underground ring, along with Matthew. Rosa grinned as she remembered how much the two men had despised each other then. She'd often wished to witness a fight between them, preferably to Winter's death. It hadn't happened, and eventually the two men had become friends. Neither of them liked Rosa much, so she didn't look forward to the confrontation to come. Still, for Alik's sake, it would be worth it.

She glanced at Alik who walked alongside her, his expression unreadable, though she knew he must feel apprehensive. Part of her longed to tell him what she planned. Still, the idea that perhaps they weren't compatible and might not be able to locate a vampire who was able – and willing – to change him in time...No! She wouldn't think it!

"Are you all right?" His hand warmed her back as they stepped into the lobby.

"Yes. It's just that Matthew and I don't get along very well."

"Then why is he seeing me?"

"He wouldn't refuse you out of spite. It's not in his nature."

"I'm not sure I like how you're talking about him. Were you lovers?"

"No. Definitely not lovers. Matthew is *very* married. He and his wife have a picture perfect little relationship. It's enough to make you sick to your stomach."

Alik smiled and tugged her close as they headed for the elevator. "Sounds nice to me."

"Well," she tilted her face up to his, wrinkling her nose, "you've changed *my* theory on relationships."

"Glad to hear it."

"Rosa Ferrer?"

A man's deep voice, sounding about as friendly as a guard dog after dark, called across the lobby. Rosa would know that voice anywhere. She turned to the tall, black man striding toward them. Judah – part vampire and part werewolf - was as powerful as he was handsome.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded, his wide-set brown eyes glaring into hers.

"I could ask you the same question."

"I came to see Matthew and talk to him about some research I've been doing."

"Judah's a rocket scientist." Rosa glanced at Alik, her voice dripping sarcasm. Unfortunately, the statement was pretty much the truth, which probably explained why Judah and Matthew were such good friends. One was a bigger intellectual snob than the other. The up side was both dedicated their lives to finding new ways to understand and aid vampire-kind. One project both tirelessly pursued was finding help for a new species created by a scientist who had tampered with vampire, werewolf, and human genetics. Most of the nowdeceased doctor's monstrous experiments existed as bizarre half-intelligent, halfbestial creatures and were kept confined by the vampire community. Judah and his wife, Leah, had been victims of the scientist's foul work. Judah had been lucky enough to mutate into a more powerful species of vampire, one who retained his keen intelligence and physical strength but possessed the regenerative powers of the werewolf. His wife hadn't been as fortunate. The experiment left her with the brain of a beast and a body that was part wolf and part woman. Together, Matthew and Judah did all they could to discover a way to either reverse the effects of the experiment or improve life for Leah's species. While Matthew forged ahead with the medical side of the research, Judah used his skills in astronomy to try locating and contacting the Originals – the vampires who had landed on Earth thousands of years ago. From them all vampires, Immaculate and hybrid, had sprung. Originals had also brought with them the werewolves - guard dogs for their military police. Finding the Originals would be the key to improving the life of Judah's wife, just as Matthew Winter now held the key to saving Alik's life.

"Well I'm here with a friend," Rosa said to Judah.

The brawny Immaculate's gaze swept Alik who stared at him with equal intensity. Rosa nearly smiled. Most men would be intimidated by Judah's six feet five inches of solid muscle, but not Rosa's Royal Marine Commando.

"You going to introduce us, love?" Alik asked Rosa.

"Why not?" She forced a smile. "Alik, Judah. Judah. Alik. Now we have to get to your appointment before we're late."

The elevator door opened, and Rosa grasped Alik's hand as they stepped inside.

"Who was he?" Alik demanded.

"He...was actually one of my fighters a long time ago."

Alik lifted an eyebrow. 'Then you really weren't kidding when you said you train for a living."

Rosa raised her eyes and sighed, resisting the urge to slug him. "The macho act is getting tiresome, Alik."

"You didn't say that last night." He grinned.

They stepped off the elevator and Alik followed Rosa to a door at the end of the hall. Being late at night, most of the offices were closed, except for those workaholics like Matthew who labored through most of the night then worked a day shift for his mortal patients. Winter split his time between two hospitals, this one, which served mortals, and another that specialized in vampiric medicine. Of course the vampire hospital ran under the pretense of human research. The last thing anyone wanted was for every human in the world to discover vampires.

No sooner had they stepped into the waiting room when Matthew joined them. Upon seeing the doctor again, Rosa suddenly recalled what an imposing impression he made. With six feet four inches of big-bones and hard-muscles, the bastard possessed brawn as well as brains. Rosa had once found him extremely handsome in a primitive sort of way, but now that she'd met Alik, no other man seemed to exist.

Winter offered Rosa a curt nod and focused his attention on Alik.

"Thank you for seeing me on such short notice," Alik said. "Though, it's really Rosa's idea. I don't think you'll be of any help to me."

"Let me give you an examination and run a few tests first," Matthew said, opening the door leading to the office. "Right this way."

Rosa sighed and settled into a chair to wait. At least Matthew remained pleasant and professional in front of Alik. She'd known his dislike of her wouldn't affect how he treated a patient. Winter might be an annoying, egg-headed bastard, but he had integrity.

Flipping through magazines without really paying attention to the pages, Rosa waited anxiously for the men to return. Over an hour later, Matthew opened the door and motioned for her to join them in his office.

Alik sat in a cushioned chair across from the desk. Rosa took the one beside him, and he reached for her hand, holding it tightly. Her heart twisted when she met his eyes. In spite of all his courageous words about accepting his fate, he still wanted to believe Matthew might be able to help him.

Rather than sitting behind the desk, Matthew leaned on the edge of it, closer to his guests. The doctor's dark blue gaze seemed to hold both of theirs at the same time. "I'm sorry, but I have to agree with your doctors in Scotland."

"There's nothing you can do," Alik stated. He glanced at Rosa, his hand tightening on hers. "Told you."

"We can discuss treatment and –"

"Treatment for what?" Alik snapped, standing. "I'm not going to be some guinea pig for -"

"I'm not suggesting that at all, Alik," Matthew said calmly, though not without compassion. "There are ways of dealing with—"

"Thank you very much for your time, Dr. Winter, but I don't need you or any of this," he gestured around the office, "to help me deal. I know how I want to handle this, and it doesn't include wasting what time I have left in a hospital."

Alik headed for the door. Matthew attempted to follow him, but Rosa placed a restraining hand on the doctor's arm.

"I'll be right back," she whispered, then hurried after Alik. He stood, waiting for the elevator. She noticed his chest rose and fell visibly with agitated breathing, and she heard his heart racing.

"Rosa, I need to be alone for a while," he said.

"I understand." She slipped her arms around his neck. He held her tightly and sighed. For a moment she was able to breech his mental barrier and realized that in spite of how he'd sounded so resigned to his fate, the idea of seeing Matthew had raised his hopes. He'd desperately wanted a chance to survive. He drew a long breath, and she knew if he'd been the sort of man who cried, he'd have been sobbing at the moment. She realized she'd been right in not telling him about the possibility of becoming a hybrid. Better to find out the facts about whether or not they were compatible before giving him more false hope.

Alik pushed her gently away, and stepped onto the elevator.

"I'll meet you at the hotel," she said.

He nodded before the doors closed.

Rosa hurried back to Matthew's office. The doctor lifted an eyebrow. "Is he all right?"

"For such an intelligent man that's a stupid question. Of course he's not all right!" she snapped. Winter's gaze held hers, telling her to go to hell, though he never spoke the words. She forced her temper under control. "You took blood samples from him, did you not?"

"Of course."

"Good." She rolled up her sleeve. "Now take mine and do the compatibility test."

His brow furrowed. "What?"

"The test! I want to know if I can make him a hybrid!"

"But..." Matthew glanced from the door to Rosa. "He doesn't even know about us!"

"He will once I change him, if I'm able!"

"Hold on. There's no way I'm giving a compatibility test without the consent of both parties."

Kate Hill

"What is wrong with you! Can't you see I'm trying to save his life? Your precious medicine can't do a damn thing, but our very nature can cure him!"

"In theory." Matthew folded his arms across his chest. "We have no way of being absolutely sure what will happen to the tumor after the change."

"It's a fact dying mortals who are reborn as vampires are cured of their diseases!"

"Yes, but—"

"Give us the damn test!"

"Not without his consent!"

Rosa bared her fangs and snarled, her fingers curved into claws. "You sonof-a-bitch, Matthew Winter! If you don't do this, so help me I'll rip out your throat!"

"Oh, threats will get you far." The bastard walked behind his desk and began straightening papers.

"Do you have any idea how much I hate you? You pretend to care about people, yet you'll let him die before telling me if I can change him or not!"

"You can't just go change any mortal you want without informing him. What if he doesn't want to become a vampire?"

"Why would he prefer death to vampirism? We're superior to humans in every way!"

"How did you feel when Edrik changed you? I know he didn't do it gently. I know he didn't tell you what you'd become."

"Edrik knew the meaning of vampiric power! At least he wasn't some impotent yuppie fool with human-envy!"

"I've had enough of you, Rosa." Matthew reached her in two steps, grasped her arms, and dragged her to the door. She tried breaking his hold, but he was an Immaculate – far stronger than she was. "I said I'd see your friend for his sake. Now that he's gone, you can leave, too. Unless you both come back together asking for the test."

"I don't know how your heart even beats when it's made of ice!" she hissed, tears of frustration clogging her throat. "If this was someone you love who was dying, I'd like to see you be so controlled! You'd probably change them without giving a thought to asking whether or not they wanted it!"

"You're wrong."

"Maybe I am. After all, you have the emotions of a brick!"

"You're wrong about that, too. You think I haven't seen what you and Alik are going through? I work with it every day, and I care about all my patients. I care about my family and friends, too, but I know what *I* want isn't always what *they* want. So I can force a mortal into vampirism! Does that make it right if it's not what he wants? Talk to him. He'll probably want the change, but let the decision be *his.*"

"What if I can't do it? Don't you understand I don't want to raise his hopes unless I'm sure?"

"If you can't, we'll find a vampire who's compatible with him."

"But what if we can't find one in time?"

"Rosa, I'm telling you I will not do a compatibility test unless you have Alik's consent. Good night."

Matthew shoved her out the door and closed it, leaving her fuming in the hallway.

"Fuck you, Winter!" she bellowed before storming out of the hospital.

Rather than taking a cab to the hotel, she walked. By the time she reached Poet's Manor hotel, some of her rage had faded to disappointment and worry such as she'd never felt before. The reality of Alik's impending death was almost more than she could handle. She'd been with men before, but she'd never loved any of them. None of them had been like Alik, so decent and courageous. Mentally, he was stronger than most of the vampires she'd known.

That bastard Matthew wouldn't go against his professional ethics and give the test without Alik's consent, so now she had to make a brutal decision. Did she tell him and raise his hopes with a plan that might fail, or did she attempt to change him without the test and risk killing him even faster than his disease?

As she stepped into the hotel, she caught Alik's scent, though it was vague. She hurried to their room only to find it empty. A note rested on her pillow. After reading it, she crushed it in her fist, not even trying to control the tears gushing from her eyes. In his note he'd said how much their time together had meant to him, but he wanted it to end so she would remember him as he was. Damn the fool, and damn Matthew Winter for not helping her!

* * * * *

"You bastard!" Rosa snarled as she burst into Matthew's office. He and Judah looked up with startled eyes from where they hunched over his laptop computer. "He's gone!"

"What do you mean gone?" Matthew demanded.

"I mean he left! I have to find him, and you have to help me."

Sighing, Matthew reached for his coat. "All right, I'll help you. For Alik's sake."

"Judah," Rosa grasped the astronomer's forearm, "you're part wolf, and your sense of smell is even better than ours. You have to help us find him!"

Judah growled. "Fine."

"We'll meet back here at dawn," Matthew said. "I'll go south. Judah go north. Rosa, go west, and I'll call Brett to go east. We'll find him."

"What the hell do we say when we do?" Judah asked. "We can't just force him to come back here."

"If you have to!" Rosa glared.

Matthew snarled at Rosa then said to Judah, "Think of something more diplomatic. You're quite convincing when you want to be."

"Psychology's not my specialty."

"Wing it!" Rosa snapped as the three hurried out of the office.

Chapter Five

Five Days Later New York City

Rosa's stomach knotted and her heart throbbed as she stepped into the hotel lobby and approached the front desk. Alik's scent was strong, and she knew her days of searching had finally paid off. Judah had actually been the one to track Alik to New York. Due to commitments to his patients, Matthew had been unable to help them continue the search, but he had used his influence with the Network (his brother, Adam, was the Network leader) and field agents had helped Rosa comb the city. Alik had been remarkably elusive, but she had him now. Damn, she was going to give that man a piece of her mind!

"I'd like the number of Alik Lennox's room, please," Rosa said to the young mortal clerk behind the desk.

The girl's eyes widened, "Miss, I can't -"

"Forget it. I'll find it myself." Rosa waved her hand and headed for the elevator.

"Wait! You can't just go up there!"

Rosa spun, summoning her psychic powers, and stared into the mortal's eyes. "Of course I can go up."

"Certainly you can," repeated the clerk. "Have a nice day."

Rosa stepped into the elevator. It didn't take her long to follow Alik's scent to a third floor room.

She stood outside and knocked. "Alik!" After a moment she pounded again. "Alik! I know you're in there! Open the damn door!"

Rosa's fists clenched and she contemplated breaking the door down when it finally opened. Her belly sank when she saw Alik's haggard face. His healthy complexion had turned pasty and his expressive eyes looked dull. Dark circles sagged beneath them. She noticed no light shone in the room behind him.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"Let me in."

"Go away. Please."

"You need help."

"I need you to go. I have a splitting headache and you're making it worse."

Rosa nearly panicked. Then she realized all she had to do was make him a hybrid and the headaches would be gone. The sickness itself would dissipate.

"Why did you come here?" he whispered, touching her cheek. "Don't you understand I wanted you to remember me how I was, not like—"

"Funny, but you struck me as a reasonable man." Rosa folded her arms across her chest. "Let me in."

"I'm sorry."

He closed the door in her face and she heard the lock turn.

Rosa's teeth clenched and her heart slammed against her ribs. *Go away*? How the hell could she walk away from the only person she'd ever had an interest in loving? How could he shut her out like this? They both had one chance together, and she wasn't about to waste it. Fuck Matthew Winter's compatibility test! Now was the time for instinct!

Without hesitation, Rosa grasped the doorknob and pushed. Beneath her vampiric strength, the lock broke easily.

"Fuck!" Alik raised himself onto his elbows where he lay on the disheveled bed. She heard his heartbeat quicken with surprise and a touch of fear. "I must be hallucinating."

"Far from it!" Rosa hissed, her lips drawn back over her fangs as she closed what was left of the door and strode toward the bed. She knew her eyes glowed with bloodlust, but she didn't care. He'd know what such a look meant soon enough.

Alik rose to his feet in an attempt to defend himself, but she noticed his unsteadiness and clutched his shoulders, thrusting him onto his back. He tried throwing her off, but this time she didn't feign mortal weakness.

Grasping his wrists, she pinned his arms above his head with one hand and used her other hand to rip off his boxer shorts. She straddled his waist and lowered her face so they were nose to nose.

"What the fuck are you?" he snarled.

"I'm your chance to live."

"Lady, I don't want what you're selling!"

In spite of his words, when Rosa lowered her mouth to his and kissed him, he responded as he had so many times before. His lips parted beneath her probing tongue, and he used his own tongue to explore every moist corner of her mouth.

Rosa needed to be extra careful with him. She remembered her own change, and how the initial exchange of blood had made her sick. Edrik hadn't been gentle or cautious with her, but he hadn't really cared whether or not she survived. With Alik, it would be different.

"Do you trust me?" she whispered when the kiss broke.

"Do I have a choice?"

"Just answer my question."

"Yes, I trust you."

Rosa buried her lips in his neck, kissing and licking the warm, mortal flesh. One of her hands slipped between them and grasped his cock. Her mind sought his, forcing past the barrier she'd encountered during their first meeting.

Let me in, she prodded gently. Please.

Rosa? His psychic voice spoke to hers.

Don't shut me out, Alik.

I'm not.

She sensed the truth from him. He *was* trying to accept her, but something separated them. The disease itself?

She continued fondling his cock and kissing his neck, allowing her own feelings of passion to drizzle into his mind. His cock swelled and twitched in her grip as her lust captured him and dragged him beyond his own weakness.

Rosa raised her skirt and ripped off her underpants before guiding his erection into her heated pussy. As she gyrated upon him, her fangs sank into his neck. She heard him gasp, but that only added to her passion. The first taste of his blood brought her to a shuddering climax. He groaned, fighting to free his arms from her grip, but she wouldn't let him go.

Still in the midst of orgasm, she lifted her face from his neck and bit her free wrist. She dripped blood on his lips, but he turned away, refusing to drink it. She kissed him, forcing her tongue between his lips. The taste of her blood must have aroused him, because he licked her mouth. Rosa bit her bottom lip, allowing more blood to flow into his mouth. She pulled away before he took too much, fearing it would cause him to be sick. With each exchange of blood, she would allow him more until his body accepted the change. If he accepted it. No! She wouldn't believe otherwise!

Again she lapped the open wounds on his neck and bounced on his rockhard cock, her thighs clasping his hips. He bucked upwards, meeting her thrusts.

"Rosa! Oh, damn it, woman!" She silenced him with her lips and more of her powerful vampire blood. This time he didn't resist at all, but lifted his head to better reach her.

Alik! She screamed in his mind. Her pulse raced and she could no longer tell when one orgasm ended and the next began. She bit him again and drank. Their hearts throbbed together, and she forced herself to stop drinking long enough to feed him from her lips.

This time as he drank, he jerked his wrists from her grasp, and in spite of her fierce hold, she couldn't overpower him.

He growled, deep in his chest, a distinctly vampiric growl. His hands clamped her thrusting hips, and he flung her onto her back.

"Alik! Wait!" She tore her mouth from his and bit his shoulder, desperate to be sure she'd taken enough of his blood for the change!

"Mine!" he growled, grasping handfuls of her hair and jerking her neck back. She screamed with pleasure when his incisors pierced her flesh. He sucked deeply, his tongue lapping her throat while his cock slammed into her wet pussy. Rosa's legs locked around his waist and her arms clung to his neck, pressing him closer.

"Alik! Oh, Alik!" she panted.

He rolled so she was atop him again, then shoved her onto her back, his teeth pushing deeper. Rosa's head spun and she felt weakness flood her body.

"Alik, stop!" she shouted, sinking her nails into his back. "Stop!"

He paid no attention. His arms tightened around her so she could scarcely breathe as he continued drinking and thrusting, driving her to an orgasm so intense she dissolved into blackness.

* * * * *

Rosa awoke, her entire body aching in the most pleasurable way. A half smile touched her lips. Alik was a hybrid! She was sure of it. She reached across the bed for him and, feeling emptiness, jumped up.

"Alik?" she called, though she knew it was in vain. His scent had faded.

The bastard! After what she'd done for him, he'd abandoned her!

Rosa stood, attempting to smooth her wrinkled clothes with her hands, and walked to the bathroom.

She gazed in the mirror, noting bloodstains on her skin, and smiled. Oh, he must be a magnificent hybrid! She could scarcely wait to see him! He'd be back, of that she was certain.

Rosa undressed and stepped into the shower. She'd nearly finished washing when she caught a familiar scent. *Judah*.

Damn. He wasn't the vampire she'd had in mind.

She dried off and dressed, then stepped into the bedroom where Judah stood by the window, his arms folded across his massive chest.

"You obviously found him."

"Good deduction."

"Did you give him a choice?"

"That's not your business."

"Did you even tell him?"

"He'll figure it out. He's a smart man."

Judah's lips parted, revealing his white, wolfish fangs. "I don't believe you! You're telling me you made a hybrid who has no idea what he is and just let him hit the streets?"

"Didn't have much of a choice." Rosa began towel drying her wet hair. "Between how much blood he took and how hard the sex – Let's just say I only woke up about ten minutes ago."

"Rosa, don't you understand what this means? What if he goes nuts? The young ones – especially those who don't understand the blood cravings – have been known to go on killing sprees. The Network could end up arresting him, or worse, not to mention all the damage he can do!"

Rosa's smile faded. What an ass she'd been! The Network loved to arrest – or kill – what they considered "rogue" vampires!

"We need to find him!" Rosa threw the towel on the floor. "Why are you standing there!"

"Before you go anywhere, get rid of those bloody sheets before a maid finds them and gets the mortal police involved, too!"

"Can't you do it? I have to find him!"

"Shit no!" Judah looked disgusted. "I'm not touching those after you and he have been doing hell knows what on them! Do your own dirty work. I got his new scent just from standing in this room, so I'm going to look for him. Talk to you later."

Cursing about the fussiness of some vamps, Rosa tore off the sheets, glad none of the blood had seeped to the mattress. After emptying the contents of Alik's duffel bag sitting by the television, she stuffed the soiled linen inside.

She glanced at the bag's contents: extra clothes, toiletries, and a small box of souvenirs and photos of family and military buddies. Rosa wished for more time to go through the items, but it would have to wait. Besides, it would be more fun with Alik there to explain everything.

As she rushed out of the hotel, she could scarcely wait to find him, not that she thought he'd play the part of the rogue, as Judah had suggested - but because she longed to hold and taste him again.

Soon. Very soon.

* * * * *

Alik glanced around the city streets, fascinated by the brightness of the lights and the intensity of the sights and sounds. At first he thought the entire night had been a massive hallucination, that he'd been even closer to death than he realized.

When the initial shock wore off and he glanced down at Rosa, noticing for the first time the kittenish fangs peeking through her parted lips, he knew.

Whatever she was, she'd managed to take away his pain and return the strength he'd lost. No. Not return it – magnify it. Power surged through his body so he could no longer endure lying, motionless, in the hotel room. He needed to be *out*. He needed – something smooth, something sweet, something rich. When he closed his eyes, he smelled it. All around. He could hear the throbbing of hundreds of mortal heartbeats. It was as if the very walls of the hotel had come to life.

"What have you done to me, woman?" he'd murmured, stroking Rosa's disheveled black hair before springing from the bed and dragging on jeans and his jacket, not bothering with underclothes or even a shirt.

Too impatient to await the elevator, he jogged down the steps and strode into the lobby. A quick glance through the glass doors told him dusk had settled, though outside still appeared surprisingly light.

As he walked past the front desk, the clerk's scent nabbed his attention. He approached the plump girl with a pleasant face and mousy brown hair. She gazed at him through steel-rimmed glasses.

"May I help...you?" Her voice faded when he met her gaze with his most seductive stare. He actually heard her pulse quicken and saw her sharp intake of breath.

The girl's eyes darkened with desire. Alik nearly smiled. Apparently whatever change occurred had increased his already overdeveloped powers of seduction. He wasn't about to complain.

"Could you recommend a good restaurant?" he asked. With the bonecrushing headache finally eliminated and after making love with Rosa, he felt ravenous. And thirsty. Very thirsty. For blood, he realized. The thought was disturbing, until he recalled the taste of Rosa's blood. It had been more intoxicating than the best booze he'd ever tasted.

"Restaurant?" the girl repeated in a dreamy voice. *Goodness this man is a fine piece of ass!*

He blinked. She hadn't said a word, yet somehow he knew what she was thinking.

That hairy chest is so incredibly sexy. I want to touch it. And those lips! I wonder how he kisses?

Alik smiled slowly, seductively, and reached for her hand. Whatever had happened to him, he was really starting to like it.

Asshole!

Another silent voice pierced his mind. A bell boy approached and stood at the desk, glaring at the clerk and Alik. *Get away from my girlfriend, you son-of-a-bitch!*

"Andrea, what's up?" the boy asked.

"Huh?"

Alik released her hand, feeling a bit sorry for the boy. "I was asking if she knew a good restaurant? Maybe you can help me?"

"Sure," the boy said, "up the street about a block. Take a left. Maxine's has cheap, good food."

"Thanks," Alik said as he headed for the door.

Outside, he inhaled deeply, nearly gagging on smog and a mouthful of strong perfume from a woman passing by. The rush of traffic and buzz of conversation nearly made him dizzy. He almost panicked when the lights seemed to brighten painfully. Stepping closer to the hotel door, he closed his eyes. After a minute or two he was able to block out most of the noise and control the rest of his senses. Though still bright, the lights no longer seemed painful, and he continued down the sidewalk.

That was how he'd ended up wandering the streets of New York, feeling like he could sprint a hundred miles in full gear, and longing to sink his teeth into somebody's throat. Even more, he knew when he did select someone to bite, they'd enjoy every moment of it, just as he had loved Rosa's teeth in his shoulder even more than he'd loved her hot body wrapped around his.

Alik paused in front of a shop with rows of glass figurines in the window. The store's lights glinted off various objects in every color of the rainbow. He never realized simple glass could be so beautiful.

As he stepped into the shop, he sensed only one heartbeat: that of the cashier who counted money at the register. She glanced at him, then took a longer look as she closed the cash drawer.

"Do you want something special?" she asked.

He glanced around the shop. Maybe he did. Rosa would probably love one of the figurines.

"Yes. Something for a woman."

"Girlfriend? Sister? Mother?"

He held her gaze, and she stepped from behind the counter, running a hand through her long blond hair. "The heart-shaped crystals are popular."

"No." He walked to the back of the store and pointed to an amethyst swan sitting on a top shelf. "This one."

"That's one of my favorites." The girl smiled as she approached. She tilted her face up to Alik's. Her heartbeat quickened and her lips parted. "Would you...would you like me to wrap it?"

"Please." He took a step closer and saw her shiver, though she didn't move away.

The girl lifted an uncertain hand and placed it to his chest. She closed her eyes, as she ran her hands over his pecs, dark tendrils of hair slipping between her fingers. *Shit, what a stud,* her thoughts echoed in his mind.

Though she wasn't nearly as attractive as Rosa – and far too young for him, not much more than twenty or so – he wanted to taste her.

Glancing around the shop to ensure they were alone, he guided her into the storeroom and gently shoved her against the wall. He brushed aside her long hair and placed his lips to her neck.

"I really shouldn't be doing this," she murmured.

"Would you like me to stop?" he asked in a husky whisper against her lips.

"Not really."

"Then close your eyes and enjoy it."

She did as he suggested and slipped her arms around his neck. She moaned softly when he licked her neck then grazed her flesh with his teeth, testing his new incisors. Blood trickled into his mouth, and he licked.

"Oh, damn!" the girl panted, thrusting her pelvis against his crotch. His hand slipped between them and he pushed up her short skirt. Her panties felt damp, and he would have smiled had he not been so intent on licking her neck. He tugged down the moist satin underpants and slipped his fingers into her wet pussy while his thumb circled her clit.

She came, thrusting against his hand and moaning. Her pulse leapt and her blood flowed. Alik's cock felt ready to burst from desire, but he intended to save *that* part of his passion for Rosa. *Rosa!* The woman had done this to him, made him some kind of pervert with a blood fetish, and though he loathed to admit it, he was loving every minute of it! He'd pay Rosa back for what she'd done.

Alik grinned, slipping his teeth from the girl's neck and tugging his hand from between her legs. She sagged against him for a moment, her breathing labored. He felt concerned that he might have taken too much of her blood. After all, he didn't want to kill anybody.

"I...I don't know why I did that." She looked up at him with startled eyes.

"Don't worry." He traced her lips with his fingertip.

"I'll go ring up the swan for you."

"Thanks."

The girl adjusted her skirt, smoothed her hair, and headed out of the storeroom, Alik behind her.

He paid for the swan, and while the clerk wrapped it, Alik gazed outside. Before he returned to the hotel, there was a city full of warm, aromatic people and much more blood for him to taste. Then he'd demand some explanations from Rosa – after he fucked both of them into semi-unconsciousness. He wondered just how many mortals he could sample that night without losing the grip on his passion. *Control.* His military career had taught him self-control and discipline. Now he was going to need it in a way he never imagined possible: to test an inexplicable and thrilling new life he'd never dreamed of.

Chapter Six

Rosa's stomach clenched as she approached the hotel. Her pulse leapt and her entire body tingled with excitement. Alik was back!

Taking the steps rather than wait for the elevator, it took seconds for her to reach the room.

"Alik?" she said, stepping into the dim room. The curtains remained drawn, and he hadn't bothered with the light. That was a good sign, since so many new ones often relied on lights simply out of habit. He was apparently adjusting well to the change.

He stepped out of the bathroom and leaned a broad shoulder against the door jam, his arms folded across his chest. Hypnotic blue eyes seemed to look inside her soul.

"Alik," she repeated – sounding dumb even to herself – as she approached. "Are you all right?"

"You know exactly how I am."

She paused. His tone didn't frighten her, but made her wary. She reached out a tentative hand towards his face. "I have a lot to tell you -"

"I'll say." He grasped her shoulders so fast she had no chance to respond before he hurled her onto the bed.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she demanded, standing to meet him, but he shoved her onto her back. Rosa's foot lashed out in two fast, successive kicks. The first struck him in the stomach, though he scarcely flinched. The second he caught before it struck his face. "Let me go!"

"What did you do to me, Rosa?" he snarled, pinning her body beneath his.

She controlled her temper enough to refrain from struggling. It was a reasonable question. He deserved answers. What she couldn't tolerate was his overbearing attitude. A man's man had been sexy enough on a mortal, but she hadn't considered how, after the change, his male dominance might magnify along with his strength and stamina.

"What do you think I did?" she snapped. "I saved your life!"

"I want to know exactly what you are – what *I* am – but later." He dragged her wrists above her head and clasped them in one hand while he used his other to rip off her clothes. He lowered his head and captured one of her nipples between his lips, licking and sucking before using the tip of one incisor to pierce the sensitive little nub.

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She shrieked, though not with pain. He already knew the ecstasy given by a bite – so long as the bite was done with love or pleasure in mind. Releasing her wrists, he spanned her waist with his hands, licking and kissing his way down her belly. He stroked the wiry triangle between her legs, then covered her clit with his mouth, nipping and licking while his hands kneaded her breasts.

"Oh! Alik!" she panted, clutching his head.

"I love it when you talk to me," he growled. "Tell me what you want, Rosa."

"Everything...whatever you want as long as you don't stop touching me!"

He growled again, a raw, animalistic sound, and rolled her onto her stomach. His hands stroked her bottom gently before he slapped it, not hard enough to hurt, but more than enough to arouse. His lips covered the place he'd struck while two of his fingers gently stroked the soft, ultra-sensitive flesh between her bottom cheeks. His other hand reached beneath her and fondled her breasts while his teeth sank into the flesh between her shoulder and neck.

Rosa sobbed with passion. She'd created a genuine monster!

When his teeth withdrew from her flesh, she uttered a moan of protest which quickly turned to one of lust. He lapped her ear while one of his steely arms wrapped around her waist. As he mounted her from behind, she felt every inch of his cock slip into her pussy, slow and easy, then fast and hard when he bit her again. Orgasm broke over her like storm waves. When he exploded inside her, she felt his chest rumble with sounds of passion as he continued lapping her neck.

"Now," he said, his voice husky as he shoved her onto her back and pinned her beneath him so they were nose to nose, "you're going to tell me everything."

"We're vampires."

"Elaborate."

"I was once human and a vampire changed me. Now I've done the same for you."

Confusion and denial crossed his brow. "This can't be, even though I know it's happened."

"Before you get too spooked, we're not demons or magical creatures. We're a living, breathing species, and there's a lot you need to learn."

"I want to know it all."

"Before we go any further, there are two things I have to know."

"What?"

"Are you mad at me?"

A smile played around his sensual mouth. "No. I'm not mad at you."

"Are you grateful?" She tossed him her most coquettish look. "We'll see."

"You arrogant son-of-a—" His mouth covered hers. As their tongues joined, she nearly forgot what she wanted to call him until he broke the kiss, "—bitch!"

"What's the second question?" he asked, unaffected by her furious expression and her fingernails sinking deliberately into his back.

"Did you kill anyone while you were gone?"

"Of course not."

"Oh."

His lip curled. "Don't look so disappointed."

"I had this little fantasy about you turning into a magnificent rogue vamp, but I guess you're going to be one of those by-the-book bloodsuckers. You'll probably end up as part of the Network and -"

"Network?"

"It's an organized group of vampires active in every part of the world. There are historians, doctors, agents – "

"Agents?"

"Sort of like cops, or military. They keep law and order among our kind. It's on the corny side, but I guess it can be a good thing at times, even if they did try to make my life miserable."

"Why would they do that?'

"Because I once ran the best underground fighting ring for vampires. It was illegal by order of the Network and I was forced into hiding. I made millions of dollars and the fights were so much more exciting than they are now. Vampires used to fight to the death in my ring. Blood and guts, ripping out each other's throats. It was magnificent! Now that I'm Network approved, there are stupid rules like no intentional killing."

"Violent little thing, aren't you?"

"You're the Royal Marine Commando."

"Speaking of that, I need to get back to Scotland. I have to rejoin my unit."

"Rejoin your unit?" Rosa's brow furrowed. Was he insane?

"I feel fine. You seemed to have cured me."

"But we want to be sure. We'll go back to Boston tonight so Matthew can check you out. He can explain more about the biological side of what we are, and -"

"Dr. Winter's one of us, too?" This time his surprise sounded in his voice.

"Yes, in a manner of speaking. He's an Immaculate vampire."

"What's an Immaculate?"

"One who's born, not made, such as hybrids like us."

"Vampires can be born?"

Rosa smiled, slipping her arms around his neck and kissing him. "Darling, you have *a lot* to learn."

"I know, but..." Alik paused, his eyes wide and glowing as a scent, far more powerful than any hybrid, filled the air. "What the hell is that?"

"Remember Judah?"

"Why does he smell like that?"

Rosa grinned. "He's an Immaculate vampire."

"I guess I do have a lot to learn."

* * * * *

"So you're saying the tumor's gone?" Alik held Matthew's gaze across the doctor's desk.

Rosa smiled from where she sat to Alik's left.

"Without a trace. Not unexpected after the change," Matthew replied. "You're in excellent health."

"For a man?"

Matthew smiled, as if sensing Alik's unasked question. "For a hybrid vampire."

"So I can't get sick again?"

"Vampires can certainly become ill, though diseases among our kind are rare. Usually a vampire's health fails if he or she is exposed to poisons dangerous exclusively to our kind, certain plants for instance. Some vampires are highly allergic to sunlight, which has given birth to the legends that daylight is fatal to us. Of course that's a fallacy. Only Originals can't abide sunlight."

"Originals?"

"The first vampires who landed here."

"You're telling me we're descended from aliens?"

"Exactly."

Alik stood, pacing the room. "This is unbelievable."

"I know it's hard to accept at first, especially for hybrids. I won't overload you with too many details at this point. Just the basics. From studies of other hybrids, I'm guessing you have roughly two to three times your mortal strength. That can also expand, depending on the type of exercise you do, just like humans. Also, strength in hybrids is for some reason affected by your emotions. The stronger your emotions, the greater your strength, the calmer you are, the closer you are to normal human strength. Studies have shown that daylight does seem to affect the powers of hybrids, in theory because vampires are more alert at night and nighttime gives rise to the desire for blood. These things have bearing on emotions, so hybrid vampires are usually at their physical peak after dark. The average speed for hybrids is thirty miles per hour, but some have been known to –"

"Thirty miles an hour? That's faster than some fucking horses."

Rosa examined her fingernails and shrugged. "Tell him what Immaculates can do, Matthew."

"My brother, Adam, is one of the fastest known Immacs. He does a little over fifty, but that's not important right now. Vampire vulnerabilities: you can recover from most injuries, unless your heart is damaged. Some have even been known to recover from heart injuries, but only with immediate medical attention. You can burn to death. You can drown, though it's not very common. Usually vampires *appear* to drown, but in reality their bodily functions have slowed until they seem dead. However, sustained submersion will eventually result in death. According to legend, silver can harm the vampire, but that's a myth. We're actually highly allergic to platinum. Wounds caused by platinum weapons are excruciating and the scars can take centuries to fade – assuming we survive the injury. Vampires' regenerative powers are strong, though they can't grow back missing limbs."

Alik laughed. "Guess you can't have everything."

"Unless you're a werewolf," Rosa muttered.

"Rosa!" Matthew snapped. "Let him get used to one new species at a time."

"Werewolf?" Alik glanced from Rosa to Matthew.

"They were guard dogs to the Originals' military police. Some were brought here and merged with vampires and mortals through an unauthorized experiment. It's a long story."

"Talk to Judah about it. He's part wolf."

"Rosa!" Matthew flung his hands in the air. "Tell him everybody's secrets on your own time. I want to give him enough information to keep him alive and out of trouble."

"I guess there's no flying or turning into smoke or a bat or anything?" Alik said, and Rosa nearly laughed. She knew he was trying to be humorous, but Matthew Winter hadn't been born with a sense of humor.

"Those are more myths," Matthew stated. "Also, you need human blood to survive, though you can certainly drink vampire blood."

"And enjoy it, too." Rosa held Alik's gaze, running her tongue over her lips. His mouth twitched in a smile.

"Rosa can fill you in on the rest. Of course if you have any questions, I'm always available."

"Thank you. I'm sure I'll have plenty of questions, but they'll have to wait. Right now I have to make plans to get back to Scotland and rejoin my unit." "Rejoin your unit?" Matthew wrinkled his brow. "Surely you don't plan on returning to a human military organization, at least not now?"

"I have to," Alik stated.

"It's no use, Matthew." Rosa sighed. "It's something to do with honor and loyalty. I don't understand it."

"You wouldn't," Matthew muttered, then turned back to Alik. "I know how you must feel, but think before you act. How are you going to explain your miraculous cure?"

"Why not explain it as such? It is a miracle, isn't it?"

"No, Alik, it's just nature," Matthew stated. "Our nature."

"That's not what I meant, Matthew. I mean for me to happen to meet and fall in love with a vampire at this point in my life is a miracle in itself."

Rosa stood and slipped her arms around Alik. "If you're in love with me, then why do you want to leave?"

"Because right now, so long as I'm healthy, I belong with my unit, finishing the job we started."

"All right, say you can convince the doctors of this miracle," Matthew said. "You're no longer strictly human."

"Which is why I need to be with them. I can do things they can't."

"Precisely. That means you can take risks they can't. Damn it, Alik, you could unknowingly put them in danger! Think about what you want to return to. A unit. The idea of being part of a mortal unit is impossible for you now."

"How can you say that when you're doing it?"

Matthew narrowed his eyes. "What?"

"Here at the hospital you're constantly working with mortals who have no idea what you are."

"And you think there isn't an emotional toll I pay?"

"Are you saying you're the only one who's capable of paying that kind of toll?"

"No, I'm not saying that at all. I've just had more experience being a vampire. You need to give yourself time to fully understand yourself and your new capabilities."

"I can't talk about what my unit does, but they need me with them. I can learn along the way, just like everyone else in life."

"All we're asking is that you spend time among vampires." Rosa took Alik's hands in hers. "Please. Can't you do this for me, if you love me?"

For the first time, Alik appeared hesitant. She sensed his desire to learn more about what he'd become, but his loyalty to the military tugged him away from her and into what she knew would be nothing but a painful experience for him.

"Alik," Matthew opened the middle drawer of his desk and removed a business card, "I have an acquaintance who's studied vampiric behavior for centuries. She's a counselor who specializes in recently changed hybrids. Would you just meet with her?"

Alik laughed without a shred of humor. "A vampire shrink. Great."

"What are you afraid of? That she might understand what you're feeling and offer some sound advice?" Matthew said.

"You know, Matthew, I'm grateful for all you've done, but you can be a pisser." This time Alik's smile was genuine as he took the card from the doctor. "Thanks for everything."

Matthew shook his hand. "Good luck. Remember, the door's always open."

Alik nodded before taking Rosa's hand and leaving the office. As soon as they stepped outside the building, Alik tugged her to his side and squeezed her while purring close to her ear, "I want to fuck you until you pass out."

Her belly tightened and she shivered with desire. When she'd contemplated making a hybrid male, she'd never dreamed he would be as perfect as Alik Lennox.

* * * * *

Alik glanced at Rosa as they walked to the same hotel they'd stayed at during their last trip to Boston: Poet's Manor. Of course during the first visit, Alik hadn't realized the hotel was owned by a vampire and staffed by them as well.

"I find it hard to believe you've hidden yourselves so well," he said as they rode the elevator to their room.

"I suppose it's because we haven't actually tried hiding. We've tried blending."

"What's the old saying? Hide in plain sight?"

"Exactly. Then, of course, most of us do have mind control. The funny thing is, so do humans, only most of them haven't learned to develop their psychic abilities as well as we have. Something about powers of the mind frightens them."

"You mean like when I felt you in my head? And how I can listen to what's going on in other people's minds, if I focus?"

Rosa grinned. "You are learning fast."

"It's strange, listening to people's thoughts. I've listened to some things I'd rather not hear. I didn't realize how many men think 'asshole' when they look at me."

She lifted an eyebrow. "Were there women around at the time?"

"I'm not sure...well, yeah, I guess there were."

"Uh huh. And what were the women thinking?"

He grinned. "Are you sure you want to know? The kind of thoughts they were having I can definitely handle."

Asshole.

He smiled. "You're thinking it, too."

"I can't help it. You're the worst flirt I've ever seen, human or vampire."

"I'm not a flirt," Alik said, catching the scent of sweet, mortal blood as another guest stepped out of a room and into the hallway. His stomach grumbled. Damn. He and Rosa had just fed before visiting Matthew. They'd gone to a club and had so much fun with a group of college girls.

The woman hesitated as she passed Alik. He gazed into her eyes, listening to her throbbing heart.

An elbow in his gut snapped him back to reality. As the mortal continued down the hall, Alik turned to Rosa.

She glared. "Not a flirt, huh?"

"I can't believe I'm hungry again."

"I might have offered you a little snack, but I think I'm mad at you."

"Mad at me?"

She opened the door to their room and stepped inside, stamping her foot, her fists clenched. "Fuck you, Alik! I can't believe I'm jealous when I think of you feeding on other women!"

"Fuck me." He backed her against the door, took her hands in his, and pinned them to each side of her head as he nuzzled her neck. "I like the sound of that."

"Umm," she purred, thrusting her pelvis against his.

He unzipped his jeans, released her hands, and pushed up her skirt.

Rosa slipped her arms around him and sank her teeth into his neck.

He groaned, tilting his head so she could better reach him while his skilled fingers slipped into her pussy, gathering moisture and circling her clit. His cock felt ready to explode as she drank, moaned, and clung to him. He bent his knees and slid into her warm pussy, driving into her with long, slow thrusts until she came. Her sharp little teeth sank deeper into his flesh. Alik shuddered with desire and bit her, ramming his rock-hard cock into her wet pussy, driving her to another orgasm as his own broke over him in red hot waves.

Still drinking her sweet blood, he swept her into his arms and carried her to the bed. Already he relished his vampirism, and he loved Rosa like he'd never imagined loving any woman.

Chapter Seven

"Nice." Alik glanced around the enormous warehouse done over as a martial arts school. He and Rosa had returned to New York earlier that evening, partly because Rosa wanted to show off her favorite training hall, and partly because the shrink Matthew had recommended was staying in the city temporarily.

They had an appointment later that night, but Rosa wanted to introduce him to some of her friends first.

Though the training hall was used to instruct vampires preparing for matches, Rosa also allowed others into the facility to sharpen their skills.

"Judah uses the place a lot," she explained as they stepped through what had once been the loading dock. Several vampires punched and kicked heavy bags while others struck what appeared to be solid metal cylinders.

"The cylinders are for Immaculates," Rosa explained. "One punch and they'd knock the sand bags through a window."

"What's going on over there?" Alik nodded to a man and a woman scaling a smooth metal wall extending to the warehouse ceiling, roughly four stories high.

"Immaculates strengthening their claws. There's a wall for hybrids in the next room, but like human climbers, we need to look for holds in rock and such. Immacs have claws beneath their human nails. Hybrids don't."

Alik paused a moment to watch the man and woman climb up and over the wall – very quickly. "We could scale it with the right equipment."

"Yes, but the idea is they're *born* with their equipment. Come over here and we can have a workout, then find some sparring partners."

Alik followed her, casting one last glance at the climbing Immaculates as well as those striking the cylinders.

In the next room, the vast floor was roped off in sections where pairs of fighters sparred with one another.

"There's a fight coming up in a couple of weeks," Rosa said. "It might be something that interests you. If so, I can arrange for you to be tested so you can compete."

"Tested?" His brow furrowed.

"Just a simple obstacle course to ensure you're physically suitable. You'll pass with no problem."

He should hope so! He'd only spent most of his life as a Royal Marine!

"There's two tests, one for Immaculates in the early evening, and one for hybrids later."

"Of course. They're superior, right?"

"You sound sarcastic."

He shrugged. "It's just that everyone seems so impressed by them, as if hybrids should bow down and kiss their ass or something."

"I wouldn't say that," she huffed. "But at least give them the respect they're due."

"When fighting, never underestimate the enemy, but never think yourself defeated, either, or you won't stand a chance."

Rosa smiled and slipped her arm through his. She winked. "Why don't you just get used to being a hybrid before you start trying to beat up Immaculates, all right?"

He took her chin gently in his hand and kissed her mouth. "I'll see what I can do."

After introducing Alik to several hybrids, Rosa left him to meet with her instructors and help in training some new fighters. Alik spent his time exercising and sparring with some of the other men. Several were very good fighters, but nothing he couldn't handle. He was surprised to learn how old some of them were. Though they teased him about his youth, when they fought with him, all joking remained outside the ring.

"You have talent," said another hybrid, Brett, after he and Alik ended their match with a draw. The attractive Spanish vampire had been Alik's best challenge yet, since he'd managed to beat the others – even the old ones.

Alik shrugged. "We just do what we've been trained to."

"So you're Rosa's, huh?"

"Yes." Alik's spine tingled with protective jealousy. "And she's mine."

Brett offered an easy grin. "Don't worry. She's not my type. I just never expected to see her so taken with a man."

"One thing you should know about me, Brett," Alik began unwrapping his taped hands, "I don't discuss my woman behind her back."

"A wise decision." Brett saluted him. "My son mentioned you weren't like the others Rosa has been with."

"Your son?"

"Matthew."

Alik narrowed his eyes at Brett who appeared even younger than Dr. Winter.

"I know." Brett shrugged. "I was changed as a youth. Matthew and his twin, Adam, stopped aging around thirty years old. Pisses them off that their two thousand year old father looks like a kid near them."

Alik shook his head, scarcely believing a two thousand year old man could exist, let alone look no older than twenty five! He was about to ask Brett more questions when Rosa approached, a lovely smile on her lips.

"Brett, have you been telling Alik horror stories?"

"Of course." Brett smiled, revealing his catlike incisors. "We had quite a sparring match."

"Is he good?"

"Good?" Brett snorted. "If he ever wants a position in the Network, I'll put in a word for him with Adam."

"The illustrious First Father." Rosa's voice dripped sarcasm. "That son of yours nearly ruined my fighting ring!"

"He could have had you imprisoned instead of letting you into the Network."

Rosa raised her eyes to heaven and waved her hand in front of Brett's face. "Go away. You're annoying me."

"I'm running." Brett sneered at her then nodded in Alik's direction. "Good luck to you, in more ways than one."

"I've had more than my share of luck." Alik tugged Rosa into his arms and kissed her.

Brett chuckled as he walked away.

"Well, lover," Rosa slipped her arms around Alik's neck, "we'd better go so we won't be late for your appointment with Colleen MacKenzie."

"Right. The shrink."

"Who knows, maybe she can help?"

"Help convince me to shirk my duty."

Rosa touched his cheek. "No one's trying to do that. We just want you to understand more about who you are."

"I know who I am. I'm still Alik Lennox."

"Yes, but you have changed."

"I've enhanced."

"For someone like me, I'd say the change makes little emotional difference, but for someone like you —"

"What makes me different?"

"You have honor, integrity. To me, those are just words – at least they were until I met you. Damn it, Alik! You've changed me, too. If you hurt yourself, you'll also hurt me."

"How can I make you understand why it's so important for me to go back?"

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"And how can I convince you how important it is for you not to rush into a foolish decision!" Rosa snarled, then shook her head and smiled. "I suppose that's why we're going to see Colleen. It's *her* job to convince you."

"If you can't then she won't," Alik stated as he followed Rosa out of the warehouse.

* * * * *

Colleen McKenzie was a tiny hybrid, even shorter than Rosa's five feet three inches. She wasn't beautiful, but had a fresh, pretty face with delicate features and large blue eyes. Her smile and manner were friendly, and an Irish brogue flavored her voice.

The three of them settled into her home office in Manhattan. After nearly an hour of discussion, the counselor was no closer to convincing Alik to avoid his old life than when he'd arrived.

"You have to understand, the military isn't just a job to me," Alik said. "The men and I watch each other's backs. I had to leave because I was dying and was a detriment to them. Now I have more strength, speed, and stamina than ever before. And I can't be killed – at least not in the manner most humans realize."

"Right now you feel completely immortal," Colleen said. "We all go through that phase. The fact is, we can be killed, and the older you get, the more you'll come to appreciate the years we're given."

"Why do you need to go back right now?" Rosa pressed. "Can't you at least take some time to learn about what you are?"

"How much time?" he said.

"A few months," Colleen answered before Rosa.

He lifted an eyebrow. "A few months?"

"Doesn't seem so daunting, does it?" the counselor said.

"It could be life or death for my unit."

"A few weeks then?" Colleen suggested. "We won't talk years or centuries, Alik. Not yet."

"A few lousy weeks, Alik! What's that?" Rosa snarled.

"A lot!"

"It's not -" Rosa began, but Colleen motioned for her to be quiet.

"One month," the counselor said. "I know your military organization goes through long, tough training to prepare for all kinds of situations. Don't you think you should at least take some time to prepare yourself for the major changes in your life? And what about Rosa? She's your lover and your vampiric creator. Don't you want to bond with her now that you're a hybrid?" "Yes." His gaze held Rosa's. He spoke to her using their mental bond. *I do love you, Rosa.* "But my personal pleasure cannot come before my duty."

"Don't you think your first duty is to understand exactly what you are and what you're capable of before rushing blindly back to the world of mortals? If you had a job that was less dangerous, I'd say this learning stage wouldn't be so crucial, but lives depend on your actions and decisions."

The counselor's words must have finally reached Alik because Rosa sensed his hesitation. Though relieved, Rosa also felt a touch of anger. His feelings for her wouldn't influence him to stay, only the idea of harming his precious unit. Damn, but men were funny – and annoying – creatures!

"All right. I'll stay for a while," he said.

"Would you like to meet with me again next week?" Colleen asked.

"No."

She nodded and handed him a business card. "Call if you change your mind."

"Thank you." Alik stood.

He and Rosa walked to her car.

"Something the matter?" Alik asked once they'd been driving a few minutes.

"Yes, if you must know."

"What is it?"

"Is the thought of staying with me so bad?"

"Bad? There's no place else I'd rather be."

"Then why are you so damn anxious to leave!"

"You know why."

"Duty."

"Yes."

"Loyalty."

"Yes."

"Fucking honor!"

"It's not something I can make you understand. You either know what I mean or you don't."

"You're right." Rosa slammed on the brakes. She parked in front of her house and stomped inside. When Alik touched her arm, she shoved him away. "Just like you'll never understand how I feel right now! I gave you part of my *life*, Alik!"

"You sound like you should be able to use it to control me."

"I should, but I can't! There's no controlling you, bastard!" She grasped his shoulders and shook him with all her strength. He didn't move, just stood, rock hard and unbendable, though his beautiful blue eyes held hers with affection.

"I'm sorry." He slid his arms around her and held her so close their hearts slammed together as one.

"No you're not." She tilted her face up to his, tears threatening to spill. She kissed him so hard their incisors cut their lips. Their tongues slipped into each other's mouths, stroking and tasting.

"Rosa," he murmured, slipping off her clothes while she tugged off his.

They dropped to the hall floor, his lean, hard body pressing her naked curves into the thick black carpet. Rosa wrapped her legs around one of his hairroughened ones, one of her feet stroking his calf. She squirmed her hips, her pussy already wet for him. He eased his cock into her waiting body. Neither wanted to take it slow. His hips drove down as hers lunged up. Rosa's fingers sank into his shoulders and back as they rocked together, their mouths fused, their tongues exploring while their incisors nipped each other's lips.

Rosa felt the first rush of her orgasm and moaned, clinging to him in a hold that would have strangled a mortal. Alik seemed to relish her strength. He grasped a fistful of her hair and tilted her neck so he could bite and thrust, suck and gyrate at the same time.

"Oh, Alik!" Rosa shrieked, reaching another peak. He growled, his long, fast thrusts never slowing. Each climax seemed more powerful than the last until she floated on a black and red haze of passion.

Rosa lost track of time as she trembled beneath his magnificent body. She knew hybrids had staying power, but this was unprecedented! His lips and hands seemed to be everywhere at once: nipping her neck, licking her ear, biting and sucking her breasts. All the while his rock-hard cock plunged in and out of her quivering pussy.

She clung to him, his flesh slick beneath her palms. She ran her hands down his back and clutched his buttocks, squeezing and stroking the warm globes as she sank her teeth into his shoulder.

"Rosa!" he groaned, his breathing hoarse. "Hold me hard, woman!"

She gripped him tightly, her nails sinking into his buttocks, squeezing to the rhythm of her sucking on his shoulder. He lunged hard, every muscle in his heated body tense. With a growl of pure desire, he came.

They lay panting, their sweat-soaked bodies entwined. *I love him*, Rosa thought. *I didn't intend to, but I do*. Damn everything! Love was the most wonderful feeling in the world.

* * * * *

For the next several weeks, Rosa experienced the most blissful relationship she'd ever imagined. When she wasn't training her fighters, she and Alik spent almost every moment together. They explored the city, hunting for delectable mortals and watching each other feed. There had been times in the past when Rosa had killed humans while taking their blood, but since meeting Alik, she'd lost the desire for such violence. Making love with him fulfilled her every passion, and his code of ethics had influenced her more than she realized.

Like her deceased father, Rosa had always been fascinated by martial arts. She loved practicing, teaching, and watching. Alik shared her exuberance, even surpassed it. It became his habit to awaken long before dusk to train at the warehouse. Though Rosa could certainly tolerate sunlight, she preferred the traditional nocturnal life of the vampire. Usually by the time she arrived at the warehouse in the evening, Alik was already several hours into training. Sweat soaked, his eyes glowing with vampiric passion, he'd sweep her into his arms and give her lips a playful nip. That sharp kiss always tightened her belly and left her anxious for the lovemaking they'd share once they left the training hall.

They'd been in New York about three weeks when she decided to surprise Alik by arriving early at the gym. She guessed they'd probably have the place to themselves, since most of the fighters didn't show until after sundown.

As she approached the warehouse, disappointment washed over her. She caught Alik's delectable scent, but also those of Brett, Judah, and an Immaculate called Vincent. Rosa grinned. Vincent was one of the few Network vampires she could understand. He might be an agent, but he still relished his power and thought nothing of blatant rebellion against his superiors when the desire took him.

As she stepped into the warehouse, her gaze riveted to Brett, Judah, and Vincent gathered at the base of the Immaculate scaling wall. Rosa's brow furrowed when she saw Alik halfway up the wall, climbing the smooth metal as if he had claws. As she neared, she realized he held a metal spike in each hand. He climbed by driving the spikes into the wall and pulling himself upward.

Rosa smiled as she joined the men, pride washing over her at the speed with which Alik accomplished his climb.

"Not bad!" Judah shouted to Alik who had nearly reached the top.

"Shit, this hybrid thinks he's an Immaculate." Grinned Vincent, a tall, thickly-muscled vamp with a neatly trimmed goatee. His dark eyes fixed on Alik as he straddled the top of the wall before descending the other side.

"Afraid of some competition?" Brett glanced at Vincent from the corner of his eye.

The bearded Immaculate snorted with sarcastic laughter before turning away to work out on the metal cylinders.

"Alik will be more than ready for the competition next week," Rosa said.

"I'll say." Brett nodded. "He's going to be one hell of a challenge."

"So you think it will come down to you and him?"

"Of course." Brett shrugged.

"I'll tell you, the matches aren't like they used to be." Judah shook his head. "I remember the old days when there was death and maiming every other night. Wasn't fun, but at the time most of us needed the money."

Rosa sighed. "Those were the days."

"And you loved every minute of it." Judah flung her a disgusted look.

"You made a lot of money from me, Judah. You, Matthew, and plenty of others. No one twisted your arm to fight. Part of you enjoyed it. Admit it."

Judah growled and joined Vincent in striking the cylinders.

"You're like, what is the saying? A skunk at a cookout?" Brett told her.

"Talking about the old days puts me in a bad mood."

"Because you miss it, or because you want to forget how you used to be?"

Rosa glared at him, then said, "Probably a little of both."

Brett glanced at Alik who approached them. "You have a good new life, Rosa. Not everyone is so lucky. Enjoy what you have."

"What was that about?" Alik asked Rosa as Brett walked away.

"It's not important." Rosa brushed away a droplet of sweat clinging to his eyebrow. "I had no idea you were scaling. You're as fast as many Immaculates."

"It's amazing how quickly we can develop physically. A few weeks of training and my condition has improved in what would have taken months as a human."

"Are you looking forward to the competition next week?"

He placed a hand to the back of her neck and kissed her. "Let me get showered and dressed, then I want to take you somewhere so we can talk."

Rosa's stomach fluttered. She didn't like his tone or expression. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Not really. I just have something to tell you."

"What is it?"

"Not here."

"No, right here!"

"You need to calm down." He strode toward the locker room, but she grasped his arm and yanked hard.

"Tell me, damn you!"

"I won't be going to the competition, Rosa. I have a plane ticket back to Scotland in two days."

For a moment she forgot to breathe. Her teeth clenched and she resisted the urge to punch him. "Your unit again?"

"I need to go back. I'm more than ready, and I don't feel playing games here is the right thing to do when I can be useful there."

"What about us?"

"I love you, Rosa. I swear I do. As soon as I can I'll be back, and when I do, it will be for good."

"Don't do this, Alik." She took his face in her hands, knowing her plea must show in her eyes. He was about to make a terrible mistake – not to mention leave *her*, knowing all they could have together!

"Please try to understand."

"No! You understand this: if you go, don't come back. Not ever!"

"Rosa -"

She backed away, fury squeezing tears from her eyes. "Not ever!"

As she turned and ran, he caught up to her. This time she did hit him. He lifted his hand to block the blow.

"Will you just listen –"

"No! Get on that plane, and we're through!"

His jaw tightened and his eyes darkened. "If that's how you want it."

"No, you son-of-a-bitch, it's how *you* want it. Now stay away from me!"

This time when Rosa ran, he didn't follow.

Chapter Eight

Boston Five Months Later

Brushing tendrils of rain-drenched hair from her eyes, Rosa glanced around the misty street as she crossed to Poet's Manor. The stormy weather dulled the glow of dawn, but Rosa felt daylight creeping up and longed to snuggle in a warm bed in her dark hotel room. For the past couple of weeks, the nights had been pure hell. A killer stalked the streets of Boston: not a killer of mortals, but of female vampires. After taking their blood, he'd rip out their heart, leaving the organ in close proximity of the body.

Network forensics leaned towards an Immaculate male as the killer, since the victims were both hybrid and Immaculate females and their hearts had been torn out by claws. Unknown to the mortal police, Network agents combed the city on high alert.

Rosa, though not an agent, had volunteered her services to help find the monster. The idea of a killer terrorizing the females of her species infuriated her. Never in her life had she felt so dedicated to a cause – except when she had decided to save Alik's life. *Alik*.

She sighed as she strode through the hotel lobby and into the elevator. She hadn't seen him since that night in the gym, when they'd fought about him returning to Scotland. Part of her still couldn't believe he'd gone. For weeks she'd stomped around hating him. Probably because she still loved him so deeply. Even Colleen's advice to let him go and make the mistakes he needed to had been little help to her. How could she just turn away when he was making a stupid decision? Since the serial killer had struck, however, she'd begun to understand his desire to return to his unit. His need to join them in fighting for their country must have been akin to her desire to defend her own kind.

Every day they'd been apart, she'd longed for him. She wanted to hear his voice, touch his warm, sculpted body. More than anything, she wanted him to hold her so she could bury the anger and fear she felt each night she searched for the killer. Since it was considered too dangerous for anyone to work on the case alone, the female agents had been paired off during their shifts. Rosa had been working with Vincent's wife, Trixie, a sleekly-muscled five-foot eleven-inch Immaculate female. Though confident in her own ability to take care of herself, Rosa had to admit feeling a little bit better with an agent like Trixie working alongside her.

Stepping off the elevator, Rosa yawned and approached her room. She unlocked the door, looking forward to a long, hot shower and a few hours of sleep before meeting with Trixie and several other agents on the serial killer case.

She slipped off her drenched coat and hung it on a hook behind the bathroom door. She'd just kicked off her shoes and removed her sweatshirt when she smelled *him*.

Her heart pounded and her mouth went dry. A tap sounded on her door, and she approached, not caring that all she wore was her black satin bra and faded jeans.

She opened the door and fought to control her emotions when she gazed into Alik's beautiful blue eyes. Rain soaked his short, dark hair and misted his face. A drenched black shirt clung to every inch of his lean, muscled torso.

"What the hell do you want?" she demanded, furious that she was unable to keep the strain from her voice. God, if possible she loved him more than ever!

"I know you told me not to come back." He grasped her shoulders and backed her into the room. Kicking the door closed, he wrapped one arm around her waist and buried his other hand in the hair at her nape. His eyes bore into hers as he spoke against her lips, "But don't make me beg."

"You've never begged for anything in your life, you bastard!"

The closeness of his body and the intensity of his stare made her legs weak. Still she fought her desire to melt against him.

"Are you telling me to go?"

"I should."

His mouth descended on hers in a kiss so charged with emotion that she couldn't resist – nor did she want to. Her arms slipped around his neck as her tongue met his.

Without breaking the kiss, he swept her into his arms and carried her to the bed. In seconds, he'd discarded their clothes and pinned her naked body beneath his.

His kisses were passionate, fierce. Behind the bloodlust, she sensed his desperation and sadness. She felt how badly he needed her, and she was unable to refuse him. He was her love, her vampire child, the only man who had ever gentled her.

Alik nuzzled her neck and took one of her nipples in his mouth while he fondled her clit. Dipping his fingers into her moist pussy, he stroked the soft folds of her flesh until she writhed.

"Alik! Oh, Alik, come to me!" she breathed.

He slid down her body until his mouth fastened on her clit. He licked the hard little nub, using the tip of his tongue to tease then the flat to lave. Rosa threaded her fingers in his hair and panted. Orgasm ripped through her when his teeth pierced her sensitive flesh.

Suddenly his thick, hard cock was inside her, thrusting, filling, pleasuring until she moaned and sobbed his name as another climax broke over her straining body.

Simultaneously, their teeth sank into each other's shoulders and they exploded in a mutual orgasm.

"Rosa, love! Ah!" Alik gasped, tearing his mouth from her flesh. When he kissed her, she tasted blood on his lips. He rolled onto his back, cuddling her to his chest. For several long moments they simply lay still, enjoying the closeness and warmth of their bodies.

Finally she said, "What happened?"

He swallowed, his arms tightening around her. "You were right, Rosa."

She lifted her head to meet his gaze. In spite of his outward calm, his pain cried out to her. She touched his face. "Tell me."

"I can't go into detail about our mission. I at least owe them that much loyalty, even though I know now I don't belong with them – with mortals. We were deep in enemy territory when we were discovered."

From his memories, Rosa caught flashes of the men in his unit, of the filth, heat, and cold they'd endured. Of the hard travel and violence they'd witnessed. Finally of...No!

"They were all killed," he murmured. "I was wounded, but when I came to, I tried saving them – changing them, like you did for me. It didn't work."

"Alik, I'm so sorry." She stroked his forehead. Her words weren't just for comfort – she did feel terrible for his loss, for their loss. Many of them had probably been much like Alik, and the thought of his death was something she didn't want to contemplate.

"I tracked the ones who did it," Alik said. "I killed them."

"I don't blame you."

"It felt good at the time, Rosa. Part of me still feels good about it, but another part..."

"What?" she prodded gently.

"Another part got to thinking that I slaughtered men who could no more fight me than a rabbit could fight a wolf. Even so, when it had mattered, I hadn't been any more help to my unit than if I'd not been there at all, and a few times I did take risks that probably got us into trouble. Maybe you, Matthew, and Colleen were right. We belong among our own kind, fighting our own."

"We can blend with mortals, Alik, it just takes time to understand what we are and what we can do. Even many of the old ones say they never stop learning." "They think I'm dead, you know, back in Scotland."

"Is that how you want it?"

"Yes." He held her gaze. "Rosa, I feel..." He shook his head, and she sensed his confusion and shame.

"Tell me."

"I feel lost. I'm not used to feeling so out of control. I'm a soldier. It's what I do – now I don't even have that anymore."

"Yes you do."

His brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"I have an idea."

* * * * *

"I can't believe you were in this kind of danger while I was away," Alik said as he and Rosa walked down a dim alley behind a Boston restaurant. "What is wrong with you, woman? Volunteering to search for a maniac!"

"Remember one time you asked if I'd ever done something because it's the right thing to do?"

"Yeah."

"Well that's the reason. Someone has to get this guy. A girl can't even go out for some blood and a good screw anymore without worrying about getting her heart ripped out – literally."

He shook his head. "The idea of anything happening to you makes me sick."

"Well, now we're partners in work and in play, so you can do whatever you like to protect me."

Rosa had brought him to the Network meeting where, after a phone call to the First Father – the Network figurehead – Alik had been sworn in as a temporary agent for the case. If he worked out well, he could be nominated for a permanent position. In the meantime, the Network would secure a new identity for Alik, now that he was presumed dead in the mortal world.

At the meeting they'd also learned the Network considered the serial killer such a top priority that a specialist had been called in. Cody Dilorenzo, Vincent's cousin, was head of the agents' training program and oversaw camps throughout the world. Known for his ability to bring criminals such as the serial killer to justice, Cody was one of the toughest, most experienced vampires in the Network, with centuries of battles behind him.

"I'd protect you with my life, woman." Alik glanced at her, his eyes intense.

"That's terribly romantic, but I hope it doesn't come to that. I—"

"Smell that?" He lifted his chin and sniffed. "Blood and vampire. Immaculate."

"No one I know." Rosa's heartbeat quickened as they drew their guns, loaded with platinum bullets, and followed the scents, knowing another victim – and most likely the killer – would be at the end of the trail.

"Shit!" Rosa snapped when they stepped down another ally and saw a body twisted beside an overturned garbage can.

Rosa hurried toward it as Alik shouted, "Rosa, don't!"

Stooping beside the body, she noted the heart had been ripped out and positioned beside the head. "Alik, it's - "

A crash sounded at the mouth of the alley and Rosa's gaze riveted to where Alik struggled with a tall man clad in jeans and a dirty raincoat. His scent told her he was an Immaculate, as did his strength, since he'd already ripped the gun from Alik's hand and flung him face-first into a brick wall.

Rosa fired her gun at the killer who dodged the bullets. Apparently he possessed keen mind control and was able to sense her actions, enabling him to avoid the gunfire. There was only one way to fight a vampire with such a skill, and that was to depend on instinct alone. To fight without thought.

Before she could reload, the Immaculate leapt across the ally and grasped her by the throat, pinning her to the wall. She felt his claws sinking into her flesh and her heart throbbed wildly. She jabbed her knees into her captor's stomach and tore at his hands to no avail. Hybrid strength was nothing to an Immaculate.

Alik leapt on the killer's back and raked his nails across his eyes. Howling in pain and fury, the Immaculate spun, ramming his back – and Alik – into the wall.

The killer broke Alik's choke hold and slammed him onto his back. Rosa lunged for her discarded gun, yelping when the maniac's booted heel crushed her hand into the pavement.

Alik flew at him, and the Immaculate caught him by the throat. The fiend's lips drew back in a hellish snarl, revealing thick white incisors. As he dragged Alik closer to bite, he shrieked. Alik had driven one of his metal climbing spikes into the side of the killer's neck. He yanked out the spike as his captor dropped him and staggered out of the alley.

Alik followed.

"No!" Rosa shouted, ignoring the pain in her crushed hand as she reloaded the gun. "Let him go! He'll kill you!"

Ignoring her, Alik leapt onto the fire escape and dove on the Immaculate before he picked up too much speed emerging from the alley.

Rosa watched in horror as the two rolled on the ground. She tried aiming her gun, but didn't shoot for fear of hitting Alik. The scent of yet another vampire filled the alley, but she was too absorbed in the fight to care who it was.

A death cry rang out and Rosa screamed, racing toward Alik and the killer who lay entwined on the bloody pavement.

With a groan, Alik shoved the body off him. The killer gurgled, his dark eyes still wide with shock. The metal spike protruded from his chest. His hands clenched it weakly before dropping away in death.

Rosa paused, panting, elation and rage leaving her momentarily speechless.

Alik stood, leaning forward with his hands on his knees and taking several deep breaths. He glanced up at Rosa, his blue eyes gleaming.

"Are you crazy?" she demanded. "You can't fight an Immaculate!"

Alik cocked an eyebrow and straightened, prodding the body with his foot. "I just did."

"Hey!" A deep, masculine voice caused them both to spin. A tall Immaculate with short blond hair and shrewd blue eyes approached them from the street. A black leather coat draped his broad-shouldered, long-legged body, and a toothpick protruded from the corner of his mouth. His scent was the one Rosa had detected moments before.

"Who are you?" Alik said, and Rosa felt him tense for another fight.

"Name's Cody Dilorenzo."

The specialist!

Cody stopped in front of Alik so they stood eye to eye. "It's been centuries since I've seen a hybrid kill an Immaculate."

"We're supposed to be inferior, right?" Alik's lip curled.

"You are. It just so happens that among every species there are ones who rise above their own limitations. Am I right in guessing you're Alik Lennox?"

"Yes."

"Well, Alik Lennox," Cody tugged the toothpick from his mouth and chucked it in a garbage can, "I've heard a lot about you, and now that I've seen for myself what you're made of, I have a proposition for you."

* * * * *

Before his temporary initiation as an agent, Alik had no idea that Poet's Manor was the Network's North American headquarters. The hotel was a haven, prison, and information center for Network activities, with the entire top floor devoted to their cause. Alik sat with Rosa, Cody Dilorenzo, and the Network leader, Adam Lindsay. The First Father's resemblance to Matthew Winter was eerie – but Alik told himself that was to be expected from identical twins.

"Here's the story." Cody leaned back in his chair at one end of the long, rectangular table. He rested his elbows on the wooden arms and created a steeple with his long-fingered hands. "You all know I've been looking for a drill instructor for a special forces unit of hybrids I'm training at my camp in Canada."

"Yes. Brett was among the candidates, but he didn't want to end his career as a street agent just yet," Adam said.

"Well, that might have been a good thing." Cody glanced in Alik's direction. "I found somebody who's probably even better for the job. Lennox, how would you feel about taking it on?"

Alik held Cody's gaze before glancing at Rosa. "I could take her with me?"

"Excuse me!" Rosa snapped. "When did I say I wanted to move up to some training camp in Canada?"

"You didn't."

"Then why should I want to go?"

Because, I want you to be my wife, Alik spoke to her telepathically. I'm sorry this isn't the most romantic way to propose, but I'll get down on my knees later.

Rosa grinned. "I've always wanted to live in Canada."

"It'd be no problem." Cody shrugged. "So, Adam, how soon can he be initiated?"

"I can do it tonight," Adam stated. "It would probably be best since I have to return to New York as soon as possible. Are you sure this is what you want, Alik?"

"Yes," Alik stated. "As I said to Rosa, I'm a soldier. Always will be."

Cody's lips curled back in one of the toughest grins Alik had ever seen – and he'd *seen* the toughest. "That's what I expected to hear. You'll do well, Lennox. Train us some sharp-toothed ass kickers and make the Network proud."

"Cody, I'll need you and Rosa to stand as witnesses to the initiation," Adam said.

The tall, blond vampire cracked his neck and rolled his broad shoulders. "Let's get to it."

Alik glanced at Rosa, a smile in his eyes as he stood in front of Adam who began the initiation.

Less than an hour later, he and Rosa walked down the dark Boston streets as the first snow of the year fell. Alik slipped his arm around her shoulders and held her close.

"Suppose we can find a jewelry store still open?" he asked.

"Why?"

"Because I owe you an engagement ring. You want a diamond, or is there another stone you prefer?"

Rosa gazed up at him and smiled, revealing the tips of her lovely little fangs. "Our kind traditionally gives rubies for an engagement."

"Then a ruby it is."

Together, Alik and Rosa chose a heart-shaped ruby surrounded by tiny diamonds. After paying for the ring, Alik slipped it into his coat pocket.

"I thought you'd at least let me wear it." Rosa huffed.

"Not until we do it right."

As soon as they entered their room at Poet's Manor, Alik closed the door, grasped both of Rosa's hands, and dropped to one knee in front of her.

"Rosa Ferrer, will you be my wife?" He stared at her, saw the desire burning in her eyes, and felt his cock leap.

"Yes, I will."

Alik took the ring and slipped it on her finger before kissing the back of her hand.

"Alik," Rosa knelt facing him and took his face in her hands, "after you left, there was something I regretted not telling you, so I'll say it now. Thank you."

"Thank me?" His brow furrowed. She was the one who'd given him another chance at life!

"Before I met you, I had no idea what it felt like to love, or to be loved myself. I never knew my mother, and my father – he didn't know the meaning of love any more than I did. You've given me a priceless gift and shown me what really matters, so thank you."

He took her hands and pressed them to his chest as he whispered against her lips, "You're welcome."

Epilogue

One Month Later A Network Training Camp in Canada

Rosa smiled as she stepped out of the shower, dried off, and smoothed vanilla-scented lotion over her body. Naked, she walked to the bedroom and sprawled on the bed, waiting.

It was just before dawn, and Alik would be home any minute – she hoped. After Cody Dilorenzo had recruited him as a drill instructor, Alik had thrown himself into his work. Sometimes he didn't return until well after sunrise. Still, she was glad he'd found a way to accept his new life. *Their* new life.

Rosa couldn't believe they were married – and that she loved being a wife. She'd never imagined binding herself to any one man for eternity, but she'd never dreamed of finding a man like Alik Lenn – She grinned at her slip. As part of his new identity, he'd taken her last name. Alik and Rosa Ferrer. How she loved the sound of that!

She still trained fighters, but had set up another school in Canada, near the camp. Every now and then she traveled for special matches, but she preferred not to be separated from Alik for long. They'd built a house near the Network camp, and though it still needed work, they were in no rush. After all, they were looking forward to a long, long life together.

Her pulse quickened when she caught Alik's scent. Moments later he paused in the doorway.

"Damn," his hypnotic gaze raked her naked curves, "am I hungry."

"Then come here and eat."

Alik growled as he kicked off his boots, tugged off his trousers, and jerked his T-shirt over his head. Rosa's belly tightened at the sight of his long, rock-hard body striding towards her. His cock rose, thick and ruddy, as his gaze roamed from her breasts to her hand stroking the thatch of dark curls between her legs.

His body covered hers, and he nuzzled her neck as his fingers dipped into her heated slit.

"Rosa," he whispered close to her ear before nipping the lobe. His thumb stroked one of her nipples to a hard peak before he swept his hand down her ribs and hip. "Alik! Oh, Alik!" she breathed as his skilled fingers stroked her moist folds of flesh and circled her clit.

"Talk to me, Rosa. I love it when you talk to me."

"I love you, Alik." She caressed his face and nearly gasped as his gaze met hers with pure affection and desire, reflecting his every emotion. She knew it was a rare thing, for her soldier to bare all, and she savored the moment.

"I love you, Rosa. I owe you my life."

"No more than I owe you mine. Before you, I thought I knew what happiness was, but I had no idea."

"Glad I could give you an idea." He buried his hand in the hair at her nape and kissed her.

Rosa's arms slipped around his neck and her legs locked around his waist. His fangs and cock simultaneously penetrated her flesh in two very different places, both providing unimaginable pleasure - much like she and Alik themselves, opposite yet an absolutely perfect combination.

The End

About the author:

A lifelong fan of action and romance, Kate Hill likes heroes with a touch of something wicked and wild. Her short fiction and poetry have appeared in publications both on and off the Internet. When she's not working on her books, Kate enjoys dancing, martial arts, and researching vampires and Viking history.

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Also by Kate Hill:

Ancient Blood 1: The Blood Doctor Ancient Blood 2: The Stalking Ancient Blood 3: Deep Red Dream Stallion Knights of the Ruby Order 1: Torn Knights of the Ruby Order 2: Crag Midnight Desires Moonlust Privateer

PREY FOR ME

CLAUDIA ROSE

"Do you want me to give you a bath?"

"Oh, darling. There's nothing I'd like more." The old woman's voice cracked with pain and tailed off to a whisper. She looked up at the marvelous creature standing over her. His beauty bathed her like rays of sunlight. She so desperately wished she could bask in it forever. But she couldn't. Her decision was made, and it was final. Determination to die a mortal death didn't prevent a stab of grief wracking her wasted body. She gasped, but succeeded in turning the gasp into a weak chuckle.

"What's funny?"

"I'm sorry. I just thought of you as being like the sun, and then realized how ironic that was."

He smiled wanly.

"You could be my son, though."

"Don't joke, Rose. I can't stand it."

"Oh , Prey. We've always been able to laugh. Right from the time when I was just a girl and you were the mature handsome man with lethal eye teeth."

Prey wouldn't laugh. Nor would he be distracted by reminiscences of happier times. Tenderly he pulled back the sheet and began carefully removing Rose's nightgown.

"Haven't I changed since then," she whispered, looking down at her shrunken, aged body.

"You don't look any different to me. You're as beautiful as the day we met." His face affirmed his words. His eyes caressed her with the same awe they had the first time he beheld her naked body.

"Flatterer. That was sixty-five years ago."

"The best sixty-five years of my..."

"Life?"

"If you can call it a life."

"Don't be so bitter. Haven't we had a wonderful time together?

"Have we? You're leaving me. Alone. If it's so wonderful you only have to say the word and we can be together forever. Please stay, my love. We don't have to part."

Prey For Me

"If I stay, we'll part anyway. It was you who told me love between the undead is always destroyed by the craving for human warmth...and human blood."

"Perhaps I was wrong. And anyway, I haven't tasted much blood in decades."

"No, my dear, you haven't. I'd have let you take more if you'd wanted it. But you have basked in my warmth. If you make me the same as you, I won't be warm anymore. You'll have lost me anyway. Now, what about my bath?"

Sighing, Prey stood up and shrugged out of the silk robe he was wearing.

"You haven't changed," marveled Rose in a whisper. "You haven't changed one bit."

Before her stood a sculpture of firm cool flesh. So white he seemed made of alabaster. A marble sculpture of a big, powerful man, half brought to life, supple and pliant, yet cool to the touch. Only a dark bush of pubic hair interrupted the white perfection of his body.

"Let me touch you." Rose reached one veined, shaking hand towards him. Obligingly he moved closer so she could explore his crotch. His testicles were cool, and heavy to her touch. She gripped his scrotum for a moment, and pulled. Prey closed his eyes and sighed softly, showing the faintest hint of the retracted tips of his gleaming, needle-sharp fangs. His cock began to thicken.

"I want you."

Prey opened his eyes.

"Is that wise? What if I hurt you?"

"I don't care. I want you. Make love to me. Please Prey. Please, my beautiful lover. Take me as you always have. I want you."

Without another word, Prey settled himself on the bed. Kissing his lover's aged body. Murmuring endearments. Tasting her breasts with the same passion as the very first time he'd taken her. Entering her as gently as he had the night he'd taken her virginity. Slowly, carefully, making love until Rose clutched at his back, her nails digging in ever so softly, and they both climaxed.

"Prey. Oh, Prey. Do it for me. Prey...for me."

"Come in!" called John Tsaloumas firmly, looking up from his papers to see who had knocked.

The woman who entered was physically imposing. Six feet tall, she gave an impression of athleticism and strength. Her brunette hair was cropped short for convenience. Her shoulders were as wide as an Olympic swimmer's, their width accentuated by the shoulder holster she wore. A tight t-shirt displayed her large breasts. Form-fitting slacks hugged her strongly-muscled thighs. Only her hazel eyes were incongruous. They were deeply shadowed, the irises half hidden behind eyelids drooping with exhaustion.

"You wanted to see me, Captain?" Her voice was strong and husky. At school she'd been nicknamed "Alf," after the singer Alison Moyet.

"Yes Jessi – Yes, Detective Sergeant Croft. Come in and shut the door."

Jess willed her face to remain impassive. John–Captain John Tsaloumas of the Union City Police Department–hadn't offered her a seat. She came stiffly to attention, her insides stiffening too. This could get bloody.

"I'm gravely concerned about your handling of the Stalker case."

"I'm not sure why, Sir. I've just stopped a brutal serial rapist in the process of attacking his seventh victim. What could be the problem with that? It's what you, the media and the Mayor have been demanding for weeks."

"Don't get flippant with me. Krantz just called from the hospital to say our suspect has died from his wounds."

"That'll save our good citizens the cost of a trial."

"I said, don't get flippant with me Croft." The Captain's mouth pursed into a hard line. "Our suspect is dead because *you* shot him. Right in front of one of your tame journalists. She is now going to bite the hand that fed her by telling the City he was unarmed. You're swimming in shit, Croft. And I'm not diving in to keep you company."

"I didn't know he was unarmed, Sir. As I've already explained, it was almost dark when we surprised him. He jumped up from his victim with something in his hand. I fired because I thought he was holding a weapon."

"He was holding his penis, Detective."

"Just as I suspected, Sir. Armed and dangerous."

"One more wisecrack, and I'll throw you to the investigators myself."

"Try telling his victims that his sad little prick wasn't a weapon, Sir. The damage he's inflicted on some of them, he may as well have shot them."

The Captain softened his tone.

"Look Jess, I know how hard this case has been on you. Personally I don't have a problem with what you did. It was only a matter of weeks before that bastard began killing. But it's an election year, and police conduct is a hot topic on the campaign trail. More than one candidate will be wanting to use you as a stepping stone up the polls."

"Let them step. I can sleep nights."

"Oh for goodness sakes. Sit down. Let's talk about this rationally."

Jess's resolve slumped with her into the chair. She stared blankly at the floor of John Tsaloumas's office, trying not to think about the man—the animal—she'd just executed.

"Are you alright, Jess?" The Captain's softened voice couldn't disguise his worry. She looked up, and into his eyes. She felt too tired and depressed to front with her customary bravado.

"I've been better, John. Things seemed to have got out of hand these last few weeks. I'm sorry for the problems I've caused you."

"Forget them." He gave a small, dismissive wave with his hand. "I'll sort it out. The girl he was attacking is only fourteen. You'll probably become a hero. Nobody will dare touch you."

"I don't want to be a hero. I just want to get back to my job."

"That might be more of a problem."

"What do you mean?"

"You're traumatized, Jess. I've seen it before. You need a break and you need some help, some counseling. For your own safety, and for the safety of your partners, I need you to take some time off. I'm scheduling you an indefinite leave."

Jess stiffened in her seat, rising panic replacing her weariness.

"No! You can't do that to me, John. I'm fine. I don't want to take leave."

"It's not a choice, Jess. I'm not going to stand by and let you destroy yourself. You're on leave, with full pay. Take a holiday. Hell! Tell Chris to take a holiday too. The two of you can take a break."

"Chris has already taken a break."

"What? What do you mean? You haven't split up have you?"

"Two months ago," Jess affirmed dully.

"Why the fuck didn't you tell me?" exploded the Captain.

"What the fuck difference would it have made," Jess countered bitterly. "Just another cop marriage falling apart. Happens every day around here."

Claudia Rose

"But I just saw you two together at Christmas. You both seemed so happy. I heard Chris joking about giving birth to sporting millionaires--a son named Tiger and a daughter named Martina--so you'd be secure in your retirement."

"That was just before we learned there wouldn't be any sons or daughters. He couldn't forgive me. He left in search of a better incubator for his precious sperm."

"Oh God Jess. I'm so sorry. Why didn't you tell me?"

"It's not something I want to talk about. I just want to do my job. Don't send me on leave, John. Please."

"I have to Jess. I hear what you're saying, but I have a responsibility to you and your team. You need help. And you need it bad. If I let you stay, it's a recipe for disaster. Finish any urgent paperwork and pack up your desk, then come back to my place for dinner. Poppy would love to see you, and it'll give us a chance to talk about what you're going to do."

Prey woke abruptly. He knew at once where he was, and what had happened. They'd made love. Then they'd fallen asleep, just as they always had. But he'd promised Rose a bath, she had no clothing on, she'd get cold. It wasn't as if his body provided any warmth.

He propped himself up on one arm and smiled at the peaceful repose he saw on the lined face of his lover.

"Rose," he whispered. "Time for your bath." She didn't stir. He touched her face. She *was* cold.

Too cold.

Prey knew at once she'd gone.

"Rose!"

Panic.

"You can't be dead! Don't leave me!"

Grief and pain, like nothing he'd ever known in his long existence, overwhelmed him. He couldn't lose her. With a cry of animal passion, compelled by pure instinct, he extended his fangs and buried them in the wasted neck of Rose's corpse.

Love, need, grief and desire, welled within him. In that moment, if he could have, if there had been even the smallest spark of life, he'd have brought her back to be with him, among the undead. But there was nothing. Not a trickle of fluid, not a flicker of warmth.

Rose was gone. Forever. And all he had in his mouth was the wasted, fleshly remains of the one person he'd ever loved.

Prey released his bite and snarled his agony at the empty room. In a moment the sacred place where they'd cloistered themselves away for six blissful decades had become a crypt. His mind reeled with the pain. It was too much.

Desperate to escape he did something he hadn't done for years. He transformed—shrinking in seconds into a poorly defined shadow, the size of a bird. Frantically the shape raced from room to room. Prey's blundering was deliberate. He wanted to hurt himself. He hit walls, glanced off lights, tangled in curtains and flew into doors. Eventually one particularly heavy collision stunned him and he fell to the floor.

He had no idea how long he lay there. Some time later he returned to consciousness and, with it, some form of sanity.

Claudia Rose

Back in human form and numb with grief, Prey set about robotically performing a series of necessary tasks. He washed Rose's body. He dressed her in her most beautiful gown. He laid her tenderly on the bed. Then he found a letter written some months ago and slipped out the front door under the cover of dark to place it inside the mail box for tomorrow's post.

Everything was in order. He placed one last kiss on Rose's cold forehead. Then he left without looking back. He descended to the bottom level of the house. There he opened a small dark door to a flight of steps leading even further downwards, disappearing into pitch blackness. Prey entered without hesitating. Closing the door behind him, he turned the key in the lock and stepped slowly down into the darkness.

The house was silent. Upstairs the candles illuminating Rose's body flickered, guttered, and went out.

John Tsaloumas parked and squinted up at Jessica Croft's home. When she'd stopped returning his calls he thought he'd better turn up in person. The front door was wide open and he could make out movement in the shadowed interior. He got out of his car and walked up the path.

"Hi, John. What are you doing here?"

Jess was inside the front door packing books into a box. She greeted John matter-of-factly, hardly glancing up from her work.

"Hi Jess. I was just passing and thought I'd stop in. What's happening?"

"I've rented my house for four months. I'm just putting a few things into storage and shipping some others to my new abode." She hefted the box off the ground effortlessly, and pushed past John to place it on a large pile of similar boxes stacked out on the porch.

This done, she placed her hands in the small of her back and arched backwards. She was wearing the tightest pair of black leather pants he'd ever scene. They were practically a second skin. There was no way she had panties on. A very tight, very tiny, black tank-top with spaghetti straps was her only other garment. Her big, unfettered breasts jutted towards him as she stretched her back.

"Nice outfit," John commented, failing miserably to sound casual. He'd always tried to be detached about his female staff, but if he'd ever broken his own vows and values and had an office affair, he'd have chosen Jess to have it with.

She grinned, aware of the effect she was having on him.

"It's my biker-chick ensemble. Like it?"

"Ye-es. But why are you wearing it? And where are you going?"

"The outfit is for my new toy." She pointed to a gleaming Harley out on the street. "I'm renting because according to a letter I got last month my only living relative, Great-Aunt Rose, has just died and left me her home in Stillwater."

"I'm sorry about your Aunt."

"Don't be. I hardly knew her. She was my Mother's step-sister. I met her about twice. I always found her a bit creepy. She lived in this huge old house, all on her own, with the drapes permanently pulled. She had long black hair and a deathly pale face. I think she was beautiful, but she always reminded me of Morticia Adams." "You're not moving permanently are you?"

"I'm not sure. I don't think so. I'm just going there to check things out. I need a change of scenery, and something to occupy my mind while I'm – ahem – stood down. As you know, I love 'Do it Yourself'. My plan is to spend a bit of time renovating the house, and then decide whether to keep it or sell it."

"You aren't on leave forever, you know."

"I know, John. But you were right. I needed the break. I was going crazy. And now that I'm re-gathering my wits, I'm less sure that I want to go back to what I was doing. Some of those cases still haunt me."

"I don't want to lose you, but I do understand. You go, Jess, and do what you have to. But keep in touch. Okay?"

"Okay." Smiling, Jess gave him a brief kiss on the cheek. Then she turned back to her packing, filling one last box and placing it on the pile.

"That's the lot. And just in time, here's the truck to collect it all." Jess went out to the curb and spoke briefly to the truck driver. Then she returned to where John was waiting. "That's taken care of," she chuckled. "As soon as I get the rest of my biker-chick gear on, I'm outta here."

John watched as Jess bent to slip her feet into a pair of expensive leather boots--the sort a dominatrix would die for. The way she bent over as she pulled the boots on gave him an unimpeded view down her front. He knew he should look away, but the sight of her firm, full breasts transfixed him. Of its own accord, his groin thickened uncomfortably. The grin she gave him as she straightened up and took down a leather jacket from a hook inside the door made him worry that she knew exactly what was going on in his mind. She shrugged into the jacket which, even zipped, didn't conceal the womanly thrust of her breasts.

"What do you think?"

John whistled softly. "You look like something out of *Terminator*. Don't scare those people in Stillwater, they're not so resilient down there."

Jess laughed. John walked with her out to her bike. She mounted in one fluid motion, pulled on gloves and a full-faced helmet, and kicked the gleaming machine into life.

"Good luck."

Jess acknowledged him with a casual wave of one hand, then opened the throttle and rumbled away up the street.

John Tsaloumas watched until she disappeared from view, his mind awhirl with arousal and regret.

Once past the town limits, the empty road stretching ahead filled Jess with excitement. She opened the throttle wider. The hog vibrated powerfully between her legs. An unfamiliar feeling welled up in her. What was it? Euphoria! For the first time in God knows how many long months she felt glad to be alive.

With one hand she loosened the chin strap of her helmet and pulled it off, sitting it between her thighs. She'd seen enough head injuries to know how dangerous this was, but the need to feel the wind of freedom in her hair overrode all thoughts of safety.

"Yeee-hah!"

It was good to be alive. And good to be away from a job that brought her into continual contact with the bottom dwellers and scum that preyed on the poor, the weak and the defenseless.

"Fuck them!" she shouted to the empty road. "Fuck the rapists! Fuck the thieves! Fuck the murderers!" Jess hesitated for a moment. She felt more like her old self—confident, alive, strong and sexy. She was back in control. Taking a deep breath, she made herself confront the thing she'd blocked out these last, terrible months. After seven years he had left her. "And fuck you as well, Chris, you sanctimonious bastard! I hope you get what you deserve."

Fuck Chris! Oh God, how I'd like to fuck Chris. Just to make love once more. We were so great in bed. He had such a nice cock for an utter bastard. I don't miss him, but I sure miss that big penis. Give me a choice and I'd rather ride that than this here hog.

Still, the hog was here and Chris wasn't. And the thought of sex sure had made her wet. These tight leather pants molded themselves so deliciously against her flesh. The seam of the crotch contrived to stimulate her clitoris better than Chris ever had. Leaving her inhibitions in her wake Jess began rubbing herself through the leather of her pants, opening the throttle still wider with her other hand. The throb of the Harley increased. Jess kept the throttle open. At close to one hundred miles an hour, on a switchback straight, Jess had the best orgasm she'd enjoyed all year.

Jess arrived at Aunt Rose's house just on sunset. She pulled up the drive and killed the engine. It really was a most beautiful mansion, and worth a fortune. With Aunt Rose's legacy she was set for life. Even so, in the gathering dusk the darkened edifice appeared eerie and deserted. Jess shivered, reminded unwillingly of all the haunted mansions she'd seen in horror movies. What if Aunt Rose wasn't really dead. What if she was lurking up in the attic, like a female Norman Bates waiting to plunge a knife through the shower curtain and into someone's warm flesh.

Chuckling softly at her own imaginings, Jess got off the bike and strolled purposefully up to the front door. The key she'd been sent by the lawyer turned smoothly in the lock. There was a light switch just inside the front door, and when she tried it the entranceway lit up with a warm glow from a large ornate chandelier, some fifteen feet above her.

"Wow!" Jess breathed. This she hadn't expected. She'd been a little girl the last time she'd set foot in Aunt Rose's house, and she didn't remember much of what it looked like inside. The house was beautiful. Everything in it was old, but it was all in perfect condition, and of the finest quality. And it was all hers.

Entranced, she began wandering from room to room. Her heels clicked on the marble of the foyer, and then echoed hollowly on the polished floors of the rooms off it. She'd never imagined this. Not in a million years. There was a great dining table, a drawing room, a billiards room, bedrooms and bathrooms everywhere. It was a stately home without servants. She made her way up the wide sweeping staircase, trailing a finger up the gleaming banister. Not much dust even.

In the master bedroom, she found a huge walk-in closet, still full of clothes. Not only Aunt Rose's clothes, but a complete wardrobe of clothing for a man. A very tall man with exquisite fashion sense, even if the styles were somewhat dated. Jess chuckled softly to herself. There was a lot more to Aunt Rose than she'd ever imagined. Whose clothes were these, and how long had they been hanging here, she wondered. She turned to walk out and spied in the corner near the door a folded wheelchair. Strange. She hadn't thought Aunt Rose had ever needed to use such a thing. Shit, what did she know?

Out of the whole house, only one door was locked. It was a small door on the ground floor next to the kitchen, a cupboard perhaps, or possibly a way down to a basement. "You can check that out tomorrow. Right now you need a shower, some dinner, and a good night's sleep," she told herself. Her voice sounded

hollow beneath the high ceilings. It was slightly eerie, but she dismissed her unease with a self-conscious chuckle and went in search of the refrigerator.

Again she found more than she'd bargained for. Aunt Rose, who was already being revised in her estimation, rose even more rapidly when Jess discovered a giant freezer full of gourmet meals sourced from the city's finest restaurants. She may not have gotten out much, but the old lady certainly appreciated the best. And whatever else Aunt Rose was, she wasn't a Vegan. There was enough red meat here to heat up the blood of the hungriest bikerchick. For a long time Jess hovered over a meal labeled 'Veal Tournedos Chantal', before succumbing to her love of seafood and heating up a large bowl of Creole Bouillabaisse. Perfect. Fish and shellfish in a mouth-watering tomato broth redolent with saffron and garlic. By the time she'd finished, she was satiated and sleepy.

Late the next morning Jess awoke when a sliver of sunlight squeezing between the heavy velvet drapes of the master bedroom fell on her face. For the first time in months her sleep had been uninterrupted by dreams. She felt at peace, and content to let the day reveal itself. She stretched between Aunt Rose's silk sheets (style, the woman had style) and thought about her day. Her initial intention to modernize the house and sell it, had lasted as long as it took her to open the front door. She had fallen in love with its grandeur and elegance.

Shrugging into some clothes, Jess wandered again through every room, throwing open the heavy drapes to let the morning sun in. A light shower of dust made her sneeze, clearly these drapes hadn't been opened often. Admiration for her aunt's style kept on growing. She was falling steadily more in love with the timeless beauty of the place and the classic objets d'art she kept encountering. Where had the woman got all her money from? Eventually her wandering brought her once more to the mysterious little locked door. She'd been a detective too long to like a mystery. She searched everywhere for a likely key.

"Oh what the hell. It's my house." Jess had kicked down a few doors in her career, and she was pretty good at judging how much give a door had. This one shouldn't take more than two charges of her shoulder.

It took three.

The narrow steps descending into darkness made Jessica shiver. She felt around the wall inside and encountered a switch. The tiny bulb didn't give much illumination, she still couldn't see the bottom of the stairs. Hesitantly she descended a few steps. Suddenly she froze. There was a soft creaking sound, and it came from behind her. She spun round in time to see the small door she'd forced open rattle shut against the splintered frame.

"What the fuck!" Jess gasped, her heart hammering. Something out of place had set off every alarm in her detective's brain. She'd found the key. The door had been locked from the inside.

Two bounds took her up the stairs and back through the door. She stood in the hallway, her heart beating furiously. Think! Try to think! How could the door to the basement be locked from the inside? It was ridiculous to imagine there could be someone (or something) down there. What was the logical explanation? Another door. There must be a way into the cellar from the outside.

Laughing at herself, Jess walked out the front door and into the garden. Aunt Rose's large section wasn't nearly as well maintained as the interior of her house. Big trees enclosed the boundary and within them a basic lawn that looked as if it was cut irregularly. There were no flowers, and no sign that the outdoors was ever utilized.

"Looks like this is where I'll be doing most of my work," muttered Jess to herself. The thought excited her. The chance to create a garden from scratch was just the sort of challenge she needed. She had the mystery of the cellar to solve first, however. Sure enough, there were coal doors flat in the ground. A second way into the cellar. It was as simple as that. Someone had locked the inner door, and exited through the coal doors. In the bright sunlight Jess felt a bit stupid.

She returned to the house, and headed for the cellar door again. Back inside, out of the sun, the steps down into darkness seemed no less ominous. With a muttered curse at her own wild imaginings, she went and found a flashlight and her gun before venturing back down.

Weapon in hand she descended slowly into the darkness. The cellar was unusually deep. She counted twenty-two steps. The flashlight revealed another switch at the bottom that illuminated two more very weak bulbs. They were enough to show that the cellar contained almost nothing. There was a rack full of ancient bottles of wine, some old furniture, a few rusty tools, plenty of cobwebs, and, across the farthest end, an incongruous wall.

The wall was completely out of place. It was totally unlike the other three walls in the cellar. For one thing, it appeared new. The bricklaying was some of the worst Jess had ever seen. Mortar dripped and squeezed haphazardly from between the bricks, leaving spatters on the floor. There was a gap of at least an inch between the top row and the cellar ceiling. Standing on her toes, Jess was able to insert her fingers into the gap. They didn't encounter any resistance on the other side, just a feeling of a cold, damp space.

Looking around, Jessica spied an old leaf rake with metal tines propped against a wall. She picked it up and squeezed the tines between the space. They gripped on the top row and when she pulled, two of the bricks fell down with heavy thunks. One broke on the cellar floor. She pulled again, more bricks came free. She had less success with the next row. These were more thoroughly mortared in, although the mortar still seemed damp and soft.

Jess looked around the cellar once again. There in the far corner was a heavy steel crowbar. Hefting it up, she got a firm purchase on the next row down and pulled with all her strength. The bricks shifted with a grating sound. Another pull. The upper three feet of the wall leaned precariously outwards. A third pull. The wall collapsed, not from the middle, but from the left, falling forward like a sun-struck soldier dropping to his knees on the parade ground. Jess barely escaped being crushed by the falling bricks. She coughed and sputtered as her nose, mouth and eyes filled with dust. For at least a minute she couldn't see a thing.

When the dust settled her flashlight revealed a large, irregular hole where the wall had been, and a great scatter of bricks. Behind the walled off area was a room of sorts, six feet deep. Jess played her beam over its roof and slowly down the back wall. Then she did something she hadn't done in years. She screamed in pure terror.

The beam of her light illuminated a corpse. A man, naked, pure white, lying flat on his back on a rough wooden slab laid atop a base of bricks. She took an involuntary step backward, tripped over a brick, and fell heavily. Desperately she scrambled back to her feet, clutching her gun. She couldn't credit what she'd just seen.

She had another look. It was still there, a dead body, hidden in a secret room in the basement of her new home. Yet there was something wrong. She'd seen plenty of corpses before. This one just wasn't right. Or rather, it was too right. There was no sign, or smell, of decay. Perhaps it wasn't real.

She edged closer. Not too close, but enough to play the beam over every inch of the body. It must be a sculpture of some sort, it couldn't be a corpse. For one thing, no man was this perfect. He...it...was beautiful, there was no other way to describe him. A little thin for someone so large perhaps, but still marvelously proportioned.

Her pulse returning to normal, Jess idly studied the extraordinary vision before her. Long limbs, alabaster skin, slender but powerful hands, large pecs, strong neck, square jaw, delicately shaped lips, a fine bridged nose, and eyes a little too deeply sunken and shadowed to be ideal.

"Will you take that light out of my eyes?"

Jess's earlier scream was a whisper compared to the terror-stricken shriek she gave this time. The flashlight clattered to the floor and went out. Only the dull bulbs illuminated the scene. The thing in there had talked and, worse, the eyes had opened and the head had swiveled to look at her. This couldn't be happening. She wanted to run, but for the first time she understood what people meant when they talked about being rooted to the spot with fear.

The thing sat up slowly and looked at her. "Go away," it commanded flatly.

"Wha...wha...?" managed Jessica.

"I said go away. I don't know who you are. I don't care who you are. Just turn off the lights and leave me alone!"

"Who are you?" Jess gasped.

"That's none of your business. Go away. Leave me alone."

Taking two steps back, Jess felt in her jeans for her cellphone. She dialed 911 without removing her eyes from the creature. He watched her actions, his eyes narrowing into a frown.

"Put that phone away."

"He...hello operator. Get me the police."

"Put that phone away or I'll kill you."

Jess took another step backwards.

He was so quick, she hardly saw him move, but in a fluid leap he was upon her, the phone and the gun snatched powerfully from her grasp. He threw the gun behind her and dropped the phone on the floor, crushing it beneath his heel.

"Are you deaf?" Jess was six feet tall, but the man towered over her by at least six inches.

"N...no."

"Then what is it about 'go away' that you don't understand."

"Who are you?"

"That's none of your business."

"None of my business? This is my house."

"Your house?" The man gave a dry chuckle. "I guess you're the niece then."

"You knew my Aunt Rose?"

"In a manner of speaking. She left me this basement. So get out."

"What's your name. I don't remember any mention of a man getting the basement in the will."

"My name is Prey."

"Pray? Pray for what?"

"No. Prey. P-R-E-Y. And I imagine I'm not mentioned in the will. Such mortal constructs are meaningless to someone such as me. But as I don't plan on going anywhere that hardly matters. Get out."

Past her fear, and emboldened by adrenalin, Jess countered, "Stop ordering me around, this is my house, and you—whoever or whatever you are—are trespassing. You've got fifteen minutes to go or I'll have you removed."

The man closed his eyes and his jaw clenched.

"You don't know what you are playing with, girl. Accept the fact that I am here and leave me alone, and you'll never be bothered by me. Cause me problems, and niece or no, it'll be the last thing you ever do."

"I don't respond well to threats. Never have."

"Then respond to this, you stupid mortal fool." Before Jess's eyes, the creature seemed to swell in size. His eyes darkened until they were almost totally black, and his lips pulled back from his gums to reveal the whitest, most deadly-looking set of fangs she'd ever imagined. The fangs extended slowly from his jaw until each was over an inch long. From his throat a low growl rumbled.

Terrified all over again, Jess retreated towards the stairs. The creature made no move to follow her, just watched until she was at the base of the flight. Then he spoke again.

"You may find this hard to believe, but I mean you no harm. For the sake of your Aunt I would not willingly harm a hair on your head. I just want to be

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alone. But be warned, if you do trouble me there will be no escape. The police cannot detain me, conventional weapons cannot harm me, and I will hunt you down and destroy you. Now, for the last time, leave me alone."

Jess crouched down and scrabbled at her feet for the gun. Then, without another word, she stood up, took one final look at the creature, and retreated slowly backwards up the stairs.

* * * * *

In the hall, her back to the cellar door, Jess's mind whirled. This couldn't be real. Had she seen what she thought she'd just witnessed? There was a handsome, nude man down in her basement. At least he looked like a man, but no man she'd ever met, not even one of the murderers or rapists, sported such an evil looking set of fangs.

What to do?

She didn't want to be intimidated by him, but she didn't want to call the police either. She wanted privacy, and if there was something going on, she wanted to sort it out on her own. Added to that was the thing she could barely admit to herself. He was the most amazing male she'd seen in her life. Men that perfect, and that perfectly alarming, just didn't exist outside the pages of romance novels. She'd like to find out more about him, on the off-chance he wasn't really mad, just sexily bad.

With that thought, she gave a grin, and decided to think things over for a while. Just to be on the safe side, she dragged a heavy cupboard across the hall and wedged it against the door. The basement would keep until tomorrow.

"Have you missed me, *brother*?" The sibilant whisper pierced the darkness.

Prey didn't move. He had been aware of her presence for some time and had deliberately ignored her.

Flame flared. Flickering light from a smoky torch illuminated the basement, revealing Prey seated on the slab, naked, his back to the room. He could have been a statue.

He didn't turn to the light. He didn't flinch as a scarlet fingernail, sharp as a talon, scored a vicious line down his back. Tiny beads of dark blood welled slowly from the wound, a delicate string of dots, like black seed pearls. A questing tongue, cool and moist, lapped the drops in one easy stroke. Prey gave the barest shudder.

The voice whispered again, close to his ear. "How can you endure it, the cold tar that fills your veins? You need to feed, Prey. Come, turn around, here is my breast, taste my blood. Commune with me. The warmth of mortals pulses within. Let me share it with you."

No movement. No sound. Then a snarl of exhausted patience.

"Did the mortal slut bite off your tongue in her death throes?"

Finally, an answer, through clenched jaws. "Begone Aphra, I have nothing to say to you." Prey spoke softly, his tone flat and unequivocal.

"Nothing? How curt you are to one who has abandoned a night's hunting to comfort you in your hour of grief. And here I find you, cold, naked and hurting." This time she couldn't stifle a malicious chuckle. "Perhaps there's another way to take your mind off your problems."

Slender fingers snaked around Prey's torso, beneath his arm, directly towards his groin. He pulled away abruptly, rose to his feet, and turned to face his tormentor.

The vampiress was tall, slim and beautiful. Cropped black hair framed a pale face with high, Asiatic cheekbones and glinting black eyes. A smear of human blood colored her lips. The arterial red threw her delicate white fangs into stark relief.

Leather jacket and pants emphasized Aphra's aggressive sexuality. The jacket fell open to expose firm, naked breasts. The pants sat so low around her hips that a curl of black pubic hair peeked provocatively above the waistband. Aphra faced Prey with her weight on one leg and the other hip pushed

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provocatively forward. She grinned defiantly up at him and licked at the blood around her mouth with a delicately pointed tongue.

"How the mighty have fallen. Can it be we were ever lovers?" She paused and bent slightly at the waist, peering at Prey's penis. "What is that sad thing between your legs, I scarcely recognize it."

"Begone, I said. You sicken me."

"I sicken you?" Aphra's eyes flashed dangerously, her lips pulling back in a snarl to fully expose her fangs. "I sicken you? You are a disgrace to your lineage, First Begotten. If the Count could see you now, he would destroy you for the pathetic creature you are."

"You are the disgrace, Aphra," countered Prey evenly. "Your malignance hangs about you like the stench of hell. You hunt when you should harvest. You swell our ranks with zombies and demon-vampires. You expose us to the notice, and the wrath, of the Arbiters."

"Fool! Cowardly fool! Were it not for me our ranks would have dwindled to nothing but a rabble of pathetic Lotharios denying their birthright and spending themselves on mortal sluts. Mortals, pah! Creatures that endure no longer than the time it takes to extinguish a candle."

Aphra turned away from Prey and gave a high pitched shriek. In seconds three shadows swooped through a vent leading into the basement from the garden. The things landed behind Aphra, shape-shifting in an instant into human forms—two males and a female. The waxen pallor of their faces accentuated the bright arterial blood that stained their lips. It was so fresh Prey could smell its warmth. Seconds earlier the three had been draining the life from some nearby mortal.

As Prey regarded them, he couldn't prevent a grimace of disgust.

The three newcomers returned his gaze curiously.

One spoke, a tall male with long blond hair and a beautiful face, marred only by a single, totally-white eyeball bisected by a vertical scar that ran from his forehead to below his cheekbone.

"You summoned us, Countess?" His voice rasped unpleasantly in the back of his throat.

"Yes, Harwood. Here he is, behold him."

Harwood stared at Prey, subtly altering his posture so that his left leg was forward and his right hand resting at his hip. Prey recognized the stance of a master swordsman. "Good evening, Count."

"Don't call me that?"

"Why not? Are you not a First, directly descended from our own Lord?" asked Harwood.

"Much as he might try to deny it, he is," affirmed Aphra. "His vampirism traces a direct line from Dracula, just as mine does. But his line was created out of love...just as mine was created out of hate."

"I care not how he came to be," grated Harwood. "I only want to know where his blade is? I have heard of your skill, Count, and crave a bout with you."

Prey's silence and look of contempt was of the sort a nobleman reserves for an upstart vassal so far below him as to merit no recognition. Harwood's eyes darkened with fury.

"I don't understand what you're all talking about," interrupted the second male. He was a huge and heavy vampire, with a low scowling brow and hatefilled eyes. He radiated physical power, but little in the way of intellect.

Prey groaned and looked at Aphra. "What have you been doing?"

"I needed an enforcer," she replied defensively. "Dal here fits the bill perfectly."

"And you say what I do would have the Count turning in his grave. He at least gave passing thought to the quality of the undead he created."

"I want to know what you're talking about," demanded Dal more aggressively.

"Be calm, Dally," piped the third newcomer in a chilling falsetto. Prey shuddered involuntarily and turned his attention to her. He had thought her a child. But she was more than that. In stature she might almost pass for a little girl, slender as a spring flower. But on closer inspection the curves of her body were those of a pouting teenage Lolita on the threshold of womanhood. Only her eyes were ancient. They had savored a thousand deaths. The malignant hate in them chilled him.

"Wh...what are you?" he whispered.

"I'm Juice," she giggled. "Is that your cock?"

The huge vampire rumbled angrily. She laid a protective hand on his arm. "And I'm Dally's," she added.

Prey shuddered and turned to Aphra. "Do you know what she is?" he demanded.

Aphra gave an unbothered shrug. "Fucked if I care. Juice arrived, and she stayed. She takes care of Dal, and she's a mean fighter." Juice feigned indifference as Prey and Aphra discussed her, one hand idly sought out Dal's groin in its tight breeches.

"She was hardly out of childhood – it's obscene."

Juice, rubbing her hand along the outline of Dal's thickening cock, delivered Prey a sideways glance. "Don't underestimate me, Countey-count. I was draining the fluids of bigger men than you when you were a gleam in some mortal's eye." Prey's eyes widened in complete understanding. Again he turned on Aphra. "You fool, can't you see how dangerous this thing is?

Aphra started to laugh. "We're vampires. We're all dangerous."

"Not like this. This is poison. Creating undead from one so young is bad enough, but this one is possessed by a succubus. She'll destroy us all. You know what a vampire succubus does to its victims. Her bite is invariably fatal, and it's an obscene death. We need to alert the Arbiters. Before they come looking for us."

At the mention of the Arbiters, Juice's demeanor changed dramatically. In an instant, before Prey could move, she launched herself at him, shrieking loudly, her thin taloned fingers scrabbling for his throat...face...eyes.

On cue, Dal lumbered forward snarling, swinging his meaty arms like clubs. Juice ripped at Prey's flesh, plunging her needle fangs into any exposed skin. Dal methodically pounded his torso and lower body.

"Aphra, stop them," gasped Prey. Aphra looked a little concerned, but made no move to intervene immediately. She stood watching with the fascination of a voyeur at a train-wreck as the attack intensified. In his weakened condition, Prey had no defense against the violence of the creatures.

Then an explosion crashed in the tiny space. It was so loud it was a physical assault on the senses. All the vampires froze. As one they turned to face the cellar steps.

"Get off him," commanded Jess, evenly. The gun was pointed, steady as a rock. Juice rose lightly to her feet, her black eyes gleaming malevolently. Dal turned, apparently ready to charge. Jess took a bead on him.

"Don't move an inch. I'll shoot if you force me to." With a roar of defiant anger Dal rushed her. Jess fired, again the noise was deafening. The bullet shattered the vampire's elbow. He spun around, yowling with pain and fury, and collapsed to his knees. The shocked silence that ensued was pierced by a high-pitched cackle.

"Now you're in for it," exulted Juice.

Dal staggered to his feet and, with an enraged snarl, raised his shattered arm slowly. Jess reeled backwards with horror. The deep wound, full of blood and white shards of bone, was healing in front of her eyes. Then the four vampires began advancing on her. The woman smiling cruelly, the men eager to cause pain.

"So, now all is revealed," mocked Aphra. "The first born has a second mortal slut. No wonder he seeks to keep us away. He wants this fine, juicy, delicious piece of flesh for himself. Well he can't have you, can he? We'll all sup well tonight." Horrified, Jess inched backwards up the stairs, her gun, now shaking, aimed at the four terrifying creatures advancing upon her.

"Get back! I'll put a bullet in every one of you."

"And then what," asked Harwood, evenly.

From behind the vampires, Prey's voice croaked. "Their eyes."

"What?" asked Jess desperately, uncertain what he meant.

"The eyes. Shoot at their eyes. You can't kill them, but you can blind them. Look at his white eye, he's half blind already. Aim at the other one."

Jess aimed her gun at Harwood's one good eye. With a grimace of anger he stopped, his scar livid with his fury. The others hesitated too. Emboldened, Jess's grip on her gun firmed.

"Get out now, the way you came in, or I'll put you all in the dark."

"Maggot food," hissed Juice. "You're marked for the remainder of your short life."

"She's right, mortal slut," agreed Aphra. "Prey can't protect you. We'll be back tomorrow night, and every other night, until your carcass is ours."

Jess fired again. The bullet cut a path between Aphra and Harwood. The four vampires drew back, snarling, before transforming and flitting out through the vent that had admitted them. Jess raced after them, galvanized by pure adrenalin, and jammed some of the bricks fallen from Prey's wall into the gap.

Then she leaned her head weakly against one of the pillars supporting the cellar roof. Her heart was pounding, and the metallic after-taste of fear and adrenalin made her grimace. Bile seared the back of her throat. Had she really just confronted four creatures straight out of her most awful nightmares? *And I thought I knew what evil was.* They made the worst of her murderers seem like a babe-in-arms.

A sound, like a cough, brought her back to herself. Prey! What had happened to him? There was no sign of him in the room. Cautiously Jess crossed the cellar, gun at the ready, and peered behind the table that had been his bed. She was shocked by what she saw. This was far from the magnificent creature she'd first encountered. Lying there, wedged between the wall and the table, half-draped across some fallen bricks, he looked like a broken shop mannequin. To her surprise, feelings of pity and concern filled her breast. She holstered the gun and squeezed into the narrow space to see what she could do to help him. He looked so damaged that for a moment she feared he was dead. His face was horribly mauled. Black bruises colored his torso. Vicious bites had been inflicted on his flanks and, most noticeably, his groin. But then he coughed again, and a small spray of black blood bubbled from the corner of his mouth as he panted for breath.

"Prey. Can you hear me?" At the sound of her voice one eye flickered open, the other was too matted with blood to be serviceable. "You're going to be fine, Prey. I'll have you out in a moment." He made a noise. He was trying to speak, but his voice was too faint. "What? I can't hear you."

"Flee...now." He was still faint, but clearer.

"No way. I'm not leaving you, and those evil bastards aren't driving me out of my home."

"Kill...kill you. They'll kill you. Get away. Leave me. You must escape."

Instead of replying, Jess took a deep breath, grabbed Prey by an arm and hauled him up until he was draped face down across the slab. He grunted with pain, but was too feeble to resist. His position reminded Jess of a prisoner from the old west, dangling across the rump of a bounty hunter's horse.

"Right, pardner. I'm takin' you in," Jess muttered to herself. Squatting down she drew him forward until he was half across shoulder. He stank of venom and old blood, and it was all she could do not to gag. With a mighty heave and a tremendous effort of will she got him up on her shoulder and into a fireman's lift. He was lighter than she'd expected but still, with the size of him, a fair load for any woman smaller than a female wrestler.

Taking another breath she began the slow, careful journey up the cellar stairs. It seemed like an eternity of effort, and spots were flashing before her eyes, but finally she was in the hall. There she rested for a minute, Prey's weight supported against the wall. She didn't dare put him down because she knew she'd never get him up on her shoulder again, and there was another flight of stairs to go yet.

"Let's do it," she said to herself. Slowly, carefully, painfully, Jess trudged up to the master bedroom. Once there she let Prey fall onto the bed. He was like a rag doll, limbs falling loosely in disarray. In the brighter light his injuries appeared even more appalling. How could anyone, even a creature who was evidently a vampire, endure such violence and survive?

Now that Jess had Prey up in the bedroom, she was even less certain what to do. Should she call a doctor? And tell him what? That she had a severely wounded vampire in the house that needed a transfusion?

Clearly it was up to her. Alright then. First things first. Clean him up and get rid of the smell. Decided, she headed for Aunt Rose's bathroom. Soon hot water was running and warm steam drifting into where the unconscious Prey lay. While the water ran, Jess searched for medical supplies. She found a complete first aid kit in a cupboard and laid out some ointments and dressings for later use.

When the bath was full she went to get Prey. The sight of him, pallid where he wasn't bloody, and motionless as a corpse, filled her with fear. He looked even more dead. And he felt so cold when she touched him. But at her touch his good eyelid flickered once more and he moaned softly. Without further hesitation, she picked him up in her arms and staggered with the dead weight into the bathroom. It wasn't easy to lower him into the bath, but she finally managed it. He gasped faintly at the first touch of the hot water, but then it seemed that he might have fainted again, because he went still and made not another sound.

"You're going to be fine," she said once more to the motionless...man. She couldn't really think of him as a vampire, he was a man and he needed her help.

Carefully and systematically, Jess began to wash Prey's body. Much of the blood cleaned away, revealing wounds that weren't quite as bad as she'd first feared. She paid particular attention to the really deep wounds, the worst of which seemed to be around his groin. A shame really. He was, as she'd noticed when she first found him, quite well-equipped. Why would anyone, even that fearsome little hag, want to brutalize him there?

By the time she'd finished cleaning him, the water was red. She let it run out, and rinsed him off with the small hand-held shower nozzle. Then she lifted him carefully out of the bath and carried him back to the bedroom. There she dried him and dressed the worst of his wounds. Finally, she clothed him in a pair of black silk pajamas she found among the men's clothing in the closet. She wasn't surprised to find that the pajamas fitted him perfectly. Lastly, she eased him into the bed.

Now what? It was almost morning. The sun would be up in two hours. Jess suddenly felt very tired. Fear and physical exertion had taken its toll. She needed to rest. But where? She couldn't leave Prey. He might need her. But she didn't fancy falling asleep next to a vampire. She pulled a chair up to the bed and sat down, gun on her lap. She'd just rest her eyes for a moment, then she'd decide what to do to get some proper rest.

A bell jolted Jess awake. For a moment she had no idea where she was or what time it was. Then she saw the pale figure of Prey, exactly as she'd left him, and memory flooded back.

The bell pealed again. It must be the front door. She looked at her watch. It was almost midday. She'd been asleep for seven hours. No wonder her back ached. Then again, the ache might have more to do with lugging a large unconscious vampire up two flights of stairs.

A vampire. Shit! This couldn't really be happening.

The door bell rang again. Four long, demanding rings. Prey stirred and muttered something.

"Coming, coming," Jess muttered to herself, heading for the stairs. At the door were two policeman. They looked at her suspiciously.

"Can I help you?"

"We're doing some enquiries in this neighborhood ma'am. Would you have a moment to answer some questions?"

"Uh, yeah, sure. What's the problem?"

"Did you see or hear anything suspicious last night?"

"Suspicious? What sort of thing?"

"Like prowlers, gunshots, or unusual activity?"

"Um, yeah. There were gunshots. They came from my basement. I'm really sorry, I should have reported them." The police officers stiffened perceptibly. Hands rested on the butts of their weapons simultaneously.

"Would you mind explaining yourself, ma'am?" They were coldly formal.

"Sure, but there's not much to explain. I heard a noise down in the basement, and I went to investigate, armed with my handgun. The intruder turned out to be a rat. Unfortunately for it, I'm phobic about rodents and I blew it into tiny pieces with three shots."

"Could I see the weapon and your firearms license, Ma'am?" demanded the younger of the two, clearly unimpressed by Jess's explanation.

"Sure, I'll just get it."

"If it's all the same to you. Would you mind taking us to where it is?"

"No problem. Follow me."

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Jess led the way inside, and showed them the gun, in its holster. One of the officers picked it up and examined it.

"Police issue?"

"Uh, yeah, I'm a cop from Union City."

"Do you have any identification that verifies that, ma'am?"

"Sure do. Just in here." She opened her wallet and handed the officer her badge and ID card. He visibly relaxed, but seemed puzzled.

"'Detective Sergeant Croft.' What are you doing up here, ma'am?"

"Truthfully, I'm on a long leave. And I've just arrived to take possession of this house, which my great-aunt left me in her will."

"Is there anyone we can contact to verify this?"

"Sure. Call my boss, Captain John Tsaloumas. Use my phone if you want."

"That won't be necessary Detective Croft." For the first time the young officer smiled. "They'll do that from division if they decide they need to."

"Whatever works. Do you want to see the rat?"

"No, don't bother. We've taken enough of your time. And to be honest, our asses will be in slings if we don't get moving. There's been a death two streets away and we've got the rest of the block to canvas."

"No shit. What happened?"

"It's too early to say. Some bum was found dead. Probably alcohol poisoning. But there are some strange marks on him—almost as if some animal had bitten him—that have got the boss worried."

"Weird," Jess remarked, nonchalantly. "Well, let me know if I can do anything to help."

"Will do, Detective Croft. Enjoy your stay. Who knows, you might decide to make it permanent."

"I might," Jess agreed, laughing. "Any jobs going in Stillwater?"

"Always jobs for good people, Detective. Come and check us out."

"Thanks guys. Take it easy."

Jess closed the door behind them, and took a shaky breath. God, already she was lying to fellow cops. What if she'd told the truth? "Hell yeah fellas. I was shooting at four vampires who were mugging a fifth vampire that I stumbled upon yesterday in my cellar. He was naked and apparently on a hunger strike. Now he's up in my bed, more dead than alive. And, by the way, it was probably the other four vampires that killed your poor homeless bastard."

Jess trudged up the stairs. Prey was still exactly as she'd left him. She touched his forehead, it was like ice. She wanted to examine him more carefully, but the room was so dark. The drapes that she'd closed last evening let in virtually no light at all. She crossed to the window and pulled back one heavy

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curtain. A ray of sunlight lanced into the room, illuminating the bed. Seconds later a thin screeching noise made her jump. Prey was moving. To be accurate, he was writhing. In agony. His hands, clawed like talons, were covering his face to shield it. There was a hissing sound, as if something was being dissolved in acid. Then Jess saw marks, like scorch marks, appearing on the back of Prey's hands where the sunlight fell on them.

"The sun. Shit!"

Jess jerked the curtain closed. The keening sound stopped, to be replaced by a rapid panting. She raced over to Prey and flicked on the bedside light. His eyes were open, but he didn't seem to be seeing her. To Jess, it looked as if he was in shock.

"Prey. Prey. Are you okay? Oh my God, I'm so sorry. I wasn't thinking."

There were dark streaks on his face where the sun had penetrated between his fingers. The backs of his hands were worse, they looked as if they'd been under a griller. In places the skin seemed to have bubbled and be lifting off.

"Prey, are you alright, can you hear me?"

"Rose?" Prey's whisper was faint, but clear.

"No Prey, it's Jess, not Rose."

"Rose. Oh my darling. You've come back." He smiled, a brilliant smile that clenched itself like a fist around Jess's heart. "I've missed you so. Don't leave me again." His voice tailed off, and he seemed to fall into a deep sleep, or more likely back into unconsciousness.

Jess left him. Her own sleep had helped, but exhaustion had given way to other needs. She was ravenously hungry. She went downstairs and fixed herself a huge, late breakfast. So late that she decided to succumb to the temptation of the veal. Over the meal, she pondered her next move. Prey needed her and she had no intention of abandoning him. Not only that, she knew with absolute certainty that the four lethal creatures from the preceding night wouldn't give up that easily. She had to assume they were seeing out the day somewhere dark, and would be back at nightfall. In that case she needed to be prepared. And the best preparation was more sleep.

She spent the next two hours fortifying the bedroom where Prey's motionless body lay, hoping she'd prevented any possibility of one of them making a surprise entrance. In the middle of the afternoon she lay down to rest. Thanks to her job she was adept at taking a rest when she could snatch one. She was asleep in minutes and didn't stir till early evening.

Prey hadn't stirred either. Jess was getting seriously worried about him. She pulled back the bedclothes and carefully removed his pajamas to change the dressings. To her surprise, most of the superficial wounds were all-but gone, and the really bad ones were much less severe. Intrigued, she studied the back of his hands. The places where the sun had scorched them were noticeably better also.

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His body was capable of healing extremely quickly, although not nearly as quickly as Dal's shattered elbow had repaired itself. She shuddered at the thought of that fearsome creature, but still managed a small, wry smile when she removed the dressings from Prey's groin and discovered that it, too, was in much better shape.

The evening passed slowly. Periodically Prey would rouse himself and mutter something. But for the most part he could have been a corpse. Jess couldn't put her finger on it, but she had the feeling he was slipping away from her. She truly feared for his life.

"Tsk, tsk mortal slut. You really should take care. You make things so easy."

Jess didn't know she'd dozed off. It was the gloating whisper and the iron hand encircling her throat that jolted her awake again. She opened her eyes to see Aphra's fangs mere inches from her face. The vampiress's breath was nauseatingly sweet and heavy, like something overripe and about to decay.

Jess's eyes bulged in horror. When she tried to struggle the vice-like grip on her throat closed even tighter. Aphra smiled maliciously.

"That's the way, my lovely. Fight. Let me feel your hot blood pulsing under my fingers. I can hear your heart hammering from here. What a tempting feast for one such as me." Jess willed herself to relax. Her fear was turning quickly to anger, at herself for falling asleep and at the intruder. She glared into the other woman's eyes. Aphra smiled back, nastily.

"My goodness, you are feisty. But no big phallic gun in your hand to threaten my eyes with this time. What say I take one of yours out instead. I could peel it like a grape and feed it to Juice. She has a penchant for warm eyeballs." As she spoke, Aphra extended one needle sharp talon until the tip hovered just above Jess's eye socket. Jess clenched her eyelids shut and braced herself for pain. Instead she jumped as cold lips brushed against her ear and Aphra whispered, "But I won't make you suffer yet, slut. I have a use for you. Much as he deserves it, I really don't want Prey dead. I need his seed, given willingly, and if you help me, I'll let you live for a while longer. Furthermore, when it does come to death, I'll give you a quick one. And once you've seen what dear little Juice is capable of, you'll really appreciate what a kindness that is."

"What do you want me to do," whispered Jess.

"You are such a sensible girl. And so beautiful with it." Jess jumped again as Aphra's cool moist tongue slipped into her ear. It took all her self-control to remain motionless as the vampire's free hand began roaming her body. "Big firm breasts, and all natural. And such large nipples." Jess yelped as two cruel fingers pinched her viciously. "I can feel them hardening. Do I excite you, mortal? And what do you have between your legs? Ah ha, a secret place burning with heat." Jess gasped again, and cursed between clenched teeth, as Aphra's icy fingers explored down the front of her panties and felt between her legs. A thin, icy finger forced itself inside her.

"I'd so like you for myself. But right now you have exactly what is needed to keep Prey in the land of the living undead." She laughed quietly and removed her hand from inside Jess's underwear. "Use your sex, use your heat, and if you

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have to, use your blood. Do whatever you must to bring him back. Fail, and I'll throw you to Juice myself, and then let Dal and Harwood have what's left of you. Understand, mortal slut?" Jess nodded, wordlessly. "Good. Then we agree with each other. Any questions?"

"I...I thought vampires were immortal."

"Oh no, dear. How silly. Nothing is immortal *per se*. But we can live a very long time, and we don't die as you understand it. Unless we meet a violent end, we just sort of...fade." She looked at Prey, quizzically. "Already he's looking a little thin at the edges. I'd give you a sixty-forty chance of losing him. And when you do, well there won't be anywhere for you to hide. I wonder how long you'll scream for. If you do bring him back, remind him of our past love and its outcome. That is all I want, just his seed, once more.

Aphra rose and stood over Jess for a moment. "I'd so like a taste of you. You've given me quite an appetite. A-hunting I shall have to go." With a rush of air, she transformed and swooped out an open window.

Jess exhaled a long shuddering breath. Things were getting well out of hand. She didn't think of herself as a coward but these last two days were more than anyone should have to bear. What was she going to do? She knew with a gutwrenching certainty that there was nowhere to escape to. Those things would pursue her for her entire life, and she knew to expect no mercy.

Next to her, Prey stirred a little. She heard his whisper.

"Rose...Rosie."

Unexpected rage took hold of her. She pulled herself up on her elbow and screamed at the semi-conscious vampire. "I'm not Rose, you fucking freak. I'm Jess. Jess! Rose is dead, and well out of it. She's dead, and you're my death sentence." Maddened by the aftermath of terror she hammered on his chest. From his delirious state, he cried out softly in pain.

The sound, so human and so full of need, brought her back to herself. What was she doing? He was suffering. More than that, he was her only hope. She didn't believe for a second that reviving Prey so that Aphra could use him as a sex toy would help her. But one thing she did know with absolute clarity was that Prey, alive and healthy, was her best chance of surviving this.

"Sex, heat and blood," Jess muttered under her breath. "What did the bitch mean by that?" She thought for a long time. Evidently Prey and Aunt Rose had been lovers, so sex was explicable. Jess shivered at the implications for herself, whether in fear or excitement she wasn't sure. And he was a vampire, and everyone knew that vampires drank human blood. But what about heat? She touched his bare arm. His skin felt as it always had – cold. What body could heal when it was so cold? Jess came to a decision. She'd forget the blood and sex for now, heat was something she could manage.

Prey For Me

Leaving Prey in bed, she went to run a bath, deep and hot. While she was waiting for it to fill she removed all her own clothes and stepped quickly under the shower, suddenly desperate to wash the icy touch of Aphra's fingers from her skin. Naked and dripping, she returned to the bedroom and carefully hefted Prey out of bed. Her muscles, straining once again under the weight of the unconscious vampire, rose to the challenge. She actually enjoyed the sensation of carrying him. His skin was so smooth against hers. His torso rubbed against her breasts causing her nipples to harden. Despite everything, it felt good.

Prey hardly stirred as Jess positioned him in the bath, seated upright. Balancing him, she slipped into the bath behind him, her legs on either side of his body. Then she let him fall gently back until his head rested on the cushion of her breasts. The water covered almost all of him, and lapped up around his face. It amazed Jess to see how much better his wounds looked from even a few hours ago. Some sort of physical healing was taking place, the problem was it didn't seem to be bringing him out of his coma. In the hollow of fear within her, Jess felt him slipping even further from life. With her hands she began to rub him, trying to stimulate some form of circulation. The water was almost hotter than she could bear, but it was a long time before Prey's body began to warm.

After a while Jess relaxed back in the bath, resting her head on the end and closing her eyes. Her hands continued to massage the parts of Prey's body she could reach, his shoulders, chest, and even chin and jaw. She wasn't prepared for the hand that suddenly grasped her wrist, however. She gave an involuntary squeal of fear, and her eyes burst open.

Thankfully it was only Prey, holding her wrist gently. She looked down, he was looking up at her, the eye that had been damaged showing almost no evidence of the terrible injury it had sustained. His brow was furrowed as he tried to make sense of what was happening.

"Rose?" His voice was so low she had to strain to hear.

"No, not Rose. Jess. Rose's niece."

"You. What are you doing? Why are we in this bath together?"

"You're injured. I'm trying to save your life."

"Don't...don't want you to. Take me back to the cellar...leave me."

"Sorry. I'd like to oblige you, but you're my only hope of staying alive at the moment. My motives are purely selfish."

"Don't...understand."

"Your friends have promised to rend me into a thousand pieces if you don't survive. I'm hoping that, if not for my sake then for Aunt Rose's, you might be prepared to help me."

Prey made no reply. He seemed to fall asleep, or back into unconsciousness again. Jess sighed. What now? They couldn't stay in here much longer. The water was cooling, and she was starting to wrinkle. Carefully she pushed Prey forward,

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climbed out of the bath, pulled the plug, and let him lie back down while the water drained out. Then it would be time to carry him back to the bed and...and what? Sex? Blood?

She walked back through to the bedroom to straighten the sheets, so lost in thought she didn't think to check whether it was safe.

"You've got a big bottom."

Jess yelled, and whirled around. Juice and Dal stood flat against the wall, one each side of the bathroom door, staring at her.

"She's got big tits too. Hasn't she Dally?" The big vampire grunted, his eyes absorbing the sight of Jess's naked body.

"What the fuck do you want?" Fear made her angry.

"I want you to take care how you talk to me, for one thing," snarled Juice, her black eyes snapping with hate. "And I want to see whether the *First Born* has faded away yet. 'Cos when he does, your cunt belongs to Dally and the rest of you belongs to me."

"Well he isn't dead yet," replied Jess. "So perhaps you might like to leave me alone and let me do what Aphra told me to."

"Aphra doesn't rule us you know," replied Juice. "Don't presume she can protect you if we change our minds. Show her Dally."

The giant vampire attacked. Jess was powerless to defend herself. He literally flew across the room, picked her up by the neck and threw her onto the bed. With a single bound he was upon her, leering over her. His huge hands clutched cruelly at her body. She screamed in pain and fear. This incited Juice to spring up on the bed beside her.

"Don't you like this, mortal slut? I do. Dally's good at hurting, and I so love the smell of fear. I can small your fear now, I think the stink is coming from between your legs. Hurt her down there Dally. Let's hear her scream. Make her bleed for me. I want to taste."

"Enough!" The voice was strong and imperious. To Jessica's amazement Prey stood at the door of the bathroom. He seemed much larger than she'd remembered. His eyes blazed with anger. "Get out, scum."

Dal's head flicked around with unnatural speed. His face contorted with hatred, exposing fangs any carnivore would be proud of. His long tongue flicked out, like a blind snake questing for food. Snarling incoherently he rose from the bed and advanced on Prey. But Juice intercepted him.

"Not yet Dally-dally-dal-dal. We can't do him yet. There's plenty of time, be patient. When we're ready we'll take him, and he'll be all yours."

Prey said nothing, simply watched with contempt as the demonic creatures debated before him. Finally, with a resigned growl, Dal turned away,

transformed, and disappeared from the room. Juice wasn't finished. She lingered a moment longer.

"Your cock's looking better, Countie-count-count. Good enough to stick in this nice big piece of hot mortal-flesh. Does she suck it for you? I'm looking forward to my next taste, too."

Then she followed Dal without waiting for a response. Prey's calm, haughty demeanor seemed to collapse and he staggered towards the terrified Jess, who hadn't moved from the bed. Halfway there he hit the floor.

"Not again," she moaned, as she steeled herself to lift him into bed.

Chapter 12

"How are you feeling?"

Prey had regained consciousness. Jessica lay next to him on the bed, propped up on one elbow.

"Better," he replied. "Have I been out for long?"

"Not this time."

"I'm sorry I couldn't help you more. I should have destroyed them."

"Hey, you appeared at the perfect moment. Like a white knight in shining armor. Given what they intended to do I've never been so glad to see anyone in my life."

"Still, it's my fault you're caught up in this."

"Can't change the past. I'm more concerned about the future. As far as I can tell, unless you help me, I'm doomed. You are going to help me aren't you?"

Prey grimaced. "Do I look capable of helping anyone at the moment. Those four won't give us much time. Certainly not enough time for me to regain my full strength. Look at me. I've been starved, frozen, poisoned and wounded. I'm not at my best."

"Aphra said you needed heat, sex and blood. Is that true?"

"In a way."

"Why those things?"

"It's all about fluids. Mine are depleted and sluggish. They barely circulate. They can't clean my system, and they don't transport energy. If my fluids cease to flow entirely I'll simply waste away to nothing. That was what I was aiming for when you broke my wall down. If it hadn't been for the hot bath you gave me, which temporarily improved my circulation, I'd never have made it out here to help you." He stopped for breath, clearly exhausted by the effort of talking.

"What good is sex?"

"It stimulates. It renews. It makes the blood flow. It sustains me."

"Is that why you were with Aunt Rose?"

Prey turned his head away. "No. I was with your Aunt because I loved her. The sex had the happy result of reducing my need for blood."

"Did Aunt Rose love you?"

"Ye-es."

"You don't sound sure."

"I was sure. But then she chose death over me, and the memory pains me."

"What was her alternative?"

"I could have made her into a vampire. We could have been together for millennia. But she chose death."

"Why?"

"She thought becoming a vampire would destroy our relationship."

"Would it?"

"Possibly."

"You can hardly blame her for not wanting to turn out like your four friends."

"They aren't my friends, and she wouldn't have. When mortals become vampires the essential qualities of the vampire that returns the blood, tend to predominate. I am of a nobler line than three of those four. I could not create such beings unless in a state of violent anger, hate or despair."

"You've lost me. What does 'return the blood' mean?"

"It is complicated, and I am tired."

"Sorry, but I think I need to know. Now. It might help me better understand what is happening and why. I'm a cop, information is essential."

Prey sighed, and was silent for a long moment. Then he started speaking again, in a flat voice, as if teaching a bored student. "Vampires are created when a vampire swallows a mortal victim's blood, then regurgitates and re-injects them with it. It is not a simple process. Often it is unintentional. It must occur at the point when the mortal hovers between life and death. Normally it takes a vampire in a state of heightened passion to be able to effect it. It seems that the nature of this passion affects the personality of the new vampire. So, for example, I was created a vampire out of love. I would not willingly do evil. Aphra, on the other hand, was created out of hate."

Prey paused, his eyes blank and brow furrowed as if trying to decide how much more to tell Jess. After a time he resumed speaking, his voice more passionate as he struggled to explain the intricacies of vampirism.

"Most importantly, in the light of our current predicament, as vampires Aphra and I are related in two significant ways. We are both what is known as 'Paramounts'. The first vampire another vampire creates is a Paramount, which represents a higher status in vampire society. The second connection is even more important. Aphra and I are not only Paramounts, we both trace our lineage directly back a scant two generations to the greatest of all vampires. It is because of this common ancestor that she, as the first female created, and I, as the first male created, are called First Born. We are the only two so honoured."

"And this ancestor is?"

"Dra... Count Vlad Dracula."

"Dracula? He was real?"

"Most certainly. And don't believe everything about him you see on television. He was the first and greatest of the vampires to colonize this planet. I cannot tell you from whence he came, but he was not originally of this world. His first Paramount was my human mother. He loved her dearly and created her a vampire out of that great love. She in turn created me a vampire, also out of love, to prevent me dying before her eyes."

"What about Aphra?"

"She was created out of hate, from a man that Dracula hated and unintentionally created as the first of the demon vampires."

"This is making my head spin. Who was this man?"

"My mortal father, Salvé Du Pres."

"Du Pres? Is that where Prey comes from?"

"Yes, it was the Count's nickname for me. It amused him, and it stuck. I'd rather be Prey than Du Pres. My biological father was the epitome of evil, a violent sadist, the King's official torturer. He begat me and my twin sister out of rape. My mother loved us despite the nature of our conception, and she tried to protect us from him. But it was always his intent to harm us. He wounded my mother mortally, which was when the Count intervened and gave her the gift of undeath. Later, Du Pres captured me and beat me to the point of death, which was when my mother intervened and transformed me. Dracula was so enraged by this assault on me that he attacked my father with the intention of destroying him. But one of those accidents of fate happened. Perhaps the smallest drop of blood was re-injected. Instead of dying, Du Pres was transformed into a vampire also. He survived Dracula's attack and found my twin sister. Taking his revenge upon her."

"Did he kill her?"

"No, he turned her into a vampire also. You have met her."

"I have a sinking feeling I don't want to hear this. Tell me it's not Juice."

"Aphra is my twin sister. That is perhaps the greatest irony in this sad tale. As humans we were siblings who shared a filial love. As vampires we are also related, but the ties that bind us are composed of hate."

"Hang on. She says she wants to have sex with you. Isn't that a bit sick?"

"She does not want me for the reason you imagine. Our mortal relationship is nothing, it is our vampire lineage that matters. She wants to have sex with me because we are the First Born. Normally vampires cannot procreate. But First Born can. Were we to create a child it would be the direct heir of Dracula. Among earthly vampires Aphra and I are of the most noble lineage. Our child would inherit everything of the Count's. And Aphra would become the Countessmother. Guardian of the most powerful of all vampires." "I get it now. It's the usual old 'sleep your way to the top'. So, are you going to do it?"

Prey's eyes darkened. "No!"

"Why not? Apparently you've done it before if I understand what she was telling me. It would get them off your back, and I could go back to my quiet little life catching violent criminals."

"When I did it before, I didn't know Aphra was my sister. We'd been separated for many years, and my father, Du Pres, had carefully groomed her to seduce me and mate with me."

"If you didn't have a child then. What makes her think you'll have one now."

"I didn't say we didn't have a child."

"What? Where is it, then?"

"Dead. My distraught mother learned of the incest and killed the babe. Enraged, Du Pres destroyed her, and then he and the Count battled to the death. I do not want to speak more of it now. It was long, long ago, and best forgotten. The death of the babe turned Aphra completely to evil."

"She's that alright."

"Yes, and she will never leave us alone. You cannot credit the malignance of her hate. All four, in fact, are driven to destroy you for no better reason than the fact you defied them. And if Aphra conceives this time, she will have to destroy me, or the claim of her child to dominion over the undead will be forever secondary. I am the most direct surviving descendent of the Count. All know it."

"So why weren't you out there being the big boss instead of skulking in here with Aunt Rose?"

"That is my business." Prey's voice trailed off, and he closed his eyes. Jess remembered how truly unwell he still was.

"Prey. Stay with me. What are we going to do?"

"I'm not sure there's much we can do. For myself I don't care. I'll do what I can to protect you. But you know how little that is in my current condition."

"Sorry. That's not good enough. I don't plan on rolling over for those bastards from hell. Furthermore, I'm still a sworn police officer. That lot have already murdered at least once in the last day, and I'll bet that's the tip of the iceberg. You may not think much of the 'mortal span of existence', but they're still people's lives that I'm sworn to protect. I've glimpsed your power, and I'm betting that's what Aunt Rose liked about you. Tell me what I can do to make you better."

Prey sighed. "You heard Aphra—heat, sex, blood. The three things the undead crave above all else. The last two are out, so you'd better run another scalding bath for me, and I'll try to crawl to it."

"Sorry. Why are the last two out?"

"I won't dignify that with an answer."

"It's not a trick question. Four maniacs have promised me a gruesome death, I'd like to explore other options. Explain the sex and blood things to me."

Prey was getting angry.

"Sexual union with a warm-blooded mortal has powers to restore and preserve the undead. Drinking the fresh blood of a mortal is even more effective, it is like the elixir of life. 'Heat, sex, blood.' Do you see?"

"And to get this blood you have to sink your fangs into someone's neck and kill them?"

"You watch too much television. It can come from anywhere, and it need not kill. Done properly, while they are asleep, the mortals need never know their blood has been harvested. They will simply sleep longer, and wake up feeling very lethargic for a few hours while their blood replenishes itself. Often they have very graphic, usually sexual, dreams. There are a lot more undead than you realize. If we killed every time we fed, we'd quickly destroy great swathes of the mortal population."

"And it doesn't turn them into vampires?"

"You weren't listening, were you? The fluid has to be injected back into the bloodstream by a vampire possessed by great love or great hate at the point where the mortal is on the cusp between life and death. It's simple mathematics. If every bite created a new vampire, the numbers would increase exponentially, with such speed that within a week the entire world would be populated by the undead, all with nothing to feed on but each other. Are you going to run me a bath?"

With a muttered curse of frustration, Jess went back to the bathroom. She was just testing the water when Prey appeared at the door, unaided, but shaky on his feet.

"Can you get in?" she asked.

"Yes, leave me."

"You're rather imperious for someone who can hardly stand."

"Go. Stay. I don't care."

"Then I'll stay. I've seen it all before." And it's worth a second look.

Prey climbed stiffly into the steaming water and settled back with a sigh. Jess watched for a minute, then knelt beside the bath and pressed the inside of her right wrist against his lips.

"Bite me."

He opened his eyes and looked at her, than reached up and removed the wrist from his mouth.

"Don't be stupid."

"What's stupid? You said it was the elixir of life. Take some."

"I don't want your blood."

"Why not? Not good enough for you? I'll bet you were happy to suck away on Aunt Rose. Your own little transfusion service. No wonder she always looked so deathly pale every time I saw her."

A spark of emotion kindled behind Prey's eyes. For the first time he seemed defensive. "I almost never harvested from your Aunt. And I never would at all if she hadn't insisted."

"Well I'm insisting."

"And I'm refusing. Go away."

"Go away? Go away? For some great noble, you're pretty pathetic. You sound like a child. Those murderous thugs intend to violate me and torture me to death just so they can have a vampire's tea party and all you can say is go away. Tell you what, why don't you get angry and transform me. If I'm already a dead woman walking then I've got nothing to lose by joining the undead. At least if I'm one of them I'll be able to defend myself on equal terms."

"This is not something to joke about."

"Who's joking, you fucking pathetic shit! They want to murder me in the worst way possible. I've seen too many violent deaths to stand by and let that happen. And I'm not taking the easy way out either. If you won't fight alongside me, then give me the means to defend myself. You say you loved Aunt Rose. Some love if you won't even protect her only surviving relative."

With a snarl Prey reared up in the bath, so suddenly that Jess screamed in fright. With his lips pulled back she had an unobstructed view of needle-sharp fangs lengthening from his jaw. He seized her wrist, held it to his mouth and, before she could even flinch, plunged those fangs into her arm.

There was really nothing to feel. The faintest pressure, a short sharp stab followed by numbness, and then a dull tingling inside her arm that gradually spread up and into her chest. Prey's eyes were closed, his lips a white seal on her skin. The only thing that moved was his Adams apple, slowly, slowly, as he swallowed. Eventually the tingling reached her skull and the room began to spin around. Jess teetered a little and dropped onto her haunches. Prey opened his eyes and looked at her, then he removed his mouth from her wrist and covered the area with the palm of his hand, but not before she'd seen four tiny punctures bubbly with bright-red, oxygenated blood.

"Are you alright?"

Jess shook her head feebly, his voice seemed to come from such a long way away. She wanted to close her eyes and sleep forever. But this was important. "M-more...take more." Was that really her voice croaking from so far off?

Claudia Rose

"No. It would not be good for either of us. I have not tasted such blood in an age. It is young and very rich, I must be careful. Come, let me help you." He reached for her shoulders and laid her gently on the floor of the bathroom. She was grateful for the firm surface under her head, although the room seemed to tilt backwards every time she closed her eyes. From down on the floor she watched as Prey, with one fluid, powerful motion rose to his full height and stepped out of the bath. He dried himself quickly, standing directly above her. She was fascinated by the view of his penis and testicles. They seemed so close and so far away. She wanted to touch them or taste them. Weakly she raised one hand, but could reach no higher than his shin. Perhaps he would kneel with one knee on either side of her head so she could take him in her mouth. In her disoriented state, it seemed a logical thing for him to do. She moaned with disappointment when he simply stooped and picked her up, all six foot of her, as if she were a small child. Was this the same vampire she'd been carrying around, weak as a kitten?

"So...so strong, so quickly," she whispered, her lips moving against the smooth skin of his bare chest.

He smiled down at her. "The elixir of life, as I said, particularly blood as young and fresh as yours is. My cells have been crying out for such an infusion. It is a bad analogy, but I am like a dried out alcoholic given a hit of the best single malt after a twenty year break. It is years since I have felt like this. I had forgotten what it was like. Are you alright?"

"Tired."

"I'll put you to bed. You can sleep for a few hours."

The bed was so soft. The silk sheets delicious. She craved sleep, but she had other needs that were even more pressing. Her body felt like one large bundle of over-stimulated nerve endings. She was so wet and swollen between her legs the slightest movement made her moan and sigh. She opened her eyes. Prey stood over her, naked, looking down at her where she lay. His eyes seemed to be taking in her body, as if seeing it for the first time. Was there a hunger there? Did he find her desirable? His penis certainly appeared thicker than usual. Then again, his total package seemed bigger, more substantial, and so handsome. He was not at all like the pathetic, faded creature she'd nursed not long ago. She looked into his eyes, trying to divine his emotions. He met her gaze, then made to turn away.

"Sex."

He froze. Then turned slowly back to look at her.

"What?"

"Sex," whispered Jess again. "She said heat, blood and sex."

"Heat and blood are sufficient."

Prey For Me

Tears prickled Jess's eyes. Tears? Where were they coming from? Why on earth was she crying? Because he was rejecting her. Why was he rejecting her? Why didn't he want to have sex with her? It might save them. It might be good for him. Her mind whirled with need and confusion. She couldn't really clarify her thoughts. She simply knew that she needed him to make love to her. Heat, blood *and* sex. "

"Please," she wept. "Please."

Prey hesitated, his brow furrowed.

"I can't. You are disoriented. My bite has certain properties that may heighten your senses and needs. We can talk about it later when you are back to yourself."

"There may not be a later. I want you. Aphra said heat, blood *and* sex,' she was sobbing violently now. "Please Prey, do it for me. Prey. For me."

Her final words acted like some magic charm. Prey's face contorted with emotion. What was it? Pain? Grief? Desire? As if in a trance, he moved to the bed and stood over her. Jess moved languorously under his gaze. The words returned to her, unbidden, so she whispered them again.

"Prey. For me."

As she spoke she slid her limbs over the cool silk of the sheets, opening herself to him. Inviting him to take her and make love to her. She was certain he wanted to. His eyes were devouring her, taking in her breasts, her sex, the smoothness of her inner thighs as she parted them before him.

Something swung into view, making her smile. He did want her. His penis was massively erect. It took her breath away. A renewed flood of heat and moisture stimulated her vagina. She could feel her labia swelling, opening, ready to receive that wonderful big cock.

"Prey," she whispered.

Then he was upon her in one fluid motion. His body covering her completely, melding skin to skin. His mouth sought her lips and crushed them. Jess was too enervated to respond with much more than soft moans and gentle movements. It didn't matter. Prey's desperate need encompassed them both. It was like being taken by some extraordinary untamed creature. Power, wildness, strength, need, all focused on her body. Through her lips she could feel the tips of his retracted fangs. She pushed up towards them, so hard that a small trickle of blood from a cut to her lip found its way into her mouth. Prey tasted it too and it seemed to drive him wilder. His questing tongue followed the thread into her mouth until it found her tongue. His hands, meanwhile, explored her breasts, traced patterns of need down her sides, and possessed her thighs. Thankfully his hard cock arrived, at last, at the entrance to her pussy. She opened herself wider to him, offering to his hardness her hot, swollen moistness. He hesitated for an instant, his glans poised delicately between the outer folds of her vagina. What

Claudia Rose

was he waiting for? Oh God, don't let him stop. She cried out with relief as much as pleasure when, with a single smooth motion, he entered her. Prey cried out too. A sound drawn painfully from his innermost being.

The sensation of having Prey inside her was like nothing Jess had never known. His cock wasn't hot, but something about it had her instantly writhing with pleasure. Why did it feel so good? Was it just the considerable size of it? No, of course not. The best lover she'd ever had – until now – had been less than well endowed. Rather, it was as if, through this physical intercourse, a spiritual intercourse was occurring also. Prey was becoming part of her. His flesh within her was connecting directly to her centers of pleasure. She began to feel as if she were two people, experiencing his pleasure as well as her own.

As Prey held himself deep within her—immobile for what seemed like an age, but was probably less than a minute—the perception of duality increased. It was as if an alternate set of sensations was augmenting her own wonderful feelings. Jess felt as if she had a swollen, intensely sensitive shaft of pure nerve endings projecting from her body. And engulfing it, exciting it, driving it's owner mad with desire, was a skin-tight tunnel of smoldering, slippery moistness. This must be how it feels to be a man inside a woman, concluded Jess, amazed. I wonder if he knows how good he feels to me also.

Prey was certainly feeling something. He broke the kiss to murmur, "Jess. So good. This feels so good."

"Mmm," she encouraged. "Make love to me, Prey. Do it now."

He needed no further urging. He began to move inside her, long slow thrusts, increasing the wetness of her pussy, delighting her with the sensation of sliding, of slipperiness, and of the pure joy of being covered by a big, strong beautiful male body. Her earlier lethargy had given way to active arousal. Her arms, which had been spread in an attitude of abandon, began exploring him. Her hands traced his back, delighted in the ripple of his muscle, and then felt for the curve of his buttocks. She gripped them, and dug in her fingernails. He increased his strokes. She felt further down, between his buttocks, reaching for the base of his scrotum. She found it and began rubbing the sensitive area, while her other hand slipped between their bodies, feeling for her clitoris.

Jess's dual sensibility warned her that Prey was on the verge of climax. It hardly seemed possible that any man could thrust with such power and need. She felt like a leaf tossed on a stormy sea as his exertions brought him quickly towards ejaculation. Through the alternate set of sensations – his sensations – she felt a pressure building within her groin. Then it was as if a dam had burst. A delicious impression of liquid pleasure seared its way up then inside of that shaft of nerves, impelled by a series of intense muscular spasms that wracked her entire body.

With a feeling of shock, a quiet portion of Jess's mind concluded that she had just experienced an ejaculation. It was surreal, at the same time as her body was

feeling what Prey was feeling, she was aware on another level of the fluid gushing from his body into hers. In these final moments Prey thrust inside deeply and held there, crying out with pleasure. Jess felt a tinge of pity, there were evident drawbacks to being male, it was over so quickly for him. For her it was just beginning. Prey's body trapped the hand with which she was rubbing herself against her clitoris. But wriggling her fingers was more than enough to bring her to climax. Powerful waves of pleasure made her scream out and buck for long moments beneath the weight of his spent body.

"You are wonderful," a deep voice whispered in her ear.

"So are you," she replied. Then curiosity got the better of her. "Did I really feel what you were feeling?"

"I believe so."

"Is that usual when one has sex with a vampire?"

"Not normally. But it is not unheard of. It suggests a high level of affinity between us."

"Could you feel what I was feeling also?"

"I am delighted to say I could. And it was most impressive."

Jess giggled softly. "Do you want to feel it again?"

"Maybe later. But right now I can also feel your exhaustion. You need to sleep, and I need to prepare for what the night may hold."

He was right, she realized. She was beyond tired. Prey's body lay upon her, a solid, sweet-smelling weight that was unusually comforting. It was the last thing she remembered. Terror, exhaustion, blood loss and the first decent sex she'd had in months combined to put her out more effectively than any sleeping pill could have.

Chapter 13

Footsteps, a man's footsteps, wakened Jess. She opened her eyes to see Prey emerging from the bathroom. The shoes he was wearing clicked on the bathroom's marble tiled floor but quieted as soon as he stepped onto the deep pile of the bedroom carpet. He was fully clothed, and he cut a striking figure. A linen shirt, long-sleeved, in midnight blue accentuated the width of his shoulders. It also set off his pale skin and dark hair. Black shoes and black slacks of the finest cut completed the picture.

He was the epitome of masculine elegance and style. If asked to describe him, Jess would have begun with 'breathtakingly handsome' and worked up from there. He was so far from the sick, needy creature of a few hours ago that all of a sudden she felt nervous and inadequate. While she wasn't by nature an insecure person, she liked to think she was realistic when it came to the men she partnered up with. She'd usually assess any man that looked this good as out of her league and steer clear of him to avoid risking a rebuff. But this wasn't any man. This was Prey. And she was...what? In love with him? Infatuated by him? Or simply lonely and scared and in need of some *human* comfort. They'd been intimate. Didn't that count for something? With a lurch in her stomach she knew that wasn't sufficient. He wouldn't want her anymore, at least not nearly as much as she wanted him.

At that moment Prey noticed she was awake. He awarded her a lopsided grin. The uncertainty it conveyed increased her fears. *He's going to let me down gently*. Jess spoke up first, trying to sound casual.

"My goodness, you undead certainly know how to present yourselves." Prey's grin widened into a smile. A wonderful, gleaming smile. A smile that warmed her through and through. Her heart gave a leap and began to beat a little faster. The needle-sharp tips of those retracted eye teeth looked so sexy.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, sounding as if it genuinely mattered to him.

"Great. How about you?" She searched his face for any sign that he regretted what they'd done together. Another leap of the heart at the way he smiled tenderly down at her.

"I have not felt this good in years."

"You don't regret...you know..."

"Making love to you? How could I regret it?" He sounded amazed.

"I just thought...seeing as you'd been coerced...and how you felt about Aunt Rose, you might wish you hadn't."

"I? Coerced?" He chuckled. Did he sound relieved? "I thought you would feel you had been coerced. After all, you were the one under the influence of my bite, and it most certainly heightened your desire. How could you imagine I felt coerced? Was it not clear how desperately I wanted you?"

Jess laughed, then pretended defensiveness. "Well I wanted you just as desperately, and I don't think your bite had anything to do with it. However," she added, grinning wickedly, "I won't know for certain until we've tried it a few more times." Smiling, Prey sat on the bed beside her. His hand rested on her leg, then began caressing her beneath the silk sheets. Gradually his fingers traced up towards the juncture of her thighs. Jess took a deeper breath and parted her legs just a little. The silk sheet molded itself to her body, revealing her pubis as a perfect curving mound. She stifled a frustrated moan when Prey's roving hand hesitated an inch from her pussy, then retreated to rest on her knee. His eyes locked with hers. He suddenly looked very serious.

"Also, you were right. Rose would have expected me to help you. And Rose is gone. She elected to go. And we are here and in danger. I am sure we did the right thing." Jess felt light-headed with happiness and relief. She pulled herself up on one elbow. The silk sheet slid down, exposing her breasts to Prey's appreciative gaze. "You are very brave and very beautiful."

"As beautiful as Aunt Rose?" His eyes darkened for a moment, and Jess feared she'd made a grave error. But then he seemed to relax.

"You and Rose are different. I prefer not to compare. You are beautiful. Rose too was beautiful. But for the time being we should not talk about her. Why don't you get dressed? I will go and prepare us something to eat." He stood up and headed for the door.

"Wait!" He paused at her cry and turned back. Jess threw the sheet back, swung her legs out of bed and crossed naked to where he was standing. She rested her head against his chest and hugged him around the waist. He responded by enfolding her in his arms. They stood like that for a long time.

"This is so nice," Jess murmured. "I've never been with anyone tall enough to hold me like this." Prey made no answer, but his arms tightened around her. She was aware of the steady pulse of his heart and the latent strength of his muscles as he cradled her to him. His physical presence excited her. She wanted him again – desperately. Her desire had nothing to do with his bite, either. It was all natural. The feel of his penis thickening against her warm body alerted her that it was a desire shared. She tilted her head upwards and began kissing his neck. At the same time she slid her hand between their bodies to rub the hard length of his cock. Prey moaned with pleasure, and then gasped as Jess's moist tongue traced the outline of his jaw.

Claudia Rose

"It is almost night," he said quickly, attempting to gently disengage. "Our foes will probably appear quite soon. We should eat and prepare ourselves." Jess knew he was talking sense, but the element of danger only served as an additional stimulant. Her mind quested for some pretext to detain him.

"How are you feeling?" she whispered huskily. "Not so long ago you were on the verge of death, or at least fading away. I can see that heat, blood and sex work wonders. But are you really that much better?"

"You cannot imagine how much better I feel. Like a new..."

"Man?"

"Being. Like a new being."

"So you don't need any more heat, blood...or sex?" Jess injected as much disappointment and desire as possible into her voice.

Prey chuckled at her plaintive tone. "Jess. My darling Jess. I will always need more heat, blood and, especially, sex with you. But for this moment I think I have sufficient to sustain me, and we are running out of time."

She thought she detected the merest hint of regret in his voice, so she risked one last throw of the dice. "Look, I'm perfectly naked and ready. We could do it standing up and it would take only a few minutes. I want you. You want me. It'll do both of us good."

Emotions warred across Prey's face. Finally, with a sigh of exasperation at his own weakness, he succumbed. "Woman, I cannot resist you. But I fear you will be the death of us both."

"Then let's die happy."

Without further hesitation Prey seized her and kissed her passionately. Then he turned her to face the wall of the bedroom. Jess braced herself against the wall with both hands, parted her legs and arched her back so that her ass projected itself invitingly at him. "By my creator you are a delectable woman."

One strong hand felt urgently between her legs. She sighed with pleasure. His fingers entered her smoothly she was so wet. Then his hand withdrew and Jess sensed him fumbling with his belt. Seconds later he was entering her from behind. She gave a small mewling sound as he began to thrust powerfully inside her.

"This is so good!"

Prey said nothing, but his thrusts intensified. All the while his hands roamed around the front of her body, fondling her heavy breasts and feeling between her legs to massage her clitoris. Jess assisted his endeavors by raising herself on her toes as he withdrew from her, and dropping back down onto her heels to meet each new thrust. When Prey nuzzled at her neck she shivered with pleasure. The thought of a mouthful of gleaming fangs poised a scant inch from her pulsing carotid artery increased her excitement. She pressed herself harder against his thrusting groin, wriggling to extract as much excitement as possible from the sensation of the erect penis moving within her. In less than a minute they climaxed together, an intense eruption of mutual pleasure. Breathing fast and hard, Prey pulled out of her. Jess, panting also, relished the moisture that trickled slowly down her inner thigh. It was such tangible evidence of Prey's desire for her. She no longer doubted his feelings.

Chapter 14

Slow, sardonic hand-clapping disrupted the pleasant afterglow of their loving. Prey and Jess both started and spun around to face the source of the noise. Prey snarled with anger when he saw who it was. Aphra, leaning comfortably against the far wall, smirked back as she watched him struggle to do up his pants. Jess shrank behind Prey, a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach as she absorbed the implications of the vampiress's presence. She realized the futility of trying to conceal her naked body, even as she cursed her lack of clothing.

"Brother dear. I am so delighted to see you well again. And so impressed by your evident—ahem—prowess. Jess is a paragon, isn't she? Taking my advice to heart and sacrificing herself on the altar of your need. Well done, my little mortal. Juice may yet be disappointed. She has such detailed plans for you. Although one way or another I think she will carry them out."

"What is it you want, Aphra."

"Don't play the fool with me. You know what I want. And by the blood of our unlamented sire, I shall have it."

"I will never give you a child. And you can never compel me."

"Fool! Sentimental, weak-minded, fool! I won't have to compel you. You'll fall over yourself to do it when you learn what Juice has in store for your mortal bitch. I'm the only one that can save her. And you know my price."

"I'll fight you to the death or perish with Jess myself before I'll stoop to participate in your plans. Our mother died to prevent this abomination once. I'll die to prevent it again."

"Our mother?" Aphra's eyes blazed and her lips whitened with fury. "Our mother was a murdering..."

"... slut of the first water." A harsh voice interrupted imperiously. Aphra, Prey and Jess all whirled to face the newest intruder. Harwood stood in the door of the dressing room, a sneer on his face, and a sword in each hand. "I have found your sword, Count," he said. "It was hidden among women's under things. I am sure there is some significance in that, but I can't for the moment think what it might be."

"What are you doing here, Harwood?" Aphra's eyes were dark with fury, and her voice had risen to a shriek. "I ordered you to stay behind."

"Ordered? I don't take the orders of a whore. Daughter of an even greater whore." He turned his attention back to Prey. "Did you hear me, Count. I called

your dead mother a whore. Do you have the courage to avenge a mortal insult? Or are you a eunuch who hides behind women? Show me whether you still have honor, although I think not."

"Harwood. Begone this instant or I will kill you myself."

Jess couldn't credit how quickly the vampire moved. In a blink he was across the room to confront Aphra, the point of his sword hovering a fraction of an inch from her eye. "Did you not hear me? I am not your servant. I am here to avenge my honor by destroying this pretender. You can either stand aside, or be destroyed too."

"Fine. I was tiring of you anyway. Go to your doom fool. I will relish your destruction."

"So you say. Methinks that when I have finished with your sibling I will dispatch you as well. Followed soon after by the mortal. As soon as I have used her for my pleasure that is." Harwood turned his attention back to Prey. "What say you Count? Do you have honor or no?"

Prey's upper lip twitched contemptuously, but he spoke no reply. Enraged, Harwood hurled the other sword at him. Prey caught it deftly in mid-air, and in a single fluid movement slid the blade from its scabbard. The weapon gleamed with a hundred points of light from the chandeliers, a lethal tempered-steel sliver of murderous perfection. He tested the point, almost casually, and made a couple of experimental passes in the air. Then he turned to Harwood with studied nonchalance. "Shall we begin?"

"In a moment. There is one thing more to be done."

"And that is?"

In reply, Harwood dipped his left hand into the pocket of his coat and gingerly withdrew a small pewter flask decorated with arcane engravings. With a flick of his fingers, he sent the flask spinning through the air towards Jess. Caught unawares she clutched instinctively at the tiny container and barely caught it with her fingertips. Harwood's good eye awarded her a contemptuous stare. Then, in a flat voice, he said, "This is Holy Water. Pour it over our blades...if the Count has the courage to allow it."

"Wh-what? Why?" Jess stammered in confusion.

Prey answered her softly, his voice a soothing touch. "Holy Water is lethal to vampires. Drenched in it, our blades become capable of inflicting permanent injury, even death. He craves a duel to the death. I shall satisfy his craving. Trickle the water down the length of each blade as he has instructed."

"So this Holy Water is lethal to you, and harmless to me?" Prey nodded. The others said nothing, simply stared at her. "Fine," Jessica continued, unscrewing the lid. "Then you can all fucking well wait while I get some clothes on." She trickled a small amount of the clear fluid over her fingers, then began walking towards the dressing room. She knew she was playing with fire, but couldn't

Claudia Rose

help flicking her wet fingers at Aphra as she passed. The vampiress flinched, and gasped as a tiny droplet scorched her skin. Then she smiled murderously.

"One more affront you will suffer for, mortal bitch."

Jess noticed Prey looking on approvingly. Evidently he preferred to see her facing up to her tormentors. Whatever the risk, she felt better about herself for taking a stand. In the dressing room she pulled on her biker-chick gear, hoping that the leathers would offer a little more presence and protection. When she walked back into the bedroom it was as if the others had not moved. Prey smiled widely when he saw what she was clad in. Jess even detected traces of grudging respect in the faces of Harwood and Aphra.

"Hold out your blades." They did so, pointing the weapons at the floor, the bottom twelve inches crossing. Carefully Jess trickled the holy water down the length of each blade. The water snaked and twisted its way down the steel in gleaming silver coils, to puddle on the carpet.

"Now stand back, Love," said Prey softly when the last drops had anointed the metal. "For Harwood has an appointment with the judge of all." Obediently Jess moved to the wall on the side of the room opposite Aphra.

"I am the judge, Count," responded Harwood. "And I decree that your nights are at an end." At the final word he lunged furiously. Jess screamed, certain the thrust would destroy her lover. But Prey took a small light step back and turned the attack aside with an effortless flick of his wrist. Harwood was intent on keeping his opponent on the back foot, and so pressed his attack. His blade lunged and hacked. Prey's blade turned and parried. Yet Harwood seemed to have the advantage. Inch by inch Prey was forced backward, retreating before the onslaught until his back was hard against the bedroom wall.

"I'll pin you like a moth, Count," threatened Harwood through gritted teeth. Prey made no reply, his focus on containing the attack. His eyes were glued to his opponent's blade—watching it, reading it. Harwood thrust suddenly at Prey's face. Jess couldn't see how he could avoid the murderous blow. But with fractions to spare he parried the point away, maintaining contact so that the steel of the blades screeched together, loud as a pair of battling tomcats. The screeching only stopped when the hilts of the weapons clashed together. It was an impasse. Each swordsman had the other trapped in a classical dueling tableau, one that tested the power of his opponent's arm. The first to break would sacrifice the advantage and risk injury or death.

Jess realized she'd been holding her breath and exhaled shakily. The knowledge that if Prey was defeated this would be the last day of her life sent an icy shudder up her spine. It wasn't the fact of death that concerned her, everyone went some time and, the way she felt about Prey, she wasn't sure she wanted to live without him. But her dying wouldn't be on the end of a quick blade. If Aphra overcame Harwood, her rage at the loss of Prey's child would lead to terrible revenge. Even worse, if Harwood survived and handed her over to Juice

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and Dal, gratuitous cruelty would be the order of the day. Jess resolved that if Prey was defeated she'd find some way to take her life. Perhaps she could get hold of one of the weapons, or throw herself upon Harwood's blade.

These thoughts crossed her mind in a matter of seconds. All the while the vampires stood like statues, huge arms straining, swords locked, the blades pointed towards the ceiling flickering like tongues of cold fire.

"Your arm feels weak, Count," whispered Harwood, his eyes locked to Prey's along with his blade. "It shakes, and I feel your will shaking too. I will kill you." Prey made no reply. His face as still as his body.

Abruptly, as if on cue, each vampire pushed away from the other and leapt backwards. Once more the air was filled with sound and movement. It was a lethal dance, Jess realized. There was something horribly choreographed about the exchange, as if each man moved to a preordained pattern. The blades created a harsh duet of sound. The shriek, hiss, clatter and swish of the combat created the rhythm that dictated each step and movement.

Jess never even saw the strike. Her first indication was a triumphant growl from Harwood and an increased flurry of strokes that caused Prey to fall back. Prey's free left arm, which he had been using for balance, had dropped to his side. Up on the shoulder Jess spied a wound. She felt sick with fear for him. Strangely, there was no blood. Rather, a blackness was appearing beneath the white cloth of Prey's shirt, and small tendrils of what seemed to be smoke or steam were ascending up past his left ear.

"Do you feel it Count? Does it burn? Do you like this foretaste of how your soul will suffer when I have consigned it to hell?"

Prey fell further back on defense. From the corner of her eye, Jess noticed that even Aphra appeared worried for him. His back was against the wall now. He was favoring his wounded shoulder, and his blade was only barely staving off the barrage of lethal blows that Harwood hurled at him.

"I have you!"

In confirmation Prey sagged at the knees slightly, apparently on the verge of collapsing to the floor. Triumphantly, Harwood raised his arm for the killing blow.

There was another scream. But this time from Aphra, not Jess. It was a scream of rage and frustration at plans thwarted.

For a second time Jess missed the stroke. Amazingly, Harwood grew a spike out his back. He stopped, his blade still poised for the strike he never had time to deliver. The look on his face was one of incredulity that Prey's blade could have sprung from nowhere to skewer him. Prey rose to his full height and looked the other vampire in the eye. He said nothing and his face betrayed no emotion.

Harwood's mouth opened and shut, but no sound came. His blade fell from his nerveless hand with a clatter. He started to sag at the knees. Instead of allowing his foe to fall Prey, with an amazing display of strength, held him upright, still skewered on his sword. Tendrils of smoke were curling from Harwood's blackening wounds, both back and front. The only thing his eyes now registered was pain. His face transformed into a mask of agony. Dark blood trickled from the corner of his blind eye. Then a thin keening came from his mouth, as if forced from the center of his being by some crushing weight. The blackness crept ever upwards, scorching his shirt as it spread. The skin on his neck and face began to blister and peel. Black flakes of skin, like paper ash, came away and drifted towards the floor. In less than two minutes all Prey's blade supported was a caricature of the human form composed of ash and burnt twigs. One minute more and Harwood's remains crumpled, dissolved and disappeared.

Silence.

Prey turned slowly to Aphra.

"What say you, sister? Shall we end things here?"

Aphra's laugh tinkled girlishly. "We cannot end things brother, we've hardly begun. You and I both know the difference between a battle and a war. I'm glad to see you haven't lost your touch, but I am different from that sad fool. I will be back soon, and I will have an army with me." She turned to Jess. "Au revoir, mortal. We'll meet again. Too soon for your tastes I imagine. I like your spirit, but I want your blood." She transformed quickly, and flitted from the room before Prey could make a move to stop her.

Chapter 15

"Are you alright?" Jess asked anxiously, going to Prey's side and looking closely at his still-smoking wound.

"I must wash it out or it will continue to burn and I will lose the use of the arm." Quickly he pulled off his shirt and headed for the bathroom. Without bothering with the rest of his clothes, he stepped into the shower and turned the tap on cold. A blast of water sprayed against his arm, penetrating the wound and cleaning it. After a few moments he stepped from the shower, dripping. He pulled off the rest of his clothes, before accepting the towel Jess handed him.

"Do you need a bandage?"

"No. I've cleansed it. It will heal quite swiftly now." Dry, he pulled on his robe.

"Now what?"

"Now we must plan. Aphra is serious in her intent to triumph over us. It will not take long for her to return with an army of undead zombies behind her."

"What can we do?"

"Firstly, we must get away until we can develop a plan."

"Is there somewhere we can go where she won't find us?"

"No. She and I are bound by genetics. It may take a while, but she will always find me. And you are an even easier proposition. We vampires have powers for detecting people. She'd track you down in a matter of days, even if you went to the other side of the world."

"Then the first thing I'm doing is returning to Union City," replied Jess decisively. "Let me know where you'll be day after tomorrow and I'll meet you there."

"What's so important about returning to Union City."

"I'm tired of fighting uneven battles. I want to be able to defend myself. Back home I can get my hands on some serious firepower which will help balance the ledger."

"But you've got me to protect you. Besides, you can't easily defeat vampires with guns."

"I want you as an equal, not a protector. I hate feeling helpless. A gun may not easily kill a vampire, but it's a great stopper."

Prey sensed her determination. He grinned. "Now I see the connection to Rose. You're as stubborn as she is."

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"Why thank you sir. I've come to the conclusion recently that Auntie Rose had good taste, so I don't mind the comparison. I'll leave at first light, which is only an hour away. I'd suggest we fill the time constructively, but after our last post-coitus interruptus, I'm wary of another unwelcome visitor."

"This time we don't need to worry. No vampire would risk being far from their lair at this hour. The dangers of being caught out in the sunlight are too great. Besides, there is something I have to show you." Casually he opened his robe. Jess exclaimed with pleasure and delight.

"What a nice surprise! I'd better look closely. I want to remember every inch while I'm away." She sank to her knees before Prey's hard penis. With both hands she reached up, one hand to cup his balls, the other to tenderly explore the length of him.

"You have such a nice cock," she whispered. His reply was an incoherent groan of pleasure.

Jess began rubbing her face against Prey's penis. It felt huge and heavy as she tilted her face beneath it and rubbed it sensuously across her chin, lips, nose, and forehead. Her sharp nails tugged at his scrotum, gently pinching the nervefilled skin that contained his testicles. One finger traced up the back, feeling the raised seam that ran from the rear of his scrotum towards his anus. He moaned as she ran a hard fingernail down this centerline of desire. Tongue extended, Jess licked at his balls. Taking them gently in her mouth, tasting and nibbling. She explored forward, finding the place where the base of his hard penis jutted from his body. With long hot licks she stimulated his phallus ever more forcefully. He all but buckled at the knees and rested a hand on her head to support himself. Then Jess opened her mouth as widely as she could and engulfed him. He was of such a size that her best efforts only allowed a third of his length into her mouth. From the sounds he was making, it was enough.

With Prey's penis deep in her mouth, she stretched her arms upwards as high as she could to run her fingernails down his torso. Reaching inside his robe she traced a path to the small of his back. He jerked in her mouth when her sharp fingernails clawed his buttocks and thighs.

Then, with strong hands, he pulled Jess to her feet. She looked up into his eyes, seeing in them such extremes of need and desire that her heart hammered wildly. With a shrug of his shoulders Prey allowed his open robe to fall from his body. Jess's eyes traveled the length of his huge frame, marveling at its perfection.

"I want you." The huskiness in his voice told her exactly how much.

"Oh Prey, I want you too."

He took a single step towards her so that they stood chest to chest. Then he took her in his arms and swept her back off her feet, just as she'd seen the heroes do in old movies. Prey lowered his head and Jess shuddered as his lips found her

neck and traced a path past the fluttering pulse imprisoned there. When he arrived at her mouth she parted her own lips to return his kiss. Then, while his left arm supported her half-reclining form, his free right arm began to roam the hills and valleys of her body. His hand found its way inside her top and explored her breasts, making her nipples harden. Then it moved lower to the waist-band of her leather trousers. Two powerful fingers slipped the button and edged the zipper down as far as it would go. The leather was firmly melded to her, but the tight space between pants and skin was no match for the determination of Prey's hand. He forced his fingers inside until he reached her moist pussy. Jess was so wet that Prey's middle finger slid straight between the folds of her labia and entered her. Jess deliberately went limp in his arms, making him support her full weight. The added pressure this exerted on the hand wedged inside her felt wonderful. The finger pressed so firmly against her excited clit. She bounced a little to heighten the sensation. Prey broke the kiss and smiled into her eyes. "You have given me an idea," he whispered, his voice still husky.

The left arm supporting Jess's back swung her upright so that her head rested on his right shoulder. She nuzzled her face into his neck and wrapped her arms around him. At the same time she clenched her thighs together, imprisoning his hand inside her. In four quick steps he was at the bed. He made as if to lower her down on her back, and Jess released her arms, thinking to help him. Instead, with an awesome display of power, he turned her in mid-air to face away from him. Then he settled her on her stomach. His right hand trapped beneath her, his finger still inside her where she wanted them.

With his free left hand Prey peeled the black leather pants down to the middle of Jess's thighs until her naked buttocks were completely exposed. The tight leather held her legs firmly together trapping Prey's other hand where it was.

"What are you doing?" Jess whispered. She quickly found out. Prey's big body lowered itself over her, covering her completely. His penis, still wet from her mouth, slid smoothly between her buttocks, not entering her but rather sliding up and down in the crevice between the firm rounds of flesh. Prey grunted with pleasure, while his right hand moved as much as the prison of Jess's thighs would allow it to. His finger penetrated her a little further and also pressed deliciously on her clitoris. Jess moaned with pleasure at the multiple sensations of the moving hand, the sliding cock and the heavy male weight holding her down.

She began lifting her ass to him, timing her upward movements to meet the movement of the cock thrusting between her buttocks. Then, instead of lowering herself the next time Prey's cock moved downwards, she kept her ass up off the bed so that the head of his penis slipped even further downwards, past her anus, to lodge at the entrance to her vagina. Prey's finger was still inside her, but she desperately didn't want him to remove it.

Claudia Rose

"Can you get them both in?" she gasped from beneath him. He made no reply, but she felt the pressure of the head of his cock increase. To her delight he did manage to slide his cock inside her while his finger was in there as well. "Ohmigod, that's so tight," she gasped. It was almost uncomfortable. Almost, but not quite. And because it was "not quite," it was instead simply wonderful. Jess wriggled and pushed her ass upwards. Prey took her cue and began to thrust powerfully, burying himself deeply within her with each stroke.

"You are so hot...and...your ass is...so firm," he gasped between strokes. Jess started to realize that during their other love-making, intense as it had been, Prey must have been keeping his need in check, because this time she felt herself to be at the center of a whirlwind. Prey fucked her with incredible power, the huge weight of his body bearing down on her ass, while his hand held her to himself. She felt like a helpless doll, and loved it. Her efforts to contribute by moving responsively were as nothing before the extremity and power of her lover's need. Abandoning any sense that she was an equal participant in this union, Jess gave herself over to the experience. In a way there was very little human about what was happening. She felt like she was being taken by a powerful animal. Or a superman. Which is what he is, she heard a small calm voice telling her fevered brain. He is beautiful, powerful and indestructible. He is a veritable superman. And he was her lover. How good it was! So good she was going to come...and come...

The muscles inside her clenched along the length of Prey's cock and her pussy flooded with wetness. He must have felt her orgasm through his own desperate desire, because he began to thrust even harder and faster. Then, with a great cry, he buried his penis deeply inside her and held it there while ejaculating powerfully.

When he'd finally finished, he lay heavily atop her, his breathing deep and ragged in her ear. Jess lay quietly beneath him, stunned at what she'd just experienced.

"Are you okay?" he whispered finally.

"I think so. But that was truly awesome."

"For me also."

"You're just saying that. I could tell you were holding back."

Prey chuckled. "Indeed I was, my little shrinking violet. We are so genteel together."

"If you say so. My worry is that I won't be able to ride my bike comfortably."

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Positive. I want some way of fighting back and this is the best way to do it. I'll make Union City by midday, spend the night at my old boss's house if he'll have me, and be on my way back here, armed and dangerous, early tomorrow." "I'm not going to try to stop you. But be very careful. Don't risk exposing yourself after dark. I'll see what I can do to find out where they are hiding, and then we'll take the battle to them."

Chapter 16

The ride back to Union City didn't seem to take long. Jess's mind was preoccupied with Prey's final words at their parting. Specifically, she kept thinking about what his words signified for their future together.

"Take care, Love. I know you must do this, and I admire your courage and independence. In this respect you are different from Rose. She couldn't stand apart from me and at the end she wouldn't stand with me. You have a piece of my heart, so carry it carefully. I'll expect you back tomorrow early."

There was no one home at John Tsaloumis's house when Jess arrived there in the early afternoon. A neighbour told her she thought they'd gone out to watch John Jr's little league game. Shrugging off her jacket, Jess settled down on the verandah swing-seat to await the Tsaloumis family's return. It was a perfect afternoon, warm and quiet. Jess, exhausted by the events of the last few days, fell asleep.

She woke with a start to hear a youthful voice shouting, "One move and I'll shoot." She'd been halfway through a nightmare featuring Juice about to do something diabolical. Which was why, in her confused state, she came awake snarling and ready to attack. John Jr. was taken completely by surprise when the sleeping lady turned into an angry monster. Terrified, he involuntarily squeezed the trigger of the gun he was holding. A blast of cold water soaked Jess's face and cascaded down the front of her tank-top.

"Johnny, what are you doing?" shrieked a voice. Poppy Tsaloumis had walked out of the garage just in time to see her ten year old drench an angry woman scantily clad in a tank-top and leather pants. It took her a moment to register who it was.

"Jess? My God, it's Jess. Are you alright? John!" she sang out to her husband. "Jess is here. And Johnny's just drenched her. You naughty boy."

John Jr began crying loudly.

"No, no. It's alright. I gave him a fright. No harm done," Jess assured Poppy. Then she glanced down and saw just how drenched her tank top was. "Oh my God, I look like something out of a wet T-shirt contest." Blushing, she quickly pulled her jacket on.

Poppy giggled. "Why don't you come in and I'll give you something dry to put on. You can't keep wearing that jacket. You'll roast."

John Sr, who had just joined them, gave Jess an affectionate hug. He seconded Poppy's invitation. "Yes, come in stranger. We want to hear what

you've been up to. I hope you're returning to town. Your desk's been empty for too long."

"Actually, I'm only here for a night. The job will have to press on without me. Truth to tell, I'm short of a bed. If there's any chance I could sleep on your couch I'd be most grateful."

"You most certainly won't sleep on the couch," replied Poppy indignantly. "We've got a perfectly good guestroom. Come with me and I'll show you where it is and give you some things to wear more suited to a comfortable evening. John can go and uncork a bottle of wine and fire up the grill for us. Isn't that right darling?" Poppy concluded sweetly.

"Yes dear. Whatever you say dear," chuckled John, obediently heading off to do as he was bid.

Dinner with Poppy and John was like stepping back into another world. A world of civilized talk, friendship, human warmth and laughter. How she wished Prey were here to enjoy this. The thought of them sharing together in this sort of domestic harmony gave her a good feeling. The fear and horror of the last few days seemed increasingly like a bad dream. And yet a frightened portion of Jess's mind knew that this was the dream, and that the horror awaiting her back in Stillwater was reality. If she ever wanted this dream to become reality, then first she must fight the horror with every fiber of her being.

All too soon the evening was at an end. John Jr had been bundled off to bed yawning and John Sr was grumbling about an early start because he'd been assigned to head a task force. Jess tarried as long as she could, but eventually she recognized the need to let her friends get to bed. Fear caused her to linger – the fear she might never see them again.

Alone in bed, her thoughts returned to Prey. So handsome and so enigmatic. It was hard to reconcile the sick, beaten creature she'd first encountered with the magnificent being he had evolved into. Why would anyone with that much power let themselves fall so far? Love was the answer, she realized. He was capable of boundless love. She'd never met someone prepared to die for love. Her experience with humans was that they were more likely to be self-interested and venal. Prey had been so solemn when he told her she carried a piece of his heart. Did she exert the same sway over him Aunt Rose had? And what did that mean for their future? She was a mortal too, just as Aunt Rose had been. Should she fear what loving Prey might mean to her? Was mortality something she wanted to sacrifice for eternal life in the cold dark? Why couldn't vampires love each other? She had so many questions.

At some stage Jess dozed off. Later, she snapped awake in the darkened room, certain she'd heard a sound. She lay still, pulse pounding in her ears. There was nothing there. It must have been a dream. A glance at the clock showed her that it was almost 5.00 a.m. The sun would be up soon, and she needed to get what she'd come for and hit the road. Silently Jess dressed and

slipped out of the house. In the garage was John's SUV. Guiltily Jess keyed in the door code she remembered, half hoping John had changed it so she would be unable to carry out her plan and not have to break John's trust in the process. The lock opened with a solid thunk. The code she remembered to the rear gun locker worked also. With a sick feeling of guilt, Jess shoveled John's machine gun and clips of ammunition into a carry bag she'd brought for the purpose. She left a brief note. Sorry John, I have a situation that necessitates some protection. Please forgive me. Love Jess. Carefully she re-locked the weapons container and the SUV, and made to leave. The silence was shattered when her foot kicked an object and sent it spinning loudly across the floor. The thing came to a halt in a square of light shining through the window from the streetlight outside. She'd kicked another weapon! Jess picked up the gun and immediately recognized John Jr's water pistol. On impulse she threw that in the bag as well. Then she slung the straps over her shoulders and headed for her bike. It was two blocks of hard pushing before she felt far enough away from John and Poppy's home to kick the hog into life. She headed out of Union City at a sedate rumble, clearing the city limits in a matter of minutes and holding open the throttle for the long straight. 5.30am. It would be light in a little less than forty minutes.

What was that dark shadow ahead? It seemed to be moving! Abruptly Jess realized that a shadowy figure was speeding directly at her. With a sense of dread, she watched the thing come ever closer. She tried desperately to stop by jamming on both brakes, but it was too little too late. From out of the blackness a pallid leering face materialized. It was a screeching death-mask, all fangs. Jess veered for the shoulder and dropped her Harley. The grassy verge met her with a thump. Winded, she rolled a couple of times before coming to a halt, halfway down a ditch. Struggling to an upright position, Jess pulled off her helmet. She looked up into the eyes of a nightmare vision. Juice was perched above her on the lip of the ditch, cackling maliciously.

"Oh no. An accident. A poor lady unseated from her mighty steed. What can we do to save her? Does she need mouth to mouth we wonder?" Juice's voice dropped to a vitriolic whisper. "How are you, mortal bitch? I'll bet you didn't expect to see me."

Jess cowered in terror. The succubus clearly had murder in mind. Her chance of surviving the thing's poison seemed incredibly slim. John's gun was in the bag on her back, but she had no hope of getting it before Juice got her. Angry at herself for her fear and for the risk she had taken leaving too early, Jess vowed to put up a good fight. She backed away slowly, hoping to put a little room between her and the poisonous fangs and claws.

"Don't go, my sweet one," cooed Juice. "It's been a long night and I am hungry. And by my eyes there looks to be a meal or two in your plump tits. Let's hurry before the nasty sun comes up to burn us."

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Juice rose a little on her haunches, poised like a sprinter in the starting blocks, her fingers crooked into talons, ready to strike. Like some sort of reptile, her tongue flicked dryly in and out between her narrow lips. "I'm going to hurt you, and then I'm going to gut you, and then I'm going to kill you."

Jess said nothing. But she braced herself for the onslaught. With a blood curdling shriek, Juice made to leap. But before she could attack, a speeding object dropped from the heavens and hit her, as a falcon might hit an inattentive sparrow. Juice was knocked sideways and carried twenty feet along the ditch, garments flapping, ending up on the ground in a tangle of limbs. She screamed with rage and fear as she looked up at the imposing figure of Prey standing over her.

"You! You, fuck you..."

Prey interrupted in a voice invested with power and authority. "Go. Now. Or I will tear you limb from limb and cast your ashes to the wind. Foul stench of the dungeon, run like the bitch-cur you are, or stand now and die."

"Fuck you. Fuck you...I don't die. I'll show you die Count-cunt—you and your fetid mortal whore. I'll make both of you bleed, scream and suffer. I'll rip you to ribbons and feed you to the spawn of the undead." With another screech she transformed and disappeared into the shadows.

Prey turned to Jess, who was weeping uncontrollably. "Are you alright Love?"

"Oh my God, that was too close. Thank you Prey. Thank you. I thought I was dead. She was going to kill me. How did you know?"

"I didn't know. But I feared. So I thought it best to take precautions and keep watch."

"You saved me."

"Yes, and you saved me. So that makes us even. Now, Love, can you still ride?"

"I think so." Jess climbed gingerly to her feet, feeling bruised but relieved that her situation wasn't worse. "Yes, I'm fine."

"Let me help you lift the bike." Together they picked up the Harley. The damage was superficial. It roared to life at the first kick. "Good. Can you make it home? I must hurry."

Sunrise! It wasn't far off. The threat to Prey galvanized her. "God, yes. I'm fine. You get home as quickly as you can. I'll see you there soon."

With a quick, firm kiss, Prey transformed and sped away. Jess carefully mounted the bike, taking care of her bruises, and followed after him as swiftly as she could.

Chapter 17

Three hours later Jess lay naked on the bed while Prey's strong fingers finished what a hot bath had begun, rubbing the bruises and stiffness from her joints.

"Did you get the weapons you wanted?"

"Yes. I've got John's machine pistol and enough ammunition to shred a whole host of vampires. Not that it helped me much when Juice caught me by surprise."

"Yes, well, she got a surprise of her own, didn't she?"

"Mmmm. Indeed she did. I can't thank you enough."

"You can try."

"And I shall. But first, tell me, did you have any success finding out where they're hiding?"

"Yes. It wasn't hard. Harwood's bottle of Holy Water gave me the clue. There's a Catholic church a mile from here that's fire damaged around the front entrance, and closed indefinitely for repairs. Some careful snooping last night revealed that they're comfortably nesting beneath its roof. If we're going to take them, that's where it has to happen."

"Tonight?"

"I don't think so. I'm not sure they'll be there. Aphra tends to be quite literal, so if she says she's planning on creating an army of undead then she'll need at least another night to produce even a handful of your most basic zombies. Let's plan for tomorrow night. That will give us time to rest, recuperate, and prepare our strategy. What do you think?"

Jess's relief was palpable. She felt sore and tired. Mentally, the thought of an attack tonight upon a nest of vampires was well beyond her abilities. She was happy to live in the immediate moment and let the future take care of itself. She rolled over slowly and answered Prey's question. "I think three things," she whispered.

"And those three things are?"

"Heat," said Jess, laying her hand on his smooth, powerful inner thigh. "And blood," she added, moving her fingers up towards his penis. "And sex," she concluded, grasping his semi-erect cock and giving it a firm pull.

"And which do you desire first?" Prey asked.

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Jess parted her lips a fraction and moistened them with the pink tip of her tongue. Her eyes hooded a little as she stared up at her magnificent lover. Then she replied firmly, "Bite me."

Prey took a deep breath. His pulse leapt in his neck. As Jess watched, shivering with excitement, his lips parted fractionally to reveal perfectly white fangs extending slowly from his jaw.

It was one of the most frighteningly erotic things she'd ever seen. She was desperate to give herself to him. With cat-like grace she extended her arms up behind her head and arched her back, offering her breasts to him. Prey needed no urging. He lowered his head smoothly. Jess held her breath, watching as his mouth closed around the top of her breast, drawing her nipple deeply into his mouth. She felt his tongue caressing the hard nub. Then his jaw moved.

"Nnnhhh," she gasped. Icy needles pierced her flesh, penetrating the fullness of her breast. The pain was momentary, however. In its place a delicious tingling began, as if her nerve endings were swarming like bees. The tingling increased. Her breast felt warm, then hot. The heat moved downwards, flooding towards her pussy. As it arrived, a cascade of wetness caused her to squeeze her thighs together. The heat moved upwards too, into her face. Her lips tightened, she craved the pressure of Prey's lips on them. Prey's fangs released her left breast and then he turned his attention to her right one. Again Jess cried out as his fangs penetrated her. Again the momentary pain turned into long moments of exquisite pleasure.

"Bit me, Prey. Bite me," she heard herself crying out. Her voice sounded as if it came from a long distance away. She could feel a pressure on her breast, and realized he was suckling. His mouth felt so good, so right. She wanted to cry. Prey stopped and looked into her eyes. His own eyes were burning with desire. She could see his body panting with need.

"Bite me."

Again he stooped over her body, running his tongue up between her breasts towards her lips. Jess stopped him by gripping his heavily muscled shoulders and digging her fingernails into his flesh. With all her strength she pushed. Forcing him down, not up. He glanced up at her, questioningly. She gave the faintest nod in response to the inquiry in his eyes.

"Bite."

Prey's head settled between her parted thighs. Jess moaned as his lips and tongue made contact with her swollen labia. He tasted her moisture and it seemed to drive him wild. His tongue lapped, softly at first then harder, finding her clitoris and stimulating the hyper-sensitive collection of nerves surrounding it. Jess moaned and bucked, twining her fingers into Prey's wavy black hair and grinding herself against his face. His tongue entered her. She could feel it sliding in and out. Then his mouth shifted to her upper thighs. He took a bite. Needles of desire, fastened onto her flesh. She bucked and moaned, pleasure besting pain and sending her into marvelous throes of orgasm.

With one strong arm Prey pushed Jess's right leg up and then over so that she was half on her side. His tongue found its way between her buttocks. Questing, exploring, extracting even greater sensation. Then a bite again, needles sinking into her buttock. Pain and pleasure. Pleasure and pain. The tingling in her breasts that had so aroused her was now replicated in her ass. Flowing waves of sensation stimulated her. Prey's tongue explored her, finding her anus, a pulsating ring of desire. Jess wriggled, attempting to make herself even more accessible. She rolled right over, face down, her ass raised, offering it to Prey's fangs. He inflicted a second bite on her other buttock. She moaned, dizzy with need and desire. She knew what she wanted. Wanted? No–needed. She knew what she needed.

"Fuck me up the ass, Prey."

Before she could think twice his cock was there, entering her slowly, firmly but gently.

"Jess. This is so good. It's so tight," he gasped.

His bite had relaxed her. She'd always imagined that doing it this way would be painful. In fact if felt wonderful. Jess thrust upward, forcing him further inside her. At the same time she pushed both of her hands beneath her and between her legs. Her fingers found her pussy. She rubbed desperately. Prey, sensing the movement, began to thrust more energetically.

Pain and pleasure. Pleasure and pain. Jess's orgasm, which had been hovering in the background for an age, came crashing back in. Prey's potent bites were lifting her to unimagined extremes of sexual frenzy. She wriggled and humped to get him more deeply inside her. As she came, the muscles in her ass spasmed, contracting tightly around his cock and wringing a massive orgasm from him. He climaxed deep inside her, moaning and calling her name. At the peak of his passion he lowered his head and bit her one last time, a delicate nip to the nape of her neck.

* * * * *

The doorbell startled Jess from sleep. She looked at the time. It was late in the evening. "Shit. Who can that be?" she muttered. The bell rang again. She crossed the darkened room and peeked through a gap in the curtain. Even from above the man down on the porch, bathed in the streetlights, looked familiar.

"Fuck. No."

"What is it?" asked a concerned Prey, crossing to stand beside her.

"John Tsaloumas."

"Who?"

"My friend from Union City. The one whose gun I stole. Damn! Damn! Damn! I was hoping he'd leave it for a day or two."

"Ignore him. He'll go away."

"I can't. It's dangerous out there with Juice and the others on the prowl. I need to warn him to find a place of safety."

The doorbell chimed again. She could hear John calling her name monotonously. "Jess...Jess...Jess."

Throwing her clothes on she ran downstairs and through the darkened lobby. She flicked on the outside light before opening the front door. Through the patterned glass, the silhouette of John Tsaloumas turned as if to shield his eyes from the sudden glare. He kept calling, "Jess...Jess."

She had to get him inside so she could explain herself and alert him to the danger he was in. Hurriedly she unlocked the door and threw it open. "Quick, John. Come in," she said to her friend's broad back. But before she could lay a hand on him to pull him inside, his own swinging fist knocked her off balance. She staggered backwards into the house. Then she saw his face and screamed in terror. Her mind could never have conceived of anything so awful. She was being attacked by the ghastly travesty of a man she loved better than her own father.

The undead corpse of John Tsaloumas was horribly disfigured. One eyelid had been ripped off, as had a nostril and part of his upper lip. Scratches and bites, crusted with dark blood, covered every inch of exposed flesh. Where he wasn't bitten, his skin revealed an appalling pallor. The exception was his lips, which had gone an unhealthy green. His mouth was choked with black clotted blood and his swollen tongue protruded obscenely.

He advanced upon her. Jess found herself incapable of conscious, rational thought. She could do no more than scream in despair at what had become of her friend, while waiting for him to end her life.

"Jess...Jess," John's walking corpse intoned flatly. His hands reached out for her throat. She felt powerless to bat them away. Dead fingers, cold as ice, closed around her windpipe. Jess began choking and gasping. Pressure, intolerable pressure, was throttling the life out of her. All the time he was attacking, the blank, damaged eyes of John Tsaloumas stared fixedly past her shoulder. Her face darkened with congested blood. Each desperate breath felt as if it must be her last.

Then a remarkable thing happened. A thin sliver of metal transfixed John head, entering through one ear and exiting out the other. Then it withdrew, and with a swish lopped the head clean of John's body. Still the hands did not stop their work. Swish, and swish again. Prey's blade severed the hands at the wrists. Only then did they fall from Jess's neck to wriggle obscenely on the floor like stranded fish."

The horror was too much. Jess fainted.

* * * * *

"Jess. Jessica. Can you hear me?"

Jess opened her eyes to discover a very concerned Prey bending over her. She was lying on the bed. How had she got there? Memory came flooding back. She began to sob uncontrollably. "They killed him. They killed John. Oh my God. Did you see what they did to him? How he must have suffered."

"I'm so sorry, Love." Prey seemed lost for words.

"He's got a wife and a family. Who will look after Poppy and little Johnny now?" Then the awful truth crashed into her consciousness. "It's my fault, Prey. I did this. If I hadn't stolen his gun and left that note he'd still be alive. And his wife would still have a husband and his little boy would still have a daddy. It's my fault. I murdered him. He probably came here to see if he could help me. He'd have been worried about me. It's my fault."

Great wracking sobs convulsed her whole body. Prey gathered her into his arms and held her while she cried her pain and grief to the world.

"It is not your fault, Love. You did not do this. You are a victim of circumstances. All we can do now is avenge your friend's death."

His words penetrated her consciousness. Revenge. Yes, she wanted revenge. More than anything. Far more than life itself, Jess wanted—needed—craved revenge. "Yes," she said simply. "We must destroy them. Tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow night," Prey agreed. "Come, Love. We have much to do. Surprise will be our greatest ally."

Chapter 18

The pair walking by the river, bathed in the rays of the late-afternoon sun, turned a few heads. So many heads, in fact, that Jess began to feel nervous. She supposed they did look strange. A tall woman in leather, pushing a man in a wheelchair swathed from head to foot in black clothes. But surely people shouldn't be staring quite this much.

"People keep looking at us," she whispered to Prey.

An unintelligible grunt came from beneath the black Fedora pressed firmly on the vampire's head. The sound was further muffled by the heavy black scarf double-wrapped around his face. She couldn't see his eyes behind the shades, but his gloved fingers made an impatient gesture, unmistakably telling her not to dawdle.

Jess wished she could dawdle. The terror awaiting them at the end of this journey was making her stomach churn. The whole plan was such a risk. Just having Prey outside in daylight was playing with fire. She looked down at him. She could tell from the rigidity of his shoulders that he was far from comfortable.

They made it to the partly-burned church while the sun was still up. The huge building was empty, ready for repairs. The work on the fire-damaged entranceway wouldn't begin until the next year. Prey directed her to a small door around the back. When she'd pushed the chair as close as it would go she placed her hand under Prey's arm and helped him to his feet. Together they slipped into the darkened space. Inside in the gloom, Prey quickly straightened up and divested himself of the protective clothing. Like Jess, he was clad from head to toe in leather.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Better now. I don't like going out in daylight, but the wheelchair was necessary to get us here before dark. You did well. Now the element of surprise is on our side."

"Where are they, exactly?"

"Up inside the roof. It is hot up there, and as you now know, heat helps vampire blood to flow."

"So remind me what we do?"

"We stick together and get up there as quickly as we can. If we find them before they wake for the night we may be able to kill them where they lie."

"How do we get up there?"

"Through the church and up a circular staircase inside a tower. Get your weapons and follow me." He stopped to untie his sword from the back of the wheelchair. Jess unhooked her bag from the chair and took the machine pistol from inside. She loaded it, zipped the remaining ammunition back inside the bag and slung it on her back. Then she hesitated for a moment. Prey looked back. "What is it?"

"I'm frightened."

"So am I. But this is one of those moments where all possible courses of action entwine into one. We have no choice. It is, and always will be, them or us. Do not fear, Love. Stick close to me. Let your instincts guide you. I am proud to have you by my side in this battle."

"I'm scared of dying."

"I am scared of you dying. If you go, then this time nothing will prevent me going also." She looked into his eyes. He was utterly serious.

"Would you be dying for me...or for Rose?"

"For you of course, Love. I have already died once for Rose. I did not seek to be brought back. And if it hadn't been for you I wouldn't have been. You have given me a second life. I live for you now, Jess. And I will gladly die for you if that is the decree of the Judge of All." Prey's jaw firmed. "But I will not live life without you. Of that I am certain. Now come! Time is our ally, but our ally marches too swiftly."

Jess followed in Prey's wake, her mind churning. Prey lived for her. He would die rather than be apart from her. How could he feel so much for her? They'd been together such a short time, only a few days. And yet, if she were honest, she'd die for him in a second. He was like no other man she'd ever known. Without Prey, her life would be hollow and meaningless. In that moment, Jess realized she'd made a decision about her future, without even consciously realizing there was a decision to be made.

Prey was well ahead of her. She hurried to catch up.

The church smelt of polished wood and the breath of a million prayers. Prey carefully skirted the dying rays of the sun where they plunged to the floor in thick beams the color of the lofty stained glass. The luminous interior of each beam swam with myriad motes of dust. Jess found the place hauntingly beautiful. They went through another darkened door, and before them a circular staircase ascended steeply. Prey went up the stairs so lightly and swiftly he seemed to float. Jess followed behind as rapidly as she could. When she arrived at the top, panting, it was to find Prey paused outside a heavy wooden door.

"I sense creatures on the other side of this, but I'm not sure they're the ones we want. We'll have to take a look." Prey unsheathed his sword and carefully tested the handle. The door was unlocked. It opened quietly. He slipped in and Jess followed him, releasing the safety on her gun as she did so. Behind the door

Prey For Me

was a small, unfurnished room with another door on the far side. The room might have been unfurnished, but it was far from empty. Against its walls leaned four corpses, all with mutilations similar to the sort inflicted upon poor John Tsaloumas. Jess stifled a scream when one opened its eyes.

Prey didn't hesitate. His blade removed the zombie's head, which fell to the floor with a thump. Quickly and cleanly he decapitated the remaining creatures. They variously crumpled and thumped to the floor. Satisfied that he'd cleared their path, Prey walked to the door at the far end of the room. He didn't see the brown shape above until it plummeted down upon him from where it had been clinging to the ceiling. The thing hit him with an appalling thump. Prey and his attacker crashed to the floor. All was noise and motion. Jess screamed and raised her weapon. The creature attacking Prey snarled ferociously as it tried to rend him apart. Then the deafening chatter of the machine pistol silenced everything else by blowing its head off.

Prey jumped to his feet, splattered with blood.

"What was that?" stammered Jess, the gun smoking in her hand.

"A shape-shifter. I missed it," he gasped. "Quickly! We have lost the element of surprise."

Prey raced to the door. But before he could touch the handle, the door exploded in his face, sending him tumbling back into the room. The force of the impact also sent his sword flying from his hand. Dal, immense and angry, stood raging in the doorway, searching for a fight. In one leap he was on Prey. Dal's huge arms engulfed Prey before he could reach for his sword. The brutish vampire tried to crush him, but this time Dal had underestimated his opponent. Prey was no longer the weakened vampire of the cellar. He had sufficient strength to escape Dal's grip. Free, he delivered a series of heavy blows to the giant vampire's head. Dal staggered backwards, still roaring, fangs fully extended. Prey dived across the room, scrabbling for his sword. He found it and came easily to his feet, holding the lethal blade before him. Dal halted, shaking with fury.

"Attend to the mortal," commanded a voice. "I'll take care of my brother." Aphra stood in the doorway, holding a sword with the ease only achieved by someone trained to dueling from birth. Dal snarled again, but did as he was told, turning to face Jess where she stood in the far corner. The giant vampire advanced upon her, scornful of the small gun pointed at him. To her surprise Jess felt extremely calm. She knew what she had to do.

"This is for Captain John Tsaloumas," she intoned. It was clinical, an execution. The first burst took Dal across the eyes, blinding him as she'd meant to. Another burst raked his body, shattering arms and puncturing his belly. Then Jess raked his neck, emptying the magazine until his head flopped sideways onto a shoulder, only connected by a few tendons. Amazingly Dal didn't fall. All but decapitated, his body shuffled drunkenly towards Jess. Calmly she reached into

her bag and found another magazine. She loaded up, and let him have it, literally severing him at the knees. The body fell with an audible thud then, as Jess watched, it began turning to ash just as Harwood's had. Soon all that remained of Dal was a small pile of black cinders.

Aphra and Prey were fighting furiously. The vampiress was a brilliant swordswoman. To Jess's untrained eye, as good as Prey. What should she do? Would Prey want her to shoot? Surely codes of honor didn't apply in this situation. Then a movement caught her eye through the shattered doorway that had admitted Dal. Was it Juice?

Gun at the ready Jess crossed carefully to the door, keeping well clear of the arc of Aphra's blade. She looked through. There was no one evidently in sight. She glanced round both corners, still nothing. She must have imagined it. She walked a few paces into the long dark room. It was totally empty.

"I hate you a lot now!"

Jess shrieked with fright and whirled around. Juice crouched above the doorframe, clinging to the wall like a giant spider. Her eyes glared a crazy red. "I hate you for hurting my Dally. My Dally. My Dally. He's my baby. I'm going to hurt you. Hurt you. Make you bleed. Make you scream." Jess raised her gun and fired. Quick as she was, Juice was quicker. She scampered around the upper wall, always a fraction ahead of the speeding bullets.

Click. Jess's magazine was empty. Desperately she fumbled for a new clip. Time defeated her. Juice launched herself, just as she had at Jess on the bike. She was all teeth and claws. Jess inserted the new clip of bullets, but she was given no time to fire. Desperately, she raised her gun to fend off Juice's attack. The weapon was knocked flying from her hand with a force that sent it spinning the length of the room. Jess turned and raced after it, diving full length along the floor, fingers clutching desperately at her salvation. Only then did she realize that one of the shadows down the far end of the room was more than just a stain. There was a hole in the floor. The gun beat her clutching fingers by an inch and fell through the hole, twirling lazily to smash thirty feet below. Jess narrowly avoided following it through the hole. She clambered desperately to her knees and whirled to find Juice crouched a few feet away. The vampire succubus sat motionless, simply watching, a gloating grin on her face.

"Oh deary deary me how sad too bad, plump mortal. I think you have a problem," Juice cooed in a sing-song voice. "Can you fly? This might be a good time to start learning." She gave a small, excited hop forward, like a vulture closing in to peck at a meal not quite dead. Bluff was all Jess had left. Without taking her eyes off Juice, she reached into her bag. Her fingers encountered a second gun. She drew it out and aimed it. Juice's eyes widened. "Another naughty bang bang. Will it kill me? Or is it empty? I think we'd better find out." She hopped closer. Jess retreated a foot. Her back heel teetered on the rim of the hole. She made no effort to fire the weapon. "I though so. It's empty, isn't it?"

Prey For Me

Just as Juice pounced, Jess lost her balance. With a despairing cry she teetered on the edge of the hole. Her scream of terror must have alerted Prey. He came racing through the door, sword in hand, horror stamped upon his face. But he was too late. Gravity bested them. The last thing she heard was his agonized cry. "Jess! No! Jessicaaaa!"

The fall happened in slow motion. Juice watched it all with delight, her leering face growing smaller as Jess accelerated towards the ground. She didn't hit cleanly. Instead an alter railing caught her squarely across the back. She both felt and heard her spine snap like a pretzel. The impact flipped her over, so she fell the final few feet face down, landing in a puddle of water. Puddle? No it was some sort of bowl or something. She could hear bubbling. She was still holding the gun. It was immersed beneath her and filling with water.

Then she felt a hand on her shoulder. Rolling her out of the water. She opened her eyes. Juice leered down at her.

"You don't fly very well. I think you're hurt. I think your back's broken. Look's like it's curtains. But your heart's still pumping. Must be time for a feed." Try as she might, Jess couldn't move her legs. Breathing was becoming difficult. The break must be high up. But she could still lift an arm. Shakily, she pointed the gun at Juice.

"Bang bang," she whispered.

"No bullets silly," Juice lisped sweetly.

Jess squeezed the trigger of John Jr's water pistol. A jet of water sprayed Juice in the face.

"Holy water," Jess croaked.

Juice screamed and skittered backwards, scrabbling at her face with her hands. Then she stopped, water dripping harmlessly down her face. She smiled cruelly. "Very funny dead girl. Now I'm going to hurt you." She snarled and Jess cringed inwardly at the sight of the cruelest fangs she'd ever seen.

Juice advanced, giggling dementedly. Abruptly her cackle was cut off with a strange croak. As Jess watched in bemusement, her tormentor's eyes widened in shock, then Juice's eyelids began fluttering in a strange way. And then, most remarkably, her evil, leering little head toppled from her shoulders, to be followed by her body collapsing slowly to the floor. Jess could no longer see her, but from the sound of familiar hissing she guessed Juice was turning to ash.

Into her vision swam the beautiful face of Prey. How strange—he seemed to be crying.

"Jess."

"I'm sorry...fell...can't breathe..."

"Jess, don't die. I love you. I can't lose you."

"Love...you...too." How come her voice sounded so far away? Was he telling her the truth? Was she really dying? This couldn't be the end. She wasn't ready. She had things to do. She had to love Prey. She had to help Poppy and John Jr. Jess forced herself to open her eyes again. There he was, her beautiful vampire, crying over her.

"Prey," she whispered.

He leaned close. "Yes love?"

"I can't...can't die."

"Jess...my darling Jess."

"You can save me...save me."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure. I'm sure."

"But you'll become like me."

"Want you. Want to. Do it Prey. Bite me. Do it."

What was he waiting for. She knew with certainty now she was dying. She could feel life ebbing from her. She had barely enough life left for one final try. In her mind she cried out, *Save me, Prey. Change me into a vampire, too. Do it, Prey. Do it for me.*

But all Prey heard, was all he'd ever needed to hear.

"Prey...for me."

Chapter 19

"I think I'll miss the sun."

"I'm sorry."

"No need to be sorry. I was just making a comment. I'm still trying to get my head around being undead." Jess giggled. "Some things don't change."

"What things in particular?"

"I'm still lying on the wet patch."

"Oh, sorry." Prey moved over in the great bed, pulling her with him. "Nothing's perfect," he added.

"Maybe not. But there are some significant compensations."

"Such as?"

"Need you ask?"

"Well you'll have to wait. I'm feeling worn out from your last ravishing of me. You don't hold back, do you?"

"I've discovered new reserves I never guessed at. I don't like the cold though."

"You get used to it. The sun's not kind to our sort."

"What about warmth without sun? Perhaps we could move to a tropical climate. Island nights might be fun."

"I thought you liked it here."

"I do, very much. But it has its store of bad memories too, you know. This is where you lost Rose, and its where poor John met his awful end."

"You're right. A change of scenery might do us good. Besides, this is the first place Aphra will look for us once that wound I inflicted has healed. We mustn't make it easy for her to track us down."

"I never did find out why you didn't kill her."

"I glanced up as I was about to deliver the ultimate blow and saw you being attacked by Juice. Saving you became my priority. She got away. Anyhow, we'll worry about her when the time comes. Right now we've got our own future to think about."

"What if she raises other vampires against us?"

"She probably will, which is why I must claim my birthright and restore my power base."

"That's right. You're vampire royalty, aren't you...my liege."

"Don't joke, so are you as a matter of fact. I've never created another vampire before, which means you are both a Paramount, and the consort of Dracula's heir. You'll have a lot of status in vampire society. With males *and* females desiring you."

"Forget that. I'm a one vampire girl. We don't have to get political straight away, do we? I'd still like some tropical island nights."

"We have plenty of time. Centuries in fact. What will you do with Rose's house?"

"Sell it. Sell it and send the money to Poppy and John Jr from a secret friend. Maybe they'll be able to use it to give young Johnny all the things his pop would have wanted him to have."

For a moment they both lay in bed, lost in their thoughts.

"Do you regret your decision?"

Jess knew what he was referring to.

"The alternative was death."

"I know. But if it hadn't been, would you still have wanted to change."

"That's not easy to answer. I wanted you almost from the start and by the time you'd sunk your teeth into me I couldn't imagine being without you. Whenever the crunch moment came, now or in sixty years time, I'm not sure I could ever have given you up."

"Rose loved me too, and she gave me up."

"Aunt Rose was Aunt Rose. She did what she did for her reasons. And for my own reasons I'm grateful to her. I think giving you up was maybe a brave decision, and I don't think I'm that brave."

"So, apart from no sun and feeling a little cold, what do you think of being a vampire?"

"It's better than I expected. Changing into one was strange though. I think I must have died for a while. I remember feeling as if I was slowly sinking into a deep, dark pool. Then suddenly there was this ray of light behind my eyes. And my whole body was tingling. Then I could feel myself healing and getting stronger. The next thing I remember was opening my eyes to see you holding me."

"You've no idea how good it was when you regained consciousness. I thought I'd failed – that I'd lost you. I'm relieved you're so pleased to be back."

"Being back is vastly better than the alternative. And so far being a vampire seems to have a lot to recommend it, not least the fact that I can hold my own with you. Feeling permanently aroused will take a little getting used to, but there's a lot to be said for more strength. I could beat Arnie in an arm wrestle. And I even like the teeth – although the blood thing makes me a little nervous."

"Plenty of time to worry about that. Your teeth are good for a lot more than simply harvesting the fluids of mortals."

"Really. What else can I do with retractable fangs?"

"Are you sure you want to know?"

"Sure I'm sure."

"If I tell you, you'll have to do it."

"Is that a dare."

"Maybe."

"I'll do it."

"Good. Then extend your fangs."

"Mmmm. How does this look."

"Lethal."

"Now what?"

In answer, Prey stretched himself in bed like a great cat. Slowly, holding Jess's eyes with his own in silent challenge, he rolled fully onto his back. With a sudden flick, his hand swept the sheet from their naked bodies. Jess gasped as Prey glanced meaningfully down at his erect penis.

"Bite me."

About the author:

A native New Zealander, Claudia is an avid writer who has been published in many fields and loves to hear from her readers. In addition to writing erotic romances, Claudia also collaborates on horror novels and screenplays (horror and romantic comedies) with fellow EC author Jaid Black. Their joint pen name is Millar Black.

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