

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

Ann Jacobs

Eternal  
d'Argent  
Honor IV VICTORY

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Eternal Victory

ISBN # 9781419910333

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Edited by Sue-Ellen Gower.

Cover art by Syneca.

Electronic book Publication: April 2007

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*D'ARGENT HONOR:*

*ETERNAL VICTORY*

**Ann Jacobs**

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## Prologue

The night cloaked him in moist black velvet. Wild waves pounded in the ocean below him. Rhythmic slapping sounds ricocheted off his ears as he propelled himself through humid air that became warmer as he moved south-southwest toward Miami Beach and the evil vampire who was his nemesis—and his queen’s continuing nightmare.

*I’d swear the old bastard never left his lair, but another body turned up on the beach last night with a white rosebud clutched in her lifeless hand.* Alex heard the frustration in Philippe’s voice, loud and clear even over the whistling of the wind.

“Fuck.” The epithet slipped through Alex’s lips, a guttural cry that echoed against the heavy air that surrounded him. *You’re certain?*

*Reynard landed right outside the gate to this deserted estate on Biscayne Bay and went inside. There’s only one way out, and I’ve been watching it. I swear he hasn’t gone anywhere unless he’s found a way to slip through stone walls. But since he’s been in Miami, three women have died. His work. I’m sure of it, though I don’t know how he gets in and out.*

Most vampires, Alex included, could move with stealth when circumstances demanded it. But Alex had been studying Louis Reynard since his pattern of serial killings began, and he’d never observed that the bastard could cloak his presence from fellow vampires—or that he could move through solid walls the way Alex and his clansmen could if they were sufficiently motivated. Still, the wily vampire had obviously managed to sneak out from under Philippe’s watchful eye. Three times so far.

It became more evident every time Alex encountered Reynard that while he might have been old and battered, even for a vampire, he possessed an unequaled arsenal of powers. Alex shouldn’t have been surprised. After all, Louis had been honing the supernatural abilities he’d been using for evil since centuries before Alex had been born.

*What should I do?* Philippe's tone broadcast his frustration, a sentiment Alex echoed.

*It's all right, my friend. I should be there very soon—assuming the winds don't change direction.* Damn. He, Stefan and Claude shouldn't have expected a made vampire, no matter how well Philippe was motivated, to be able to destroy Reynard or even keep him under surveillance once Reynard sensed his presence. They themselves had failed to end the serial killer's life, and they'd been three against one. Alex let out another oath as he broke through the clouds and zeroed in on the bright lights of Florida's Gold Coast.

No. Reynard still lived to wreak havoc on mortal women. And to horrify and terrify Alina, his cousin and the d'Argent clan's beloved queen. Alex concentrated hard, cut through the damp air with a satisfying *whoosh* and sped toward his destination with hardened resolve.

This time he wouldn't fail. Louis Reynard would die. And d'Argent honor would be restored.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mara Leone woke screaming, drenched in her own blood. No, not blood. Sweat. It wasn't Dante returned once more from his grave, but another vampire, one exponentially more evil than the one who'd seduced her then been destroyed after having been caught feeding on the wrong mortal victim. Yes, as much as she hated to admit it, Dante had been a killer. But he'd gone berserk with bloodlust and taken one victim. One. Not three and counting.

She tamped down on bittersweet memories, concentrated on the here and now. All her instincts told her the bastard doing the killings on South Beach was on the hunt again, somewhere on her turf. Tonight, unless she missed her guess, another woman would become his victim.

And since he did his thing and promptly disappeared, there wasn't a thing she could do to prevent it.

But she could try, and she would. Moving quickly, she pulled on her clothes, ran a brush through the shoulder-length tangle of her hair and headed for the station. A crescent moon lay high in the ink-black sky, its light a faint beacon above the neon lights of the South Beach clubs.

The sort of sky she'd lain under with Dante all those years ago before he'd shed his cloak of humanity and reverted to the nature he'd no longer been able to deny. Fuck it, she had no business thinking of him. He'd been dead for years, destroyed by the vampire hunters who'd given him no chance for escape, no time to explain why he'd killed a mortal – if indeed there had been an explanation that might have saved his life.

Her responsibility now was to put a stop to this current rash of vampire attacks. If she didn't, she'd be busted back to beach patrol and spend the rest of her career handing out parking tickets.

Not her idea of upward mobility, she thought wryly as she hurried into the busy South Beach station.

"He's hit again, Lieutenant Leone," a uniformed patrolman called out as they passed on the stairs.

Why should she have been surprised? This wasn't the first night Dante had visited her in her nightmares...or the first time the nightmare had foretold tragedy.

## **Chapter One**

Another death by vampire. As she headed across the beach toward the site of the latest murder, Miami-Dade Homicide Lieutenant Mara Leone wished her bosses hadn't known about her long-ago liaison with one of the vamps who mingled, mostly unseen and unnoticed, among the humans on whom they depended for their sustenance. If they hadn't, she might have been able to escape revisiting so many old, painful memories.

But she'd had no such luck, and now she had a vampire serial killer to stop—as if she could do that with her very mortal team of detectives.

The beach patrolman who'd found the body had been right when he called the murder in as being another vampire attack. Mara stared down at the dead blonde illuminated by the harsh light of the patrolman's flashlight. Probably a showgirl, she surmised from the heavy makeup that almost but didn't quite manage to conceal the pallor of death. The marks on the woman's throat looked suspiciously as though they'd been made by the same vampire fangs that had punctured the other women's throats, but the pathologist would have to make that determination by measuring the angle of penetration and the distance between the two marks. What Mara found even more telling was that this woman, like the others, didn't appear to have been sexually molested or to have put up a fight.

Seduced by vampiric compulsion yet not seduced in the usual sense of the word. Strange. Her gaze settled on a freshly cut white rosebud the killer apparently had laid on the palm of the victim's outstretched hand. Its pale beauty provided a macabre contrast with spatters of darkening blood that marred its petals. Just as it had with the three previous crime scenes.



Mara had to turn away when bile began to rise in her throat, threatened to spill over and splatter over the crime scene. What the hell was going on?

This made four women found dead on the beach in less than two weeks, all apparently victims of one crazed vampire who drained them of their blood and left a fragrant, creamy rose as his calling card. Who knew when the killings would end?

Soon, if she wanted to keep her job. Her bosses had started getting nervous after they'd found victim number two. This pattern of similarly committed murders didn't do much to boost the tourist traffic on Miami's famed South Beach, and it was damn hard to keep a lid on such titillating albeit gruesome news as a spate of vampire serial killings.

"How long has she been dead?" Mara asked Joe Krill, the assistant coroner who'd arrived right behind her and now knelt beside the body.

"Not much more than an hour, I'd say. Body's still warm. Looks to me like another vampire bite."

Yeah, Mara had figured that out for herself, and she didn't have the letters "MD" behind her name. "Got any new ideas where we might find a vampire with a fetish for white roses and blonde bimbos, boys?" Not that she expected them to know. If any of the assembled cops had come up with a clue about where a suspicious-looking vamp might have been hanging out, they'd have been on him like stink on shit. Her team members were nothing if not devoted to their jobs. "Come on, don't you all start talking at once."

"Damn it, Louis Reynard's the vampire we're looking for. I don't care if everybody thinks that fiend who went around the world killing women on the full moon has been put out of commission. Or that our murderer isn't following a pattern of doing his dirty work only on the full moon. There are too many similarities. No signs of rape or attempted rape, or of the victim trying to escape. The white roses. He's at it again. Here." Rookie detective Ben Braunstein had an earnest look about him that kept Mara from ripping him a new one following his recitation of an opinion he'd held ever since

he'd researched an unsolved killing that had taken place in Atlanta a little over a year ago, shortly after the first of their own victims had turned up dead.

Yeah, Ben had done his homework, but Mara had listened to him state his opinion at least one time too many. Especially since she was beginning to believe his hypothesis that the vampire serial killer might have miraculously recovered from injuries he'd supposedly suffered at the hands of three vampires from a rival clan, and settled down to wreak more havoc on her turf. "You've told me at least a dozen times that you think this killer is Louis Reynard. You've also mentioned that some of his fellow vampires damn near killed him in Chicago a couple of weeks after the Atlanta attack." She paused and riddled the rookie with a look she hoped would shut him up. "What makes you think Reynard might suddenly have recovered and settled in here?"

"How many vampires have the balls to leave their calling card?" Ben gestured toward the rose.

"I can't imagine him being able to do this if he was hurt as badly as Ben said." The coroner looked up from the corpse, his expression dubious.

Mara shook her head. "It's not outside the realm of possibility that it's Reynard. The creatures heal fast. And they can't be trusted." She recalled how Dante had drawn her in and made her trust him, back when she'd been on the force less time than Ben. She'd been so young, so fucking gullible. And so much in love that thinking about having lost him to those hunters still made her want to cry. "Watch out. If you should ever run into an actual vampire, he or she will charm you out of your autopsy tools before you can figure out what hit you."

Ben shrugged. "I've seen some. I even saw a vampire earlier tonight at a bar a mile or so down the beach, near the big hotels. He didn't strike me as the sort of guy who'd attack a female. Doubt he'd need to—the women were swarming around him like hungry mosquitoes who didn't know their potential victim was an even more effective bloodsucker than any of them."

Mara had learned the hard way that vampires had an uncanny ability to seduce mortals without putting forth any obvious effort. She supposed the fiend they were looking for possessed a knack for seducing humans to do things they ordinarily wouldn't have done. After all, he'd apparently found it sickeningly easy to lure his victims, including the blonde now lying at their feet. "So this vampire you met seduced you into thinking he's a good one? I'm not surprised. Come on, I want to meet this paragon with fangs before another woman turns up dead."

She turned to Joe. "Go ahead, transport the body. I'll want preliminary autopsy results on my desk by the time we get back to the station. The rest of you, secure the scene and comb the area for clues, in case the killer left some hint as to who he might be." Mara doubted he had. The other three crime scenes had been as clean as any she'd ever worked, and she was becoming more certain every minute that these murders were the work of the same out-of-control vamp that had left a string of bodies peppering the globe over the past couple of years.

That didn't keep her from getting annoyed with Ben every time he put forth the vampire-serial-killer theory. Or frustrated that she had no clue as to how they were going to bring the bastard to justice.

\* \* \* \* \*

Apparently Reynard's near-death experience had fucked his mind up royally. According to Philippe, Louis had done in three blondes—two showgirls and a tourist—in the few days since he'd arrived and set up housekeeping in a previously deserted stone fortress on Biscayne Bay. Alex clenched his fists. Whatever it took, he'd put an end, once and for all, to the old bastard's murderous adventures.

Enjoying the kiss of a soft breeze off the Atlantic, Alex took up the same spot at an open-air watering hole for mortals that he'd noticed before checking in at one of the high-rise hotels dotting South Beach. It offered a convenient vantage point to scan up and down the beach, looking for a sign that Reynard had once again come out of his hole. Idly, he stroked the short Vandyke beard he'd cultivated back in Paris after his

barber had shorn his usually longish hair into an almost military-looking cut a few weeks earlier.

So far, he'd had no luck. Philippe hadn't seen Reynard leave his fortress, and Alex hadn't spotted him hunting along the stretch of beach where blondes had been turning up dead. That didn't necessarily mean the sonofabitch was sleeping off his most recent kill, however. The Fox, as Reynard was often called, had always had an uncanny ability to slip past his observers.

Since Alex had spent months on end chasing the Fox around the world, he found the notion that Reynard would stay in one place and elude his hunters instead of meeting them head-on hard to imagine. But he had no reason to doubt Philippe's account of where the wily bastard was and what he'd been doing. The d'Argent clansman, who'd been stalking Reynard since he'd left his lair in the Carpathian Mountains, hadn't seen the killer at all after having observed him make a shaky landing on the shoreline of Biscayne Bay and hole up in a deserted hunk of stone overlooking homes of the rich and famous.

But since then, every few days another hot blonde had shown up dead on the beach, drained of her blood. Each one's limp palm had held Reynard's signature white rose. So Alex had no doubt the Fox somehow managed to slip from under Philippe's vigilant observation to get his nourishment. Nourishment he seemed to need a lot more frequently than he had before Alex and his kinsmen had nearly destroyed him.

When the bartender slid his drink across the bar, Alex looked up. "Sorry, this is all we've got tonight. Don't get a lot of call for blood."

For a minute Alex watched the guy make his way down the bar. Claude had been right. On South Beach nothing much seemed out of the ordinary. Not vampires, and not the shaky mortal at the other end of the bar who snatched a tiny bag of white powder from the swarthy guy next to him as if it were a lifeline. The addict, like Alex and his fellow vampires, moved freely in a sea of cops and derelicts, of vacation-time pleasure seekers and those who preyed on them.

A sliver of golden moon hung low over the ocean, its light faint compared with tiki lights and neon signs that dotted the beach and blinked along the highway. Alex sipped the very ordinary but seemingly fresh A-positive the bartender had delivered. No one paid him any mind. Not him and not the man who now was snorting his own poison. It seemed that, in this place, the mortal patrons wore blinders to anything but their own needs, their own pleasures.

He doubted any of them would have their guard up enough that they might sense the presence of an evil vampire like Reynard. They'd become too blasé, too caught up in their own pursuits of pleasure to sense mortal danger in their midst. The Fox had picked an ideal place to disappear. A killing ground full of long-legged blondes with which to satisfy his hunger – and his madness.

Back in Chicago, he, Stefan and Claude must have come closer to destroying Reynard than they'd realized at the time. Alex was certain now that Louis no longer had the energy to wing it from city to city, taking out one victim then moving on. When Alex made mind contact with his two kinsmen, they agreed it was likely that the evil vampire had been damaged sufficiently that he'd never completely healed, and that he now had to hunker down in one place to feed an ever-growing appetite for blood.

That place was here. Miami's South Beach, where tourists came in droves for a taste of the forbidden. Where vampires could blend in with the locals—businessmen and undercover cops and drug lords—and attract no particular attention to themselves. A place where hot blonde showgirls and tourists out for a thrill could be found at every bar, on every stretch of the clean white sand. The hot pink neon exotic dancer sign that Claude had just mentioned with what sounded like fond memories, gyrated above a sign across the highway that said "The Strip".

The neon cast eerie colors over two undercover cops who were making a beeline for the bar. Idiots. The way they looked, they might as well have been wearing blues and badges. Anybody with eyes could make them a mile away. The nondescript guy's ill-fitting jacket did a piss-poor job of concealing a nine-millimeter semiautomatic in a

shoulder holster. And his female companion, a short, skinny redhead, had on a beat-up blazer despite the warmth of the night air. Who the fuck but cops wore jackets in Miami—in July, yet?

Hey, what the hell? The cops were heading straight for him. Alex remembered having spoken to the man soon after his arrival at the bar, but the woman was new. From her body language, he gathered she was the one in charge. She wasn't the sort of submissive beauty Alex usually chose for his liaisons, but something about her—maybe it was that fall of silky auburn hair his fingers itched to fondle—made his cock twitch. He ordered it to behave and bestowed one of his best smiles on the little firebrand. "What can I do for you tonight, beautiful?"

"Cut the crap and tell me where you've been for the past three hours." When she perched her hands on her hips, her blazer gaped open, the tank top underneath it giving him an eyeful of surprisingly full, round breasts—and a very businesslike-looking Sig Sauer automatic in a black shoulder holster. As though she were laying down a gauntlet in challenge, she slapped a shiny badge onto the bar. "I'm Mara Leone, detective lieutenant, homicide division. Come on, spill it."

Something about her attitude made Alex pretty damn sure she wasn't inclined to believe him no matter what he might say, but he'd give it his best shot. "I've been sitting here for the past hour, watching the stars and nursing this draft. Before that I was traveling here from Paris, checking in at my hotel and resting up for a night of partying."

"What about last Thursday? Last Tuesday? And a week ago tonight? Where were you then?" She met his gaze, her lips set in what she must have thought was a menacing frown.

Oh, shit. She'd made him as a vamp—at some point he must have forgotten to take care and keep his fangs retracted—and from the direction her questioning was taking, he gathered she thought she'd just cornered herself a serial killer. He'd better talk fast, or he'd end up cuffed and hauled to jail unless he wanted to pull a vampire

disappearing act. “Cool it. You’ve got the wrong vampire, baby. I was having a great time in Paris until three days ago, when I came here looking for the same bad egg who’s got your ass bent out of shape. I’m Alexandre d’Argent.” Smiling his sweetest, Alex extended his hand. “And by the way, you *are* beautiful.”

She snorted, a sound that should have turned him off but didn’t. “So are you going to tell me how you heard about these murders?”

This cop wasn’t about to step aside, or to give an inch of control over her case to him—unless he used vampire compulsion to seduce her. It wasn’t his usual method of obtaining bed partners, but he figured Mara would be better off at his side than on her own, impeding his own hunt for the Fox. He met her gaze, willed her to give in. “Members of my clan have been after Louis Reynard since he started on his killing rampage nearly two years ago.”

He sounded sincere—too much so—but Mara had her doubts. The vampire sitting calmly at the bar sipping a draft of blood had her heart beating double-time. Not just because he had the most compelling smile, or because the twinkle in his deep green eyes seemed to be focused exclusively on her. It wasn’t the ripple of powerful biceps that she sensed he did deliberately, just for her. And it wasn’t only the impressive bulge of his sex that drew her eye beyond muscular jeans-clad thighs and between his casually spread legs. Nope. Alexandre d’Argent, if that was his real name, was the epitome of a vampire seducer...an expert at the art of vampire compulsion, so practiced he wouldn’t need to exert conscious effort to draw a woman in.

Like Dante, who’d come and gone twelve years ago and hadn’t bothered to give her back her heart. Mara glanced over at Ben, whose eyes had widened with undisguised interest when he heard the name “Reynard”.

“Pity you haven’t managed to stop him.” She kept her tone deliberately noncommittal even though her clit swelled against her panties when she imagined how

it would feel if he rubbed that short, crisp-looking beard and mustache against her there.

“Yes, it is. Which is why I’m here to finish the job.” He picked up her badge and traced the raised numbers on the shiny brass with his thumb.

How would it feel if he used that thumb to trace along her cheek? Over her nipples? Mara’s pussy clenched, oblivious to reason, to anything but the mindless desire this vampire kindled with such a simple gesture. *Stop it! You’ve got a job to do, and it won’t get done if you get tangled up with Alexandre d’Argent.*

Wait. Mara suddenly realized she’d heard that name before. Ben. He’d said members of the d’Argent clan had gone against Reynard three-on-one last year. That was how Reynard had ended up so battered no one had believed he might live to kill again. “What makes you think you can come on my turf and destroy this vampire? We’ve got laws to take care of criminals. Prisons.”

Alex reamed her with that emerald gaze. “Lieutenant Leone, there’s not a prison on earth that can hold Louis Reynard. Like it or not, you need me.”

Mara didn’t want to need a vampire. Dante. No, Alex. She didn’t want her pussy creaming the way it was doing now, when Alex met her gaze and smiled. She didn’t want to bare her throat, feel the pressure of his fangs, the incredible sexual rush when he pierced her. And she certainly didn’t want him to pump his big, hard cock into every orifice she possessed. So why was it she couldn’t break this sensual spell?

“Boss?” Ben’s concerned voice dragged Mara from a world where she’d sworn she’d never go again. “He’s right. If we’re going to take down Reynard, we need to work with him.”

Vampire compulsion. She understood it. Ben didn’t. He felt it, though. Mara sensed his capitulation in his voice, and in the way he looked at d’Argent with rapt interest. A picture came to mind of Ben’s sweet young fiancée—Susan something or other, she’d never been able to remember the girl’s name. “Go on back to the station, Ben. I’ll be the one working with the vampire.”



“But—”

“If you argue, Braunstein, I’ll have you walking a beat in Liberty City.”

“Damn it. I was the one who figured out we were looking for Louis Reynard.”

Almost a head taller than Ben, Alexandre stood and stared down at him. “Good for you. Now go back and stick your nose into your computer. Solve another crime or two and leave Reynard to Ms. Leone and me. Mara, come with me.” Like Ben, Mara felt the compulsion that flowed as smoothly as d’Argent’s words.

\* \* \* \* \*

The eastern sky was beginning to lighten as they walked toward Alex’s hotel, the velvety black of night transitioning to soothing tones of pale gray and lavender. The moon hadn’t yet given way to sun, but dawn was breaking. Alex figured Reynard would be back in his hideout by now, sleeping off his latest overindulgence. He’d contacted Philippe, told him to find a way inside the old mansion, locate Reynard and not let their prey out of his sight.

“Where are we going?”

Alex squeezed the lieutenant’s elbow. “To my hotel. Might as well get some rest before we go after him again. He won’t be going anywhere for a while. Sunlight hurts Reynard even more than it does most of us vampires.” Her muscles tensed beneath his fingers, as though his touch confused her as much as his own compulsion to take her perplexed him. Despite her silky auburn hair—his favorite color—Mara Leone wasn’t his usual type of bedmate.

Idly, he delved into her mind. She’d had a vampire lover a long time ago, one who’d left her emotionally bruised and bitter. Fuck. That explained why she’d sent the young detective away, to protect him from the disillusionment she felt was inevitable if he stayed and joined them *en ménage*. “I’m not like any other vampire you may have known, sweetheart. We’ll get the bastard before he kills again. I promise.”

“We must.”

The strain evidenced by her tone of voice made him want to take her in his arms, soothe away the tension...replace it with tension of another, sexual kind. It also engendered a need in him that he didn't quite understand—a compulsion to wrap her in his protection, keep her from harm. And he wanted her to do it on her own.

"Trust me," he coaxed, but he knew asking wasn't going to cut it. The walls of hurt and suspicion Dante had forced her to create for herself somewhere along the way were way too tough for a mere request to break through. Alex grasped her chin and tilted her face where she had to look at him. Without the slightest bit of conscience he looked into her solemn brown eyes and put her under a vampire spell.

In his room he closed the curtains then undressed her as though she were a child. First the ugly blazer, then the shoulder holster. "You know, this thing's pretty much useless against one of us," he commented as he laid it on the bedside table.

"So I've been told. I've never been on a vampire hunt before. Guess I'll have to requisition some silver bullets and wooden stakes." She sounded softer, compliant now that she'd shed that tough cop veneer.

He ran his hands up her arms, tracing the veins, feeling the toned muscles that didn't begin to compensate for the fragility of the bones beneath them. "Scratch the silver bullets. I already tried using them on Reynard. They didn't faze him."

"You mean that's just legend, that silver bullets kill vampires?" When he connected with her mind once more, he learned she was thinking about her lover, who'd succumbed to a barrage of them from a team of mortal hunters. Alex regretted having stirred her hurtful memories.

He laughed, not wanting her to know he'd read her mind. "There are vampires...and then there are vampires. Some go down like sitting ducks when you pump them full of silver bullets. Others don't. There are only two certain ways to destroy almost any sort of vampire."

She looked up at him, her eyes wide as he spread her collar and tackled the buttons down the front of her sleeveless white blouse. "And those would be?"

"I think I'll keep that information to myself, sweetheart." Her skin felt like silk beneath his fingers as he slid the blouse off her shoulders and slid down the shoulder strap of a surprisingly seductive white lace bra. "You're not nearly as tough as you try to sound, are you?"

"Yes. I am." She didn't sound all that tough, not when she was gasping for breath as he cupped her breasts and ran his thumbs over the hard, pink nipples. "Please."

The word came out between little moans that were driving Alex crazy. So crazy he released the vampire compulsion that had been holding her. He wanted her to want him because she wanted him, not because she had no choice. "Please what? Do you want me to hurry? Rip this skirt and whatever you're wearing under it off, and nibble your clit? Suck these beautiful breasts? Or would you rather have me sink my fangs into your inviting little throat and give you a vampire kiss?" The tiny scars he could barely see annoyed him, a lasting reminder he wouldn't be the first vampire to have claimed the feisty redhead.

"Oh, yes. Please hurry. I want to be naked. I want you naked. I want to suck your cock."

## Chapter Two

“Hush. I’m already so hard I’m about to burst.” Alex slid his hands down, fumbled with the waistband of her skirt. Gave up. “Sorry, I’ll get you a new outfit,” he said as he ripped the thing off with one furious tug.

His usually quiet heart pounded in his chest when he looked at her, all pale and creamy and—fuck it—sexier than any of the Parisian club dancers who frequently entertained him for a night or two. His cock strained against his jeans.

He could take her now. Her female musk had filled his nostrils the moment he dragged her plain cotton panties down her legs, and a fine sheen of sweat dampened her brow. It was the small tremor in her hands that made him hesitate, ignore his own need, delve into her thoughts and dreams and...

Fuck. She was still thinking of her other vampire lover. Missing him. Wanting Alex, but afraid. Alex clenched his fists as though the intruder to her mind were in the room, in the flesh, so he could pummel him the way the dead vampire’s memory was pounding at Mara’s heart and mind. “Say my name,” he ordered, reaching out and taking those hands, stilling their nervous movement. “Tell me you know who’s making love with you tonight.”

“Alexandre.” Barely a whisper, the word came out like a prayer. An admonition he read clearly in her frightened eyes. *Please don’t hurt me.*

This brash, no-nonsense mortal had turned to a quivering mass of nerves once stripped from the ugly armor of her trade. Instead of scooping her up and claiming her right now, with no foreplay and none of the niceties as he’d intended, he knelt at her feet and gently spread her legs.

“I won’t hurt you, I will only make you feel good.” Leaning toward her and drawing her hips forward, he caught her clit between his front teeth and flailed it with

his tongue. Conscious of his own need but determined to drive the ghost of some vampire of long ago from her memories, he stroked along her inner thighs with both hands, pausing to claim the sweet spot behind her knees then moving downward to encircle her slender ankles, soak in the mortal heat that emanated from every inch of her delectable flesh. She shifted, widening her stance, giving him room to move in closer, nudge away her neatly trimmed auburn pubic curls and lick the pearly moisture from her swollen slit.

His balls ached. His cock was ready to explode. Still he took his time. Before he took her he wanted her hot, so hot for him that nothing of that faceless vampire's memory stood in the way of her pleasure. With him. He found her wet, hot cunt and tongue-fucked her there, all the time touching, caressing, listening as much as he could in this painful state of arousal to the words she was thinking but wouldn't say.

The love. The trust. The loss that had turned her against males, mortal as well as vampire, for a long, long time. The desire to open up, experience all the sensations she'd suppressed beneath that prickly veneer. If Alex could have, he'd have gone after the vampire named Dante and destroyed him again for what he'd done to Mara.

But he couldn't. All he could do was show her there didn't have to be pain or fear—that she need not resist falling under his vampire spell. That he wouldn't seduce her then walk away. When he felt her first climax surge through her, he stood and laid her on the bed.

With an economy of motion she hadn't seen since Dante, Alex undressed and stood before her, his pupils distended, his shapely lips tight. He was pale—vampire pale, almost like alabaster yet so alive. Powerful muscles rippled beneath skin as smooth and unblemished as ivory satin. His sex stood straight up against his flat belly, ready to take her in whatever way he chose. It pulsed, long and thick and darker than the rest of him, a blue-veined column tipped with a fully exposed pink crown. So hard, yet so smooth and soft she longed to take it between her lips. His testicles were drawn up in

their wrinkled sac, twin orbs that looked strangely vulnerable, not hiding like mortal men's in a nest of pubic hair. A small ring swung beneath his scrotum, its brilliant gold tone a startling contrast against his pale vampire flesh. A *guiche*, she thought the piercing was called.

Though seeing he was pierced surprised her, his lack of body hair didn't. Vampires only hair grew on their heads and faces, Dante had told her. She'd loved the smoothness, the clean feeling of flesh on flesh when she'd shaved herself for Dante. Loved the incredible sensations when she'd run her hands over every inch of him. But Alex looked even more perfect than the picture of Dante that she carried in her memories, for by all appearances he was more than capable of taking her with his body as well as his mind. Mara held her arms out, the gesture an entreaty she dared not make aloud.

He answered. Without hesitation, without a hint that he, not she, should be the instigator of all things sexual. When he stretched out on his side, his cock nudged her thigh. He raised his head on one elbow and looked down on her, his emerald gaze full of vampire heat. With his free hand he traced the pair of scars on her throat, and his expression turned dark. "If I ever mark you this way, you'll never leave me. And I will never leave you, either." The surprised look on his handsome face let her know his statement came out without conscious thought, and that made her shiver at the prospect.

But she quickly shoved her own reaction away. What he'd implied was only a bunch of words. Nothing meaningful. It was just a vampire wooing a woman, keeping her in his bed with charming, seductive visions of forever.

His touch as light as a feather, he made his way down her body, circling one nipple then the other before laying his large palm over the curve of her belly and using his fingers to sift through her pubic curls. "Did he make love to you first?"

"N—no." Why did that matter? She was no virgin, and Alex had given her no indication he expected her to be. "He was a vampire, like you."

“Not like me, sweetheart. I’m a born d’Argent vampire. From what you’ve told me – yes, baby, I can read your mind – your other vampire was made. Impotent, unable to find a measure of sexual pleasure except by giving a vampire kiss.”

Mara reached up and stroked his chin, liking the scratchy feel of his neatly trimmed short beard, imagining how it would feel when he rubbed it against her throat...her nipples. “Made?”

“A mortal who was turned. With a few exceptions, they can only get off sexually by drinking blood from its source. Fortunately most don’t take it as far as Reynard and leave all their victims dead.”

A shudder surged through her, and Alex gathered her in his arms. “Easy, baby. I’m not like them. I was born a vampire, nearly three hundred years ago. I don’t need blood to come, although I admit there’s no bigger rush than to feed from a lover instead of a glass. Trust me. I’ll give you pleasure now. We’ll sleep away the day. Then, when the sun begins to set, we’ll go on the hunt for Reynard. And you’ll let me destroy him before he can kill again.”

She couldn’t do that, because if she did she’d be ignoring every rule of law that had been part of her since she joined the department right out of college. But now wasn’t the time to go into a discussion of mortals’ ethics, not when he was touching her, eliciting her trust, at least so far as it related to him bringing her that pleasure, filling the emptiness inside her. “Yes, I trust you.” The slow beating of his heart beneath her hand...the insistent prodding of his cock seeking a home between her legs...the soothing yet arousing sensation of him molding her ass cheeks with his calloused hands, holding her with a pressure that was strong yet light. “Fuck me, Alex.”

He rolled her to her back and rose above her, a magnificent male god come to life. His fangs remained retracted as he fit their bodies together and plunged inside, the delicious friction from his penetration eased by her own juices yet still significant. He stretched her, a sensation of mingled pleasure and pain and incredible fullness when he

sank deeper, when the blunt head of his big cock pressed against the mouth of her womb.

Their mating was a dance of seduction, his penetration slow and deep. She absorbed the sounds and smells of sex, her own soft moans, the slow beat of his heart and the slapping of hard male flesh. The cool metal of his *guiche* ring along her hot, wet slit reminded her he was of another world. A world that fascinated her and aroused her incredibly as he brought her along. Pressure built in her womb and radiated throughout her body, sensation about to burst in a conflagration of heat.

She wanted it all, wanted the feel of his hot semen bathing her, the extraordinary release he promised. But not yet. Not until she experienced it all, the press of his fangs at her throat. The taste of her own blood on his lips as her pussy spasmed around his rock-hard cock. "Bite me. Please."

"Not this time, sweetheart. Concentrate on feeling me fucking your tight little cunt for now." Sliding his hands down to cup her ass, he fucked her harder, faster, his testicles ramming hard and tight against her pussy with every stroke. His cock jerked once, twice inside her, setting off the explosion of sensations she'd tried to hold back. "Oh, yeah, that's it. Come with me." His words trailed off, and the only sounds she registered were his fast, shallow breathing, her own little scream of satisfaction that he muffled with a soft, gentle kiss.

How she'd missed it, the strength of a Dominant male vampire, the sense of being taken. She'd gone with him partly from compulsion, yet of her own volition as well. She'd believed she could handle the passion, savor having Alex as the living shadow of Dante's memory, but Alex hadn't let her do that. He'd made her focus totally on him, pushing Dante into the deep shadows of her past.

As Mara drifted off to sleep, it was Alex—not Dante—whose remembered image fueled her dreams.

\* \* \* \* \*



*Riinngg.*

What the hell? Alex blinked. Light poured through the window, telling him it was much too early for any self-respecting vampire to be awake. Squinting, he located the source of the noise and picked up Mara's cell phone.

"Yeah?" It was Mara's shadow, the kid detective.

Ben's worry flowed through the sound waves even before he managed to ask, "Where's Lieutenant Leone?"

Good question. The bed was still warm where she'd been curled up next to him, but the sound of water running in the shower gave Alex a pretty good hint. "In the shower. Shall I have her call you?"

"Yes. She's all right, isn't she?"

Alex shut his eyes, pictured the way Mara had come apart in his embrace. "She's fine, kid. Want to tell me what's on your mind?" When Ben hesitated, Alex concentrated hard, projected vampiric compulsion with his next words. "Tell me, Ben. We're in this together. You want Reynard put out of business as much as I do."

"One of the Key Biscayne private cops spotted a vampire last night over on the grounds outside the castle—that's what folks call a deserted estate over there. We're going over there to have a look."

Just what Alex needed, a bunch of mortal cops spooking Reynard and witnessing his destruction. "Don't do it. I know where our killer is. I have one of my clansmen inside the ruin of that old house, watching him. As a matter of fact, it was probably Philippe they spotted, not Reynard. Let it go. I intend to get him. I don't need any interference."

"I can try to keep them away." The kid's thoughts were as transparent as anybody's Alex had run into lately. Ben didn't have to say it for Alex to know he understood Reynard must meet with vampire justice. And that he approved. "Good luck."

"Thanks." Alex would need all that luck and more. Mara walked out of the bathroom, her only garment an oversized bath sheet, and took the phone as he was about to set it down. The mutual concern the two cops had for each other was evident in the way Mara reassured the young detective.

When she hung up she turned to Alex. "You say you have a clansman watching Louis Reynard?"

Alex nodded then grasped her hips and drew her onto the bed beside him. "Philippe had been observing the only way in and out of the castle—he thought. Apparently Reynard found another exit, either that or he's learned to slither through solid stone and concrete. When Philippe contacted me last night, I told him to get inside the place somehow, and not to take his eyes off the bastard."

Mara pursed her lips, as if considering the situation. "This vampire of yours. Philippe. Do you trust him?"

"Completely." When Alex sensed Mara's doubt, he went on. "He and his mate were chosen years ago by d'Argent clan leaders to guard our queen. One of Reynard's henchmen poisoned them both. Jacques, Philippe's mate, was destroyed."

"My God."

"Yes. Philippe had loved Jacques for as long as I can remember. I can think of no one who's more determined than Philippe to see Louis destroyed."

She gathered her clothes, shaking her head at the ripped disaster that used to be her good black skirt. "I can't walk out of here in this."

"Sorry. I'll have some things sent up." Though he didn't say it, he thought anything the concierge could scare up from one of the boutiques in the hotel would be an improvement over the drab outfit she was clutching in her hands. Before she could protest, he called downstairs and arranged for some clothes to be sent up for her. "I'll want some toys as well," he said, recalling the adult bookstore he'd seen among the shops across the highway from the hotel. "If you'll give me the phone number, I'll call the store across the highway and have them send over the items I want. One more

thing. Have room service send up lunch. Some meat. Fruit and vegetables. And something chocolate. Nothing she can't eat with her fingers. I'll take a half pint of blood. O-negative if it's available."

Mara looked down at him, a confused look on her pretty face when he hung up. "Don't you need more blood than that?"

"Not for another day or so. I fed last night, before you and Braunstein came on the scene. I just ordered a bit so you won't have to eat alone."

"You know, I might have some preferences of my own," Mara said, dropping the bath sheet and giving him a great view of curves she managed to hide so well under her working clothes. "And I might not like hanging around this room all day, stark naked."

"I like the view just fine..." Alex let the words trail off, using his gaze to convey what he had in mind. He knew what she liked...what she wanted. And he wanted to be the one to give it to her. This thing he was feeling for her was more than lust, more than the natural protective instinct for someone smaller and less powerful than himself. Love? Never having experienced that emotion before, he couldn't say for certain.

## Chapter Three

*Pamper me. Treat me the way you would a woman you want for your mate. Tell me I'm beautiful and make me believe it. Crack the shell I've kept around my heart since Dante left me.*

Mara didn't have to say the words. Alex heard them in his head, and they touched his heart. This woman seemed so self-sufficient, even dominant to a degree. Inside, though, she yearned to give her heart...to submit to a lover's will. His will.

He flattened his palm over her auburn bush, felt her heartbeat accelerate, heard her breathing grow ragged. "Go make yourself as smooth as I am," he told her. "By the time you're finished, your lunch should be ready."

Her quiet assent humbled him. Not that he cared whether he buried himself in satiny skin or soft pubic curls, but for some reason she cared. That was what was important. After calling in his toy order, Alex cracked the curtain and winced a little at the stream of sunlight that bathed the room. That sunlight would reassure her, remind her she was with him and not the vampire named Dante, who'd apparently stolen her self-confidence and left her with fear of males, both mortal and not.

A discreet knock on the door drew Alex out of his thoughts. Wrapping Mara's discarded bath sheet around his hips, he swung the door open. After peering inside the bag of clothes from a designer boutique whose name he recognized and seeing a smaller toy store bag inside, he signed for its contents. By the time the bellman who'd brought them moved away, a waiter appeared. Alex stepped back so the man could wheel in a small table draped in white linen and topped with dishes under silver domed covers.

"Want the table by the window, sir?"

"No. Here, by the bed." While Alex could tolerate sunlight better than most vampires, he wouldn't deliberately place his naked body directly in the path of Miami's

fierce summer sunshine. He glanced at the plates of sliced meat and shellfish, chopped raw vegetables, fruit and an interesting collection of chocolate truffles. The candies' gold foil wrappers caught sunlight, called attention to the way they'd been artfully arranged on their plate in the shape of a small pyramid and topped with a maraschino cherry. Alex smiled at the hotel chef's attempt to bridge the difference between mortal and vampire—a bottle of sparkling water on ice in a silver bucket beside his snack of blood. "Thank you." Suddenly eager to be rid of the waiter and check on Mara's progress in the bath, Alex handed over a generous tip and watched until the door had swung closed.

When he opened the bag, he fished out the toys, and saw and found clothes designed more for a vacationing socialite than a homicide detective. He liked them, imagined them showcasing Mara's petite, well-toned body. It took very little of his vampire perceptive skills to figure she'd pitch a fit, though. The clothes were going to cause an argument. He had no doubt he'd win, but not now. Checking to be sure she hadn't emerged from the bathroom, he hung up the sundress in the closet and set the bag that now contained only underwear and a pair of high-heeled sandals below it on the floor. He'd deal with that when it was time for them to leave and go find Reynard. Meanwhile, he stashed an anal plug, some condoms and a vibrating dildo in the drawer of the table beside the bed.

"Lunch has arrived," he yelled over the sound of the shower spray. "Need some help?"

The shower stopped abruptly and she stepped out, all rosy and pink and dripping onto the bath mat. "Like me now?"

Yeah. He liked seeing her cunt smooth as a vampire's...or a baby's. He was certain he'd like tasting and touching that impudent little clit that peeked out from the pink folds, even more than it aroused him to look at it. "Yeah, I like." He reached for a towel and blotted a drop of water from between her legs. "Come on, your sustenance awaits you."

As if they were clothed and dining in a fine restaurant, he seated her in the lone side chair and unscrewed the lid on the sparkling water with a flourish. Pouring two glasses—his less than half full—he slid the full one beside her plate before mixing the small portion of blood into his own. Smiling at her, he fished a strawberry from the plate of fruit and brushed it gently over her closed lips. “Try this first.”

Her tongue darted out between lips still bruised from his kisses, its smooth texture and dark pink color contrasting with the berry’s tiny black seeds on bright red flesh. When she sucked it into her mouth and bit down with small, white teeth, Alex imagined her going down on him, using suction to coax his climax. When he pictured her tugging at his *guiche* ring with her teeth, playing with it while she sucked his cock, he got so aroused that he hurt.

Piece by piece he fed her the finger foods, observing every expression that crossed her face, reading thoughts that had his cock about to burst. Lifting her glass to her lips, he zeroed in, determined to learn the fantasies her previous vampire lover had left unfulfilled—and satisfy them now, before he let her go.

If he let her go.

Where the hell had that thought come from? Alex mulled over the unfamiliar emotions Mara had wrung from him since...since she’d walked up to him last night in that bar all bristly cop, prepared to cuff him up and haul him off to jail. In less than twenty-four hours, she’d managed to engage his feelings, unlike any of his previous lovers. He wanted to protect her from all the dangers she faced, in a way no cop’s weapon could. But more than that he wanted to hold her, use all his vampire powers of seduction to drive out the memory of that long-gone vampire who’d hurt her. All the tender emotions he’d denied with success for his entire, long life had suddenly come to life, the feelings so strong he doubted he could walk away. He wanted to make her smile, drive away the doubts and fears that made her vulnerable, protect her from every man, mortal as well as vampire, who would cause her pain.

Was he in love? He didn't know, but he certainly wanted to make her every fantasy come to life. "Here, try one of these," he said, lifting one of the chocolates and holding it to her lips as he looked into her dark eyes and delved into her mind.

*Mmmm. So good.* She wasn't thinking about the chocolate truffle she'd just bitten into, but of Alex...and a shadowy figure, a man. Mortal or vampire? Alex didn't know. It didn't matter, though. He concentrated, closing his eyes and joining his lover's dream.

She spread her legs, an offering he couldn't refuse. In slow motion, he went to his knees, opened his mouth over her baby-soft pussy. Flailed her clit with his tongue and rubbed his bristly chin along her slit while she moaned softly. Her fingers fluttered then tunneled into the clippered hair at the back of his head, the pressure feather light yet incredibly arousing. Almost as arousing as the taste of her cream and the mind-picture in her head.

*She lay on her side in bed, her sweet pussy exposed, needy. A naked male with a shaved head and a ring in his penis knelt near her face. She took his cock, first in her hands. Slow and easy, she stroked the shaft, squeezing, circling, dipping down to weigh his heavy testicles then returning to her task. The ring intimidated her, kept her from taking his plump cock head between her lips.*

*She shifted her head, laid it on his massive thigh, licked and nibbled at the base of his shaft instead as another male — Alex — joined them and began to tongue-fuck her.*

So she wanted a ménage. If she became like him, a permanent part of his life, she'd experience ménages and more, on a regular basis. The more he thought about it, the more he believed Mara's destiny might be with him, in his vampire world where there were no restrictions, no constraints on sexual activity among the clanspeople. When he imagined her on her knees above him, his cock throbbing in her cunt while his kinsmen claimed her ass and mouth, he got so hard he hurt. Yet he continued to lap her honey while she writhed in the chair on the brink of climax.

*I want a vampire kiss. Please.*

Alex wanted nothing more than to give it. To feed on her until he took her mortality...gave her new life as a d'Argent vampire. But he wouldn't do it. While she might beg, he knew she wasn't ready to commit to a long lifetime in what to her would be an alien world. For that matter, he wasn't certain of his own readiness to mate for eternity with a virtual stranger, no matter how strong his feelings might be today. He nipped her thigh instead, before ringing her tight rear entrance with his tongue. "On your knees on the bed, sweetheart."

His command was just that—an order, not uttered as the vampire compulsion Mara expected...wanted. Compelled or not, she wanted to obey, longed to let go and experience all the tender emotions that bubbled to the surface whenever Alex touched her. Rising on shaky legs, she did as he'd said while he opened a drawer of the nightstand and looked inside.

"What?" she asked.

He laughed. "You were daydreaming about a ménage. I'm about to provide you with the next best thing." The drawer shut with a soft thud, and he was behind her, the coolness of his vampire flesh a shock against her own heated skin. His big hands cupped her bottom, spread her ass cheeks, his fingers delving into her wet, sensitized slit and spreading the lubrication from her swollen pussy to her rear hole. "Feel good?"

It did. Anticipation built as he petted her, made her tingle wherever his nimble fingers touched. "Oh, yes."

"I'm going to fuck you here," he told her, inserting first one finger then two past her anal sphincter and moving them rhythmically.

Her pussy clenched with anticipation. It had been so long...too long since a lover had taken her there. Since Dante. But he'd used a... She clamped down on her thoughts, certain Alex could and often did read her mind.

"I'm going to use my cock, sweetheart. But I'll put on a condom first if that's what's worrying you."



Any doubt Mara had about whether her lover was privy to her thoughts flew out the window. But it didn't matter, not now when he was arousing her to a fever pitch.

When he withdrew the hand he'd been using to tweak her clit, she nearly cried out, but then he came back and worked a dildo into her pussy. When it began to vibrate, she shuddered at the twin sensations of his fingers and the large toy working together, building pressure...and anticipation for when he'd replace his fingers with his big, rigid cock.

God, but it felt good, better than anything she'd ever experienced. Her pussy contracted, grew wetter. "Hold on, now. Think about how good this is going to feel. I'll be right back." He gave a last sensual stroke to her rear then rose and went to the bathroom.

The sound of water running...then silence. It seemed like forever, but it couldn't have been more than a minute before he came back and knelt behind her. When he rubbed his sheathed cock head along her slit, stopping to probe her rear entrance, she gave out a little yelp. Was what she was feeling fear, or anticipation?

A little bit of both. Sensations inside her built, causing pleasure so great it nearly erased the pain when he began to move against her, probing and stretching until he passed the barrier of her anal sphincter and slipped inside. The only way she could have felt fuller was if he'd also been feeding his cock down her throat. He must have read her mind because he reached up, brushed her lips with an insistent forefinger and slipped it between her teeth.

"There, sweetheart, let go. When this is all over, we'll have our real ménage. Squeeze me. Oh yeah, like that. You've got the tightest little ass. Made just for me."

The slightly salty taste of his hand made her think of the surf kissing her face while she lay in its warm embrace. But this was so much better. She panted, trying to hold back the waves of delectable feelings that sped through her body and carried her over the edge.

Vaguely, she heard him shout out his pleasure, felt him gather her in his arms. As she lay there quietly against his chest, she felt his heart race then slow to an almost imperceptible beat, as though he had found the same contentment he brought to her. Mara fell asleep, thoughts of Louis Reynard and his evil washed away for the moment in the arms of a vampire who'd just made one of her wildest fantasies come alive.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Damn d'Argent clansman who's been watching the door got inside here somehow.* Louis deduced the persistent vampire was not one of the clan leaders, since he apparently hadn't fully mastered the skill of stealth.

Damn, it was too early to be wakened from a sound sleep. Louis cracked an eye open, shuddered at the strength of the noonday sun that was seeping through tightly closed shutters. He felt every one of his nearly one thousand years, each of the lacerations and fractures inflicted on him by those three bloodthirsty relatives of the d'Argent queen he'd wanted for his bride.

Louis felt the other vampire's presence but couldn't locate him. Fuck, it wasn't only his body that was broken and bruised beyond healing. His powers also had taken a beating. Although he'd gorged himself last night, he felt the hunger returning. The compulsion to go out and feed. To kill again no matter how great the risk.

Going out to hunt tonight wasn't that dangerous, he told himself. He'd fought off three born d'Argent vampires and survived. This lackey they'd sent to watch him would be no more than a pesky flea on a dog's back, if he dared to follow and try to stop the inevitable. Louis admitted he'd been battered, and that he might not possess quite all the physical powers he'd had before.

But he was still Louis Reynard, leader of his clan. He was still one of the most powerful vampires on this earth. Whatever it took, he would have his vengeance on Alina and all the beautiful women of the world. No d'Argent clansman would have a prayer against him. Especially not just one. Not even one of the vaunted d'Argent

leaders, the born vampires who helped Alina rule the clan, could go up against Louis Reynard and survive.

Louis closed his eyes and hunkered under the covers. He'd take his rest, ignoring his enemy's malignant presence until night fell and he could hunt again. If the vampire intended to attack, he'd have done so before, while Louis had slept.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mara snuggled against Alex's broad chest, sated sexually in a way she hadn't been since...since ever. Compared with Alex, Dante came up in her memories not as the standard she'd set for lovers in the past, but as a poor substitute for the vampire who even now was stoking her fires.

But time was ticking away. The sun was sinking toward the Everglades, and Miami's night people were stirring, getting ready to open the clubs and tiki bars along the beach. Mara stroked Alex's muscular chest, her touch evoking a lazy smile, the slow opening of those sexy deep green eyes. He reached out a hand, but she caught it in midair.

"We need to talk," she said. And there was no way she could think when he was touching her. Quickly, before he could stop her, she slid off the bed, dragging the top sheet with her and wrapping it toga-style around her body. "But first we both need to get dressed."

He yawned, his gaze raking her as though he could see right through the sheet. Maybe he could. "Your new clothes are in the closet," he said as he felt the five o'clock shadow on his chin. "Go ahead, use the bathroom first. There's some makeup in the bag with your underwear and stuff."

"Don't you..." Of course he didn't have needs common to mortals. He was a vampire. It was just that he seemed so human. So like the sort of man she'd dreamed of back when she still indulged her fantasies.

“Not with any degree of urgency. I’ll trim my beard and shave while you’re getting dressed.” When he smiled and showed her his small but lethal-looking fangs, she leaned over and brushed her lips across his cheek.

“All right.” She liked his short, neat beard, though the fact he had one surprised her since she’d never before seen a vampire who let his facial hair grow.

Steam rose in the shower, surrounding her in a cloud of moist heat. Mara closed her eyes and tried to clear her head. Now wasn’t the time to fantasize about vampire lovers or imagine herself becoming one of them. Not when Louis Reynard was running free, destroying victims with alarming regularity.

Neither could she ignore all the rules ingrained in her since she’d been a rookie cop, and leave the destruction of Reynard to Alex, even though she liked the idea of destroying the killer rather than leaving him at the mercy of the courts. She’d go with Alex, find the killer, notify her team and let them deal with arresting Reynard, hopefully before he killed again.

Alex’s words echoed in her head, coming through loud and clear over the shower spray. *There is no prison on earth that can hold him, Mara.* Alex probably was right about that, but she hadn’t signed on as an assassin.

The door opened and Alex stepped inside, magnificently naked. His playful grin when she let out a little yelp touched her heart. It almost made her forget she was about to deceive him, save him from the inevitability of mortals’ punishment by taking the destruction of Louis Reynard out of his hands. “Get out of here. If you stay, we’ll never have that conversation.”

“Is that a bad thing?” Alex smiled, his fangs gleaming in the fluorescent lights as though the task ahead were no more hazardous than going out for an evening’s entertainment.

“Reynard is no joking matter to me.” Mara stepped around him and towed herself dry. When she really looked at the underwear Alex had provided, she shot him a look

that would have sent most rookie cops running for cover. "Why did you bother? You couldn't see any more if I were naked."

Alex laughed as he came out of the shower. "Not guilty, baby. I told you I'd get you clothing, and I did. The boutique apparently thought you were as hot as you are and sent up stuff they thought would suit a—"

A hooker. Or one of the showgirls who frequently augmented their already substantial income by turning a trick or two with affluent tourists. "All right. I get it. I didn't look yet at what they set up for me to wear on the outside. Am I to assume the vice squad will likely pick me up once we step outside?"

"I kind of doubt it. I saw a woman on the beach yesterday afternoon who had on less than those lacy pink things."

Mara glanced down at the see-through bra and thong panties. She couldn't imagine any woman daring to go out on the beach in less. "Okay, I guess I can wear these, but I'll reserve judgment on the other things until I see them." Showing Alex her back, she stepped into the bedroom and opened the closet door.

"Like them?" he asked, following her out into the room.

The silk sundress was as pretty as anything she'd ever seen, all tones of pink and orange and lavender that reminded her of a summer sunset. It had a swirly skirt and a sleeveless top cut on the bias. The short white jacket would work fine to ward off a cool night sea breeze, but it would hardly work to conceal her Sig Sauer. Not to mention, it had a price tag that would have eaten up the better part of one of her biweekly paychecks if she'd had to buy it. "It's very pretty. Hardly appropriate for a homicide cop, though."

"Consider it my contribution. After all I was the one who tore your skirt."

Mara smiled. "You did, didn't you? Well, let me get this on. You do know I can't let you kill Reynard."

Alex's expression tightened. "I don't know how you plan to stop me."

Arrogant bastard! "I'll toss you in jail if I have to."

He came closer, cupped her chin and forced her to meet his gaze. "You can try. Look, sweetheart, no mortal's a match for Reynard. And no mortal can put him out of business. I know it bothers you to break the laws you've sworn to uphold, but trust me. If you want this bastard stopped, you're going to have to accept that he must be destroyed. And that I'm the vampire to do the job."

She had in mind to persuade him somehow that they must do it her way, but then Alex's cell phone rang. When he answered and listened, his expression turned fierce. "We've got to go. Reynard is on the move. Philippe believes he's gone out to feed again."

"Feed?"

"Make that kill, because the bastard doesn't ever take a sip or two and walk away. He drains his victims until they're dead, beyond redemption. Beyond turning. D-E-A-D." He dressed faster than anybody she'd ever observed, slipping bare feet into deck shoes before she could retrieve her weapon from the nightstand. "Come on!"

Mara followed, but not until she'd contacted Ben and sent her team onto Reynard's tail.

"Why did you do that?" The frustration in Alex's voice made her feel she'd betrayed him.

Perhaps she had. "I had no choice. It's mortals this bastard's been killing, mortals I swore to defend and protect." She took his hand, squeezed it. "Maybe between us, we can stop him."

"Maybe." His doubtful tone made her wonder if she should have followed her instincts and kept her team out of the hunt—at least for now.

## **Chapter Four**

"Sun's still pretty high for Reynard to be out and about." Alex rested his arm on Mara's shoulder as they made their way through the hotel's courtyard toward the deserted strip of beach where the bastard had killed before. "I hope old Louis isn't leading Philippe up a blind alley."

"You and me both." Mara strained her eyes looking for signs of Ben and the others up farther along the beach, but she saw nothing. "Where were they coming from?" Ben had told her Biscayne Bay, but she didn't notice anyone coming onto South Beach from that direction.

"Reynard has been holed up at a deserted estate on Biscayne Bay, which I'm sure your fellow cop told you."

Of course he knew what Ben had told her. Alex's ability to read her mind was damn inconvenient. Sighing, she did her best to mask her thoughts. Damn it, she hated to have Alex think she didn't trust him, but she dared not let him take over her case. Not for the first time, she considered how much simpler some decisions would have been if mortals would just let vampires police each other. Yes, there was something good to be said for vampire justice, she thought, remembering a time last spring when one of them had neatly rid society of one vicious drug lord. The vice division had been trying for years to stick that piece of slime with a charge that would have sent him away for a long time before deporting him back to his native Colombia. "Mortals have to follow mortal rules."

He stopped in his tracks, listened as though somebody was talking inside his head. "Fuck your half-assed rules. Your team of idiots has just arrested the wrong vampire. They've got Philippe. Now Reynard's pretty much free to do in another victim. Philippe

said Reynard had headed into The Strip. Come on, maybe we can get to him in time to prevent another killing.”

So much for having tried to make her mind a blank. Although he never raised his voice, Mara felt Alex’s fury. Part of her didn’t blame him. “Your friend Philippe must have attracted my team’s attention.”

“You’re right there. Hold on.” Before she could complain about the indecently tight embrace he’d just put on her, he took to the air, circling slowly over the area. She held on for all she was worth, imagining as she did what a drop of fifty feet or more onto the damp sand would do to her. “Trust me, I’m not going to let you fall.”

She hoped not, for they were descending now. Palm fronds fluttered in the breeze they made as they sped by toward the beach below. “Do you see Reynard?”

“Not him. His victim.”

As soon as they landed, Alex set Mara down. The acrid smell of blood filled her nostrils as he knelt by the glassy-eyed corpse and felt for signs of life. “Can you turn her?” she asked.

“No. He killed her. Irrevocably.” Alex eyed the white rose, curled his lip in obvious disgust.

She looked down at the victim, said a silent prayer for the soul of the woman who’d just become the serial killer’s fifth victim in less than two weeks. Nausea practically overwhelmed her, and she couldn’t seem to stop herself from shaking with the frustration of it all.

Alex had been right about keeping her team out of this, even though doing it would have challenged everything she’d been taught – everything she’d believed in. Seeing the result of her following the protocols that had been drilled into her since she’d been in law enforcement made her feel as if that work she’d committed herself to had been pointless. Mara looked down at the dead woman, the rose. At Alex who knelt beside her, fists clenched in righteous anger.



Did it really come down to the fact that to get any kind of justice, you had to resort to vigilantism?

Alex stood and dusted sand off his jeans. Then he took her hands and looked into her eyes. "Sometimes it does, sweetheart. Especially when you're dealing with a vampire as evil as Reynard."

When he stared down at the dead woman once more, Mara saw raw emotions cross his ruggedly handsome face. Anger, yes. But she saw undertones of sadness, resignation...reluctant understanding that she'd done what she'd had to, as a mortal cop. "You'd better get on your cell phone and tell your people we just found another victim. And that they've got the wrong vampire." He raised his gaze, the unnatural brightness in his eyes the result of unshed tears.

As she tried to steady her hands enough to drag her cell phone from her purse, guilt washed over her. What if she'd trusted Alex before and ordered her team to stay away? *If you had, the woman at your feet might still be alive.* "Ben? While you and the others were locking up Alex's clansman you caught when he was tailing our killer, Reynard struck again." Her voice broke, and she sank to her knees as she told them where to come.

Two mortal women, one pale in death, the other vibrant with life. Alex looked down at them and concentrated on visualizing the killer. Louis was close by, sated with the blood of his latest victim yet cunning as the fox for which his clan had been named some time lost in antiquity. Intuitively, Alex knew Louis wouldn't return to the so-called castle where he'd been spending his sleeping hours. But where would he go?

"Alex?"

Mara's voice broke his concentration. "What?" he snapped.

"They're releasing Philippe. Do you want him to come here with the crime team?"

"He might as well. Maybe he'll have better luck than I, sensing where Reynard might have gone to ground." Louis could have been in one of the nearby clubs or shops, mingling with unsuspecting mortals. Or he might have walked in and rented a room at

one of the aging motels anywhere along Highway A1A. The bastard could have gone almost anywhere. One thing for sure, he'd be surfacing again tomorrow night to feed an increasingly voracious appetite for mortal blood.

A warm sea breeze caught the palm fronds above them, made them sway in a macabre dance. In the distance, sirens wailed. The sounds grew louder as blue and red lights emerged from the darkness, the colors muffled by the humid night air as cars drew into the nearly deserted parking lot adjacent to this public beach area. With Ben in the lead, the detectives converged on the crime scene with an air of futile urgency Alex fully understood. Philippe followed, his long dark hair catching the breeze and framing his face, emphasizing his intent expression.

"I'm sorry, Alex." Philippe inclined his head, a typically submissive act that seemed incongruous considering that he had all that hair while most of the male submissives in their clan kept their heads shaved. Still, Alex understood his clansman's grief and recalled his vow not to cut his hair as long as his mate's death lay heavy on his heart.

As the cops scurried about, stringing up yellow crime scene tape and snapping photos of the body, Alex considered his options. It was obvious both he and Philippe needed to restore their vampire powers...

And the best way to do that was with sex. Uninhibited vampire sex, not the conventional though incredibly satisfying joining he and Mara had enjoyed earlier. She stood beside him now, her attention focused on her team and what to do about the growing collection of bodies now filling the department's morgue. Alex didn't understand why she couldn't accept this wasn't a job for mortal cops. That Louis Reynard would keep on killing until he met a vampire stronger than himself. As much as he hated to use his supernatural powers on his lover, Alex slipped into Mara's mind. *Send them away, baby. Leave it to Philippe and me. Reynard has to be destroyed, finally and completely.*

As he'd known she would, she sent the cops away. She watched the ambulance pull out, its lights and siren silent now. Turning to Alex, she stood before him and Philippe,

her dark eyes glistening with tears. A woman. His for the night and coming day, to pleasure and protect.

And more. Though he wasn't ready to go on his knees and declare his eternal love for Mara, he felt compelled to include her in the ritual of reinstatement that he needed—the ritual he knew Philippe needed, as well. Whether or not she'd admit it, she needed it, too, the affirmation of life, the restoration of strength...the security of loving and being loved.

Alex's cock swelled in his jeans as he imagined dominating not only his grief-stricken clansman but also the delectable cop who needed a few hard lessons in obedience. In obeying the Master who controlled her sexual responses, not the rules of her profession that were meant for humans with their human limitations.

\* \* \* \* \*

The air seemed charged tonight, its damp heat caressing Mara's bare shoulders as they floated along high above the sandy beach, hands clasped. Sexual energy radiated from Alex on one side, his clansman on the other, warming her flesh that had grown cold from fear and revulsion as she'd worked yet another crime scene.

This time she wasn't afraid. She trusted them to carry her along safely. Yes, she knew when he was compelling her, like a few minutes ago when he'd had her send her team away. Part of her was angry at his arrogance, but mostly she accepted he'd only been challenging her belief as to what action would be best to stop Reynard. And he'd been right. The best—the only—way to catch Reynard would be to play by Alex's rules. And her wary acceptance of that was almost as frightening as the rapid growth of her feelings for him.

A gust of wind caught them up, deposited them in Alex's room. It looked the same yet somehow different. A maid had laid back the covers, revealing snowy linens and jewel-toned pillows...and silky-looking restraints. Light, fragrant smoke from incense smoldering in a silver holder on the table swirled around them, binding them together

as if with those silken cords. The lightweight sundress that had seemed so insignificant suddenly chafed Mara's skin, made her want to discard it along with all her mortal inhibitions and step into her lover's world.

As though he'd read her mind — perhaps he had — Alex skimmed the silky fabric off her shoulders, over her breasts and waist and hips. "Step out of it now," he ordered, his tone as smooth as the material.

Nothing could have made her disobey him, not even the knowledge that this encounter would be purely carnal. Vampire sex, where Alex and Philippe would both bring all their seductive skills into play to give her pleasure. Pleasure and submission to their collective will. No. To Alex's will. He hadn't had to say so for her to realize the third party in this ménage was submissive by nature and would bow to a Master's will.

Just as she would.

She stood there in the scandalous undies Alex had bought her, her nipples puckering and poking against the see-through lace bra cups. Matching thong panties did nothing to stem the flow of juices from her pussy — nothing but increase her arousal by brushing against her swollen slit. His touch, featherlight on her shoulder as he slid the bra strap down, sent shards of need through her, made her raise her face to his, silently begging for his kiss.

"Not yet. We're going to give you pleasure like you've never experienced before. Both of us."

Anticipation made Mara's pulse race when Alex's softly spoken words registered in her passion-drenched brain. Anticipation that trumped the very human, very mortal reserve that whispered sex was a couples' event, not a team sport. His calloused fingertips chafed her sensitive skin, reminded her of his strength—his undeniable masculinity.

"Give me your handcuffs." He handed over the black tote bag that looked so wrong with the clothes she'd been wearing and waited while she dug inside and brought out a

pair of standard police-issue cuffs. "And the key." Digging in once more, she brought out a key ring and put it in his hand.

Would he restrain her? A shiver went through her body at the thought, a little bit of fear that the pleasure might be more than she could bear mingled with heightened sexual awareness, knowledge he was in charge and could ravage her helpless body the way he'd already destroyed her will to resist.

He did nothing but set the cuffs on the nightstand by the bed. And stand there, deliberate in his motions as he toed off his deck shoes and shed his jeans and boxers in one graceful motion. His sex stood straight up, its thick head glistening with lubrication, his smooth scrotum drawn tight against his body. "Come here. I know you want to play with this." He flicked the gold ring that had drawn her gaze then ordered Philippe to take off his clothes.

Her tongue darted out, moistened her lips. Even that small touch of her own flesh excited her. "Oh, yes," she hissed, moving so close that she felt Alex's slow, deep exhalations against her cheek when he bent and took her mouth in a long, slow kiss. Following his orders, she reached between his legs and set the *guiche* ring to swinging in slow motion.

"Oh, yeah. That feels fantastic. Stop it now, before I forget we're not alone."

She dropped her hand to his thigh, not wanting to give up the connection completely. He took it, brought it to his lips, moistened the back of her hand with his tongue. Then he set her hand over her navel.

"I want you to watch. Before night comes again you'll know Philippe's touch as well as you know mine." Alex settled her on the bed and laid a hand over her mound. A possessive gesture, she thought, even though he'd ordered her to watch his clansman bare a body equally muscular, equally smooth. An inch or so shorter than Alex, Philippe was paler, his skin a startling contrast with all that dark, shoulder-length hair. His blue eyes fixed on Alex, Philippe stripped, his movements practiced as if he'd

repeated them a thousand times. Perhaps he had, for the mate who'd died. For countless vampire orgies he'd indulged in over the years.

"Philippe's a made vampire. A submissive. Hurry up, my friend, our mortal lover is growing anxious." Alex slid a finger under Mara's lacy thong, rubbed her clit in a circular motion as though to prime her for what was coming.

"Omigod." She couldn't help the exclamation of surprise when Philippe revealed his sex. Only half hard, his cock was huge, as was the heavy ring that pierced the shaft horizontally, just behind the bulbous head. His balls hung low, swinging slightly as he stepped out of his pants.

"Like what you see, baby? Philippe, come join us." Alex found her swollen pussy and massaged it, pushing her damp thong out of the way. "I want you to get our friend here hard. Use your pretty mouth and hands."

Could she take them both? She had no choice. Alex had stolen her will, primed her for the vampire pleasure she'd once yearned for with Dante. The lifetime of pleasure he'd denied her after giving her a glimpse of sexual paradise.

Alex pinched her clit, hard. "I command you not to think of him. Put those memories to rest and make new ones with me. With us."

How did he manage to intercept her every thought? Mara didn't care at the moment. She couldn't think at all, not with Alex finger-fucking her pussy and Philippe playing idly with the lacy cups of her bra. She lay back, stroking Philippe's muscular belly while Alex ran his free hand up and down her spine. Foreplay times two.

Alex kissed her, an almost chaste kiss that had him tracing the seam of her lips with his tongue. Philippe shifted, bringing his cock into her hand. "Gods yes," he muttered when she began to milk his cool, smooth flesh.

"Open for me," Alex said against her mouth, and when she did, he claimed her. A second and third finger stretched her pussy while he tongue-fucked her and she stroked Philippe.

She felt heavy. Lethargic yet so sexually charged she thought she'd burst if they didn't stop toying with her and bring her to climax. The lace of her bra cups cut painfully into her swollen nipples, and her sopping thong dug into her rear entrance, reminding her she had another hole aching to be filled. Desperate for satisfaction, she sucked Alex's tongue, hard.

"Not good, baby. You're supposed to submit, not try to dictate the pace." He nipped at her lip then shot her a stern look. "Now you'll pay the price."

What price? She figured that out quickly enough when Alex deftly caught up the silk cords and tied her ankles to opposite ends of the footboard. "Now for these," he told her as he clamped her own handcuffs to her wrists and ran another cord through the chain and secured the cuffs to the headboard. He straddled her, the tip of his erection brushing her chin. "Do you want me to put my cock in your hot little cunt?"

"Oh, yes. Please."

He laughed as he shoved pillows behind her head. "So polite. But it won't do you any good. You'll have to wait your turn. I've been sadly neglecting Philippe."

*He was going to fuck another man — another male vampire?*

"Don't get so indignant, sweetheart. Did you think you were going to have all the fun?" Alex slid off her and took two condoms from the drawer. "Philippe, suit up and come to me."

It should have seemed unnatural, watching two magnificently muscled males locked in an embrace, kissing, running calloused hands through each other's hair then down to squeeze tight asses and play with their respective anal openings. But it didn't. Once Philippe joined them on the bed, Alex took charge, straddling Philippe's hard body and setting the pace, holding back when Philippe would have hurried, reaching between them first to caress Philippe's burgeoning erection and tug at the hefty ring whose shape stretched the latex receptacle at the end of his condom.

"Fuck me. Please." Philippe's plea conveyed an air of desperation, of need too long unmet. Mara watched the two, one Dominant, the other submissive, as they danced the

dance she imagined predated modern civilization. Loving one another, celebrating all the senses. Vampire kisses that barely broke skin filled the room with a not unpleasant smell of blood. Touches, first soft then tinged with barely controlled male violence, made her long for them to use their magic hands on her as well, staunch the desperate desire that made her writhe against her bonds. Grunts and growls conveyed lust and need and something more she couldn't quite name.

Seeing them like this made her feel she should turn away, yet she could not. Their passion held her as firmly as her bonds, stoking her own lust to a fever pitch. Alex shifted and positioned Philippe on all fours, his eager ass in the air. Using his saliva to wet his hand, Alex lubricated the condom he wore. Then, surprising Mara, he withdrew a large anal plug from his lover's ass and replaced it with his own sheathed cock.

Philippe's expression was one of ecstasy when Alex plunged in up to his balls and slowly withdrew only to penetrate again, harder with each thrust. Her own look, she imagined, was one of longing, for it seemed unfair for her to have to watch Alex do to Philippe what she wanted both of them to do to her.

Their muscles bunched and strained. A vein throbbed in Philippe's thick neck, teasing...inviting. Alex leaned over, never missing a stroke. Fangs extended, he clamped down on Philippe's flesh, sucking his blood. Philippe screamed, a sound not of pain but of long-denied satisfaction. When Alex raised his head and met Mara's gaze, his deep green eyes glowed as he licked away the bloody residue that tipped his fangs.



## Chapter Five

*I want you to bite me that way.*

Mara's unspoken words resounded in Alex's head. He didn't know what it was about her, but he wanted to claim her as his own, not for a few hours' pleasure but forever. Lying there, restrained from moving by those silken cords that held her legs apart and her cuffed wrists above her head, she was temptation personified...temptation that could almost divert him from his goal.

Philippe slumped beneath him, sated for the moment yet not satisfied. His grief surrounded him like a shroud that kept out the heights of sensual satisfaction he'd found only with his dead lover. Keeping his eyes on Mara, Alex gathered Philippe in his arms, offered a clansman's love...and temptation for Philippe to set aside his grieving and participate fully in the ménage, despite his long-held preference for sex with other males.

Stripping off the condoms from his own cock as well as Philippe's, Alex drew him to Mara's side, laid his hand against her satiny cheek. Then he worked the ring out of Philippe's half-hard cock and sheathed him with a fresh, well-lubricated condom. "Help me show Mara how d'Argent vampires pleasure their lovers."

Cool. Soothing. Philippe's touch was tentative, as though it had been a long time—centuries—since he'd touched a woman to raise her passion. Looking down at her, he smoothed back a strand of hair behind her ear then crushed a handful in his fist. "Soft. I like it."

His own unbound hair brushed her shoulder when he lowered his head. Vaguely aware of Alex burrowing between her spread legs and blowing gently on her clit, she turned and accepted Philippe's kiss. Gentle at first, he suddenly claimed her mouth

with a smooth thrust of his tongue. He nibbled at her lips while Alex tongued her clit. Their combined assault made her arch against them, demanding more.

She wanted release. Needed to let loose the painful pressure that built low in her belly with every carnal thrust, each slick abrasion of male tongues on her most sensitive flesh. Straining, she sought release—the satisfaction she knew would only come with her vampire lovers' massive cocks buried deep inside her. "Please," she begged, her voice muffled by Philippe's busy lips.

Alex reached down, unfastened the restraints from her ankles. As though in concert, Philippe freed her cuffed hands from the headboard. Alex lifted her and impaled her on his rigid erection as Philippe moved into position behind her and slid the head of his cock past her anal sphincter. Alex controlled the pace, lifting and releasing her, obviously taking care that the pleasure of their joint penetration exceeded the stretching pain.

Sandwiched between her two vampire lovers, Mara reveled in the heat...the passion...those rampant emotions that bombarded her, sending her tumbling over the edge to a place she'd only dreamed of. As she came she bared her throat, wanting it all. Wanting to belong to Alex and Philippe in their vampire world.

When it didn't happen she tried to shrug off her disappointment, tell herself it was too soon. But she knew it wasn't.

\* \* \* \* \*

Everything outside looked normal. A brilliant blue sky dotted with a few white clouds. The hot golden sun drifted slowly toward the western horizon. Bikini-clad girls played volleyball on the beach outside the hotel while strippers and other club employees began straggling into the businesses on the other side of the beach highway known as A1A. A few dozen tourists were drinking beer and sunning themselves by the salt-water pool.

Alex got up quietly when he woke, and stood at the window, mulling over his options. There didn't seem to be a lot of them. Pity he didn't know exactly where Reynard had gone last night, because he'd have staked the bastard without a second thought if he'd been able to catch him sleeping off his most recent feeding.

Or maybe he wouldn't have. Attacking a sleeping vampire — no matter how heinous a villain he might be — wasn't Alex's way. Besides, the thought of explaining to a bunch of zealous mortal cops why he'd attacked and destroyed a sleeping, unarmed man didn't appeal.

One thing for certain, he wasn't about to let Mara set herself up as bait, the way she'd suggested doing earlier, after Philippe had gone to sleep. She'd wanted to talk about why Alex still refused to mark her, but that question had stayed inside her head. Good thing, because he could no more have explained that than he'd been able to justify his anger at the thought of her putting herself in harm's way.

Still, Alex chided himself because he'd hurt her feelings, pointing out that while Mara was a hell of a lover, she was no drop-dead gorgeous blonde like the ones Reynard had victimized in the past. The minute the words left his mouth, he'd regretted saying them because the hurt in her dark eyes had been unmistakable.

What they needed to do was find the bastard. Night would be falling soon, and Alex had a sinking feeling Louis would be killing on a daily basis now, since that had become his pattern over the past few days. He glanced over at the bed, then moved closer and shook Philippe's shoulder.

"Get up, both of you. It's time to go hunt down a vampire."

Philippe rubbed his eyes then tossed back the covers. "Both of us? It seems Mara has already left."

"Fuck." The expletive came out between tightly closed lips as Alex stared at the neatly arranged stack of pillows he'd thought was Mara. "Hurry. We've got to find Reynard before she does."

\* \* \* \* \*

*I'll show him.* Standing in front of the mirror in her apartment, Mara adjusted a blonde wig on her head, almost losing her balance as she did. Damn, but standing up on these six-inch platform stilettos apparently took practice—practice she'd never had. Balancing precariously, she slipped into a skintight black dress. It would have to do, because she intended to be out trolling for Reynard before too many authentic hookers came out looking for a john.

Her pussy and ass still throbbed from the tandem fucking she'd enjoyed earlier. And her ego still stung when she thought about Alex telling her she'd never pass for a hooker, adding that she looked more like a cute little girl than a sex bomb. Of course he had finally let her feel the bite of his fangs after ordering her not to do it—not to even *think* about setting herself up as a trap for the serial killer.

She'd been so aroused she'd begged him, and he'd given in and satisfied her. He'd barely pierced her before lifting his head and looking her in the eye. His words echoed in her ears. *Reynard wouldn't stop with a little taste, baby. He'd feed on you until every drop of your blood was gone. Behave or I'll tie you to the bed and wake Philippe. Between the two of us we'll keep you so preoccupied with pleasure that you'll abandon your foolish plans.*

She'd behaved—at least she'd pretended to give in until he drifted off to sleep. She'd then slid out from between her two vampire lovers, arranged pillows in more or less the shape of her body, thrown on clothes and left them. Now she had a job to do.

*Get a killer's attention before he hits on another civilian who doesn't deserve to die.*

Sitting for a minute to take the pressure off her aching feet, Mara called the station and briefed Ben on her plan. It didn't make her feel better when Ben warned her that ambitious state attorney Sierra Sienna had been nosing around, making noises about following due process, warning them all to wait and catch the vampire serial killer in the act unless they wanted to be brought up on criminal charges.

Mara hung up and checked her weapon, stashing it in the small satin purse she'd dug out of the bottom drawer of her dresser since her “hooker” dress had no place

where she might conceal it. The solid feeling of the Sig Sauer gave her a boost of confidence, even though she suspected Alex had been right when he said the gun would prove useless against their enemy.

Sighing, she got up and teetered out to her car on the fuck-me shoes she'd borrowed from the stripper who lived next door. Now she had not only Reynard to seduce, but also the mortal laws to heed in bringing him to justice.

\* \* \* \* \*

He'd been wrong. Perched on a stool at the end of the poolside bar, a drink in her hand, Mara looked exactly like a prostitute or stripper trolling for a man. If it weren't for her expressive dark eyes and the swollen lips he'd kissed and nibbled on hours earlier, he might not have recognized her even with the small puncture marks that marked her as his. "Little fool," he muttered when he saw Louis Reynard take a seat beside her and start up some meaningless conversation.

"Wait, Alex. Let her lure him away from here. Don't try to take him now." Philippe laid a restraining hand on Alex's forearm, but Alex shook it off and stepped forward. "There. They're leaving. Let them get out of sight of this crowd."

"I don't care. He's going to fucking kill her. I won't let him."

"Neither will I." Philippe's declaration was no less lethal-sounding for being uttered quietly. "Come on."

Tiki lights sparkled in the dark, lighting the stretch of beach next to the hotel. A plaintive jazz tune floated over them, its source one of the clubs across the street. Alex strained his eyes, saw Louis drape an arm around Mara's slender shoulders. "I'm taking him now," he ground out between clenched teeth.

"Wait."

There'd be no waiting. Louis Reynard wasn't going to touch his woman. Alex wouldn't let Reynard lay his filthy hands or fangs on Mara. Not that he'd have let the bastard destroy any more women if he could help it. But Mara? His feelings for her

were different. Stronger. No time to think about that, though, not now. Moving more quickly than he ever had before, he came up on the two, Philippe at his back. "Get Mara away from him now," Alex lunged at Reynard, caught him in a chokehold and wrestled him to the ground.

Weakened as he was, the ancient vampire put up an amazingly tough fight. But he was no match for Alex. Bloodlust consumed him when he thought of what Reynard had planned for Mara. Over and over until his own knuckles were bloody, Alex pounded his opponent. Bones cracked, the sounds satisfying beneath his fists. About to call for a stake to end it, Alex realized they'd drawn the attention of a crowd—mortals whose horrified expressions told him they didn't much care for his method of subduing an opponent.

Alex didn't give a fuck. Reynard was going to die. Grabbing the bastard by the neck, he dragged him into the shadows, out of the crowd's view. In that second or two, Reynard drew on some inner reserves, for he was fighting now with superhuman power, biting and gouging at Alex's eyes, struggling to get free.

His hands slick with blood, Alex struggled to hold on, but Louis somehow managed to break free. When he did, he let out an obscene cackle and bolted toward Mara.

"No!" Vaguely Alex saw Philippe shove Mara behind him, protecting her with his own body. But Reynard shoved Philippe aside and lunged at Mara. His bony hands dug into her shoulders, tearing at the fabric of her dress. He'd bared her breasts and extended his fangs by the time Alex tackled him from behind and brought him down.

"Die now, bastard." Ignoring the blood streaming down his face, Alex hoisted the wooden stake he'd kept tucked inside his shirt and drove it through Reynard's black heart.

Finally the Fox lay defeated and destroyed, his remains dissolving into a fine gray dust that blew slowly out to sea.

“Cuff him. I believe I have enough witnesses that the lack of a body won’t cause problems with the prosecution.” The words came not from Mara as Alex had expected, but from a dark-haired beauty standing next to Ben. A lawyer unless he missed his guess.

His expression apologetic, Ben moved closer and snapped handcuffs on Alex’s wrists. They looked like the ones Alex had put on Mara last night, he thought when he looked down at them. Ben cleared his throat. “You have the right to remain silent...” Miranda Rights, Alex thought they called the words Ben recited now from memory. Alex had heard them before from a sheriff in Montana and now assumed they were part of the ritual involved in arresting someone here in the United States. “Sorry, man. Reynard needed killing,” Ben offered at the end of his recitation, without the slightest change in his bored monotone.

Yes, Louis Reynard certainly had needed killing. To Alex’s credit, the evil vampire now was dead. To his shame, nearly two years had passed since he and his kinsmen had first set out on the hunt—a year, twenty-five unfortunate mortals and thousands of miles later. As he let Ben push him into the police cruiser, he watched Philippe take to the air.

Alex knew where his clansman was going, and he had no doubt that Stefan and Claude would be arriving soon. Meanwhile he’d sit in jail and nurse his wounds. Might even con his jailers out of a feed to make up for the blood he’d lost.

No need to burst the mortals’ bubble too soon by shedding the cuffs and flying away.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mara couldn’t get the picture of Sierra Sienna’s self-satisfied smirk off her mind as she sped to her apartment to change. Why the fuck had her homicide case had to draw the personal attention of the most bulldoggish prosecutor in Dade County, a woman whose only apparent purpose in life was making a name for herself in the local media?

Mara tossed off her disguise, scrubbed the makeup off her face and threw on brown slacks and a jacket. No time to primp. She ran a brush through her hair and tied it back with a rubber band before running to her car and hurrying to the station house.

Damn it, the last thing she'd wanted was for Alex to end up in jail. She had to talk to him, make him know she hadn't had anything to do with his arrest. With any kind of luck they wouldn't have transported him to the county lockup yet.

"Where's d'Argent?" she asked the desk sergeant as she scribbled her name on the sign-in book.

"Braunstein's interrogating him. Room 2."

Good. Alex still was here. Even better as far as Mara was concerned, Sierra was nowhere to be seen—a good thing since the woman had no qualms about sticking her nose in and fucking up investigations at every opportunity. Mara went inside, ordered Ben out and closed the door with a satisfying thud. "I didn't do this," she whispered as she sat next to him and removed the cuffs when she noticed he was holding his hands in an awkward position.

"I know." He curled his fingers around her hand, his movement uncharacteristically clumsy. "I think I broke a bone or two on the bastard. Don't worry, I'll heal."

It was uncanny how he read her thoughts. "Do you need to feed?"

"Your pal Ben gave me some when I first got here. It was enough that I'll survive, at least for a few days." He reached up and cupped her chin, forcing her to meet his emerald gaze. "Go away, baby. Leave me alone. I'm not in the best of moods." He stood, turning toward the barred window and staring out.

She'd get him out of here. Get Philippe to help hide him away so he could heal. Fuck it all, her magnificent vampire lover was a hero, not a criminal to be locked away. Maybe...maybe he could seduce Sierra, use his powers to sway a jury.

"Don't even think about it, baby. Remember what I told you, that no prison could hold Reynard. There's none that can hold me long, either." With what seemed like great



reluctance he reached out and drew her to him, cradling her head on his shoulder, a silent gesture that seemed frighteningly like good-bye. "You need to go now. Please."

"I want to stay." What she was feeling was more than lust, more than the vampiric compulsion that had drawn her to him in the first place. "Please," she said, tilting her head back to look into his eyes—and baring her throat in a blatant offer of submission.

Alex glanced at the door where someone was rattling at the lock. "Not now. You think you want me now. I want you, too, but it's too soon. Get out of here before you get in trouble for helping me. And think about what you want. I'm going to get out of here soon, but I'll come back."

"How?" She gripped his shoulders, but she knew now she didn't care how he planned to escape. "Take me with you."

"Not now, sweetheart. Trust me, though. I'll be back."

She did trust him. But she didn't want him fighting vampire hunters...didn't want him meeting the same fate as Dante.

"There's no vampire hunter around who'll go after me unless it's to give me a medal," Alex said, bending as he did and brushing his lips across her cheek. "Hang in there for me."

Just then two dark, compelling vampires who closely resembled Alex entered through the barred window, swooped him up and disappeared with him the way they'd come. Mara was still looking out the window when someone broke down the door and Sierra burst in.

"Where is he? And why was the door locked?" The lawyer's gaze settled on the handcuffs on the table. "You let him go," she said, pointing at the open handcuffs. "Arrest her!"

Toby Cruz, the uniformed patrolman who'd trailed in behind Sierra, shot Mara an apologetic look, but she had no doubt he'd do the prosecutor's bidding. After all, she *had* let Alex go—not that he wouldn't have escaped without her, or that she could have

stopped him if she'd tried. "The man's a vampire, for God's sake," she told the other woman, as if that would have done any good.

Sierra stepped closer as her companion cuffed Mara's hands behind her back. "Instead of staking him when he tried to escape, you took off the cuffs and let him go. For that you'll do some hard time. Read her her rights," she ordered Ben, who'd just come in the room. The lawyer's cruel smile projected her satisfaction at having found someone to put away in connection with the serial killings, however loose the ties might be. "Then take her over to the Women's Detention Center. I doubt she'll be bonding out."

Mara wouldn't be, not if Sierra had anything to say about it. Even if she was nothing except a grandstanding media hound when it came to grabbing cases to prosecute, the woman was a skillful advocate for the State when it came to getting defendants denied bail at initial bond hearings. "Get me a lawyer," she said when Ben finished telling her what she already knew.

"I will. We won't let the witch lady get away with this."

## **Chapter Six**

"I still say we should get you out of here and back to Paris," Stefan argued. "Reynard managed to get in a few good hits on you before you finished him off."

Not to mention that his cousin worried that Alex's disappearance would have set off a major vampire hunt by the Metro-Dade cops. But Alex didn't care. "I'm not leaving without Mara."

Claude turned back from where he'd been looking out the window of this new hotel across the highway from the club where he'd met his own mate a few months earlier. "Are you sure she wants you?"

No. He wasn't as sure as Claude had been that his woman really wanted to trade her mortal existence on Miami Beach for an eternity in his vampire world. After all, Mara had a good job—a good life—unlike Marisa, whom Claude had rescued from a miserable world where she hadn't been able to pull her brother out of the deepening schism of drug addiction and involvement with the mob. "I'm sure I want to find out."

They had Philippe nosing around the station, hoping to see Mara and bring her here without catching the attention of her coworkers. But Alex had an uneasy feeling that became acute when the room phone rang a few minutes later.

"Do you know a cop named Braunstein?" Stefan asked when he set the phone down.

"He's one of the men who work for Mara." While Alex understood Stefan's concern at having been located by the local police, he was more concerned with why Ben might have called. "What did he say?"

"That your woman has been arrested for letting you go. Stupid mortals, thinking you couldn't escape on your own. He says they're charging her as an accessory in

Reynard's *murder* and for facilitating the killer's escape. That *killer* would be you, cousin."

Claude laughed, but the sound didn't convey much humor. "Stupid mortals indeed. If they had half a brain among them, they'd realize there are times that call for vampire justice. Where do they have Alex's lady cop locked away?"

"The Women's Detention Center. Braunstein just took her there."

"Fuck." Alex had to swallow a scream when he forgot and grabbed his cell phone with his broken hand. But he wouldn't admit to major pain, not now. They had to get Mara, take her out of what had to be a hellish situation. Having spent several days in a Montana jail cell, he had a pretty good idea of how miserable being locked up could be. He imagined it would be many times worse for Mara than he'd experienced on his brief stay, because she was a law enforcement officer tossed in among several hundred women she might have helped put there. "I've got to call *Maman*, tell her I'm bringing home a mate and that she needs to have a maid go over and tidy up my apartment." The gods only knew what souvenirs might still have been around after the farewell party those three female d'Argents had thrown for him before he took off after Reynard.

"Are you sure?" Claude asked.

Alex had meant to wait, give his own feelings as well as hers the test of time. But he didn't have that time. Not now. Besides, he'd known the minute he saw Mara that he'd found his mate, he just hadn't wanted to admit it. There was no time to waste. He had to rescue her and claim her as his own.

She might not be too thrilled at first to become a vampire, but she'd learn to love it. Claude's Marisa had and so had Stefan's Julie. Even Sam Quill, despite all his protests that he didn't want to change, had settled in nicely as Alina's mate. Especially now that Alina had turned the clan leadership over to Claude and could reveal her submissive nature to one and all. "I'm sure. Let's go, break her out of that hole she's in."

"You know you're going to have to turn her there, and you're likely to have a very interested audience." Stefan shot Alex a doubtful look. "You don't look well enough to fight off half a dozen or more women desperate to get out and find a fix."

"I'll leave that to you, my friends. The only prisoner I'm interested in springing is Mara." Trying not to think about his aches and pains, Alex stood and made for the door. He knew, no matter how much they might protest, Claude and Stefan would always be at his back.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Women's Detention Center might as well have been a dungeon, if only it had been below ground instead of above. She imagined the only reason it hadn't been built that way was because Miami's topography didn't lend itself to belowground construction. Seeing it inside, up close and personal, made Mara wonder if she really should have brought ninety percent of the women she'd arrested over the years to this hellhole.

She had six cellmates in a boxlike room designed for eight, surrounded by concrete block walls that had recently been painted an ugly shade of gray. No window, and only a barred opening in the locked metal door. From the look of it, the other women were sleeping off drunks or drug highs, except for one snarling psycho who looked as if she was trying to decide which one of them to attack. None of them smelled any too clean, but then the orange jumpsuit they'd given Mara didn't exactly feel or smell as if it had just come out of the laundry, either.

Where the hell was the lawyer Ben was supposed to have found for her? She wanted to see him, not that she figured he'd be able to do much for getting her out of this place. She knew the ropes. They wouldn't even hold a bond hearing for a couple of days, no matter how loudly her lawyers screamed. Taking a seat on one of the two unoccupied bunks, she took a deep breath and tried to relax.

Easier said than done, when the psycho was eyeing her with what seemed like intent, unnatural interest. Mara stared her down the way she might have done a suspect, and finally after what seemed like a long time the woman gave up and flopped back on her bunk.

Mara might have gone to sleep, but a mental picture of Alex kept getting in the way. A murderer? Never. So far as she was concerned, her vampire lover was nothing less than a hero. Because of him, Louis Reynard would never victimize another. And that made the world a safer place.

She couldn't help thinking about how he'd touched her mind as well as her body. How she'd responded to him sexually as she hadn't for many long years. As she'd never responded to any mortal. *I guess Dante spoiled me.* Instinctively she knew Alex would spoil her more. Her hand went to her throat, and she felt for the small puncture marks he'd left. Gone. Just as he was gone.

But he'd told her he'd come back.

As if she'd conjured him up, there he stood, in the cell no one had unlocked. The two vampires who'd rescued him were at his back. Shock, yes, but the thrill of seeing him overshadowed her disbelief. "How?" she managed to ask, surprised she was still able to talk.

"We're vampires. That's how." Alex took her hand, looked into her eyes. "Come with us now. Be my vampire bride."

The psycho jumped up and screamed, "Get these wackos outta here. I'm trying to get some shuteye. Guard!"

"Shut up, bitch," one of the other women growled. Then she apparently noticed Alex and his two companions. "Oh, my, any of you guys can fuck me any time you'd like."

Alex laughed as he reached out and cupped Mara's chin. "Well. I'm waiting. Isn't this the time you're supposed to throw your arms around my neck and say, 'Bite me'?"

Mara guessed it was, but she was still too shocked to move. Hours earlier she'd wished he'd taken her with him. It wasn't that she'd be spending her life in prison. No jury in its right mind would convict her. This was just Sierra's ego trip, and it would be over as soon as Mara's lawyer explained what had gone down to a judge. But did all that really matter?

She wanted Alex. Wanted him more than she'd ever wanted anything in her thirty some-odd years. *Mara girl, for once in your life do what you want to do. Take a chance.* She looked him in the eye and smiled. "Bite me, baby. And please, for God's sake, get me out of here."

When she bared her throat, Alex laid her back on the bunk and sank his fangs into her tender flesh. Not even the hysterical screaming from her cellmates detracted from the incredible high. Like sex, but better...almost. The sensations were indescribable, out of this world, transporting her to a place where she'd find true happiness with the vampire she loved.

Vaguely, as if from a great distance, she heard guards' boots pounding on the concrete floor, keys clanking and cellblock doors slamming open and shut. She felt Alex lifting her, had a sensation of drifting free, flanked by the other vampires as they made their way through barred windows. Then she felt nothing. Nothing but her lover's arms holding her safe and warm.

\* \* \* \* \*

She'd lain limp in his arms as they crossed the Atlantic, and now that morning was breaking and they'd finally reached Paris, Alex tried not to panic as he strode past his clansmen who'd come to greet them. He placed Mara's cool, pale body in the center of the huge bed that had been the site of more than one d'Argent vampire orgy. Willing her to open her eyes and greet him as her mate...her Master, he went on his knees beside her, bent his head and brushed his lips across hers.

Nothing. He couldn't detect the first sign of life. Had he done as Stefan had so many years ago and destroyed his lover? No. Mara was too vital, too full of life to be dead. Alex remembered her sassy comeback when he'd said to tell him to bite her, considered the stubborn streak that had made her go out on her own to face Reynard. "Mara? Baby?"

"Let me." Alina placed a hand on Alex's shoulder, drew him gently back from the bed. "Wake up, Mara. Meet your new family."

Alex's gaze locked on Mara's face, searching for any sign she was coming around. Had she blinked at the sound of his cousin's voice? He wasn't sure. One by one, his kinsmen surrounded the bed, talking to her softly, touching her cheek, brushing lips across hands that were too still, too pale even for a newly made vampire.

*Ass. You didn't even think that by saving her, you might destroy her.* Alex cursed himself for his ego, his damnable confidence that no task might be beyond his ability. When he turned away Stefan embraced him. "She's not gone, cousin."

"Stefan's right." Her consort in tow, Alina turned into the circle of her cousins' arms. "What I believe Mara needs is a dose of our own life forces. Julie, you should join Stefan."

Claude joined them, dragging his heavily pregnant mate Marisa into the circle. "A vampire welcoming ritual?"

As they all shed their clothes, Alex felt the combined power among them, power unequaled by any other vampire clan on earth. Hope restored, he crawled onto the bed beside Mara and gently stripped away the ugly jail clothes she'd had on before she was turned. He did the same with the equally ugly white underwear, baring her completely to his family's eyes. "Join us?" he asked, wishing to all the gods he'd ever heard of that this were just another vampire orgy...just another time for sharing pleasure among his loved ones.

As head of the clan, Claude came first, sitting at the head of the bed beside Alex. He lifted Mara's head onto his lap and ran his fingers through her tangled auburn hair, his



touch confident. Marisa came up behind Alex, resting her head against his shoulder. He felt life—the strong motion of Claude’s child nudging him in the back. Alex laid a hand on Mara’s cheek, passing along Marisa’s energy...and the baby’s.

Stefan and Julie took their places at Mara’s side and began to stroke her cool, dry skin. Was Alex being hopeful or had some color come back into her still body? When Sam opened Mara’s legs and ran his hands along her inner thighs, and Alina rested her cheek on Mara’s flat, soft belly, Alex was certain he saw her eyelids flutter.

A sense of magic filled the room. Warmth surrounded her. She heard voices calling her, but she couldn’t answer. Tired. So tired.

And hungry. Desperate to feed, not on mortal food but on blood. Vampire blood. She felt the sting of Alex’s fangs, the incredible pleasure when he’d drained her. The sensation of floating...of a transformation from her world into his.

Mara rubbed her tongue across her teeth, found sharp fangs she’d somehow known would have been there. Hands touched her. Alex’s. His two companions. Another male who now was rubbing his thumb over her clit. And females. Three of them, with gentle hands and long hair that brushed her skin, all murmuring soft words of encouragement.

She reached for Alex—her master. Drew him to her. Bodies shifted. Suddenly he rolled her on top of him and sank his hot cock into her well-primed pussy. “Bite me, baby,” he said, baring his throat. “Yeah, like that. Feels so fucking good.”

The women petted her with soft, gentle hands while she rode Alex and drank his blood. One at a time the men probed her ass first with their fingers and then with their hard cocks. Pressure built inside her, threatened to implode. She came and came and came, the salty taste on her lips incredibly arousing. She’d never felt so full. So sexually fulfilled. So loved, not only by her master but by her new vampire family.

When she felt certain she couldn't come again, Alex caught her hips and slammed her down on him. With a triumphant shout he flooded her with his seed as the other males left her and began to fuck their own women.

Later Alex introduced her to his family and explained who went with whom. His very young-looking uncle, Claude, had found his pregnant mate Marisa at a South Beach strip club, while Stefan had met Julie in Chicago when Reynard had singled her out for his next kill. Sam, the rugged older Dom who'd wakened her, was Julie's father whom Alex's cousin Alina had turned after one of the Fox's henchmen had ended his mortal existence. She lay back on the bed and held out her arms for her own vampire mate. "What did you do with Philippe?"

"He's with Sam and Alina. Do you miss his big, pierced cock?"

She grinned. "It *is* mighty tempting. Seriously, he seemed so sad."

Alex stretched out between her legs and licked her mound. Good thing she'd no longer need to shave it, because she loved the tickly, tingly feeling of his mustache and beard against her sex—almost as much as she liked the way his perfectly smooth cock and balls slid sensuously against her own hairless pussy. "He hasn't gotten over losing his mate. You know, they were together like this for over a hundred years."

"Like this?"

"Well, not exactly. But close enough." His movement more fluid than any other male Mara had ever seen, he straddled her face. "Like this. Suck my cock, my precious baby vampire. You'll need a lot of practice before the next d'Argent family orgy, keeping those pretty fangs retracted."

He tasted good. Very good. Mara would miss her team—especially Ben—but she was pretty damn sure she'd never regret having fallen for Alex, or opting to trade her mortal existence for a long, lusty life with Alex and his dynamic family.

## About the Author

Ann Jacobs is a sucker for lusty Alpha heroes and happy endings, which makes Ellora's Cave an ideal publisher for her work. Romantica®, to her, is the perfect combination of sex, sensuality, deep emotional involvement and lifelong commitment – the elusive fantasy women often dream about but seldom achieve.

First published in 1996, Jacobs has sold over forty books and novellas, some of which have earned awards including the Passionate Plume (best novella, 2006), the Desert Rose (best hot and spicy romance, 2004) and More Than Magic (best erotic romance, 2004). She has been a double finalist in separate categories of the EPPIES and From the Heart RWA Chapter's contest. Three of her books have been translated and sold in several European countries.

A CPA and former hospital financial manager, Jacobs now writes full-time, with the help of Mr. Blue, the family cat who sometimes likes to perch on the back of her desk chair and lend his sage advice. He sometimes even contributes a few random letters when he decides he wants to try out the keyboard. She loves to hear from readers, and to put faces with names at signings and conventions.

Ann welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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