

The book cover features a man in a white shirt and black tie on the left, and a woman in a black leather outfit on the right. The title 'The Hunted' is in large red script, and 'Loose Id' is in smaller white script. The author's name 'Rachel Carrington' is in white script at the top.

*Rachel
Carrington*

The
Loose Id
Hunted

Praise for the writing of Rachel Carrington

Surrender

This book just sucked me right in! I didn't move for nearly 2 hours. The characters are engaging and the plot fast paced. Kira's internal struggle with the lies she had been raised on was well written and believable. A great read!

-- Melissa, *Enchanted Ramblings*

Surrender was a fast read and I enjoyed the well-developed characters. The world of the Gods is fraught with so many emotions and as Rachel Carrington shows us sometimes you just have to Surrender.

-- Gracie, *Joyfully Reviewed*

Surrender is a wonderful tale of adventure and desire... Watching the interaction between this couple is an adventure in itself. Rachel Carrington has done a great job of writing a story that leaves readers wanting more.

-- Angel, *The Romance Studio*

The battles between Kira and Jarek take place in the bedroom as well as the battlefield... This book will keep the reader glued to the pages until the conclusion.

-- Candy, *eCataRomance Reviews*

These two characters clash in a battle of wills and strong sexual tension from page one. The chemistry between them is electrifying, and the wit and sarcasm that they portray is extremely entertaining. You cannot wait to see what they will do or say next.

-- Qetesh, *TCM Reviews*

Surrender is now available from Loose Id.

THE HUNTED

Rachel Carrington

LooseId
www.loose-id.com

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This book contains explicit sexual content and graphic language.

The Hunted

Rachel Carrington

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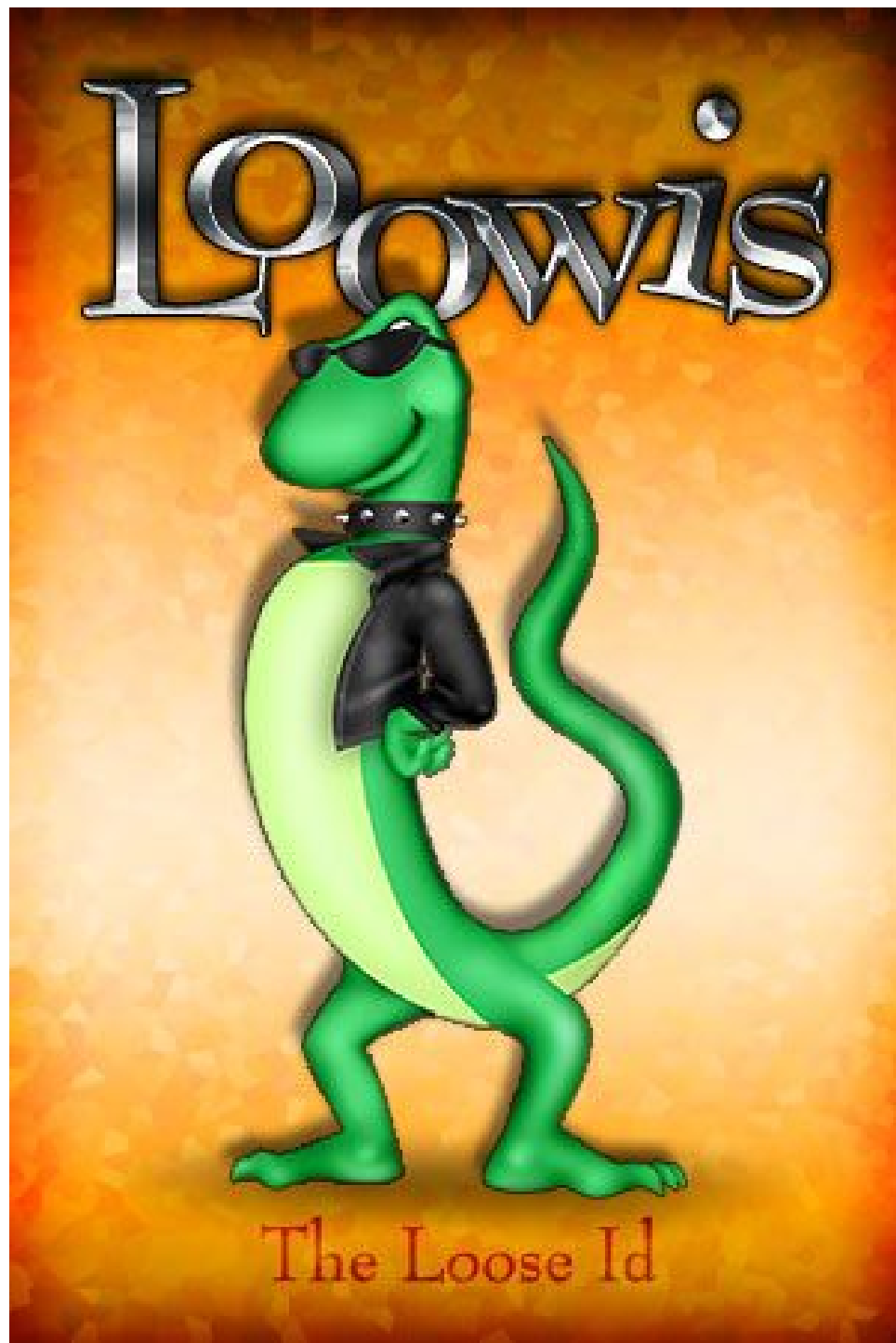
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Chapter One

Manhattan, February 2001

His erection pressed into her spine, hard as a rock.

Pure bliss. She loved waking up like this and couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so ... safe, protected, unless it was the night before.

Joquinn rolled over in the bed, his arm draping across her waist. Ariana stirred and pushed back against his chest, enjoying the feel of his body pressed next to hers. She loved everything about him -- his scent, his skin, his touch.

"Good evening," he whispered in her ear, a sound which sent tingles down her spine. Just his voice could make her cream. It was an extraordinary feeling.

Does he even know what he does to me? She turned to touch his face. "We slept the day away." Could any man be more handsome? Dark eyes, a smile that could turn night into day, and dark hair that brushed his shoulders. Absolutely beautiful.

"It's nothing unusual for me. I've always been more attuned to the night." Joquinn winked and pulled her even closer, if that was possible.

Yes, she'd known that about him since they'd first met. He'd quickly informed her he was a night owl. She hadn't thought he'd meant it literally.

Joquinn's hands began roaming down her spine and lower to cup the cheeks of her ass, bringing her pussy into solid contact with his hard, silky cock. He began a gentle rub between the folds of her flesh, slipping the smooth knob up and down against her clit. "You like that?"

Heat enveloped her lower core. How could she say no? "You know better than to ask me that question, but I'd think you wouldn't have the energy to go for round two after the day we had."

"It would be round three, actually." He nuzzled her neck and delightful little shivers danced down her spine. "And I have energy enough for ten men."

That she didn't doubt. "Eventually, I have to work."

Growling, he dipped his head between her breasts, stroking the globes with his velvety tongue. "Eventually isn't right this moment."

From the moment Joquinn had first touched her with his tongue, she'd known he was a master with that particular tool. Many powerful orgasms had been wrought just from his clever strokes, and he knew just how to wear down her defenses. As he was doing now. What would one more time hurt?

His thumb flicked her nipple, and her breath caught in her throat as common sense returned. Somehow, she managed to push him away. "No, Joquinn. We can't get started again. I have to get busy."

"Busy?" He propped himself up on his elbows. "I thought that's what we were doing together."

She scrambled from the bed before he could convince her to forget all about writing the article she had due in less than two days. Reaching for the robe, she gathered it closer to her body before turning back to face him.

“You know what I meant. I have to work -- you know, the thing that puts food on the table.” She yawned. How could she be so tired even after sleeping for almost twelve hours straight? As she considered the question, a small smile played at her lips. Perhaps it was spending so much time in bed with Joquinn that exhausted her? The man was insatiable between the sheets.

He patted the empty spot on the bed beside him, allowing the sheet to drop to his waist. “But you have all evening, *ma chérie*.”

The French words made her toes curl, and the sight of his hard, muscular chest made her seriously consider his offer. But common sense prevailed. “Joquinn, I really can’t. I have to get this done, or my editor will kill me.” Turning her back to distract herself from the mouth-watering picture he presented, she shoved her arms into the silky robe.

“Very well. I shall just lie here and contemplate the things we can do once you are finished with your article.”

Ariana huffed out a breath. “That might take a while.”

“I’m a patient man.”

More tingling. She knew that for a fact. The first time she’d walked into his embrace, she’d learned the many facets of his patience. He took his sweet time learning every inch of her body and committing it to memory.

“Well, okay, but you might get bored.” The hint couldn’t be any plainer. She needed him to leave, to give her some breathing room. Otherwise, she’d never sit down in front of her computer. All the man thought about was sex. Extraordinary, mind-blowing sex, so she wasn’t really complaining, but her editor would if she didn’t finish that damned article.

She felt him look at her, and the way his eyes gleamed caused her suspicions to rise. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like you want to ...” No, she couldn’t say that. Like he wanted to eat her? Hell, he did.

Joquinn chuckled, giving her an out. "I do not think I shall get bored, my love."

The robe suddenly felt constricting. "Why not?"

"Because I'll be watching you."

With a shiver, she tightened the sash around her robe and crossed the room to her desk. Booting up her computer, she seated herself in the swivel chair, all the while feeling Joquinn's eyes watching her every move.

"I wish you wouldn't do that." Her voice was barely above a whisper.

"It's hard for me to take my eyes off such beauty."

Oh, the man was good, and in the past few months she'd been with him, she'd learned just how good.

With a sigh of pure pleasure, she logged onto the Internet to check her e-mails. The first one caught her attention, riveting her eyes to the screen. The subject line was "Joquinn Shepherd," and inside the message, the words were simple yet powerful:

The man you're with isn't human, nor is he alive.

She scrolled down, but the sender offered no further information. But then, that didn't surprise her. This was one of many e-mails she'd received over the past few weeks. She'd discard this one as she had the other ones.

Joquinn was as much of a human as she was, and he was certainly alive. She'd felt the warmth of his skin, the strength of his embrace. But the relentless e-mails did creep her out.

"*Ma chérie*, what is wrong?" Joquinn suddenly stood behind her, his hands resting on her shoulders. She hadn't even heard him get dressed, but he was fully clothed. That had always unnerved her.

“Just someone with too much time on their hands.” Ariana quickly clicked out of the e-mail. He began to massage her neck. “You grew tense.” He leaned closer, pressing his cheek against hers. “Tell me about this someone.”

Along with the magic of his fingers, his warm breath intoxicated her.

“Every so often I get these ridiculous e-mails.”

“Tell me about them.”

She gave a little laugh. “It’s always just a short note. ‘The man you’re with isn’t human or alive.’” Her shoulders lifted in a shrug before she peeked up at his face. “I told you they were ridiculous.” She switched off the computer screen and stood, massaging the back of her neck.

Joquinn backed away to give her space, but his black eyes followed her. “Are you not going to work on your article? I thought you needed to get it finished.”

He hadn’t responded to her statement, but she tried to shake off the cold chill that chased its way down her spine. “I just don’t feel like writing, that’s all.”

“Ariana, look at me. Do the e-mails worry you?”

The uneasiness intensified. Why hadn’t he just laughed? The serious tone of his voice nearly destroyed her determination to ignore the e-mails. “Of course not.”

He ran one hand down her arm. “You’re shaking.”

“No, I’m not. I’m fine. In fact, I think I’m going to go for a walk.” She needed space, time to clear her head and figure out why doubts were crowding into her mind like a packed subway train.

Joquinn was at the door before she could take a step. “You cannot go out into the dark by yourself. It isn’t safe.”

“You go out at night all the time.” Actually, that was the only time he stepped outside the house. Long after the sun had dipped low in the sky.

Just as suddenly as she said the words, Ariana began sorting through the past few months. All the nights she'd spent with Joquinn and the days they spent indoors. Never outside until the sun went down. The unlimited supply of money he had, but yet, he never went to work. His exhaustion during the afternoons and disappearance shortly after dark without telling her where he was going.

She folded her arms across her chest, wariness making her bite her lower lip. "And now that I mention that, I have to ask you a question." The reporter in her forced her to make the inquiry.

He swept one hand into the air as if granting permission. "Ask me anything, my darling. You know I have no secrets from you."

Ariana hoped that was true. "Why do you not go out during the day?"

One eyebrow arched. "I told you I'm more attuned with the night. I don't care for the sun."

"But we can't even go to the grocery store during the day, and come to think of it, you don't eat a lot, either." Now, her antenna went up. Maybe there was something to those e-mails, after all. But who could know something about Joquinn that she didn't?

"Why do you look so pale?" His voice caressed her, like a piece of satin sliding down her arm.

She gave herself a mental shake. Sorting out who sent the e-mails wasn't the imminent problem. Figuring out the truth was.

Joquinn approached her slowly. "What are you wanting to know, *chérie*?" His eyes seemed to glitter, and for the first time, Ariana was a little afraid.

She stumbled back against the bed. "Where do you go each night when you leave me? You've never told me that." Her heart thumped rapidly against her ribcage. When had his pupils become so small? He looked dangerous, almost lethal. Her mouth went dry.

"Do you always have to know my whereabouts, then?"

“You’re avoiding the question.”

He took another step forward, and Ariana held up one hand. He stopped. “Those e-mails have scared you, haven’t they?”

Maybe it was her rising panic, but his voice sounded sinister. Her gaze flicked toward the door, and it wasn’t her imagination when Joquinn moved to stand completely in front of her.

“I’ve already told you no.” She tried to inject a lighter note into her voice. “Let’s just forget about it. It was nothing.”

He captured her arm and drew her closer. “I don’t want to forget about it, Ariana. We have been together six months, and now you question me as if you do not trust me. That concerns me.”

The scent of his skin, its usual comforting combination of spice and leather, didn’t soothe her. “Look, you’re standing right here in front of me. I think I would know if you were some kind of alien. Besides that, I know every inch of you, and if you’re not alive, then I’m the queen of Egypt. It just weirds me out that someone would take the time to send an e-mail like that. I mean, it sounds like they know you.”

As she spoke, she felt the urgent need to convince herself, to prove the sender to be a liar, but one look in Joquinn’s eyes told her she wasn’t going to hear what she wanted to hear.

“I see the fear in your eyes.”

There he went avoiding her question again. “It’s not fear you see. It’s irritation.” Her bravado lasted the space of a second until Joquinn leaned forward and flashed a smile.

She blinked. Was it just her imagination, or had she seen pointed teeth -- long, pointed teeth? Her heart dropped to her toes, and she couldn’t find her voice.

“Ariana, you must have known that I am not what I appear to be.” His hand stroked her face. “But we are good together, yes? Why change things simply because I am not the man you thought I was?”

She shrank away from his touch. “If you’re not the man I thought you were, then what are you?” Even though she asked the question, she already knew. But it was impossible. Dead people did not walk around among the living.

But things were starting to make sense now. God, this was like some kind of nightmare from which she couldn’t wake up. Joquinn wasn’t who she’d thought he was. It was as clear as the black depths of his eyes. “You’re different, aren’t you?” His stoic look convinced her to continue. “How different?”

“Do you really want me to answer the questions, *ma chérie*?” He sounded so calm, so unaffected.

“I want the truth.” The words came out in a staccato fashion.

He turned his hand over to brush his knuckles down her cheek. “I am whatever you want me to be. I can be all things if you will only close your mind to the fear.”

“Are you telling me the e-mails are true?”

“Have you ever been with a man who made you feel as alive as I do?” His thumb worried her lower lip. “Do you know of any other man who can make you come with just a flick of his finger?”

Heat splashed her cheeks, and she shoved against his chest, hoping to take him by surprise, but it was like pushing against a brick wall. “This isn’t about sex, Joquinn!” She practically screamed the words. “This is about answering my questions! How different are you? Are the e-mails true, or am I just losing my fucking mind?” Dragging her hands through her hair, she practically pled with him to deny it, to laugh it off and take her in his arms.

Instead, he tipped his head to one side and studied her a long time before replying. “Would my response make a difference in how I make you feel?”

“Of course it will! If you’ve been lying to me all along --”

“I do not lie, Ariana.”

The abruptness of his tone shook her, made her take a step back towards the bed. “A lie by omission is still a lie, Joquinn.”

He turned one hand palm up, and a small blue flame danced against his skin. “Did I not feel alive when I took you?”

She didn’t have an answer for that question. “I think you should leave.” Her breath caught in her throat. She didn’t want him to leave, but there was no other option.

“You don’t really want me to leave.” His pupils seemed to shrink even further. “I can show you the world. A world which is yours to control.”

Hysterical laughter bubbled up in Ariana’s throat. “I don’t want the world. I want a normal relationship with a normal man. That’s what I thought I had with you.” She jutted her chin toward the door. “So, please, just leave.”

“And what is normal to you, Ariana? Do I not make you feel like a woman when I touch you? Do I not hold you as a man would? Have I not shown you in every way possible how much you mean to me?”

“Why can’t you just tell me who you are ... what you are?”

“You know me, *douceur*.”

She held up one hand. “Will you stop? Just stop with the fucking French words! They don’t mean anything now. Can’t you see that? You’ve lied to me all along.”

“Perhaps you would prefer Spanish, *mi querida*?”

“This isn’t a joke, Joquinn.”

“Am I laughing?” Was it her imagination or had his voice changed, taken on a lethal edge? His hand reached out to touch her hair, and she couldn’t stop him. Didn’t want to stop him.

Shivers skated down her spine. “Are you refusing to leave? Because if you don’t, I will.”

“You should not leave until we settle this matter between us.”

“So you’re going to keep me here against my will?”

Joquinn took a step back, opening the path for Ariana. “I do not need to hold a woman against her will.”

She scooted around his body and raced for the bedroom door. It took her all of three seconds to realize that they were in *her* house. Swallowing hard, she turned around and faced him once more. “I’m not going anywhere. You are.”

He pivoted slowly. “We will talk again later, perhaps when you have had time to think about the past few months, how we’ve loved one another.”

This time, she couldn’t swallow. “We don’t have anything else to talk about.”

“So this is where it ends, then?”

The tight set of his jaw revealed his displeasure, but Ariana faced him bravely. “Unless you tell me the truth right now, yes.”

“I am a vampire. Is that what you wanted to hear?”

The words sent a shard of fear straight to her heart, and for a brief moment, Ariana thought she would faint. This couldn’t be happening. Vampires didn’t exist. Without thinking, she put one hand to her throat.

“Don’t play games, Joquinn.”

“You wanted the truth, and I just gave it to you. Do you now disbelieve me?”

“I don’t think you know the truth.” Hands clenched into fists, she glared at him. “If this is your idea of a joke, I’m not laughing. I don’t know what’s going on here, but I know I don’t want to be a part of it.”

“Do you not believe in vampires?”

Hysterical laughter bubbled up in her throat. “Do you know any sane person that does?”

Joquinn strolled toward the bedroom door. “Those I have converted are now believers.”

Her knees buckling, Ariana sank down onto the edge of the bed. “If that’s true, then why haven’t you converted me? I was an easy target.”

“You still are.” The sultry words splashed ice through her veins. “I did not, because I love you.”

A sob broke free, but before she could respond, she heard the door open, then close just as quickly.

“Damn you, Joquinn. Damn you!” As she shouted at the ceiling, tears tracked down her cheeks.

* * * * *

Inwood Hill Park, Manhattan

The night embraced him. Joquinn welcomed the darkness, needing the silence to confront his demons. Images haunted him, forever stamped in his mind.

The lights of Paris glittering over Ariana’s silky blonde hair. Slumberous violet eyes looking up at him as he lay atop her, his cock pushing into her heated softness. Traveling the world, covering it from corner to corner, in just a short amount of time, but it was time well-spent.

They’d shared much more than just a bed. Their lives had become entwined, neither wanting a day to go by without a touch, a smile, or a kiss. There had been a desperate hunger to spend as much time as possible with one another.

And now, all of that was gone.

Perhaps he should have told Ariana the truth, but he hadn't known of a way to bring it up in the conversation. Or maybe he'd known what would happen once he did.

He placed his hand over his chest, that spot where his heart used to beat until he was savagely attacked one hundred and seventy-five years ago. Joquinn still remembered it as if it had happened yesterday.

Coming from out of the darkness, the vile creature had caught him off guard, but Joquinn took back control days later. After he'd risen, it hadn't taken him long to track down his sire.

The vampire who had created him would never kill another innocent. Joquinn had taken care of that.

The leaves crunched beneath his feet, a reminder that fall had arrived. The air was crisp and cool, the scents a mixture of pine and just the hint of rain.

"Damn it, Ariana." He pressed his spine against the gnarled trunk of an old oak and searched through the darkness with night vision an owl would envy. Though he was alone, he swore he could smell her perfume, that intoxicating blend of spice and jasmine.

His hands curled into fists, and curses littered the air.

He'd broken the rules, allowed himself to get close to a human. That was the first warning he'd been given, right before he'd staked the creature who had killed him. Interacting with humans was risking the chance of exposure, opening himself up to the possibility of discovery and to vampire hunters.

So he was condemned to spend his life alone.

And this time, he'd remember the warning.

* * * * *

Ariana threw her hairbrush across the room and cursed. "Damn it! Why couldn't he have been a normal man? Why do I always have to end up in the fucked-up relationships?"

“Because you don’t have the ability to recognize the animals.”

The sound of the sultry voice had Ariana spinning around, wishing she hadn’t launched her hairbrush. It might have come in handy as a weapon.

A tall, voluptuous redhead faced her. Wearing a long white dress that skimmed the floor and accentuated her curves, the woman practically glided forward. “I can see I’ve surprised you.”

“Who the hell are you, and how did you get in here?”

White teeth gleamed in a bright smile. “Allow me to introduce myself. I’m Charon.”

“That still doesn’t tell me how you got into my house.” Ariana backed toward the door. “Never mind. I don’t think I want to know. I’ll just call the police, and you can explain it to them.”

“Please.” Charon waggled her fingers. “You are not in any danger.”

“Yeah, that’s what my last guest said before I saw his fangs.”

A scarlet-tipped nail tapped at bright pink lips. “Oh, you must mean Joquinn.” Charon waved a finger to and fro. “He’s a cagey one, for sure.” With a sigh, she positioned herself on the edge of Ariana’s bed and crossed her legs, dangling a silver sandal from her toes. “I’m so sorry about all of this, Ms. Bautiste.” At Ariana’s gasp, Charon held up one hand. “Please don’t be frightened that I know your name.” She patted Ariana’s leg. “I’m only here to help.”

“Help what?”

“We’ve been trying to catch Joquinn for years.”

Intrigued, Ariana ventured forward. “We?”

“Forgive me. I tend to forge ahead like everyone knows what I’m talking about.” She gave a cheerful laugh and leaned back against the mattress. “Now, where was I? Oh, yes. The ‘we.’ Well, I’m part of a guild of vampire hunters.”

Ariana’s breath caught in her throat. “You hunt vampires? And do what with them?”

Charon tipped her head back, causing her copper-colored hair to fall closer to the bed. Her green eyes blinked slowly. "We have to protect humans. That's why I knew where to find you. We've been watching Joquinn and realized, once he'd starting seeing you, he intended to convert you."

Ariana shivered. "Joquinn would never hurt me."

"Unfortunately, vampires always show their true colors eventually. I can't explain why Joquinn didn't hurt you. Who knows why vampires don't kill? But --" She rose with the grace of a queen. "-- I can tell you that Joquinn always kills his ... um, how shall I put this delicately? Paramours?"

Heart sinking as fear clawed at her throat, Ariana took a step backwards. She didn't want to listen to the woman's words, didn't want to believe them. Joquinn wouldn't kill her. They'd shared something special. Hadn't they?

"I know you're probably thinking what you had with Joquinn was special. He has an innate charm, which convinces women he would never harm them. In fact, that's what his last victims thought." Charon rose and walked forward, practically floating. "If you're wondering how I know, I tried to talk with them, too, but they wouldn't listen. I certainly hope you will."

Ariana couldn't get past the word "victim." She wasn't a victim and wouldn't allow herself to believe that Joquinn would come after her. He'd said he loved her. That had to mean he wouldn't hurt her ... didn't it? Or had her distrust in him now changed him? Another shiver snaked its way down her spine.

"Ah, I can see the disbelief in your eyes. Now, I know this might be difficult for you to see, but you must look at these photographs." Charon slipped two pictures into Ariana's hands. "Take a look at these, and then tell me if you still believe you're safe."

Ariana's eyes were riveted to the images, a grotesque display of bleeding necks and long, golden limbs bent at odd angles, hair matted with blood, which pooled onto the concrete beneath their heads. "Who are they?" Her voice was rusty as an unused chainsaw.

Charon tucked the pictures back into the folds of her dress, though Ariana had seen no pockets. "The last two women Joquinn slept with."

"No! Joquinn wouldn't do that. He isn't capable of doing that. This has to be some kind of trick!" Her head was spinning. Hadn't she seen and heard enough for one day ... for a lifetime? Her world had begun to tilt like an amusement park ride. Where was the sanity?

"How do you think he survives?"

Closing her eyes, Ariana pressed her palms against her temples, trying to shut out the vivid pictures Charon had waved in front of her face. But the images seemed to take on a life of their own, contorting and twisting in her mind until she saw them everywhere.

A beautiful blonde with an oval face. Joquinn standing over her, his teeth bared, dripping with blood. And then the necklace. He ripped it from her throat and walked away.

God, the necklace!

Her eyes popping open, Ariana's hand tightened around the necklace she wore. A small, heart-shaped pendant bearing Joquinn's initials hung from a chain of filigreed gold.

Shaking, Ariana dropped her hand to her side. The blonde had been wearing the exact same pendant. And Joquinn had given it to Ariana a little over a month ago. Had he been preparing her for a feast? Was she just a pawn in his deadly game?

Charon wrapped an arm around Ariana's shoulders. "Are you okay, sweetie? You don't look well."

Ariana found herself being guided toward the bed, and with a slight push, Charon forced her to sit. "This can't be happening."

"I'm so sorry, my sweet. I wish I could have gotten to you sooner, but Joquinn's best friend had me a little busy." Patting her leg, Charon sat down beside her. "He's a damned

good fighter, that one.” Her hand went to her throat. “For a few minutes, I actually thought he was going to kill me, as ludicrous as that sounds. I mean, I’m not so easily killed.” She leaned in and peered at Ariana’s face. “Take some deep breaths before you pass out.”

“None of this is making any sense. You’re not making any sense.”

“I can understand your shock, but you have to understand that I got to you as quickly as I could. I’ve been sending you those messages just to keep you on your guard until I could get here.” Her breasts heaved as she pulled in a deep breath. “There was no way I was going to lose another one, and I honestly don’t know how much longer Joquinn would have kept you ... alive, Ariana. I’m sorry -- may I call you Ariana?”

As Ariana nodded, pressing her hands against her abdomen in a fruitless effort to quell the nausea, Charon continued her speech. “Oh, honey, I know it’s a surprise, but Joquinn can’t afford to leave witnesses alive. It’s self-preservation which will make him kill.” She fluttered her hands as if uncertain what to say next. “I do believe that killing you will be harder than the others. He got closer to you than any other mortal I’ve ever seen.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?” Ariana felt faint. She just wanted the sympathetic woman to leave.

“No, it’s supposed to make you want to stand and fight. Don’t let him come after you when you’re unprotected, honey.”

“So I’ll buy some garlic and a few crosses. I should be safe enough then.”

Charon swept toward the door, but not before Ariana saw the disappointed look on her face. “Very well. I shall leave you alone for now, but hopefully one day, you’ll see what I’m talking about.” She blew a kiss in Ariana’s direction before disappearing into thin air.

Ariana flopped back against the mattress and draped an arm over her eyes. Hysterical tears leaked down her face, quickly followed by gut-wrenching sobs.

She was going crazy. That was the only way to explain the recent events. Sleeping with a vampire, having a conversation with a fairy godmother, and finding out she was now next on Joquinn's hit list all led her to believe she had spiraled off the edge of sanity.

And she had no idea how she could get back to reality.

Chapter Two

That same night, Ariana realized a moment too late that she shouldn't have taken the shortcut through the back alley, but she lived in the safest neighborhood in Manhattan. Which was precisely why she'd had no compunction about taking a walk after midnight. She'd needed the air, the darkness of the night, to restore some semblance of sanity to her cluttered mind.

Now, having walked two laps around her block to clear her head, Ariana was ready to go home. The night had grown chillier, and nothing seemed to make sense anymore.

Except for the two men following her. The soles of their shoes echoed on the pavement, stealthily, as if neither was in any hurry. Perhaps they knew something about the alley she didn't.

Adrenaline pumping, Ariana began to run, rushing headlong into the darkness, but the men moved faster. And before she could think, blink, or breathe, they both stood in front of her.

It took her less than a second to realize the two men weren't really men, after all.

* * * * *

The Palace of the Underworld

“Have you taken all the necessary precautions now that my two young friends have helped Ms. Bautiste cross over?”

Charon hated Rutger’s whiny voice, but to preserve her life, she bowed her head in a subservient manner. “But of course, my king. When Ariana awakens, she will be none the wiser.”

“I’m not talking about the girl’s knowledge.” There was more than a small measure of irritation in his voice this time.

Taking an uneasy step away from the powerful dictator, Charon bobbed her head again. “She has been protected adequately. Nothing will harm her.”

“And how long will the spell last?”

“For as long as it takes her to kill Joquinn.”

“And you really think she will be able to get close to him?”

Charon’s eyes narrowed. “She’s the only one he will allow that close.”

“And how can you be so sure she’ll accept her mission?”

Rutger’s impatience grated on Charon’s nerves, but she maintained her calm façade. “Really, Rutger, I would think by now that you would have more trust in my abilities. I assure you that I will be able to convince Ariana that she needs the abilities I can give her. Once she accepts the ‘gift’ I bestow upon her, she will become as much my puppet as I am yours.” There was a decided bite to her tone, which Rutger chose to ignore.

“And this spell of yours -- will she not know that she is changed when she awakens?”

Charon rubbed her neck. “No. Ariana will still appear human, and the spell will keep her blissfully unaware of the change. I really do believe you doubt my abilities.”

“Preventing a human from noticing her immortality is not just an easy feat. In fact, it takes more magic than most possess.” The demon inclined his head in a gesture of supremacy, as if awaiting his servant’s immediate gratitude.

“And I have you to thank for that magic, my king.” She managed to look appropriately grateful. “Ariana will move into my home, where I can watch over her, make sure she doesn’t see what she isn’t supposed to see.”

“How will she be fed, then?”

Giving a tinkling laugh, Charon turned her palms upwards. “I will make sure she receives the necessary nutrients at night. During the day, she will simply believe she has eaten. After all, we can’t have her thinking she isn’t a member of the human race anymore, can we?”

Rutger paced the small room, his flat feet creating a dull slapping noise against the stones. “What happens if she betrays you?”

“That will never happen.” She cast away the doubts tugging at her own mind.

“You seem so sure of yourself, and yet, were you not the one who told me Joquinn would never find love?”

She swallowed hard, suddenly uneasy. “He might have found it, but he didn’t keep it.”

“Yes. Yes. Well, humor me. What happens if Ariana does betray you?”

Lowering her head, Charon spoke the truth through gritted teeth. “Then I will have to kill her.”

Rutger’s eyes seemed to burn into her soul. “Then it would be the best for all of us, especially you, if she does, indeed, remain loyal.”

There was no mistaking the warning in his voice. Charon nodded and took a step backwards. “You have my assurances.”

“I’ll believe you when Joquinn lies dead at the woman’s feet.”

* * * * *

Three days later

Joquinn heard the chatter in the air and knew something had happened. He just didn't know what yet. He put the word out to his consorts that he was looking for information, but no one seemed to know anything.

Until word came of Ariana's disappearance. A gifted writer, she had acquired legions of fans who now left roses and various gifts on the porch outside her house.

Joquinn stared at the television screen, his feet planted firmly on the floor in front of him. Ariana gone? He rubbed his face with both hands before returning his gaze to the images.

Police tape surrounded her home while flashing red lights illuminated the darkness. In the background, a somber-voiced reporter provided scant information.

No word on what had happened to her. Neighbors hadn't seen anything, and her car was still parked inside her garage. So while the police stood around scratching their heads, Joquinn began a search of his own.

* * * * *

Ariana came awake with a pounding head and a dry mouth. With a groan, she pressed a hand against her forehead and cracked open one eye. Charon smiled down at her.

Blinking in surprise, Ariana tried to push herself to a sitting position, but her fairy godmother, or whatever she was, had other plans.

"No, dear. Now isn't the time to be trying to get up or move around. You've just been through hell." Charon rose gracefully and lifted a glass of water from a bedside table Ariana didn't recognize. "Here. Have some water." She lifted the back of Ariana's head and held the glass to her lips.

The liquid provided relief to her parched throat. "Where am I?" Ariana finally asked when Charon moved away.

"You're in my home, dear."

"Why did you bring me here?" Her mind a blank, Ariana demanded answers.

Charon turned with a smile. "Because I couldn't very well leave you for dead in an alley, now could I? Those guys did quite a number on you."

Ariana sucked in a breath, and pain stabbed her abdomen. "How did you find me? The last thing I remember ..." She searched her memory. The alley! Her stomach twisting into a knot, she blinked up at Charon. "Were those guys ... vampires?"

A beautiful smile graced Charon's lips. "I think Joquinn has you spooked. Not every hoodlum is a vampire, my dear. You're safe, albeit a bit worse for wear, but never fear. You'll recover just fine here with my help."

"You haven't answered me."

"About what?" The picture of pure innocence, the woman oozed grace and charm, but Ariana wasn't so sure she was buying it.

"How did you find me?"

"I have special abilities given to me by my ancestors." With a sigh, Charon walked toward her and sat down on the edge of the bed. "It's difficult to explain, really, but I guess you could call me a good witch."

Pinching the bridge of her nose between her thumb and her forefinger, Ariana nodded. "Of course you are. If there are vampires, then surely it isn't such a leap to believe that witches exist." Sarcasm dripped from her voice.

Charon chuckled and patted her leg. "I know it's hard to comprehend, my sweet, and believe me, if I hadn't lived it for the past two hundred or so years, I wouldn't believe it myself."

Two hundred years? Ariana's head swam at the thought. "Why are you doing this?" She was having a hard time believing the woman was doing this out of the kindness of her heart. No doubt, because of what happened with Joquinn, she now had trust issues.

Charon patted her hand. "Don't look so worried, Ariana. You're safe here. I'll make sure that no harm comes to you." She bounced to her feet and headed toward the bedroom door.

Leaving Ariana to wonder if she was in the frying pan or the fire.

* * * * *

"It's no use, Joquinn. We've looked everywhere for her." Devlin lifted one shoulder in a negligent shrug. "You should just leave well enough alone. Maybe she left on her own."

Joquinn shook his head in slow motion. "She didn't leave on her own. Something's happened to her."

Devlin looked at him for a long moment before replying. "Maybe what happened between the two of you affected her in a way neither one of us can understand. I mean, let's face it, pal. Finding out your lover is a vampire isn't exactly 'hey, Mom, my boyfriend wears fifteen earrings' kind of stuff."

"I know that." The words were bit out from between clenched teeth. "But Ariana is a responsible woman. She'd never just run away."

"And you know this just because you've fucked her for six months?" Devlin snorted. "Please. The most you know about her is whether or not she's good between the sheets."

Joquinn shot him a warning look before turning away. "Regardless of what you say, Dev, something is wrong. I feel it."

"Then I guess the question is, why is it so important?"

"Because it is."

Devlin came up behind Joquinn. "She's a human."

“And I’m a vampire. Thanks for the information I really didn’t need.”

“I can’t believe you fell for her.”

Joquinn barked back, “You don’t know anything about her.”

“You’re right. But I do know she’s gone, and unless you’ve got a lojack on her, you have to let her go.”

The sun had begun to rise before Joquinn realized the futility of his quest. Devlin was right. Ariana was gone, and there wasn’t a damned thing he could do about it.

* * * * *

The images assaulted her, both disturbing and erotic. Ariana tossed and turned on the double bed, kicking her legs beneath the blankets.

Dark hair and eyes. Sweat-slicked skin and a sensual mouth. She moaned in her sleep. Warm fingers caressed her breasts, lightly pinching her nipples. Waves of heat poured over her. Those same clever fingers moved below her belly button, tickling the triangle of hair between her legs.

Sexy words, questions that didn’t require answers, burned into her brain.

“Do you know what it feels like when I’m inside you? Like gliding into warm honey.”

She lifted her hips, bunching the sheet in her fists.

“When I make love to you, I never want to stop.”

Her hand slipped beneath the blankets, sliding over each breast before rubbing her stomach. That same sinfully hot voice continued to caress her.

“I love eating you, smelling your scent, tasting your cream. And the little sounds you make when I plunge my tongue into your pussy drive me wild. I’ve never been with a woman like you, Ariana, and I have a feeling I never will be again.”

She came awake with a gasp, sitting straight up in the bed. Dear Lord, she'd felt him, as if he'd been right in this bed with her. She patted the pillow next to hers to make sure it had really been a dream.

The cool spot affirmed what she already knew. Joquinn wasn't with her.

And he never would be again, though he'd sworn they'd never be apart.

Crawling from beneath the sheets, she staggered to the window and tugged open the shutters, needing the refreshing feel of the night air on her hot face. Though the hour was late, traffic was still bustling on the streets below her, and the sounds of laughter floated up to reach her.

At that moment, she wondered if she'd ever laugh again. Maybe, but certainly not as much as she had with Joquinn, especially their first night in Paris several months ago.

Hotel Plaza Athénée, a sophisticated blend of romance and luxury, and the place Joquinn had chosen to take her on their special night -- the first night they'd spent in one another's arms.

"The view is spectacular," Ariana whispered, staring at the lights surrounding the Eiffel Tower. "I can't imagine anyone wanting to leave this city."

Joquinn's arms came around her. "Then perhaps we should stay."

Laughing, she pressed back against his chest. "I wish we could, but this is all like some kind of fairy tale." She turned in his arms, wrapping hers around his neck. "Thank you for bringing me here, Joquinn. I'll never forget this."

He kissed her softly, a brief touch of his lips to hers, before he took a step back and took hold of her hands. "Come. The night is young, and you have much to see." Sweeping one hand toward the window, he indicated the sparkling sky. "If you've never seen Paris at night, you've never really seen this city."

"I've never been to Paris at all," she reminded him, still smiling. How could she stop when the day had been perfection? Joquinn was almost too good to be true, and since the day she'd stumbled on a broken piece of concrete as she walked along Charleston's Battery, she'd been caught in his embrace. Everything about him was magical, surreal, and yet so magnetic, she couldn't stop touching him.

His hand curled around her cheek. "What are you thinking, ma chérie?"

She looked up into the swirling depths of his dark eyes. "That I'm dreaming."

He returned her smile, and the beauty of his face took her breath away as it always did. "Then allow me to make your dream one of exquisite beauty."

Ariana bit down hard on her lower lip to stem the tide of tears while her hand fisted in the curtain. The night had been so magical, so perfect. They'd covered every inch of the city, or so it seemed.

Joquinn had shown her his favorite places -- around the Eiffel Tower, from the Arc de Triomphe to Concorde Square, from the Louvre to the Palais-Royal gardens and Notre Dame. They'd held hands and talked through the hours as he pointed out the sights and explained the history behind them.

And then he'd taken her back to the Eiffel Penthouse to complete the night with champagne and a bubble bath in the bathroom with its opaque glass walls.

Ariana had never felt so alive as when they'd made love beneath the heated water while the lights of the city blinked all around them. It was as if they were a part of the night, surrounded by twinkling stars.

It was that night she'd fallen in love with him.

* * * * *

"I'm going to fuck you now." He loomed over her, his cock pressed against the opening of her pussy. "Is that what you want?"

"Yes," she breathed, bucking her hips beneath him, her hands fisting in the grass beside her. "Fuck me now. Hard. Deep."

He loved the sound of her voice, the whiskey-laced tones, but it was the deep violet of her eyes which riveted his gaze. So intensely beautiful. He could watch her forever. Pulling back, he lowered his gaze to the damp hair between her legs.

"You're so beautiful." His fingers danced across her swollen flesh. "So warm and wet." One digit found her clit and Ariana whimpered.

He'd exhausted her with several orgasms before rising over her, but now, he found he wasn't ready to fuck her. Not yet. Though his cock threatened to explode, he wanted to plunge his tongue into her tight, wet pussy again.

"Joquinn, please," she begged. The words broke apart, as if it was an effort to force them past her lips.

He draped her legs over his shoulders. "Oh, I'm going to please you, all right. All night, all day." Scooting lower, he went headfirst into her sweet cream.

Joquinn sat up straight in the bed, his hair clinging damply to his forehead. With a vibrant curse, he pushed himself to his feet, leaving the sheets in a tangled mess behind him. Fucking dreams, but not really dreams. Images. Remembrances of the one time he'd taken Ariana to his park ... his home.

His bare feet slapped against the hardwood floors of his bedroom as he made his way to the window overlooking the garden. The sun was just beginning to set, and the lingering brightness stung his eyes.

Dropping the drape, Joquinn stepped back and spun around. He couldn't get her out of his head. Ariana was haunting his every waking moment.

He dragged his hands through his hair and dropped back down onto his bed. Once more, the sounds and sights returned, vivid portraits of the past.

His tongue circled her clit, testing its sweetness. Ariana's gasp nearly drove him over the edge, but he held on to his control. Hands lifting her ass, he lifted her upwards, craving her juices.

Lifting his head, he commanded, "Sit up."

Ariana squirmed beneath him. "What? What's wrong?"

"I want you on my face."

Slowly, with wide eyes, she sat up. "Wh-what?"

He lay back against the grass, crooked one finger, and beckoned her. He heard every breath she made as she climbed atop his body, straddling his face.

"Here?" Uncertainty colored her voice.

Positioning her legs, he looked up into the dark valley between her thighs. The lips glistened with cream, weeping with need. One finger tested the wetness, and her legs jerked. His thumbs parted her flesh, exposing her swollen clit. For the space of a second, he waited, feeling Ariana's impatience.

"Sit down," he whispered.

"But I ..."

"Ariana, sit down!"

Her muscles relaxed, and her pussy came to rest against his face. Her musky scent enveloped him while the warmth nearly made him come. An experimental lick made Ariana cry out.

“Joquinn!” The sound of Devlin’s impatient voice brought Joquinn out of his restless slumber.

He came to a sitting position, glaring at his friend. “What? This had better be important.”

Devlin strode back toward the bedroom door. “It is. I just picked up a scent in the wind.”

Joquinn swung his legs over the side of the bed. “Are you going to tell me, or am I going to have to guess?” He rubbed his bleary eyes, sure they were red.

“Rutger.”

The one word was enough to send a chill down Joquinn’s spine. “Fuck.”

“Yeah. That about sums it up.”

What in the hell was Rutger, one of the world’s nastiest demons, doing outside of his world -- outside of the prison that had held him for the past fifty years? And how in the hell had he gotten out?

* * * * *

“Are you feeling better, darling?” Charon sailed into the bedroom, carrying a tray laden with coffee and toast. “I thought you might want something in your stomach.”

Ariana lifted a hand to dissuade her. The thought of food made her nauseous. “No, thanks. I’m feeling okay, but just not ready to face something to eat yet.”

The beautiful blonde frowned. “You really need to get your strength back.” Before Ariana could reply, Charon continued, “I can help you if you let me.”

“By making coffee and toast?”

“Oh, much more than that, dear.” She sat down on the edge of the bed beside Ariana. “You don’t want anything like this to happen to you again, and you certainly don’t want Joquinn to come back and exact his revenge on you, do you?”

That much was true, but Ariana wasn't fully convinced Joquinn would come back. Maybe she was being too starry-eyed, but she knew he'd felt something when they were together. And remembering their many nights together, she had to believe those same feelings would prevent him from hurting her.

When Ariana didn't respond, Charon resumed the conversation in an almost irritated voice. "Are you listening to me?"

Ariana massaged her temples. "Do we really have to discuss this now?"

Fine, blonde eyebrows arched. "Do you think you have all the time in the world?"

She hoped so. "And you don't?"

"You know about Joquinn now, Ariana. He has taken great pains to disguise his identity from humans. Otherwise, he could become the hunted. So it stands to reason that Joquinn never leaves witnesses, and if you think you'll be the first, well, then you're just making yourself an easy target."

"I can't just condemn Joquinn based on a few pictures, Charon."

"Was the necklace not enough proof for you? You're wearing the very same necklace he took off of one of his victims."

"And how do I know those pictures weren't doctored for my benefit?"

As Charon's eyes flashed, for a brief moment Ariana thought she might have pushed the woman too far, but then her face softened. "You want further proof? Very well. I'll show you." Catching hold of Ariana's hand, she brought her to her feet. "Go look out the window."

Unsteady legs carried her across the carpeted floor. "What am I supposed to see?" She hesitated as one hand curled around the edge of the curtain.

"You will see the truth."

Her heart pounding, she moved the curtain aside. All she could see was darkness, but before she could protest, light broke over the ground below, the moon glistening across the

dew-laden grass. Blinking several times, Ariana held her breath as she waited, wondering what it was she was supposed to see.

“Be patient, my sweet.”

Ariana shivered as a cloaked figure emerged from a thick mist, and then she gasped. “Joquinn!” She didn’t even realize she’d cried his name until Charon came to stand beside her, placing one hand on her shoulder.

“He can’t hear you, my dear. This is what happened last night.” Her lips twisted into a smile Ariana caught out of the corner of her eye. “A replay of sorts. Though I didn’t really want you to see it, I knew this would be the best way to show you Joquinn’s true nature.”

The rapid tapping of her heart nearly drowned out Charon’s words, and all Ariana could do was focus on the scene unfolding below her.

The grass gave way to a paved street, and beneath the glow of a streetlamp, Joquinn stood, barely moving. He seemed to blend with the night until the sound of high heels clicking on concrete captured his attention.

Ariana held her breath. “Joquinn, no.” But even as she spoke, Joquinn was moving to intercept the young woman. She couldn’t hear what they were saying, but in the space of an instant, Joquinn had his arm around her as his long, sharp teeth sank deep into the woman’s jugular.

“Oh, my God.” Ariana sank to her knees, her hands covering her eyes while her entire body quaked with horror. “Oh, my God.” It had really happened. “He ... he killed her.”

Charon knelt down beside her and captured Ariana’s hand. “I’m sorry, but you had to see that. You could very well be Joquinn’s next target. And if not him, then some other vampire. You see, my dear, they’re all around us.”

How could she not believe it now? Sick with the knowledge, Ariana nodded. “If what I just saw was true --” And she didn’t dare doubt that it was. “-- there’s not a lot I can do to protect myself.”

Eyes gleaming, Charon tightened her grip on Ariana's hand. "Ah, but there is. Let me help you."

An internal sensor went off. Why would this woman want to help her? "How?"

"I can make you invincible. You would be able to protect yourself, do things beyond your wildest imagination. Even fly if you wanted to."

"And why would I want to fly, exactly?" Ariana's heart raced. What was it that Charon was offering? Immortality or some form of witchery?

"You could not only save your life but others. Now that you know vampires exist, can you really sleep at night knowing someone you care about could be their next victim?"

Now she had Ariana's full attention. "We've been safe so far."

Charon smirked. "Except for that woman you just saw. I know she wasn't part of your family, but she very well could have been."

Nausea rolled in the pit of Ariana's stomach. "So what are you proposing?"

The woman stood, her arms outstretched. "I'm offering you the chance to be free, Ariana. Free from worry, fear, all of it, and to be more powerful than you can even imagine!"

It was too easy, too much of a gift. "At what cost?"

"You will help me in my quest to rid the world of evil."

Ariana frowned. "You mean like a superwoman of some kind?"

"Almost like that, yes." Charon stood. "Well?"

The blanket dipped as Ariana shifted. "Well what? Don't I get time to think about it?" She wasn't so sure she wanted to be a superhero. A part of her just wanted to return to her simple life. Only this time, it would be without Joquinn.

"There isn't time to think, Ariana. I won't be able to stay much longer. You either take the gifts now, or I leave you to your own devices. And wish you well protecting yourself."

The woman didn't play fair. Ariana shifted on the bed and clenched her hands. "Why do you want to help me?" There was still that last niggling doubt.

"Because you will help me in the end. As much as I hate to admit it, I can't save these innocent people all by myself. Though my powers are extraordinary, they become even more powerful when they are shared."

Everything made sense, but why didn't that thought make her feel better? "I'm not sure."

Charon leaned in, pressing her face close to Ariana's. "Are you so sure Joquinn won't return to kill you?"

The woman had a point. Being able to protect herself wasn't such a bad thing. "No, I'm not."

"Then your options are limited, aren't they?"

"Yes." Ariana's voice cracked on the one word.

"Well?"

Closing her eyes, Ariana took the plunge. "I accept the gift."

"Excellent. Now just enjoy the ride."

Ariana's eyes popped open. "Will it hurt?"

The blonde look positively offended. "Of course not. My goal is to help, never to hurt. So close your eyes once more. All you will feel is my strength and power."

Nibbling her lower lip, Ariana battled with the seed of doubt nestled in her heart. "Are there others like me? I mean, other people who have your gifts?"

Charon's jaw tightened. "Unfortunately, no. Most humans haven't had the experiences you've had with a vampire and lived to tell about it." She slid her palm against Ariana's cheek. "Now, do close your eyes, my sweet. You have an exciting life ahead of you."

The doubts currently at bay, Ariana allowed her eyes to close and relinquished control to the unknown.

* * * * *

He couldn't stop thinking about her, but even as one corner of Joquinn's mind remained centered on Ariana, he had a mission. To track Rutger down and end his reign of terror once and for all.

"Hey." Devlin clamped his hand on Joquinn's shoulder. "I'm not letting you do this alone."

Joquinn gave him a grim smile. "You can't come with me. I put Rutger in that prison, and he'll come after me. If you're with me, you could be killed."

"But if I don't come, you won't have backup."

"I need you to stay here, Devlin. I won't be able to focus if I know your life could be in danger."

Devlin sneered. "In case you haven't noticed it, buddy, I'm as dead as you are."

Joquinn nodded. "But at least you're up and walking around. Rutger can end your existence permanently."

A sigh escaped Devlin's lips. "Sometimes I think that wouldn't be such a bad thing."

Joquinn's head whipped around. "Don't say things like that." The very words sent shards of pain through his heart, but he only had himself to blame.

Once Joquinn had been sired, he'd had an insatiable thirst for blood, and Devlin had made the mistake of being the first mortal to cross his path. Joquinn had begged his friend to leave, but Devlin knew something was wrong, and he'd been determined to help.

Then Joquinn had killed him, taking his life's blood without restraint. It was only through Devlin's amazing resilience and adaptability that they'd managed to remain friends once Devlin had arisen.

Joquinn didn't know if he could have been so forgiving.

He cleared his throat and headed toward the door. His hand on the knob, he cast a look at his friend over his shoulder. "Promise me you'll stay here."

With a grunt, Devlin nodded.

Still worried, Joquinn disappeared into the night, his footsteps falling soft across the forest floor.

* * * * *

He loved her. He knew it the moment he woke to find her watching him, her hand propped up on the pillow next to his head. Dusk had just crept over the city, but the dim lighting in the room couldn't hide the glow on her face.

One hand reached up to touch her cheek, and she smiled. At that exact moment, Joquinn felt as if his heart started to beat again. All these years he'd spent in a dark hell, wanting only to escape, and yet, he'd always known that freedom might mean a more torturous existence than what he now lived. And then he'd met Ariana.

"Why are you smiling?" He spoke the words on a whisper, not wanting to spoil the moment.

"Do you really have to ask that?" She leaned in to kiss him, allowing her lips to hover over his.

The scent of her skin enveloped him, but it was the warmth of her blood which beckoned him. He yearned to make her his, to cocoon her in a moment that would last for eternity, but he couldn't. Not yet. Once he told her everything, she would need time to absorb the truth, to understand his existence.

His thumb plumped her lower lip. "I suppose not."

She nipped at his chin. "Paris is a beautiful city, but I think I liked the view from the tub better than the walk."

His chest rumbled with laughter. "Then perhaps we should have the maid prepare another bath for us."

Her nose wrinkled. "I think I can fill a bathtub with water, Joquinn." She tried to climb out from beneath the sheets, but he pulled her back in, needing to feel the warmth of her body against his. "What are you doing?"

The husky tone of her voice answered the question for him. "I'd like to make love to you again."

She leaned into him, her breasts pressing against his chest. "After last night and this morning, you still have the strength?"

His hands spanned her waist and lifted her on top of his body. "Amazingly, yes."

Her pupils dilated. "Joquinn, what are we doing? We barely know each other." Her hands framed his face even as she said the words.

"I believe it's called falling in love, Ariana."

She sucked in a sharp breath. "Weren't you just listening when I said we barely know each other?"

He shifted his hips, allowing her to feel the hardness of his erection. "But we have all the time in the world to learn what we need to know and ..." Another move of his hips had her gasping. "... I believe we shall enjoy the journey."

* * * * *

Ariana awoke to a strange sensation flooding her body, like warm liquid flowing through her veins. She opened her eyes and saw Charon's smiling face. "What's happened?" Her voice sounded as rusty as an unoiled hinge.

The smile broadened. "You have been given a great gift, my dear, one I'm sure you will use with the utmost care." She held out her hand and Ariana took it. "From here on, your life will never be the same, but never again will you fall prey to a vampire's trap."

The words instilled a small measure of reassurance, but worry still creased Ariana's brow. "And how do I use this gift?"

Charon pulled her to her feet. "You do not have to use it. It resides within you. Whatever you think shall be done. You are stronger than any mere mortal now, faster, more cunning. No vampire can overtake you, and think of how many lives you can save."

Ariana's eyes squinted. "Do you have the same gifts?"

The sorceress gave her a benign smile. "But of course. How do you think I could pass them along to you?"

"I suppose I should have asked this question before, but why exactly do you need me if you have all of this power?"

The woman's face closed. "Because the vampires can recognize my scent. They know me well, and since I am not mortal, I cannot hide my presence from them. But I've provided you with more than enough ammunition to keep you safe. The vampires will never know you're coming." Charon rested a hand on her shoulder. "Now, my dear, shall we get to work?"

* * * * *

Impatience drove Devlin deeper into the forest, searching for his friend. Joquinn had left hours ago, and now Devlin couldn't pick up his scent. Clouds obliterated the moon as Devlin stared up into the sky. "Where are you, my friend?"

"Are you looking for Joquinn?"

The quiet, feminine voice brought him spinning around. "Ariana? Joquinn has been looking for you for days." He didn't mention Joquinn's other mission. "Well, he'll be glad to see you. I'm sure you can work things out when he gets back. He should be back any moment now."

Ariana's nostrils flared, and her eyes began to glow.

Devlin went on guard, though he didn't really know why. Ariana was a human, one Joquinn had declared to be off-limits. It was a rare vampire who would go against Joquinn's wishes.

"Are you all right?" Devlin saw her body stiffen. "Has someone hurt you?"

"You're one of them, aren't you?"

His brow furrowed. "One of what?"

"Don't play games with me."

"You'll have to forgive me, but I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

Two seconds later, Ariana's hand fisted in his hair, dragging his head almost to the ground. He yelped and caught hold of her wrist, attempting to yank her arm away. But her strength was amazing, equal or perhaps even surpassing his.

"Now, I'll ask you again, and this time, I'll expect a straight answer."

"Then give me a straight goddamn question," Devlin barked.

Ariana stepped on his foot, using her leverage to maintain control over his body. "Are you a vampire?"

His face cleared. "Oh, that. Well, I didn't figure Joquinn would have told you, but yeah. But you don't have to worry. He's made it quite clear you're not to be touched. No vampire within a five-thousand-mile radius would touch you unless he wanted to be staked."

Her eyes clouded, and Devlin didn't even see the sharply pointed wood until it stuck out from the center of his chest.

He'd always imagined his final death would be painful, but instead, it was like slipping away into the night, fading into nothingness. He fell to the ground, closing his eyes.

And reached for peace.

* * * * *

Joquinn knew something had gone just horribly wrong.

He'd spent the last four futile hours searching for Rutger until instincts told him to go home. Now, he raced through the forest with unnatural speed. The animals of the forest leapt out of his way, clearing the path as he barreled over their terrain.

Coming through a dense copse of trees, Joquinn skidded to a stop. "Devlin. No!" He shot forward and knelt at his friend's side. His hand closed around the stake and yanked it from Devlin's chest, though he knew he was too late.

"Devlin, who did this to you? Who?" He cradled his friend's head against his shoulder.

And then he caught a scent on the air. One he recognized. Remembered. It would haunt his dreams forever.

"Ariana?" As he spoke her name aloud, he lowered Devlin's head to the ground. She'd done this! He didn't know how, but he was as certain as Devlin was dead that Ariana had taken his friend's life.

His hands clenched into fists at his side. As much as the next words pained him to say, he still spoke them aloud. "You'll pay for this, Ariana. No matter how long it takes, you will pay."

With tears leaking down his cheeks, he bowed his head over Devlin's body. "May your soul rest in peace, my friend, and may you find the happiness that eluded you in these mortal realms. I will avenge your death. This I swear on my own immortality."

Standing up, Joquinn swiped his hands across his cheeks. He couldn't have known Ariana would come after Devlin, but then, maybe she hadn't. Maybe Devlin had just been an easy target. Just as he had been when Joquinn had killed him.

He shuddered at the thought. "Never doubt, *mon ami*, that I will exact vengeance on the one who has forever taken away your existence."

Chapter Three

Ariana sensed him before he arrived back at her apartment. She'd been waiting for him. And he hadn't disappointed her. The stake resting against her palm had been whittled to a sharp point. It felt unnatural, but Charon had assured her she would get used to it. Killing Devlin had been easier than she'd expected. That scared her.

Sweat pooled between her breasts, a grim reminder of the man she was about to face and her own disillusionment. The sound of his footsteps raised the hair on her arms, and she turned slowly.

Dressed all in black, he looked like he'd walked off the pages of a men's magazine, stylish and sexy, but his eyes reflected pure fury. For a brief moment, Ariana wondered if she could fulfill the task ahead of her.

Her mind flashed back to the nights spent aboard Joquinn's yacht en route to the Bahamas, the sunrises watched from the darkened windows of the hotel room on Grand Cayman and the crisp blue waters where they'd snorkeled at night.

"Ariana." He spoke her name like a caress, but there was an element of steel beneath the one word.

She drew in a deep breath and squared her shoulders. "Joquinn."

“I saw your handiwork.”

A shiver went down her spine. “Are you talking about the vampire?” Refusing to allow the glitter in his eyes to scare her, she stared straight back at him. “You never told me that all of your friends were vampires, too. Oh, wait.” One fingernail tapped her cheek. “You didn’t even tell me that you were one.”

“You just made a very bad enemy.”

The threat in his voice incited her anger. “I’ve changed a bit since we last saw one another. So you might want to carefully consider your words.” She raised the stake to allow him to see it. “As you’ve seen, this can end any vampire’s life.”

His jaw clenched, and he took a step forward. Only the cross in Ariana’s other hand stopped him. “Resorting to television tricks?” He sneered.

“You should have told me.”

“Why? So we could have missed the nights we had together? I treated you like gold. Did you really think I would have hurt you?”

A lump formed in her throat. “And what about now? Will you hurt me now?”

“You are no longer my lover, and you killed my best friend.”

“Just as I’ll kill you.”

His eyes narrowed. “I look forward to our next confrontation, then.”

She took a step toward him. “What’s wrong with now?”

Joquinn’s face closed in pure fury. “I have a friend to bury.” He didn’t hang around for her response.

Ariana had never seen him move so fast. She walked to the window through which he’d disappeared. The stars in the sky winked down at her, and the air was fresh and clean. But she could still smell him.

Her fingers curled around the window ledge while her heart pounded in her chest. The look in his eyes would forever remain in her mind. That cold, heartless glimmer, a warning ... or more of a promise.

She didn't doubt he'd come for her again. So she had to be ready, but the thought of killing him left a vile taste in her mouth.

Having spent six months with him, she'd grown to care for him. No, it was much more than that. She'd fallen in love.

His arms went around her waist, pulling her back against his chest. A warm tongue licked her cheek, and Ariana shivered.

"I missed you," he whispered.

She didn't ask where he'd been. It was more important that he was with her again. Each time he came to her, she never wanted him to leave. He was in her soul now, a part of her.

Her hands covered his. "I missed you, too."

"But I'm here now." The purr of his voice washed over her, a heady combination of desire and heat.

"Where do you go when you leave me?"

She had to have imagined the sudden stiffness of his body behind hers. "As I've told you before, ma petite, sometimes, I require the night air to clear my mind."

"You need to clear your mind even when you've been with me?"

"Yes."

The softly spoken answer surprised her and irritated her just a little. "Thanks for the compliment."

“Ariana, if I did not leave you now and again, I would never regain the strength I need to love you as I do each night.” His fingers tiptoed down her neck. “Being with you is so powerful, it’s almost overwhelming. I do not wish to frighten you with my feelings.”

Her arms lifted and cupped his head, drawing his head lower. “You could never frighten me, Joquinn. I feel the safest when I am with you.”

“That is good to hear.” Fingers glided down the side of her silk skirt. “Are you wearing panties?”

Heat shot from the core of her pussy up to the back of her neck. “No.” She knew how hot her answer would make him. In an instant, his cock pressed against her ass.

His lips nuzzled the back of her neck. “Would you like me to eat you?”

Her legs went weak. God, how could he read her mind? Before he’d arrived, she’d been thinking about him, about the way his tongue would caress her clit.

She could only manage a shaky nod.

“Tell me how.” His hands slipped beneath her short summer sweater, palms splayed across her abdomen.

“You know how.”

He cupped her breasts, drawing her even closer. Her peaked nipples enticed his fingers, and he tweaked the hard points. “Do you want to lie down on the bed? Or ...” His cock bumped against her. “... do you want to sit on my face?”

Her breath caught in her throat. It was difficult to breathe. One of his hands drew her skirt up the back of her legs, over her ass. She moaned and dipped her head forward. The warmth of his palm stroked the round globes.

“I want to sit on your face,” she finally managed to say.

“You read my mind.” His voice, so sensually husky, nearly made her come. The man was pure sex. A simple touch could make her pussy quiver with need, and the caress of his tongue between her legs never failed to grip her with a raging climax.

If eating pussy was an Olympic sport, Joquinn would take the gold. He always told her it was because he knew what a woman wanted.

“Are you still with me?” he whispered in her ear, taking hold of her arms to guide her toward the bed.

“Where else would I be?”

His chuckle made her shake. She wanted to push him down on the bed and push her pussy into his face. In a matter of seconds, she’d come. There’d be no stopping her. Not that she wanted to stop.

Ariana didn’t want to remember each time they’d made love, but the scrolling images wouldn’t go away. Her knuckles whitened on the ledge, and her eyes closed.

“Come back to me, Joquinn.” The memory was clear and vivid, taking her back to that long night.

Joquinn lay back on the bed. “Come to me.”

On her hands and knees, she crawled up his body, wiggling her hips as she traveled over his crotch. “You’re so hard already. Are you sure you’re going to be able to keep yourself under control?”

His hands settled on her ass, massaging the skin with naughty fingers. Ariana moaned and slid upwards, adjusting her knees on either side of his face.

“I love it when you don’t wear panties.” He ran one finger down her slit before bringing it to his mouth. “Mmmmm. You taste like sweet cream.”

His hot breath made her wetter, and she lowered herself onto his face. “Eat me, Joquinn. I want to feel your tongue.”

“With pleasure,” he murmured before his tongue dipped between the slick lips of her pussy. With a deftness born of practice, he flicked her clit, circling and stroking while Ariana rocked back and forth.

“Oh, yes. Oh, yes,” she moaned, her hands clawing at the headboard. “God, that feels good.”

His teeth nibbled the damp flesh, and Ariana bucked with a whimper.

Joquinn stared at the ceiling of the suite he kept reserved at the Buckingham Hotel in New York. He hadn't expected to need to use the room again, not for a very long time anyway. He'd spent every night for the past six months with Ariana.

Those memories caused his cock to grow harder with each passing second. God, how he'd loved eating her. She'd tasted like sweet honey. The pink lips, swollen clit, and musky scent had always enticed him.

He slung one arm over his eyes though he knew sleep wouldn't come. It was night. He should be outside, absorbing the darkness. Instead, he couldn't stop thinking about Ariana, despite the fact that she'd killed his best friend. What was it about this one woman that made him crazy?

She got under his skin, and now he would have to kill her.

Life just kept biting him in the ass.

He closed his eyes and welcomed the vivid images of the past.

She rode his face fast and hard, grinding her clit against his tongue. Her juices flowed over his taste buds while his cock pounded painfully. He could fuck her right now, slam into her so hard she'd cry out from the sheer pleasure of it, but he didn't want to stop eating her.

Working his fingers between her ass cheeks, he shoved his tongue deep into her pussy, lapping at the slick walls like a thirsty man. Her moans above him drove him wild, and when she came, she clenched her legs tightly around his face.

"Fuck me now, Joquinn."

The husky tones of her voice caused his cock to jump. "Not yet, baby. Not yet."

She made an irritated sound of protest.

He pushed at her thighs. "Open wide, honey. I'm still a hungry man."

Obediently, her legs parted, and she leaned forward, pushing her ass into the air. The position gave him the perfect opening, and as the cream dripped onto his face, he finger-fucked her ass. Animal sounds broke from his throat. He'd never been so hot. So hard.

Ariana came again with a wild scream, sinking lower onto his face.

"That's it, baby. That's it." He gripped her hips and dragged her lower. "Get on your knees." Positioning her on her hands and knees, he ran his cock between the globes of her ass.

She dropped her elbows to the mattress, and Joquinn took quick advantage. His fingers stretched her pussy, almost driving his entire hand into the opening.

Ariana bucked and shoved back against his arm. "God, yes. Just like that. You know what to do."

He withdrew his hand and guided his cock into place. "I know exactly what to do." Fingers biting into her hips, he rammed into her, driving his hard shaft deep into her sweet cream.

Ariana tugged the blankets down on the bed, exhausted but unable to sleep. Charon had just now excused herself, leaving her alone with her thoughts. Climbing between the sheets, she slid her nude body onto the mattress with a sigh of relief. Her pussy quivered as

she remembered one of the most powerful nights of her life -- the first time she'd ever made love with Joquinn.

God, he was in so deep. She felt him everywhere. The thickness of his cock stroked the walls of her pussy, rubbing the most sensitive spot. Ariana felt another scream bubbling up in the back of her throat.

"Faster. Harder."

Joquinn obeyed the command, his fingers biting into her hips. Grunting, he pumped into her.

He touched every sense. The growling noises filtered to her ears. His scent surrounded her, an enticing blend of sweat and male heat. Her fingers fisted in the comforter as the pressure built inside.

She felt him begin to jerk, but her own orgasm hit first, and she released a wild, carnal yell.

Joquinn lifted her legs, pressing her further down into the mattress, thrusting in and out with furious strokes until he came with several guttural groans. After staccato bursts of strokes, he finally sank down on top of her back.

Ariana's arms gave way and she collapsed.

Joquinn's hand curled around his cock, beginning slow strokes. His mind still gave him the perfect picture of Ariana's face. Blonde hair flowing over her shoulders. Violet eyes and full, moist lips. Even now, he could remember them closing over his shaft, sliding up and down.

And now that she'd discovered his secret, he'd never have her lips again.

Never was a very long time.

Two years later, Manhattan 2003

Shoulders hunched, Ariana rested her palms against her knees, breathing hard. It had been another clean kill. The vampire lay at her feet like a fallen trophy, and she felt nothing but emptiness, this strange, almost surreal feeling.

Straightening, she tugged her black shirt down over her exposed stomach and allowed the breeze to caress her face. She'd lost count of the number of vampires she'd exterminated over the past three years, and maybe that was a good thing.

"Excellent, my dear." Charon's voice floated down from overhead seconds before her tiny feet, encased in gold-rimmed sandals, touched the dirt. "You have refined your skills and exceeded my wildest dreams for you!"

Ariana wondered why she didn't feel as pleased as her benefactress did. Rolling the kinks from her muscles, she retrieved the stake from the vampire's heart and turned away. "If you'll excuse me, Charon, I'm exhausted."

"Of course you are. Let me make you some tea, and then you can take a nice long rest." She fell into step beside Ariana.

"No! I'd rather be alone." Without giving Charon time to object, Ariana picked up the pace, her feet literally flying over the soft earth, heart pounding in her chest.

She'd never make Charon understand how she felt after a kill because she couldn't understand it herself. She was supposed to be doing the world a favor, ridding it of the hideous creatures who preyed on the unsuspecting, but each time she staked another vampire, she felt a little of herself die inside.

No, Charon would never understand. Though Ariana's skills were honed to an artistic perfection, she couldn't shake the nagging feeling, even after all of these years, that something was wrong with her life.

Chapter Four

Manhattan 2006

She caught his scent on the air and smiled. Ariana wouldn't have difficulty tracking him with this wind. Just like all the other animals she'd trapped over the years, she would catch this one. But this kill -- her smile broadened -- this kill she'd wanted for five long years. And her skills were honed and ready.

A small flicker of uncertainty made her hands tremble, but she quickly pushed it to the back of her mind. She wouldn't allow nerves to get to her now.

Joquinn. He'd outlived most of the animals in his sect and had even managed to do so with the utmost dignity. But tonight, that would change. Judgment Day had arrived.

He'd spent the past few years tormenting her, driving her nearly mad with the roses he left at her doorstep, the scented parchment paper on her pillow, and the whispers late at night ... promises of retribution. And yet, he hadn't touched her, had not made a move to fulfill his vow of revenge.

Well, now she'd had enough. She wouldn't take anymore of the taunts or the late nights wondering if this was going to be the night he would come for her. He'd haunted her

mornings and her days, making her remember each moment she'd spent with him, but after tonight, that would change.

Her spine tingled at the mere thought. She would be the one to snuff out his life, to rid the world of his tainted existence, and even as the thought solidified in her mind, she shivered. Her memories crowded her, dragging her back into a world she didn't want to recall.

The long, passionate nights lying skin to skin with Joquinn, the heated embraces and naughty whispers. She closed her eyes and tried to shut out the images. She didn't want to remember anything good about him. The time she'd spent in his arms was long before she'd known what he was.

Joquinn cared little for the mere mortals he killed. As quickly as he captured his prey, he moved on to the next kill, drinking his fill of his victim's blood. She'd heard tales of his exploits in the past few years, but every attempt she'd made to confront him ended in frustration. He was too quick, too cunning.

But he'd left an invitation for her tonight, and this would be the final confrontation.

Ariana shuddered, her chest heaving. She knew him all too well, and though she tried to shut out the memories, they were powerful forces, pushing past the barriers of restraint until the images rained down on her. God, how she'd loved him, and knowing her final mission only served to create dread in the pit of her stomach.

Joquinn. She wanted to hate him, but her heart wouldn't allow it.

* * * * *

Inwood Hill Park, Manhattan

Joquinn circled the base of the oak, his shoulder bumping against the trunk. What could possibly be taking the woman so long? He checked his watch again. Just after

midnight. He'd waited for two hours now. And he'd continue to wait. He wouldn't want to disappoint Ariana. After all, she'd been searching for him for so long, patiently tracking him, following the clues he left behind like a trail of breadcrumbs. And there was no way in hell she'd turn down the invitation he'd left her this time.

He'd tired of the games and, tonight, on the anniversary of the night they'd met, he wanted it to be over. But even the thought of killing Ariana swept a wave of nausea through the pit of his stomach, and usually it took a lot to make a vampire nauseated.

His nostrils flared as her scent washed over him. She drew closer, and his cock hardened in response. He remembered every inch of her luscious curves, the fire in her eyes, and the wild, wanton way her body cleaved to his.

She hadn't known what he was then, and he hadn't wanted to tell her. Having her in his arms, being able to taste the sweetness of her pussy and feel the tightness of her muscles as they clenched around his cock, was more important to him at the time than sharing the knowledge of what he was.

But though a five years had passed, he remembered all too well the day she'd discovered the truth for herself. He'd seen the loathing in her eyes and known then that their time together was over. It would never be the same. Ariana had ensured that the moment she'd staked Devlin. Joquinn had bided his time, enjoying the cat-and-mouse game he played with her, but, in a way, dreading each glimpse of her satiny skin, her gorgeous hair now swinging low against the indentation in her spine.

"Dammit, Ariana, why couldn't you have left well enough alone?" His fist punched the trunk of the tree, stinging his knuckles, but as he watched the scraped skin, it healed, leaving no trace of the injury behind.

Such was his curse. He's spent almost two centuries as a vampire, and in the end, it had cost him the one woman he would always love as well as his best friend. No matter how

much he'd tried to forget Ariana, he couldn't. Now, he realized he didn't really want to forget. Nor could he hate her like he'd intended the last time he'd stood face to face with her.

Of course, he'd never meant to leave her alive that time, but the sight of her pale skin and wide eyes had given him that slight moment of hesitation, which extinguished his anger. Instead, he'd made the decision to content himself with ensuring her misery, driving away each and every potential mate who dared to grace the steps of her door until she died a lonely, old woman.

Only, there'd been no men, at least none that he'd seen. And what was worse, there were times he was sure Ariana was standing right next to him, taunting him. Occasionally, when the wind would shift, he would catch her scent. It hadn't taken him long to figure out that sorcery was involved. Perhaps she'd turned to the black arts. It mattered not. Because of Ariana, his life had changed. She'd changed him.

He could have gone on with his existence, never seeking her out, putting aside the powerful love and mind-numbing orgasms he'd found in Ariana's arms, if only she hadn't taken the life of his best friend.

Joquinn and Devlin had been friends since early childhood, and though Devlin had had every right to abhor Joquinn after his siring, instead the younger man had been determined to retain their friendship.

For nearly the next two hundred years, Devlin had learned from Joquinn, taking in the little knowledge that had kept him alive for so long, and what Joquinn didn't know, they'd learned together, surviving wars and vampire hunters. Neither had imagined Devlin's life would end at the hands of a woman who knew little about vampires. But then, it only took a stake and opportunity.

"As I promised you, Devlin, I will avenge your death. Never doubt that."

Life played its cruel tricks, as the circle of death would be complete tonight when he killed Ariana.

* * * * *

In the Underworld

“Can you trust her?” Rutger’s breaths came out harsh sounds.

Charon almost winced as the insolent question reached out to her from the darkness in that eerie, scratchy voice she hated. “I created her, didn’t I?”

“That doesn’t answer my question.” This time the voice held a warning that made the centuries-old demoness shiver.

“I have trained Ariana well. She will do as she has been instructed.” Her knee-high boots crunched over the glowing coals as she approached the blood-red dais. Bowing low to indicate her subservience, she waited for her master to give her permission to rise.

“Stand.” Rutger snapped his fingers to add to the command.

Charon straightened, thrusting her shoulders back proudly to face the demon who controlled her life, her very soul. She’d learned long ago not to wince at his grotesque appearance.

With jowls that hung down to his chin, bloodshot eyes as round as marbles, and a leathery hide the color of dried mud, Rutger was hideous to behold. But those who served him learned quickly to hide their abhorrence or risk his wrath.

Only one had dared to ever defy this demon. Joquinn. The very reason why Rutger demanded his death. He’d been bested by a vampire, thrown into a hellish prison in his own world -- a world he was supposed to control -- and left alone. Charon hadn’t asked how he’d escaped the prison several years later, but she suspected it had much to do with a deal he’d made with a universal demon.

“You have not answered me.”

The snap of Rutger's voice snatched her from the past. "Do not worry, Master. I will watch every move she makes, and should she fail me, I will eliminate not only the vampire, but her as well." She spared him a benign smile, seeking to reassure him, but wanting his permission to leave even more.

The demon roared his approval, his lengthy canines gleaming in the light of the glowing fire. "You do realize what will happen if you disappoint me, don't you, Charon?"

She swallowed her fear, not wanting to consider that possibility.

"You seem disturbed." His voice rumbled over her skin like the glide of a rusty chain.

Drawing in a deep breath, Charon gave him the reply he sought. "Failure is not an option."

"Good answer." He tapped his talons against the concrete arms of his chair. "Good answer, indeed. I have trained you well, Charon." He gave her a fatherly smile that almost made her shudder. "You have always made me proud."

"That is my greatest desire," she lied with a quick flash of her teeth.

His chin jutted toward the double doors behind her. "Be gone with you, then. I will await your report."

She bowed again and backed toward the door, relief washing over her when she felt the fresh air of freedom on her face. Her jaw tightening, she turned and marched toward the opposite end of the tunnel. She hadn't been lying. Failure was not an option.

Her own life depended on it.

Chapter Five

Ariana increased her pace over the wet leaves, and as the musty scent of the forest guided her, she advanced deeper into the shroud of trees, her muscles tensed. Her every sense was attuned to the night, waiting for that one little twinge that would alert her to Joquinn's presence.

Another step, and the tingles began, climbing up her spine and settling around her shoulders like a thick fog. Trepidation mixed with anticipation, and she slowed to a stroll, her eyes wide and alert.

It was only a matter of time now.

An owl hooted, calling to its mate. Ariana held out one arm, and vicious talons curved around her flesh. She petted the bird softly, and the sharp beak leaned in dangerously close to her lips. But she only laughed and nuzzled against the softness of the feathers. "Where is he, my friend? He is close by. I smell him." The hairs rose on the back of her neck. "I feel him." *L'homme et pourtant le vampire*. She had more than a few surprises in store for Joquinn.

She hadn't wasted the time that had passed. Learning his language, his lifestyle, and the ways of his people had given her the upper hand, one she wouldn't relinquish easily.

The owl's wide, unblinking eyes held her gaze, and Ariana smiled. "No, I don't imagine you'd want to share that information even if you did know, would you? He might make a snack out of you."

She tossed her arm, and the owl took to the air, riding high on a gust of wind. She allowed herself the luxury of watching the magnificent bird soar over the treetops before returning her attention back to her goal.

"Now, if I were a vampire, where would I be hiding?" She tapped one short nail against her chin. "Correction. If I were a vampire in fear for my life, where would I be hiding?"

"You might want to try one of the local bars. I hear they're packed with creatures claiming to be undead."

Ariana didn't turn, although the sexy voice struck a discordant note in the center of her chest. She knew to whom it belonged. She saw the face every night in her dreams. Eyes the color of obsidian, hair as dark as a raven's wing, and a smile that could charm his way into the most frigid woman's bed. She knew that all too well.

Her hand curving around the handle of the honed stake, she strove for calm, a degree of serenity she didn't feel. "Joquinn. *Nous rencontrons encore.*" She wouldn't allow herself to think of all those heated nights they'd spent together in her bed, but as the rustling behind her intensified, her blood pounded in her veins.

A branch crunched beneath his feet as Joquinn came into her line of vision. Good God, he was still as beautiful as the last day she'd seen him. Breathtaking.

"Yes, indeed, we do meet again. Your French is flawless. You've been studying."

"I've been doing a lot of things."

He inclined his head. "Some lessons you haven't learned very well. Hasn't anyone ever told you that looking for a vampire in the middle of the night isn't particularly smart?" Joquinn's voice carried a slight hint of amusement, but any moment, that humor could

change. Charon had warned her that he wasn't a vampire to be trusted under any circumstances.

Ariana felt his hand capture a lock of her hair and twist it around his finger. He was standing close enough for her to feel the warmth emanating from his body, and every nerve within her came alive.

She pivoted slowly, her gaze seeking his face. His eyes glittered like diamonds amidst a bed of coal, and she clung determinedly to her resolve. But the sight of him made it difficult. He was simply amazing to look upon, and knowing she was going to sink a stake into his black heart made her hands shake. But she couldn't allow the shame of destroying such male perfection to color her mission. "You're looking well."

His hand fell to his side, releasing her hair as one side of his mouth tilted upwards into a smile, devastating in its impact. "I could say the same of you."

The air snapped with electricity, charged with both sexual tension and hate. Her nipples hardened, her cotton shirt chafing the aching tips. As Joquinn's eyes raked over her, she read the desire within, the hunger she knew too well.

"I've missed you."

The admission made her control slip. No! She couldn't allow herself to feel anything beyond hatred. He would not get the best of her, no matter how much charm he used. She smiled and took a backward step, needing more distance between the two of them. She didn't need to guess that the vampire was on his guard, ready to pounce should she let her defenses down.

"I doubt that." She offered the statement with a wry smile.

"You haven't missed me?"

"I've been busy."

He inclined his head. "Sorcery certainly takes a lot out of you."

"Don't you think I deserved something for the time I spent with you?"

His lips curved into a sneer. "So you admit it, then." His teeth flashed in the darkness. "You really shouldn't play around with things you don't understand, Ariana."

"I'm sure that's supposed to frighten me." The sweetness of her tone belied her growing irritation.

With a gesture of supreme mockery, Joquinn bowed low and flashed her a wicked smile as he straightened. "You should be careful. Accepting presents from strangers can be dangerous."

He was deliberately goading her, taunting her, but she wouldn't give him the pleasure of seeing he was getting under her skin. "I don't recall telling you a stranger had given me anything, Joquinn."

"I gave you gifts once, Ariana. Do you remember them?"

The twist on the subject caused a lump to lodge in her throat. How could she forget endless nights in Paris, hiking in the Himalayas, and making love while Niagara Falls provided the background music? In six months, Joquinn had taken her everywhere, given her everything, and had she allowed him, he would have given her a different kind of immortality, a life knit to the night.

His gaze scorched her as he awaited her answer, but she wouldn't give him the pleasure of knowing he'd pierced her heart. Instead, she allowed herself the luxury of a complete head-to-toe scan, hoping to put him on the defensive.

Joquinn cleaned up well. Even in the everyday garb of jeans and black knit shirt, he presented the perfect picture of nineteenth-century elegance and modern-day casual. He still held the air of old-world charm and grace. Now that she knew what he was, how long he'd lived, she could easily imagine him sitting in front of a hearth inside a stone castle, one hand curved around a tankard of ale or wearing a dark cape while his black eyes searched the darkness.

The scene sifted through her mind, tangling with erotic images of a bearskin rug and their naked bodies tangled together in front of a roaring fire. Her legs would open to welcome the thrust of his cock and ...

Realizing she'd drifted off into dreams that served no purpose, Ariana blinked twice and found him staring at her, a mocking smile curving those lips that could do unspeakable things to a woman's peace of mind.

Her body hummed, and she shook her head to clear her thoughts. "It won't work, you know."

"What won't work?" He played innocent well for a man accustomed to breakfasting on the blood of his victims.

"You're trying to charm me again."

One eyebrow lifted and added to the mockery. "Am I?" He shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans, and Ariana couldn't help but notice the way the denim material hugged his crotch. Even now his cock was hard, pushing against his zipper, and the knowledge that she could create that kind of powerful reaction in an immortal like Joquinn empowered her.

She cursed below her breath at the thought. She couldn't let him get to her. "Enough talking." She didn't want to think about what she could do to Joquinn's body or what he could do to hers. She needed to focus on her mission. Withdrawing the deadly spike from the back waistband of her jeans, she took a step forward. "I think I've been very patient with you, given you plenty of time to move on, and yet you refused to leave Manhattan. Why is that?"

"I thought you said we'd had enough talking. And Manhattan is my home."

"Even though you know you're a target for every raving lunatic wielding a stake?"

One eyebrow shot upward. "Does that include you?"

Dammit, the man -- if he could, indeed, be called that -- could drive her over the edge and into sweet oblivion. The last thought penetrated her brain like the thrust of a traitor's

sword. Gritting her teeth, she focused on the stake. "I've been waiting for this for a long time."

Joquinn grinned. "Not as long as I have."

Momentarily caught off guard, she faltered. "You've been waiting to die?"

He laughed good-naturedly, and Ariana regretted that she hadn't known him as a man instead of just thinking of him as such. She wondered what he had been like before he'd become this ... this vile creature he now was.

"I have chosen to allow you to live, and the only reason we're meeting face to face now is because I sent you the invitation. I have a debt to repay, Ariana."

She liked the way he said her name, husky and warm, in spite of the intention behind the word. Perspiration coated her upper lip. Suddenly nervous, she felt the stake slip a notch. "I'm not interested in your debts, Joquinn. I'm only interested in ending this here. Tonight. You won't escape me again." So why wasn't she moving forward? Her feet felt frozen to the ground, unwilling to obey her commands.

He took a step closer to her and held his arms wide. "Well?"

The nervousness intensified. "Well what?"

He tapped his chest. "Kill me, then. I'm waiting."

She heard her own breath, battling with the whisper of the wind. "Don't be a martyr." Her palms began to sweat. He laughed again, and the sound stirred something within her. Feelings, possibly? She squared her shoulders. "You think that by dying nobly, you will be remembered as a hero to your people? I hate to disillusion you, Joquinn, but vampires are a notably ignoble lot."

All humor faded from his face, and Ariana watched the changes taking place within the darkness of his eyes. She knew the vampire's abilities, but she could match his strength, his agility. Charon had not been lax when gifting her with the powers she needed.

It had taken Ariana quite some time to come to terms with Charon's belief that Ariana was in danger -- that the vampires had to be stopped. But once she had accepted it, she'd embraced it fully. At her hands, the vampire population had greatly diminished.

"I have given you the opening you require, but make no mistake, Ariana. It will be the only opportunity you have to destroy me. If you fail, you will become my trophy, a curvaceous statue reminding other vampires that a true hero does not exist." He again bowed low at the waist, one hand sweeping out in a courtly gesture. "Vampires have existed since the dawn of time, my sweet, and when your life has faded to dust, we will still exist. 'Tis both our blessing and our curse."

"Have you not noticed that there are less of you in the city, then?" The taunt struck home.

Joquinn's shoulders tensed. "Yes, you've been busy."

"And once you're gone, the rest of your kin will be easy prey."

"And that's what they are to you ... prey. Disgusting creatures that don't deserve to live."

"You aren't alive!" she practically screamed.

"Then make it so!" he shouted back.

Ariana lunged forward, but the stake missed its mark by several inches. She straightened and stared at her hand. The night stilled, and the creatures of the night scurried for cover. She opened her hand, and the sharpened piece of wood tumbled to the ground. It lay there at her feet like many other useless branches of the forest.

She never missed, but it was like something unnatural was guiding her hand and had forced it to one side ... and away from Joquinn's heart.

"I-I don't understand what happened."

"You can't kill me," he whispered, the deep undertones of his voice warning Ariana that he spoke the truth.

She clenched her hand behind her back. "Why?"

He walked closer, and Ariana saw the gleam in his eyes. It didn't matter to her that she would greet death soon. She'd known it would arrive eventually and thought it apropos that she would die by a vampire's bite.

Joquinn's touch surprised her by its gentleness. He brushed a curl away from her cheek and slid his fingertips to a spot just beneath her chin. He tipped her face up to see her eyes. "Only you can answer that."

"I will not live as a vampire," she announced in a haughty voice designed to let him know she meant business.

He tucked that same strand of hair behind her ear. "And what makes you think my intention was to allow you to live at all?" He licked her cheek, leaving behind a warm swath of wetness. "Though now that you mention it, I do think tonight is a perfect night for rebirth, don't you, Ariana? It's our five-year anniversary, or have you forgotten?" His arms formed bands of steel around her waist as he dragged her close. He didn't give her a chance to respond before he continued. "Do you know what I've been dreaming about these years?"

Her eyes widened and she pushed against his chest, an ineffectual attempt at freedom. "I will not have sex with you!"

His eyebrow lifted. "No?" He tipped her chin up and nibbled the length of her neck. "Would you really deny yourself that which you crave the most?"

Ariana couldn't breathe, could barely move, and when Joquinn pulled her into his arms, she knew she was lost. She'd fought for so long, trying to avoid the emotions battering her soul. But here, now, she would take that which she craved, and then, somehow, she would take his life.

Her head tipped back and her eyes met his with a challenge. "Take me, then, Joquinn, but make it last because this will be the last time."

Charon's heart burned with her breast. "Stupid, stupid fool!" she screamed into the darkness. "You would fail me now, after everything I've done for you!"

The birds of the forest scattered at her rage as she whirled her long robe in a vicious circle, her eyes glowing like hot beacons. "I will take you apart myself if I must, Joquinn Shepherd, but you will die this day, no matter who does the killing."

She rubbed her temples, willing the throbbing away, but she couldn't erase the fear welling up inside of her. "I cannot fail. Don't you understand that, Ariana? Joquinn cannot live."

Her fright subsiding somewhat, she surveyed the couple with a keen eye. Did the girl even know what she had given up with the failure of this one mission? "Ariana, you could have been so powerful. I would have given you the world as my assistant." Her head drooped. "Now you, too, must die."

As she spoke the words, Charon felt defeated. She'd grown to care for Ariana in her own way, but Rutger would never allow her to live after this betrayal. Even now, she knew he was watching, waiting to see how Charon would respond to Ariana's actions.

The choice had already been made.

Chapter Six

Joquinn read the challenge in those deep, violet eyes and felt the softness of her skin beneath his palms. In that instant, he was lost. He couldn't take her life any more than she could take his. Would they be forever doomed, then, to loathe each other's existence and yet fall into one another's arms whenever they met?

Guilt swept over him at the memory of Devlin's fallen body lying at his feet. How could he even consider not avenging his friend's death? Were his heart to beat, it would be pounding against his chest now as the agony of his final decision rendered Devlin's death for nothing.

But he couldn't kill Ariana. Much more than emotion wouldn't allow it. He couldn't imagine knowing she was no more, that he'd been the one to extinguish her life. Though he'd played the cat-and-mouse game with her for a while, it was more for the chance to see her, know she was alive and thinking of him. And he had no doubt she'd been thinking of him.

At night, when he'd stand outside her window and watch her sleep, she would moan his name. He'd seen those full, moist lips curve around each syllable and grown hard from the sight.

Ariana was sheer perfection, and he could no more keep himself from touching her now than he could dislike the taste of blood flowing over his tongue. He cupped her face and traced the fullness of her lips with his thumb.

“You’re as beautiful as I remember,” he whispered into her hair, the vibrant scent enveloping him.

Her hands clutched at his wrists. “Joquinn.” He heard the hesitancy in her voice, and it heated his blood.

He sifted his fingers through the silky length of her blonde hair and brought it close to his nose. It tickled his upper lip, and his cock surged to life, jutting hard against his jeans. “I think about you constantly. I can’t get you off my mind. You’re a constant craving, burning within my soul. Tell me you haven’t thought about me just as much. Tell me I don’t see the desire in your eyes even now.” He pressed the lower half of his body against her thigh.

Ariana’s hands curled around his wrists, and she closed her eyes. “Stop.”

“Stop what? Wanting you? Craving you?” Her hand allowed his to dip into the vee neck of her blouse. “I could just as soon stop living as I could stop desiring you, Ariana. You are the other half to my soul.”

“Just words,” she whispered.

“Ah, but there is a powerful mystery behind those words.” He nipped at her neck, her collarbone, while his blood poured through his veins like warm honey. His hands took on a life of their own, traveling everywhere, moving over the course of her perfect skin, enjoying each dip and curve. “God, Ariana, I don’t think I can wait.”

She backed against a tree, her breasts jutting forward as she arched her spine. “Then take me, Joquinn. Fuck me here. Now.” As she spoke, her hands worked the zipper on her jeans, giving him a glimpse of white lace.

He shoved the swatch aside and dipped his fingers into her creamy heat. His reward was Ariana’s cry as she pressed upwards and into his thrusts. “You like that, don’t you? You

like when I rub your clit like this.” His thumb worried the small, sensitive nub while Ariana clutched at his shoulders, her eyes glazed.

“You like it even more when I fuck you, when my cock sinks deep into your pussy.” He released the buttons on his jeans and freed the heavy length of his cock. Ariana’s hand curled around him, and he jerked with a low moan. “No, baby. I want to come inside you.”

Reeling from the sensations overwhelming him, he shoved her jeans down to her ankles, drew off her shoes, and peeled the thick denim off her legs. The sight of smooth, glistening skin made his mouth water, and with a flick of his wrist, he tore her panties away.

The lips of her pussy were red and swollen, dripping with cream and need. His cock swelled another inch, threatening to burst. His fingers dug into the cheeks of her ass as he lifted her, bringing her moist cleft into direct contact with his shaft. Holding her high, he rubbed her clit back and forth over his cockhead while Ariana moaned her pleasure.

“Not yet, not yet,” he instructed, kneeling before her.

Starting with long, slow strokes of his tongue up the inside of her thigh, he spent an inordinate amount of time just tracing her skin, leaving wet, heated patches. Ariana began to squirm, to shift her hips. Then, like an expert painter, he caressed every inch of her pussy from the top of the slit to the bottom opening. He left no place untouched; her skin knew every stroke of his tongue and glide of his fingers.

Once he’d completely bathed her skin and had her pussy twitching, he upped the stakes in the sensual invasion. His tongue slipped between the swollen lips, lightly tickling until Ariana’s hips pushed against his face and she begged for more in husky whispers laced with need.

With just the tiniest flick, he touched her clit. Her hands fisted in his hair, drawing him closer.

“You like that, do you?” God knows he did. He’d never forgotten the taste of her, the scent of her pussy during sex, like an exotic, musky perfume.

Ariana moaned a response and threw one leg over his shoulder. Joquinn chuckled low and began to nibble at her sensitive clit with just enough pressure to make her jump.

Though his own control was rapidly slipping, he pursed his lips and began to suckle while his tongue rubbed back and forth across Ariana's sensitive bud. The pressure mounted as he cleverly moved along the slick valley created by her juices.

She was hotter than liquid silver and sweeter than plum wine. He couldn't get enough of her. He buried his face in her pussy, animalistic growls coming from the back of his throat.

His tongue went deep, pushing into her until he was sure she could feel it in her womb. He circled inside her, leaving no spot inside her pussy without caresses. His hands cupped her ass to lift her closer as his own pleasure spiked. With an artist's perfection, he moved his tongue in and out of her moist gate, mimicking a slow, leisurely fuck.

"God, yes!" Ariana screamed, her back bowing away from the trunk of the tree.

That was his cue to refocus. He captured her clit again, raking his tongue back and forth, up and down, with more pressure at every stroke. The suckling, nibbling, and licking nearly drove him over the edge.

"I'm going to come," she began to chant, "I'm-I'm -- oh, yes, yes, yes! Oh, God!"

Joquinn eased his fingers into the wet heat just as her pussy began to convulse around his fingers. She rode the orgasm hard and wild, throwing her head back so hard, it bumped against the tree behind her.

His vision grayed. He had to have her. Now. Sliding upward, he thrust his hips forward and bumped his cock against her leg.

Ariana murmured her approval and closed her fingers around his length. "You feel like silk," she whispered in a dreamy voice.

His hand captured her wrist. "You can't do that, baby. I want to come inside you." Wrapping her legs around his waist, he plunged into her creaminess, driving his cock all the way in. He held himself perfectly still, his balls drawing up so tightly, he clenched his teeth

from the sheer agony. “Sweet Jesus,” he whispered against her hair. He knew he wouldn’t last long once he started thrusting into her, no matter how much he wanted to extend the few minutes he had with her.

“Fuck me,” she commanded, her nails scoring his shoulders. Her hips began to move, impatient for his participation. “Now, Joquinn. Make me come again.”

He didn’t have a choice. His body took over, demanding the release. His hips began to pump, and he thrust in and out of her cleft while Ariana screamed his name and writhed against him.

She raised the hem of her blouse upwards and thrust her nipple toward his mouth. “Suck me. I want to feel your lips on my nipples.” Her hand rested underneath her breast, providing the perfect opportunity.

Joquinn’s lips closed around the red tip, taking it deep into the cavern of his mouth, suckling and licking while his cock throbbed inside her. The slow burn began at the base of his spine, squeezing his ass and drawing his balls even tighter.

She stroked his hair. “I feel it.” Wiggling, she pressed upwards and rode him like a wild stallion, reaching for the ultimate orgasm.

As her pussy spasmed around his cock, Joquinn held her even tighter, plunging in and out of her dripping pussy with reckless abandon.

Ariana tipped her head back, and the golden expanse of her throat and the pleasurable little sounds she made proved to be his undoing. He sank his teeth deep. Her spicy blood spurted over his tongue, and he came almost immediately, his body thrusting one last time.

He bumped his forehead against hers. “God, I’ve missed this.”

She touched her hand to her neck. “Well, that was a definite first.”

As realization dawned, Joquinn withdrew, the taste of her blood still clinging to his lips. “Ariana, I ...” He broke off, his gaze riveted to her face.

Her hand went to the wound, her fingers covering the tiny pinpricks. “Don’t look so shocked. It didn’t hurt,” she whispered. “Actually, it felt kind of erotic.”

He blinked at her. “What?”

“When you took my blood, it didn’t hurt.”

Joquinn’s hands clenched into fists. There was only one way a human didn’t feel pain at a vampire’s bite.

If the human wasn’t a human after all.

Ariana backed away from him, her knees knocking together. “Are you still planning on killing me now?” She looked into his face and saw the look of revulsion that swept over his features.

“I have every reason to kill you. You took away the life of my best friend. We traveled together for almost two centuries until you staked him.”

“His tough luck,” she responded without remorse, though her insides were still writhing from the aftereffect of the release. After dressing herself, she spared him a look. “That still doesn’t answer the question. Aren’t you going to kill me?” When he didn’t respond, realization became a gnawing sensation in the pit of her stomach. “You can’t kill me, either. That doesn’t make sense. You’re a vampire. Vampires aren’t choosy about where their next meal is coming from.” She began to pace. She always paced when she was confused. Or deep in thought.

“I had not intended to eat you, Ariana.”

Heat slammed into her. Had he any idea how erotic his words were? She looked up to see his face and noticed the grimness fading. Apparently so. The reminder pummeled her, reaffirming her belief that Joquinn had always been a master at eating pussy.

“But I did enjoy it.” How could she not?

The look he gave her said it all. He'd enjoyed it as much. "You always were a responsive woman."

She was going to come again, just by the sound of his voice, the words. God, he had enough sex appeal for ten men. She wondered if he knew about his power over women, how enticing he could make ordinary words sound or the way the touch of his palm felt like soft silk. Swallowing hard, she shifted her stance, willing her nipples to soften, but instead, they only grew harder, punching against her shirt.

"Ariana?" He waved his hand in front of her face, making her realize she was staring into space.

The blood rushed to her face. "I told you that was the last time."

"You're embarrassed," he noted with a smug grin.

"I've never been embarrassed at what we've done between the sheets. I was just as involved as you were. Don't try to play games with me. It won't work."

"Oh, I can assure you I'm quite serious. So if you'd like to make another offer," he added in a smooth-as-baby-oil voice, "I'm more than up to the challenge."

Ariana felt the warmth suffusing her cheeks, heating them to an unbearable level, and she quickly looked away from him. "Were you not just listening to me when I said that was the final time? I answered your invitation to end this part of my life, not to continue our affair."

He chuckled. "I wouldn't really call it an affair. It was more like an explosion. Every night we were together was like the first."

Joquinn was just as good with words as he was with his tongue. Her pussy continued to throb, her nipples peaking once more. "Joquinn, don't."

"Don't you remember that night, Arianna?"

How could I forget the last night we spent together? They'd been swept up in the moment, a night rife with moist heat and rising passion. He'd taken her in a fury of thrusts,

claiming her as his own, promising her they'd be together forever. And she'd believed him, taking him at his word, only to discover the depth of his deception.

"Have your memories stolen your voice?" His voice poured over her, a wicked combination of aged whiskey and sex.

She had to get away from him. Just to stare into the depths of his eyes unleashed a primitive feeling inside, a power she didn't think she could control much longer. She took a step back, almost stumbling over an exposed tree root. Her jeans were still unzipped, and she quickly fixed the problem, feeling Joquinn's eyes on her nether regions.

His hand snaked out and captured her wrist. "Such a shame to cover up now," he whispered, turning her hand over in his palm. "You have such beautiful skin."

Mesmerized, Ariana couldn't pull her hand free as he brought her arm to his lips and gently licked the exposed area just below the wristband of her watch. An erotic pull cascaded down to her pussy, and it seemed she'd never be free of his spell. "Let me go." The words sounded broken, even to her own ears.

Joquinn lifted his eyes and met her gaze. "Perhaps we should continue our conversation elsewhere."

Ariana gave him a baleful look. "If you can't kill me and I can't kill you, we have nothing to discuss."

One eyebrow lifted in a sexy, challenging manner. "No? You know as well as I do that you should have felt the pain of my branding. Aren't you just the least bit curious as to why you didn't?"

She stared at him. "What difference does it make? We hate each other." Desperation clogged her throat. "You do hate me, right?"

He inclined his head shortly. "Yes, I would imagine I did at one point."

“You did? What do you mean you *did*? Surely you’re not saying you don’t hate me now? That’s impossible.” Hearing the words, she knew she was really as hysterical as she sounded. “What could possibly have changed your mind?”

She barely blinked and he’d returned to stand before her, powerful and sexy, his eyes haunted. “Now I find myself wanting to kiss you again and again, just to savor the taste of your lips.”

Ariana couldn’t think of one reason to deny him. She made the first move by standing on tiptoe. Easing into him, she allowed her lips to barely caress his. A taunt more than a kiss. Were a vampire’s lips supposed to be this soft? She’d always wondered that about him.

Joquinn cursed softly and snatched her closer to his body. “I am not supposed to want you. Yet, whenever I fuck you, I only want more. I can’t get enough of you. You’re like a drug in my veins, and each night I’ve spent away from you has only damned me to a miserable existence.”

Common sense slipped away, and the creature in her arms segued into a living, breathing man with every intention of taking her again. And she had every intention of allowing it. Damn the consequences. “Kiss me again, Joquinn.”

“Did I kiss you?” His voice rumbled next to her ear. “I thought it was you who had kissed me.”

Ariana didn’t waste time arguing. She simply hooked her fingers behind his head and dragged his lips down to meet hers. *Dear God*. When had she felt so alive, and how was it possible that a dead man could make her feel this way? She felt him everywhere. He invaded her senses, her mind, her soul. And she wanted him to stay.

Joquinn brought her hand to his cock, which had grown hard again. It jumped against her palm, and he groaned. “That’s it. Touch me. Rub your palm up and down.”

She stroked the tight skin, moving it back and forth while Joquinn closed his eyes, tipping his head backwards. Her nails scratched lightly at his balls, and he groaned his approval. "You always liked that," she whispered.

"I like to feel your lips around me, too."

Taking the hint, Ariana slid down his body until she was eye-level with his swelling erection. She cupped the smooth knob and hummed low in her throat. It was too late to deny that she'd missed this. Her memory had never let her forget the taste of him, anymore than it had his touch.

Her tongue caressed the sensitive skin underneath the head of his cock, and Joquinn cursed in French. She moved her mouth lower, placing sucking kisses against his sac, and he stumbled.

"Sweet Jesus," he muttered, fisting his hands in her hair. "You remember."

"I remember everything," she murmured before taking him fully into her mouth.

The past came crashing back. Scents. Sights. Sounds. His fingers against her scalp, the tightness of his balls, and the thickness of his cock were all familiar to her.

Her hands stroked the back of his thighs, the smooth, round globes of his ass as she took him deeper. Up and down, back and forth, she suckled him, her fingers playing with the skin underneath his balls before tickling the cheeks of his ass again.

Her mouth never stopped, but it was more than desire that drove her on. She needed to do this as much for herself as for him. To know that she still held the power in her hand to literally bring him to his knees was a rush of pure adrenaline. To know that he'd never stopped thinking about her as much as she thought about him was a relief.

"Ah, God, Ariana. I'm close." The words were guttural, as if pulled from the depths of his chest.

She quickly pulled free of his cock and turned over until she lay beneath his scrotum. “We can’t have that just yet. Kneel down.” As he obeyed her, she pushed herself up on her hands and gently took his tight sac into her mouth, closing her lips around the taut flesh.

Joquinn’s legs splayed wider to give her better access, his hands moving to slide up and down his hips while he whispered her name.

The sound of his voice thickened the cream between her legs. God, how she’d missed this! Her tongue tickled around his sac, against his legs, before slipping between the cheeks of his ass to torture him further. Licking one finger, she inserted it gently into that tight hole, wiggling it ever so slightly until Joquinn cursed aloud.

His hips began to pump, pushing back against her finger. With muttered curses, he stood, pulling her back to her knees. Ariana chuckled lightly and began working both her hands and her tongue with precision and skill, licking the head, holding the skin of his cock tight to add more sensation.

As his body began to jerk, she recognized the signs of his nearing orgasm, and she went deep again, forming a tight suction with her mouth. Her finger pressed upwards against the flesh inside his ass while her tongue moved back and forth over his sensitive spot.

His knees began to wobble; his hands came back to fist in her hair just as the first jet of his juices spurted down her throat. He cried out, his head tilted back as she milked him, taking every last drop of cream.

Finally, he shuddered and relaxed his hands. “That was perfect,” he whispered in the stillness.

Ariana climbed to her feet as a rush of guilt cascaded over her. What had she been thinking? Joquinn was supposed to be her mortal enemy. She’d been trained to kill his kind, and yet something prevented her from taking his life. She needed answers, which she wouldn’t find in his arms or while sucking his dick.

He reached out to take her into his arms, but she pushed against his chest to put some space between their bodies. His arms held fast. "Joquinn, please."

He fixed those dark, sexy eyes on her face. "You're having regrets now? Or perhaps it's modesty I see in those beautiful eyes of yours."

She placed a finger against his lip, an action which only caused him to growl in the back of his throat. Instantly, she removed it. "Don't. I can't stay here. I never should have allowed this. We can't go back to the way things were."

"So we won't." His fingers edged up her spine. "We'll start all over. Go somewhere new. Different."

"We can't start all over, Joquinn. There's nothing to start. We are enemies. That's exactly what we're supposed to be because I've sworn to kill your kind."

"You can change your mind."

"But I can't change the past." Her shoulders sagged. "Neither can you. Maybe we should --"

She didn't get the opportunity to finish before a scream and a flash of light rent the night air.

Chapter Seven

Joquinn's instincts kicked in. He shoved Ariana behind him and took a fighting stance. Every muscle in his body tensed, and he focused every ounce of his attention on their visitor.

The brightness faded, giving way to black silk and flowing hair the color of polished copper. Eyes like twin diamonds blinked at him from beneath heavily accentuated lashes, and a voice as black as sin reached out to him.

Ariana tried to see over his shoulder, but Joquinn effectively blocked every move she made. She didn't need to see this new enemy. As dangerous as she was beautiful, the demon was a take-no-prisoners type and would never hesitate to eliminate anyone who got in her path.

Charon's arrival came as no surprise to him. He might have known she would show up sooner or later. She'd spent most of his existence tracking him, and yet she never struck out at him, never tried to end his life. It made no sense. But then, he'd never tried to figure it out. He rather considered her as one would a pesky insect.

"Joquinn Shepherd." The demon raked him with a scathing look. "You're looking incredibly well for a dead man."

Joquinn took a step closer to his age-old enemy. “Charon. I should be surprised to see you here, but amazingly, I’m not. You’re like a bad rash one can never quite get rid of.”

She shook free of the black cloak and allowed it to slide to the ground to pool at her feet. Wearing a white sheath that clung to her every curve, she sailed forward. “It’s so nice to see you again, too.” The neckline of the dress dipped low, revealing full breasts, nipples peaked against the thin material, a feast for any man’s eyes. But Joquinn knew the evil that lay beneath the dress.

Charon had been trained by Rutger to torture humans and vampires alike, and she would stop at nothing to please her master. Her presence always exacted a price.

“Again?” Ariana finally spoke. “I didn’t think the two of you had met, Charon.”

Joquinn spun around and fixed his eyes on Ariana’s ashen face. Seeing the recognition in her eyes, he felt his mouth go dry. “You know her?” The knowledge settled in the pit of his stomach like a bitter pill.

No, it wasn’t possible that Ariana was working in tandem with Charon. Though Ariana might convince herself that she hated him, he’d seen the truth in the depths of those violet eyes. There was no way she was in Charon’s camp. But she’d called the demon’s name. He hadn’t really been listening, but now, he heard.

Ariana knew the demon. And that information was enough to send his guard rocketing sky-high. Was this where the sorcery had come from?

Eyes alit with a smile, Ariana barely looked at him. “Know her? She’s my benefactress. I am what you see before you today because of Charon.”

Joquinn leapt into the air, somersaulted, and landed several paces away from Ariana. He whipped his gaze from woman to demon. “If you’d mentioned from the start you’d been sired by a demon, I might have taken your threats a bit more seriously.” *And I damned sure wouldn’t have kissed you or fucked you.* No, he still probably would have done both.

“What are you talking about? Charon isn’t a demon. She’s a sorceress.” Ariana went to stand beside the blonde-haired fiend. And as Ariana’s hand fell upon the flowing white material Charon wore, Joquinn couldn’t take his eyes off the sight.

Nothing could touch Charon without her permission, neither god nor mortal. To do so would invite one’s own death. And seeing Ariana’s claim to the demon sent a shard of pain deep into the center of his chest.

“Right. And I didn’t live through the Civil War,” Joquinn shot back. “Ariana, ask her to tell you the truth. She’s here for some reason. Ask her why.” He waved a hand toward Charon’s smirking face. “She’s a fucking demon. She feeds off the misery of others, sates her lust on humans, and then sends their carcasses into hell. Ask her if what I’m telling you is the truth. I doubt she’ll tell you, but she won’t be able to deny it. You’ll see it in her eyes if you look close enough.”

The demon quickly schooled her features once Ariana turned to face her. “Ariana, love, you can’t really believe this vampire’s story, can you?” She brushed her knuckles down Ariana’s cheek. “I have been by your side for these past few years. I have helped you hone your skills to purge the earth of the evil left behind by the undead. Do you really think I am a demon?”

Ariana’s eyes narrowed, and Joquinn counted on her good sense to help her acknowledge the truth. It shouldn’t matter. He should just leave now and let Ariana work things out with Charon, but damnation, he couldn’t just walk away from Ariana. Not now. His only option was to stay and see this through to the end. Of course, if Charon had her way, the end would be his death.

“Why are you here, Charon? I thought you were going to let me handle this.”

Joquinn mentally congratulated Ariana on the question. It was a start.

Charon’s lips pursed. “You’ve never questioned me before.” Her eyes flashed in the darkness, and Joquinn sensed a tension in the demon’s muscles, as if preparing for battle.

“You’ve never shown up at one of my kills.”

Charon tipped her head, and Joquinn felt the heat of her gaze scorching his skin. The demon’s wrath touched him as tangibly as the rake of fingernails down his arm. He didn’t flinch. Instead, he took a few steps closer to Ariana, positioning himself by her side.

“Obviously, this isn’t a kill,” Charon pointed out with just enough ice in her voice to make Ariana suck in a sharp breath. “Were it a kill, Joquinn would already be dead. You’ve never taken this long to complete a mission before, my dear. Perhaps I underestimated your charm, Mr. Shepherd.”

He gave her a grim smile. “Perhaps.”

“I can assure you. I’m immune.” The demon parted her lips in an evil semblance of a smile.

“Tell me what’s going on,” Ariana demanded as she gripped Charon’s arm. “You’ve always given me rein to dispose of the evil in any way I saw fit. So why do you choose now to arrive?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Was it not you who was just fucking the vampire?” Charon tapped her fingernails against her chin. “Perhaps I was mistaken. Do feel free to enlighten me.”

Ariana turned to face Charon fully. “You were watching us? How dare you! You had no right.”

“And you had no right to allow this creature to fuck you!” Charon leaned in, spitting fury. “He’s dead, Ariana. Tell me, was his cock as cold as it was hard?”

Joquinn saw the arc of Ariana’s hand, but he couldn’t move fast enough to stop it. Her hand connected with Charon’s cheek with a loud pop, and he saw the red in the demon’s eyes turn to a fiery glow.

Snatching hold of Ariana’s arm, he leapt upwards to take her to safety.

Ariana sucked in a sharp breath, too stunned to do anything more. “What are you doing?”

“Skipping the death scene.”

“You don’t need to take me with you to do that. Charon wouldn’t kill me. She’s been angry with me before.”

Joquinn’s feet thumped against a thick tree branch, and while his eyes searched the night sky for an escape route, his lips curled upwards in a sardonic smile. “You really think Charon was going to let you live after you just destroyed her plans and humiliated her all in one night?”

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re crazy?”

“Hold on tight, sweetheart. We’re going for a ride.” Joquinn’s body began to contort, and he tightened his fingers around Ariana’s arm before he assumed the shape of his counterpart. But she slipped out of his grasp, and he shot a look toward the empty space.

He only saw another bat. A bat with a husky laugh and devilish violet eyes.

“Ariana?”

“Hell and damnation,” Joquinn shouted when they’d landed safely inside a copse of trees. The scent of the forest surrounded them, but except for the sound of the wind, it was eerily silent, as if even the animals sensed the danger.

Ariana didn’t see the cause for his anger. If anyone should be angry, it should be her. “Why are you so upset? I mean, I know you think my mentor is trying to kill us both now, but I don’t believe there’s a particular reason for your ire at the present moment. As I’ve told you, Charon would never have hurt me. I’ve been with her far too long.” She brushed her hands down the front of her jeans to sweep away the dirt. “She just needs time to calm down, that’s all.”

Joquinn raked a hand through his hair, and she admired the way the silky length flowed across his fingers like dark wine. “Do you realize what you just did up there?”

What had she done other than fly through the air with a madman at her side? Ariana searched her mind for a proper response. Then, with a shrug, she replied, "I flew beside you to escape a woman you thought would try to kill me."

"She wouldn't just try; she would succeed. And you flew as a bat," he snarled.

She laughed suddenly, and the sound startled them both. Ariana couldn't remember the last time she'd laughed like that ... or when she'd found something which amused her enough to laugh. "Oh, that." She waved a hand in dismissal. "Just another one of the gifts Charon bestowed upon me. And if she were truly evil, do you really think she would assist me in such a way? She has helped me time and again, Joquinn."

"Like hell." He took hold of her arm and frog-marched her deeper into the woods.

"Where are we going?" Ariana knew she should have killed him when she'd had the chance. The man defined insanity. She never should have kissed him. Or fucked him. Or sucked his cock. She refused to dwell on those indiscretions or the fact that she wouldn't mind doing any of the three again.

Her eyes dropped lower as he towed her along. The tight jeans he wore helped to define his particularly nice ass -- a nice view, indeed.

"Why aren't you answering my question?" she called to his back.

Joquinn came to a dead stop and looked over his shoulder. "I said I want you to see something. If you would pay attention, you would have heard me the first time."

"Why?"

"Why should you pay attention?"

Her lips pursed. "No," she spoke as if talking to a child, "why should I see something? Why can't you just tell me where you're taking me first?"

"It's important, and it's not something I can explain." He practically shoved her into a dark, damp cave, and before Ariana could protest, he dragged a fingernail down one stone wall. A tiny flame flickered from his fingertip. "Look," he demanded.

She blinked at him. “Have you gone mad? So it’s a flame. Big deal. I’ve heard vampires can do that with their fingers. Am I supposed to be impressed?” Her nose wrinkled. “Because I’m not.” Nor was she frightened anymore.

If he thought she was the same person he’d left alone that night in her house, he was in for a shock. He couldn’t scare the hell out of her and expect her to run crying. Not this time.

Joquinn took hold of her hair with a much firmer grip than she liked. “Not the flame. Look at the ground, the puddle.”

She gave him a strange look, but did as he commanded. “I see water.” Had the flying addled his brains?

“Clear water,” he corrected.

“Okay, fine. Clear water. What next?”

Joquinn yanked her lower, pressing her face closer to the miniature pool. “Now what do you see?”

She struggled to catch his train of thought. “I still see the water.”

“Nothing else, do you?”

She sighed, growing more irritated by the minute with his high-handed manner. As Charon had said, the only good vampire was a dead vampire. She’d thought she could make an exception in Joquinn’s case, but maybe not. “No. I see nothing else. Now, do you want to get to the point? You’re hurting my neck.”

He released her instantly. “Ariana, you didn’t see your reflection, did you?”

A cold, clammy sensation swept over her, and she swayed on her feet, one hand clasped over her heart. The beat reassured her slightly. “What are you trying to say?” She blinked at him while nausea wrapped itself around her intestines. Blood roared in her ears in a desperate attempt to drown out Joquinn’s next words. He was just trying to scare her, keep her off guard. Charon had warned her about these types of tactics. Where was that damned stake? Why hadn’t she carried it with her?

He caught hold of her shoulders to gain her attention. "Sweetheart, you're a vampire."

Ariana gave an almost hysterical laugh. "You're crazy. I breathe. I have a heartbeat." She snatched his hand and placed it over her breastbone, ignoring the flare of awareness in the black depths of his eyes. "See? Don't you feel it?"

He softened his voice as his palm rested against her breast. "All illusion. Charon is good at that, but Ariana, even a demon can't give you enough magic to make you shapeshift into a bat. Nor can you be given a reflection. I don't know about you, but I don't know any demons who don't have reflections. Only the undead have no reflection." He circled his palm over her breast. "I'm sorry. I know this is difficult to hear, but you can't escape this."

Panic clawed at her stomach. "No, you're wrong. I'm not. I'm human. Charon has just protected me." She'd stood in front of the mirror just that morning, had seen her face, her hair. "I don't know why I can't see my reflection now, but I have before this." The words tumbled over themselves, and her hands clasped together, her knuckles growing white.

Joquinn didn't know what he was talking about. There was no possible way she was a vampire. Charon would have told her. Hell, Charon wouldn't have wanted anything to do with her. Why on earth would the sorceress befriend a vampire? It didn't make sense.

Ariana continued to shake her head frantically. "There has to be another reason. I would know. I'm telling you," she shouted, "I would know!"

Joquinn dropped his hands and walked around her. "It all makes sense now. How you're able to track other vampires and how I was able to track you. We caught each other's scent. And ..." He paused long enough to throw a look over his shoulder "... why we weren't able to kill one another."

Ariana's hand fisted over her heart. "Vampires can kill one another, Joquinn." The words came out sounding sickly.

"True, but soul mates cannot."

I've been wrong. Joquinn gives insanity a new definition.

Chapter Eight

The sound of applause snapped Joquinn's head back toward the entrance to the cave. Charon filled the way, her eyes narrowed and her lips tilted in a cruel smile. "Poor Ariana. I didn't intend for you to find out this way." Fire licked at the hem of her robe, wrapping her in a glowing circle. Her skin gleamed like porcelain and she appeared cast in stone, immortal, unbreakable. "I know it must be a cruel discovery for you." Her tongue clicked against her teeth. "Poor thing."

Ariana pushed her way forward. "Why? If you hate vampires so much, why didn't you kill me? Has everything you've told me been a lie?" The words echoed off the stone walls.

The demon snapped her fingers in the air as if to dismiss Ariana's pain. "Of course it was, innocent. Who else to track these loathsome creatures better than one of their own kind?"

"So you used me."

Charon placed her hand over her heart in a mocking gesture. "Well, let me think. Oh, yes, I did."

“How could you do this to me? When did this happen? I wasn’t a vampire before, when Joquinn and I were ...” Ariana stopped talking, her eyes going wide. “The men. The night they grabbed me. They were vampires, and you knew it!”

Charon’s menacing laughter caused the hairs on the back of Joquinn’s neck to rise. “Knew it? My boss sent them, love. He and I had plans for you.” Her arms swept wide. “And finding Joquinn was exactly what I wanted you to do. I really did think you would do me proud and stake him, but I can see you always allow your pussy to control you.” She held out a hand and crooked one finger, but Joquinn snatched hold of Ariana’s arm. “Don’t be stupid, Joquinn. You wouldn’t want Ariana to get hurt now, would you?”

He responded by shoving Ariana behind him. “When I say go, run toward the exit.” Though he spoke below his breath, he knew she heard him.

“I’m not leaving without you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Charon could kill you.”

“And what makes you think she can’t kill you?”

Joquinn tossed a look over his shoulder. “Never mind that. Will you just go?”

Ariana gripped his arm. “I’m not leaving you,” she snapped, catching a hold of the back of his shirt. “We’ll destroy her together.”

Charon broke out into a laugh that scraped the air like fingernails against a chalkboard. “Oh, do go on. I’ll give you a few more minutes to say your final good-byes.” She inspected her nails. “But don’t expect me to wait forever. I’m looking forward to the applause I will receive in the Underworld for ridding the world of the great Joquinn Shepherd. He has long been the bane of our existence, but then, you know that already, don’t you, sweet Ariana?”

“I know only what you’ve told me, and apparently, that’s all been a bunch of lies.” Ariana’s shoulders squared, and Joquinn caught the flash of temper in her eyes. “I think from here on in, I’ll make my own judgments.”

“And if left to your own devices, you would do it by continuing to fuck a vampire,” Charon scoffed.

He wanted to kill her slowly, but he wouldn’t make Ariana suffer through the demon’s death. He’d seen the hurt in her eyes when Charon had revealed the truth. “Anyone ever told you that you’re a bitch, Charon?”

She hissed through her teeth, and a long stream of acrid spit flew across the room to sizzle against the rock. “Don’t test me, Joquinn. When it’s time for me to kill you, you want me to be humane.”

Joquinn folded his arms across his chest. “I’ll take my chances.” She couldn’t kill him. He knew it and so did Charon. Oh, she would try, but she’d never succeed, and he doubted Rutger had warned her.

Her face tipped back toward the stone ceiling, Charon began to chant in an ancient, guttural language.

Joquinn dove forward, catching the lithe blonde around the waist and taking her down. “Ariana, run! Now!” Though he shouted the words, he didn’t expect her to obey. He locked his hands around Charon’s neck and began to squeeze.

Charon struggled to extricate herself, but Joquinn’s strength had been given a purpose, and her name was Ariana.

The demon became a living, breathing entity, her body contorting to reptilian. Eyes bulging and tail knocking against the ground, she twisted and turned while screaming aloud.

“Joquinn, release her,” came Ariana’s voice, cold and lethal.

He looked over his shoulder. “I rather had killing her in mind.”

“Exactly. It will be my pleasure.”

He closed his eyes, feeling her anger. It radiated from within her, coated her soul, but he couldn’t allow her to kill in anger, especially the demon she’d known as her benefactress. Ariana would never forgive herself, though the death would be well deserved. For now, she

was simply feeling the pain of betrayal, and the need to strike out was so intense, she didn't recognize it for what it was.

But he did. Joquinn looked down at his captive and gave a slight shrug. "Sorry, but I have to protect Ariana even if it means taking away the pleasure of this kill." He lowered his head and sank his teeth into the spiny hide of the demon's neck.

Charon let loose one last, long squeal before she went lax in Joquinn's arms.

Ariana rushed forward, but the drink lasted mere seconds. Joquinn pushed himself to a standing position and brushed the dirt from the knees of his jeans. His face contorted in a grimace as he spat blood on the ground at their feet.

"Sorry you had to see that. The kill, I mean, although I never have cared for the taste of demon blood."

Her eyes narrowed. "Don't start treating me like glass. I should have been the one to kill her." Shoulders shaking, she stared down at Charon's fallen body. "God, Joquinn. I'm so sorry about Devlin."

"You didn't know." Joquinn touched her face with his fingertips. "And I believe he would want me to forgive you. You would never have done it had you been yourself. I should have realized that, but the anger ran too deep at the time."

Ariana's body sagged against his chest. "I need --" A sob broke free. "-- some time alone. Could I just be alone?" She didn't give him time to respond before she turned and ran out of the cave.

Every tear she shed created an ache within the center of his stomach, but Joquinn knew she needed this time to grieve.

Ariana sat with her back against the stone wall outside the cave, her knees drawn up close to her chest. Her head drooped low, and sobs shook her body.

Joquinn waited as long as he could, but his arms ached to hold her, to help ease her out of the agony. He approached her slowly, giving her time to wave him away before he knelt down next to her. "Ariana?"

Instinctively, she turned into his warmth, seeking the reassurance of his embrace. Her head went to his shoulder, and a lump formed in Joquinn's throat. What in the hell was it about this woman that wreaked havoc with his insides?

"I'm sorry," he murmured against her hair.

She clung to him for a moment longer before she pulled away with a sniff. She knuckled the tears away from her eyes and squared her shoulders. "She was evil. She deserved to die."

He wrapped a lock of her hair around his fingers. "But it would have been a helluva lot easier for you to take if you weren't here to see it happen."

"I thought she believed in me, Joquinn, that she was someone I could trust."

His shoulder bumped hers. "And she wanted you to think that, but you can't blame yourself because you did. Charon was stronger and knew exactly what she was doing." Hoping his words gave her a measure of peace, Joquinn touched her leg. "Now that you know, you can change your life."

"I don't know where to go from here."

He pushed himself to his feet and held out his hand. "With me."

Her large violet eyes blinked up at him. "With you? Where?" She held up one hand. "And please don't give me that bullshit about us being soul mates."

With a grumble, he snatched her hand and dragged her to her feet. "It's not bullshit, and we are soul mates. Now, do you want to get out of here or not?"

"So where exactly are we going?"

He held her tightly against his chest. "Home. We're going home."

* * * * *

“Impossible!” The ground shook with Rutger’s displeasure as word of Charon’s death reached his ears. He bounced his fists on the arms of his concrete chair, and steam poured out of his nostrils. “I will not allow this!”

Leaping to his feet, he raced toward the door, which swung open upon his command. “Tonight, you will die by my hand, Joquinn. This I promise you.” Though he couldn’t feign love for the demon he’d just lost, he must avenge her death. It was an unwritten law of the Underworld. A soul for a soul.

“And I’m coming for what’s left of yours, Shepherd!” His loud roar echoed in the night sky as the demon streamed into the air.

It didn’t matter that the last time he’d crossed paths with Joquinn, he’d been condemned to prison. He had to believe he could kill the vampire this time. And if he didn’t try, he’d lose the respect of all of his servants.

“I’ve been waiting for this for a very long time.”

* * * * *

%Boras, Scandinavia

The castle boasted the finest in antiques and tapestries. Wealth whispered around every corner, hung from every chandelier, and beckoned with the glistening promise of perfection.

Ariana walked from room to room, inspecting her surroundings. With each step, she could feel Joquinn’s eyes on her spine. He followed her, remaining silent, giving her time to come to terms with the turn her life had taken.

Slowly, she climbed the circular staircase, one hand on the banister. As Joquinn ascended behind her, she finally broke the silence. “Where are we?”

“In Scandinavia. This is my home.”

“You never told me that.”

His lips curled. “I never told you a lot of things I should have.”

She accepted his words with a small smile. “Do you know why Charon wanted you dead?”

“I would imagine it’s because her boss doesn’t like me.”

Ariana threw a look over her shoulder as she reached the top. “Her boss?”

Joquinn placed his hand at the small of her spine and guided her down the opulent hallway. “I can see she really did keep you sheltered. Charon’s boss is Rutger, king of the Underworld.”

Her nose wrinkling, Ariana shook her head. “I’ve never heard the name, and I don’t really know much about the Underworld.”

“It’s not his name you have to worry about anyway.” Joquinn walked ahead of her and opened a door at the far end of the hallway. “He’s a much more powerful demon than Charon.”

Ariana walked toward him, gnawing at her lower lip. “So why doesn’t this Rutger like you?”

Joquinn held out his hand and wrapped his fingers around hers. “Because I trapped him in an Underworld prison many years ago.”

The bedroom Joquinn led her into boasted large, masculine furniture and a four-poster bed, which dominated the room. A large, oval rug covered most of the hardwood floor, and a three-tiered chandelier swung from the ceiling. Ariana swept her hand along the crocheted afghan lying at the foot of the bed before climbing up to sit down.

“Why did you do that?”

“Because he didn’t like my kind, and I didn’t like his. We fought. I won.” Joquinn approached her, coming to stand next to her knees. He began to stroke her upper thigh.

“So could you win again?” The words came out on a whisper.

“I suspect I’ll have to.”

Her eyes popped open. “Why?”

“Because somehow Rutger has managed to escape, and now that Charon is dead, well, he’ll come looking for me.” His fingers continued the light touches, inching ever closer to her pussy.

Ariana closed her eyes as sensations swamped her. Just the slightest touch of his fingers made her cream. She shook her head in an attempt to focus. “Why are you doing that?”

Joquinn’s fingers slipped between her thighs. “I want to touch you.” His shoulder bumped hers.

Her skin began to burn. “But that’s not getting us anywhere.”

He lifted her hair away from her neck and blew softly. “I didn’t know we had anywhere to be.”

She tipped her head forward. “Umm, Joquinn, don’t you think we should talk? I mean, I just found out that I’m a vampire, and I’m not sure I can live like this.” A long, low chuckle reached her ears. “What’s so funny?”

“Honey, you don’t have a choice about living like this.” He pressed a kiss against the nape of her neck. “You are a vampire, and from here on in, you will live as one.”

Her hands rested back against the mattress. “So what exactly do vampires do each night besides kill innocent people?”

Joquinn snagged a handful of her hair and gave it a slight tug. Her eyes widened and stared into deep pools of black. “I don’t kill innocent people, Ariana. I feed to live, and the people I choose live to see another day.”

She caught hold of his wrist. “To be used as food. That’s magnanimous of you.”

“You might want to get used to it, sweetheart. Now that your benefactress is gone, you’re going to have to learn to survive without help.”

“I don’t know if I can do this, Joquinn.” Her voice was barely above a whisper. She hated admitting her fear, but it had settled deep inside her bones.

He softened his grip. “Did you really think I would leave you to your own devices? Besides, I believed you asked what vampires do with their time.” His hand cupped the back of her neck. “Please allow me to show you.”

Ariana knew she should protest. Hot sex would get them nowhere, but as Joquinn said, they didn’t have anywhere to be. And right now, hot sex sounded pretty damned good.

Her lashes fluttered. It only took a look to make her come alive, but a touch could make her simply come. For Joquinn was a master at touch. And taste. He was especially good at tasting.

“Lie back,” he instructed, wrapping Ariana in a fantasy of silken limbs and scented candles. Standing over her, Joquinn snapped his fingers and blew fire from his fingertips. One by one, as if reading her most intimate thoughts, he lit the candles lining the walls, creating a soft, golden glow.

As Ariana’s shoulders made contact with the mattress, Joquinn unzipped her jeans and slid them down her legs, tossing them aside. He palmed her pussy, and the heat made Ariana squirm. Grinding his hand into her clit, he whispered her name.

Her eyes found his face, and the intensity of his gaze made her part her legs, bringing her heels up to the mattress.

Joquinn knelt, and electricity sizzled from the top of Ariana’s head to the soles of her feet. Anticipation became a gnawing ache in the center of her stomach as she waited, eyes squeezed shut, hands clenched for that first ...

His tongue bathed the crease of her pussy, and Ariana couldn’t think anymore. Her world spun out of control, only to crash around her when Joquinn captured the globes of her ass and lifted her higher.

“Joquinn,” she moaned.

Making animal noises in the back of his throat, he savored the taste of her pussy, rolling his tongue around her clit before sweeping back and forth along the creamy crest. She bucked beneath him, writhing and begging. The hot length of his tongue dove into her opening, and his hands slipped up between her thighs to press against the soft flesh.

“Oh, Jesus,” she moaned, her muscles clenching. Her nipples ached and pushed against the softness of her blouse.

Joquinn stroked, suckled, and lapped at her cream until Ariana’s head tipped back against the mattress and she came on a feline moan of ecstasy.

He rose up over her, his eyes dark and challenging. For a long moment, he just stared into her eyes, until Ariana slid one hand up the wall of his chest. “Joquinn?”

His jaw clenched. “While I’d love to continue this, sweetness, I’m afraid we’re about to have company.”

Joquinn turned just as the room came alive in a shower of fire and sparks. The temperature increased to inferno level, and flames licked at the windows, turning the bedroom into the pit of hell.

Ariana had just enough time to shimmy into her jeans before the air shivered and split into a blue panel. Green fog illuminated the atmosphere, and from the midst, a large, muscled reptile with beady black eyes and horns protruding from his forehead emerged.

“Joquinn.” With a voice like rusted metal, Rutger clamped his hands on his hips and reared his head back on a scaly neck.

“Rutger.” Joquinn circled his nemesis, observing the demon’s stance and posture with a critical eye. “Have you put on a little weight since the last time I saw you?”

Rutger roared and thumped his spiny tail against the thick Persian rug. “You will not be so smug when I tear you into tiny pieces and feed you to my barracudas.”

“Same old song and dance, I see. Didn’t you learn your lesson the first time?”

For a moment, the demon looked unsure. "I always learn from my mistakes."

"Yeah, well, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but your little friends are going to have to go hungry. The lady and I have other plans."

"Joquinn," Ariana warned as the creature spun around.

Joquinn held up his hand. "It's okay, Ariana. Why don't you wait for me downstairs? This won't take long."

She came to stand beside him. "Nice try, but I'll leave when you leave."

"Impossible woman."

"Who happens to be one hell of a fighter," Ariana responded.

"What you had was given to you by Charon," Rutger growled.

"Not everything," Ariana contradicted with a sly grin. "I learned a few tricks on my own."

The demon hissed and swung his tail forward, catching Ariana around the legs. She stumbled, flipped over backwards, and landed on her feet.

"Your fight is not with her, Rutger," Joquinn snarled. "Let's end this once and for all."

Rutger bowed low. "Indeed. I've been looking forward to this."

"Really? Is that why you've been sending your minions to do your job for you?"

The demon attacked, coming in low, his claws extended. He tore into Joquinn's jeans, slicing the skin to the bone.

Joquinn countered by gripping Rutger's neck and slinging the demon's head backwards. As strength surged through his body, he tightened his grip and increased the pressure around the creature's throat.

Rutger thrashed violently, but Joquinn held tight, sinking his teeth deep into the thick hide. The demon gave a loud squeal and then, with a low hiss, faded into the mist, leaving Joquinn with a handful of air.

“What the fuck?” Joquinn spun around, searching the room, but except for Ariana, it was empty.

“Where did he go?”

Joquinn remained on the alert. “He’ll back. Maybe not tonight or tomorrow, but he will return. Now that he’s decided to do the job himself, he’ll have to.” He walked to the window, muscles tensed. “His reputation depends upon it.”

Arianna followed him. “Reputation? One wouldn’t think a demon really worried about his reputation.”

Joquinn stretched out an arm and drew her close to his side. “Rutger is a different kind of demon. He prides himself on maintaining a good front among the lower-class demons.”

Her head nestled against his shoulder. “And we don’t know when he’ll come back, then.” She slanted him a glance. “That could put a real damper on our sex life.”

Joquinn threw back his head and laughed. “Somehow I think we’ll manage.”

“So what do you want to do right now?”

“Right this very moment?”

“Yes. Right now.”

Joquinn gave her a wicked grin. “Eat pussy.”

* * * * *

Ariana woke at dusk, her body deliciously tired and tucked next to Joquinn’s. Late into the night he’d shown her the nocturnal activities of vampires, and now her muscles ached. But she could definitely grow accustomed to this manner of living ... as long as it was with Joquinn.

The thought brought her straight up in the bed. What was she thinking? Considering a life with Joquinn was an impossibility. She’d never believed in soul mates, and though last

night had come close to convincing her, it couldn't make her believe that she was meant to live as a vampire.

Slipping off the mattress, she padded to the window on bare feet. Drawing the curtain aside, she watched the night come alive. Stars began to appear against a backdrop of black, and a sliver of moonlight drenched the back lawn. She pressed her palm against the cool glass pane.

"I don't know what to do now," she whispered.

"You'll stay with me." Joquinn spoke from behind her, his voice husky from sleep.

She didn't turn around. "I'm not sure I can." The blankets rustled and his feet thumped against the carpet. Seconds later, his hands settled on her shoulders.

"Why not?"

Her head fell forward to rest against the window. "This is all so new to me, Joquinn, and I have a lot to learn. I have to rediscover my entire identity."

"And you can't do it alone." Massaging her muscles, he pressed a kiss against the back of her neck. "We can have a good life together, Ariana. Let me show you."

"You live life waiting for the next attack." Her skin warmed as his arms crept around her waist.

"And you used to live for the next kill. Ariana ..." The way he said her name sent shivers down her spine. "... I know this is hard for you. Finding out that you are the enemy can't be easy, but you can't deny what you are." He turned her in his arms. "You have to face this, accept it, and learn to live the life you were really meant to live."

She gave a bitter laugh. "Those words sound strange coming from a vampire."

He bumped his forehead against hers. "I was speaking metaphorically, of course."

"I'm scared."

Joquinn raised his head and cupped her cheek. "You're not alone. I promise. Now, come back to bed. The night is young and there's still so much more I want to show you."

She tipped her head back with a suspicious look. "More?"

White teeth flashed in a devious grin. "You haven't forgotten that I've been around for centuries, have you? I've learned a lot in my lifetime."

Ariana eyed the bed. "Lucky me." She allowed him to guide her back across the room. Perhaps thinking about a life with Joquinn wasn't such a bad thing, but she didn't have to decide anything right now.

At present, she only had to live moment to moment ... especially this one. As Joquinn pushed her lightly against the mattress, she felt the familiar tingle begin. "So do vampires have any other nocturnal activities besides sex?"

Joquinn stood over her, his face thoughtful. After a long pause, Ariana prompted him. "Well?"

"I'm thinking."

Ariana began to laugh. "I have a feeling life with you is never going to be boring, Mr. Shepherd."

He wiggled his eyebrows at her. "Lady, you don't know the half of it."

 THE END 

Rachel Carrington

Rachel Carrington is a multi-published author of fantasy and paranormal romance and currently writes for four publishers, including Loose Id. A freelance editor as well as writer, Rachel can be found on the web at www.dawnrachel.com or on her blog at www.rachelcarrington.blogspot.com.