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Forever Valentine
"Caught by Cupid"
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A Valentine's date gone wrong marks the beginning of a love that will last for all time.

Forever Valentine

Bianca D'Arc

Jena knows about vampires, particularly about the one who watches her every step, lest she somehow reveal her knowledge to the mortal world. Ian Sinclair would be her executioner should she even try to share her knowledge, but she doesn't fear him. No, Ian bothers her on an even more elemental level. He's just too sexy for his own good—and hers.

Ian finds himself attracted to the all-too-mortal lady doctor, though he knows better. He's been assigned to watch her, not seduce her, but seduction seems to be all he can think of when he looks at the gorgeous woman who works entirely too hard and has such sad eyes. He feels things he hasn't felt in centuries when she's around, including an unreasonable jealousy when he follows her on a Valentine's date with one of her colleagues.

After the disastrous date, will they both be able to resist temptation when Jena invites the vampire in?

Warning, this title contains explicit sex and graphic language.

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Forever Valentine

Bianca D'Arc

Dedication

To my Mom and Dad. The two most amazing people in the universe.

And to my Australian friends, Megan and Rosemary. Thanks for all your helpful advice and kind support to a newbie. You're both incredibly special ladies.

Let me not forget my fantastic editor, Jess, and the wonderfully supportive people on my chat group. I couldn't do any of this without you! St. Valentine's Day has always been a kind of strange day for me filled with hopes and let-downs alike. I hope this story brings you all a little joy and an escape from the everyday, if just for a little while. Hopefully that will be my gift to you this year. Happy Valentine's Day!

Chapter One

Jena noted the vampire's presence in the little bistro almost immediately. It was hard to miss a man as handsome as Ian Sinclair. They'd met at her friend Christy's wedding. He was an old friend of the groom...a *very* old friend, considering the groom was a vampire with over two centuries under his belt.

Jena had learned about the existence of vampires the night Sebastian, Christy's new husband, saved her friend's life by turning her. Christy had been under Jena's care in the hospital, and they needed her complicity in order to save Christy's life. Christy's first husband, Jeff, had finally beat her to death, but Sebastian and his magic blood saved her and not long thereafter, Christy was free of Jeff for good and happily married to Sebastian.

As a doctor, Jena was fascinated by the idea of vampirism, though all of the vampires she now knew refused to let her get close enough to try to figure out what made their blood so different. As a woman, Jena was intrigued by the vampire's erotic power. Jena hadn't let Sebastian turn Christy without first receiving some assurance that his bite wouldn't hurt her more. No, Jena had demanded to be bitten first, so she'd know for herself Christy wouldn't suffer.

What she'd felt when Sebastian first licked her neck, then bit down and sucked hard, had been unbelievable. An intense orgasm had shuddered through her body, though she still had all her clothes on. Worse, she and Sebastian were in a hospital room full of friends, ancient and newly turned alike, who watched every spasm of her ecstasy with varying degrees of envy and amusement. Jena could have died of embarrassment, if she hadn't felt so damn good. Just the bite of the vampire, paired with his ability to influence her mind and sexual

responses, had her coming for him shamelessly. And she'd only just met the man!

Jena had since learned that vampires fed not only on blood, but also on the psi energy that was strongest at the point of orgasm. Sex was sustenance to them, just as much as blood. They were erotic creatures in every sense of the word and the males who were now mated to her closest friends were sexy in the extreme. They all seemed to exude some kind of animal magnetism that was incredibly hard to resist. It helped to remember that they were married to her best friends and said friends now had sharp teeth of their own.

Then there was Ian.

A single, devastatingly handsome vampire with sad eyes that smoldered. Jena had spotted him across the reception hall at Christy's lavish wedding and from that moment on, no other man seemed to exist in her world. He was tall, handsome as sin, and just looking at him made her body cream with anticipation. Oh, he had the same sexual pull as the others, but like them, he'd never focused it on her. If he had, she was very much afraid she'd throw herself at him, strip naked in front of all the wedding guests and yank him down onto one of the catering tables to be roundly ravished.

He was just that sexy.

Sebastian had given her the best orgasm of her life—which she knew was pretty pathetic, considering they hadn't even had sex. And he'd been rushed at the time, worrying over Christy, and a little ticked off at Jena standing in his way. He'd taken her blood quickly, with little finesse, but oh, how fantastic he'd made her feel.

If Sebastian was that good on the run, she wondered what Ian could do if he took his time.

Ian Sinclair was every bit as alluring as Sebastian, and far older. What little she knew about his past came secondhand from Christy, and she'd be damned if she could understand why the man fascinated her so much. Christy told her little tidbits, such as how Ian had once been a knight. Those incredible muscles had been first built by wielding a sword, and he kept a stable of horses at one of his homes on the coast.

He lived nearby, but Christy either didn't know where or wasn't telling. Jena had also heard he was employed as some kind of enforcer for the vampire organization that her other friend Kelly's new husband Marc headed.

Simply put, Ian was assigned to watch her. Watching and waiting, ready to end her life should she make any move to reveal the existence of vampires or disseminate her knowledge of their kind. He was like police, judge and executioner for his kind, keeping sacred the most important of their laws, that of secrecy. She had no doubt the man was a cold blooded killer, though the thought of him didn't send shivers of fear down her spine. Nor revulsion. No, if she shivered it was in a very sexual kind of anticipation.

Since Christy's wedding, she hadn't been able to get the man out of her mind. They had shared a dance and conversation that wasn't quite as light or banal as it should have been between strangers.

They'd started out quite normally, talking about the bride and groom. It was Ian who turned the conversation to a more philosophical discussion about the miraculous existence of love in the world, even for a couple as unlikely as Christy and Sebastian. A battered woman and an English nobleman turned vampire over two centuries before.

Ian's firm belief that there was someone for everyone touched her heart, as had the warmth in his dark eyes. After that one dance, she'd felt the heat of his gaze on her as the party progressed, and she found herself watching him as well. Not only was he a fine figure of a man, but his manners were impeccable, and he seemed to have genuine affection for his friends. When it came time to toast the bride and groom, Jena was touched by Ian's eloquent, romantic, and tender salute to the new couple.

He wormed his way into her soft heart that night, and she hadn't been able to oust him since. Of course, it was nearly impossible to forget the man, since he was watching her every time she turned around. She'd seen him observing her come and go from her small, suburban home almost every night.

Yes, every night when she came home from work he was there, watching her, making his presence known but never speaking. His quiet appearances were probably meant to be menacing, but she found his surveillance oddly comforting. In fact, when she hadn't seen him tonight, for a moment—just a moment—she'd panicked.

But it was Saint Valentine's Day and she had a date. Jena had put Ian's absence from her mind with some difficulty and prepared for her evening out.

She didn't date much these days, spending most of time at the hospital, but she didn't want to be alone on this special night. So she'd given in and finally said yes to one of her fellow doctors, Dick Schmidt, a cardiac specialist with a big ego and very expensive car to match. Normally Jena wouldn't have given such a frivolous man the time of day, but Dick had been asking her out for weeks now, and his persistence had worn her down. Plus, what single woman really wanted to be alone on Valentine's Day?

She'd agreed to dinner and a few hours later, there she was, sitting in a trendy little bistro with a man she really didn't like sitting across from her. And a drop dead gorgeous vampire eyeing her from across the room.

They sat on the enclosed patio with tinkling white lights and soft moonlight filtering in through the glass roof. It was chilly outside, but within the heated glass enclosure they had the illusion of sitting outside without the cold February air intruding.

She tried to focus on Dick's inane conversation but it was hard. For one thing, he kept trying to touch her. The man was like an octopus, though mostly respectful of the fact that they were in public. Still, he was forever reaching across the table and touching her arms, her hands, and anything else he could reach. It was repulsive.

And then there was Ian. Sitting there, his eyes hot as sin. Watching her.

It was comforting in a way, but at the same time, rather annoying. As a vampire, Ian was totally off limits, unless she wanted to be a blood donor. But she wanted more than that from a man. She wanted a home and family, a man to care for who would care for her in return. She was

getting to the critical age where she needed to think of those things before she succumbed—like her ancestors before her—to the rare condition that caused her no end of worry about her future.

So she tried to ignore Ian and concentrate on getting to know Dick Schmidt better. Perhaps he really was a nice guy under all the outward flash. He deserved a chance, and heck, he was the only guy who'd asked her out in months now, so beggars couldn't be choosers. Jena tried to smile at his jokes and put all thoughts of the vampire across the small, dimly lit room out of her mind.

Of course it didn't help that Ian had a direct view of their table. The way his flashing eyes followed her every move was somewhat unnerving, but when he raised his glass of deep red wine in silent toast to her, Jena found she couldn't control the rush of blood to her cheeks. She tried to hide behind her water glass, but she knew the vampire's keen vision had picked up her blush, even in the dim lighting of the restaurant.

Ian didn't know why he was torturing himself this way. He'd watched the woman for months, and she showed no signs of betraying her friends or their secret. Her obvious loyalty counted for much in his mind. From what he had observed, the female doctor had formed deep friendships with Christy, Kelly and Lissa, the three new vampire mates who had been recently claimed and turned. The women had become fast friends in college and those bonds would not be easily broken. Jena seemed okay with the notion that some of her best friends had been converted by their new mates.

She was curious, of course, since she was a highly trained medical professional, but accepting that her friends and their new husbands were immortal. Ian admired the woman. She was strong, like the women of his clan had been back in the days of endless war with the English and then later in his travels through the Holy Land and along the Silk Road. But Jena was also soft and caring, with a gentle heart. He'd observed her at the hospital when she was on the night shift—though he was careful to mask his presence in such a public place—and he'd seen both her skill and her compassion.

He'd also watched the pathetic excuse for a man who now sat across from her ask her out on this ludicrous date. Silently, he'd been hoping she'd tell the weasel to take a hike, but to his consternation, she'd agreed to dinner with the other doctor. It had been all Ian could do not to reveal his presence and pound the smaller man into the floor for even daring to think he had a chance with this special woman.

Coming here tonight was immature, he knew, but Ian couldn't help himself. He had to watch over her. He told himself he was just doing the duty he'd sworn to perform as an enforcer for his kind, but really, he was here for himself. Jena wasn't going to tell weasel-boy about vampires, and even if she did, the mental munchkin sitting across from her wouldn't believe it. He just didn't have the imagination.

But he did have audacity. In vast quantities. Ian saw him reach across the table to snag her hand at the same time his leg moved and his sock-covered foot brushed over her calf. Jena jumped, moving her chair back so she was mostly out of reach of his marauding footsie, but she couldn't pull her hand away without causing a scene.

If that little twerp touches her one more time, Ian thought loudly in their direction, *it'll be the Saint Valentine's Day Massacre all over again.*

Really, Ian. The feminine flavored thoughts landed gently in his mind, shocking him down to his Italian leather loafers. *Please try to behave yourself.*

You heard me? It didn't seem possible the little human doctor could have any psi ability—and certainly not this kind of strong, delicious-tasting telepathy. Ian could count on one hand the number of humans he'd met over the centuries who could communicate with him this way.

Obviously. Her tone was dryly amused.

Fascinating. The observation escaped through his astonishment. *Do you make a habit of listening to other people's thoughts?*

Actually, no. I've only ever been able to pick up on really strong personalities and practically no one ever hears me when I talk back in their minds.

'Practically' no one?

Well, my mother can. And a few others.

More and more intriguing.

Dick Schmidt interrupted their silent conversation by squeezing her hand.

What do you see in a guy like that? He's on the make, plain and simple. And if you dare take Romeo home with you tonight, I may not be able to control myself.

His name is Dick.

How appropriate.

You wouldn't really hurt him, would you?

Ian paused. *I'd try not to, but honestly, Jena? I can't be certain. I don't like seeing you with him.*

But is it so wrong to want someone in my life, Ian? Compared to you, my life is so short. I want to find love, if I can. Her tone was so wistful, it lit the dark recesses where he'd buried his heart.

You won't find love with the likes of him. And you still have many years to consider, and find the man who will treat you right.

Not as many as you might think—or that I might wish for.

Ian would have asked what she meant by that cryptic comment, but Dick reclaimed her attention, shoving a small box across the table. Ian's hackles rose.

"For you, dollface." Ian's sharp hearing picked up the other man's smarmy tone.

Ian's only consolation was that Jena didn't seem all that thrilled at the prospect of receiving a gift from the other doctor. She opened the small package as if it were contagious, an expression of guarded curiosity on her beautiful face.

When she lifted the lid and dropped the box back on the table, Ian almost rose and rushed to her side, but she was quick to recover her composure. She pasted a patently false smile on her face and thanked the man for the lovely thought, but demurred from accepting what Ian now saw was a chunky silver bracelet. Even from across the room, he could smell the metallic tang of fine silver, more pure even than sterling.

Poison.

Pure silver was the fastest, most painful way to kill a vampire. It reacted with the special agent in their blood and tissues, frying them from the inside out. Ian had seen one or two of his kind die that way in his many centuries and the agony of their deaths haunted him still.

Give it back to him. I don't want that poison anywhere near you. Ian knew he was being unreasonable. She was human after all, silver wasn't lethal to her. But all his protective instincts rose when he saw the otherwise pretty ornament.

Believe me, neither do I. Silver and I just don't mix.

Jena slid the box back over to Dick using just the tip of one finger. She thanked him again for the sentiment, but explained her allergy to silver. She also said—much to Ian's satisfaction—she couldn't accept such a costly gift from a man she hardly knew.

You're allergic to silver? The idea made Ian pause. Few humans were truly allergic to the precious substance.

My skin turns black and a sort of disgusting shade of green. It's pretty gross, so I steer clear.

Curiouser and curiouser, Ian thought carefully to himself. The fair skin, the allergy to silver, preference for working the night shift...all these things suddenly made him suspicious. They brought to mind legends about how once in a very long while, a child might be born of a vampire and a mortal. It wasn't common at all, but every few hundred years or so, such things did occur.

The resulting children were often sickly, but usually survived into their thirties, and sometimes had children of their own. Demi-vampir, these oddities lived on the fringes of both worlds, often totally unaware of their connections to the supernatural unless they came into contact with a true vampire who was willing to clue them in.

Perhaps Jena, or one of her ancestors more likely, was the product of such a union? Then her abilities and proclivities would make a lot more sense. Ian wondered if she could be one of these—the rarest of the rare.

Chapter Two

Ian sat through the rest of the interminable dinner date, calmly sipping his wine, presenting a tranquil façade to the world while he inwardly seethed. Dick was really getting on his nerves. The unctuous doctor had more moves than an acrobat, and he tried every last one on Jena. But she was just a little too savvy. She verbally skirted around his glaring innuendo, and avoided his roving footsie with aplomb. Ian silently cheered her on from his ringside seat.

When it came time to leave, he was right behind them. Oh, most people wouldn't be aware he followed, but another supernatural being might just ferret him out—if they were really good.

Ian watched from the bushes at the foot of Jena's driveway as Doctor Octopus tried to charm his way inside her home. The little bastard would step through that door over Ian's dead body, and no other way. But he'd give Jena a chance to get rid of him in a more reasonable way first.

Ian didn't quite understand his own violent responses, but he knew he was far from rational where Jena was concerned. Still, he would try to play by the rules, as long as Doctor Dick didn't do anything to push Ian over the edge. He wanted so badly to pound the other man's face into the ground, he knew he had to steer clear if at all possible. Contact between himself and the smaller mortal male could very well be deadly for Doctor Dickhead.

Ian amused himself thinking up insulting variations of Dick's name while he waited impatiently for Jena to finally send the jerk on his way. Hey, it was better than ripping the man's face off. And far less troublesome.

But what had the world come to when a fearsome, centuries-old vampire had to play schoolyard games in his mind to keep from brutally biting a man he didn't like at all? Ian shook his head. It was because of Jena. Had to be. The woman was driving him crazy. It was as plain and simple as that. Before Jena had come into his life, he had been a mentally balanced, somewhat austere man. Since babysitting for the beautiful doctor, he'd become a salivating, slandering, just downright silly parody of himself.

Ian grinned in triumph when the sniveling facsimile of a man finally turned away from Jena's door in defeat. A silent pounding of his fist in the air was Ian's victory dance. He watched Dick Schmidt back his pompous luxury car out of the driveway, and followed his progress down the dark street until he was out of sight.

Only then did Ian make his way up to Jena's door. It was partially open as he knocked, and Jena stood on the other side as if expecting him. Perhaps she was, he thought with an inward quake. Perhaps she was one of the precious few mortals who could detect his kind, even when he wished to remain hidden. Or perhaps—and this was even more frightening—she was the one woman in all the world, and all the centuries, who was destined just for him.

"Will you invite me in?" Ian's voice was pitched low, his tone somber.

Jena knew the vampire had to be formally invited inside her dwelling. It was tradition, and these creatures thrived on tradition, if nothing else. But the question remained in her mind—should she? Should she invite the vampire into her home, breaching the sanctity of her only retreat?

Could she trust Ian not to take advantage? Could she trust him not to kill her, if for some reason he took it into his mind that she was a threat to his people? That was the crux of the matter right there.

Jena considered for a long moment before stepping back to make room for him to enter.

"Please come in, Ian."

"You say that with such resignation. As if you've been expecting me."

Jena shrugged. "I knew from the moment I saw you in that restaurant, you would show up here sooner or later."

Ian sighed dramatically. "How the mighty have fallen. I've become predictable in my old age."

Jena chuckled as he swept past her into the small foyer of her house. He had a quirky sense of humor and it took her by surprise.

"I'll grant that you're probably much older than me, but you give the appearance of being only a few years my senior. So the 'old age' thing just won't work."

"Ah, the impertinence of youth." His eyes sparkled with mischief. "But then what's an immortal to do?"

Jena ushered him into the small, heated greenhouse that was attached onto the back of her home. It was a refuge in the sheltering greenery of her private backyard. She kept a small wine cooler in the room for when she needed to unwind after a long day—or night—at the hospital. There were also a multitude of candles just waiting to be lit around a small patio set with a table and two chairs.

"Will you join me in a glass of Beaujolais Nouveau? Can your kind drink that?"

Ian actually shivered. "It is a delicacy to me. The first wine...the closest thing to sunshine I will ever feel again."

Jena was touched by his unexpectedly poetic words as she bent to retrieve a fresh bottle from her private stock in the wine cooler. When she straightened from her task, Ian was already seated, and several of the nearest candles were lit.

"You move fast," she nodded toward the flickering tapers.

"When the need arises." Ian bowed his head slightly in acknowledgement.

Smiling, Jena set the wine bottle before him, along with a cork screw. "Will you do the honors?"

"Gladly."

Ian made short work of the wrapper and cork, allowing the wine to breathe a bit while Jena reached behind her for a pair of crystal glasses. He really had impeccable manners, like something right out of the pages

of history. But then, that's essentially what he was. He had lived in gentler times and had the manners to prove it.

Jena could not let herself forget that regardless how polite he was now, Ian was a cold-blooded killer. Not only had he embraced the darker side of existence when he became a vampire, but the work he did as an enforcer for the vampire hierarchy only honed his deadly skills. It was his job to hunt down rogues among his kind, dispense justice, and protect the secrecy of their existence from all mortals.

She guessed he had also dealt with other kinds of supernatural beings throughout his many years on earth. Intrigued, she tried to imagine just a little bit of what he had lived through in his centuries. The things he must have seen. The places he must have lived. It boggled the mind.

"I wish you wouldn't look at me like that." Ian's voice floated from out of the night. The candles were for her benefit, she knew. Vampires could see quite well in the dark.

"Like what?" She tried to be nonchalant, but it was clear she'd been caught staring.

Ian poured the wine calmly. "Like you're wondering just what horrible things I've done over the centuries."

Damn. "So are you a mind reader as well as a vampire?" Jena lifted the glass and tried to brazen it out.

"Sometimes. Though it's more my skill at reading facial expressions and body language than anything psychic. And you're wonderfully easy to read, Jena." He toasted her with his glass.

"So much for a woman's air of mystery."

Ian drank a small sip from his glass and appeared to truly savor it. The look on his face was that of a man who had touched the sublime. Jena knew the Beaujolais was good. It came from Atticus' vineyard, after all. Atticus was a vampire who had spent centuries perfecting his vines and his wine making craft.

"Oh, your mystique is in tact, doctor. Never fear." Ian cradled the glass as if it held the most precious thing in the universe. And for him, perhaps it did.

Jena's newly changed friends had told her just a bit about the vampire's relationship to wine and how alcohol somehow reacted with their body chemistry to heal them. It was about the only thing they could ingest without becoming ill and it held an almost mystical significance to them. It was their one last link to the sun.

Her friends wouldn't tell her much more, but just knowing of the existence of vampires in the world fascinated Jena. It amazed her to think her newly-turned friends would live on long after she was dead. They would remember her and perhaps in that way, she'd leave just a little of herself behind.

Depressing thoughts bothered her more and more often these days. Part of it was seeing her friends' happiness and wondering how she might find just a small portion of the same before her short time on earth was up.

They sat quietly for a while in companionable silence while the night wore on. Jena thought of the miserable date she'd just ended and the rotten luck she had with men and with Valentine's Day in particular. She'd never had a successful date on a Valentine's Day and thought the holiday was vastly overrated. Jena sighed as she sipped her wine.

"This whole Valentine's thing is for suckers."

Ian chuckled as he poured more wine for them both.

"I knew a man once who guarded Valentine in Rome, a thousand years before I was born. Valentine was a humble priest when the emperor outlawed marriage among his young soldiers. Seems he thought single men made better soldiers with no one at home to worry about. Valentine was imprisoned and killed for the crime of marrying off youngsters who had every reason in the world not to marry. Romantic fool that he was, he claimed the only true reason to wed was love."

"You're talking about Saint Valentine?" Again Jena was fascinated by the idea that this man had walked the earth for centuries and had known others who were even more ancient.

Ian nodded. "Legend has it he wrote the first Valentine note to the daughter of his jailer, a blind girl who befriended him. When she opened

his note, God granted her a miracle and she could suddenly see. He'd signed the note simply, 'Your Valentine'."

"That's such a beautiful story."

"My friend often said Valentine would have been tickled to see what's become of his name and his legend. He was a pious man for all that he enjoyed seeing young love in bloom."

"When did he live?"

Ian shrugged. "Oh, somewhere around 270 A.D., I think."

Jena was stunned by the idea. "Just how old are you, Ian?" Her whispered words reached out through the darkness.

Ian dreaded the question. At no time since his conversion had he felt the weight of his years more acutely than when sitting across from this young, vital woman. But yet, something inside him longed to be open with her, when he hadn't talked of his past with anyone in decades...perhaps centuries.

"Not quite that old, Jena. I was born in 1232, or thereabouts. Back then, the common folk didn't keep such rigorous track of the years as we do now." He waited, but Jena was silent, which surprised him. She didn't ask questions about his life, she merely waited, as if prepared to accept whatever he chose to share. Somehow that made it easier. "The Crusades were mostly over by then, but I only realize that now, by virtue of being able to look back at what seemed so important to me at the time, through the lens of history. Even though I knew it was foolhardy, I trained as a knight and followed King Louis—the ninth one—to lay siege to Tunis. Got sick as a dog from some gut rot that was going around." Ian sipped at his wine, remembering. "Louis actually died from it. To this day, I still think it was sabotage, but we couldn't prove anything."

"So you were still...human then."

Ian's eyes challenged her. "Mortal, you mean? Oh, yes, very much. I didn't run into Dom until a year or two later. 1271 was the year I followed Marco Polo and his father to China."

"You're kidding."

Ian chuckled. Somehow it felt right to be telling her these things that he hadn't thought of in decades. "Afraid not. I was part of their traveling party. After the failed siege at Tunis, I went to Rome to seek the wisdom of a priest I'd met in my travels who lived there in service to the Pope. He knew the Polos and suggested to them that I might be handy to have along as added protection, I guess. Father Augustus counseled me to meditate on the long journey. He told me I would find my answer in the East. Or that's what he claimed God had told him. He was a funny old man that way, but back in those days I was inclined to believe when a holy man told me God spoke to him on a regular basis." Ian shrugged. "Regardless, off I went on the Silk Road to China. And there I met Domitian, the vampire who gave me the blessing and curse of immortality."

"But why?"

Ian sighed heavily. "Who's to say? Perhaps he was lonely. Dom had traveled the earth since before the time of Christ. He's the one who knew Valentine. He once told me he'd been a Praetorian Guard during the reign of at least three Caesars. We had Rome in common, though the Rome I knew was much different from the city in which he'd been born."

Ian put his half-full glass on the table, his gaze meeting hers. "As to why he changed me? Treachery. Pure and simple. There were factions that didn't want the Polos to succeed in their business venture, both rivals from their own land and isolationists and political maneuverers in the lands through which we traveled. Some were more violent than others and as a knight, it was my job to organize a defense and repulse any attacks. It's what got me killed—or as close as I've come in my long life.

"I'd already become friends with Dom. We met him on the Road and he invited us to stay at his compound while we rested for the next leg of the journey. We'd been staying with him for a few days when the attack came—raiders from the East trying to stop us before we could make it through to the Khan—but we repulsed them. I was gravely wounded in the fighting, though, and taken within Dom's private home to be treated,

but I was too far gone. When Dom saw me, he decided to save me in his own way and made me what I am.”

“He gave you his blood.” Her tone was solemn, her eyes filled with compassion that was almost his undoing. Ian couldn’t believe he’d told her so much of the past he usually kept well buried. He sighed and picked up the glass once more, twirling it by the stem between his agitated fingers.

“Forgive me. I didn’t mean to dwell on things better left forgotten.”

“What happened to Dom?” Her soft voice tempted him.

“I don’t know, actually. He taught me all I needed to know about my new life. When the Polos continued on their way, I stayed with Dom in his compound. I stayed there for quite a while, in fact, until Dom decided to pick up stakes and move on. When he left, I did too, though traveling was a lot tougher in those days for our kind.”

“I bet.” Jena chuckled just slightly as she sipped at her wine. “I’m glad he saved you, Ian.” Her tender tone nearly stopped his heart.

Ian paused, considering his words before speaking. “There are times I wished he’d let me die over the years, but just now, being here with you, it all seems worthwhile.”

Jena blushed, her vital young blood heating her cheeks and making him salivate in anticipation. “I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“I say that only to you, Jena, because it’s true.” He reached across the small table to grasp her hand, stilling her nervous movements.

Chapter Three

Jena thought absently how different this little tête-à-tête with Ian was when compared to the disastrous date she'd had earlier that night with Dick. For one thing, when Ian grasped her hand, her womb clenched in anticipation and excitement instead of dread. Ian was a man well out of her league and much too dangerous to her heart. How could she even entertain the idea of flirting with him when there was no way she could survive any closer encounter with him without badly bruising—if not breaking—her fragile, mortal heart?

She knew it was highly unlikely Ian would magically discover she was the one woman in all the world meant just for him. Sure, just that had happened to a few of her best friends, but what were the odds of Jena being yet another match for one of these amazing vampire studs? Not likely. Not likely at all.

Still, just looking into Ian's eyes was a pleasure she would remember all her life. When he left, she would pull out the memory of this night and warm herself with the echoes of the fire she saw in his burning gaze. His hand tightened on hers and her nerves erupted. He was getting too close. It was time to pull back in the name of self-preservation.

"Don't think you're going to sweet talk your way into a blood donation, Ian. I've been bitten once, and that was enough."

Ian sat back, breaking the contact and pulling his hand away from hers. She missed his touch immediately. His gaze was still hot though, burning over her skin as he considered her.

"Sebastian told me about it, you know."

Oh, God. Jena took a sip of her wine, hoping to cool the flush of embarrassment she knew must be staining her cheeks.

"You mean you guys bite and tell? Have you no shame?" She hoped he would go with the humor and drop the subject, but somehow she suspected he wouldn't let her off that easy.

"Sebastian drank from you in front of witnesses, and he was half out of his mind with worry, knowing he had to change Christy quickly in order to save her life, but he made a point to tell me he thought there was something odd about your blood."

"Odd? I don't think I like the sound of that."

"Special then," he conceded. "He said your essence gave him more energy than it should have, though he couldn't be sure with all the turmoil of the moment. Still, when things had settled down, he remembered it and thought it significant enough to call and tell me. He thought I should know when I was assigned to watch you."

"So why are you telling me this? Is this some elaborate way of asking for a taste? If so, I'm not buying it. I refuse to give another vampire cheap thrills and a meal."

Jena blushed furiously as she remembered the way Sebastian had fed from her, his astounding mental powers taking over her body and giving her an orgasm unequalled in her experience. In public! In front of her friends. And with all their clothes still on and his hands around her, but only to hold her upright, not in any place the least bit provocative. The man was dangerous.

And she'd bet Ian was downright lethal.

"First of all, you could never be cheap, Jena, and you'd get as much—if not more—out of it as I would." His gaze burned a path over her pebbled nipples as if he knew just how much his sexy, low voice turned her on. And he probably did too, the rat.

"Second, I really am curious enough to ask. Sebastian is relatively young compared to me and I truly wonder if what he sensed was accurate or just a product of the tense situation you were all in at the time. Third, I've observed you for the past weeks and have some theories of my own I'd like to test. Tasting your blood would go a long way toward helping me secure your future safety."

She would have questioned him on that point, but he just kept talking in his commanding way, not letting her get a word in edgewise.

“And lastly,” his voice dropped even lower, sexier, “you know as well as I do that I could seduce you into baring your neck—and anything else I asked for. But I’m man enough to give you the choice. I don’t want it if you don’t want to give it. I’m old fashioned like that.” He shrugged and tossed off the last of his wine, replacing the glass on the small table.

Holy crap.

The man was walking, talking sex on a stick. And he was thirsting for her. Or her blood, at least. With it, if he was anything like his friend, he would give her intense sexual satisfaction, but somehow she didn’t think Ian would be satisfied with just giving her a mental orgasm. No, Ian would want more. He’d want skin on skin, body on body, all out, messy sex.

And she was practically salivating at the thought of it. Her womb clenched and her panties grew embarrassingly damp.

“So you want to bite me?” She had to get control of this conversation back somehow.

“In a word? Yes.” Ian’s eyes bored into hers. “And I want to fuck you.”

Jena twirled her nearly empty glass, trying to buy time while her thoughts were in turmoil. She fought down the gulp of panic that wanted to sound from her suddenly parched throat.

“You know, that’s not very romantic.”

Ian stood and swept her up into his arms. She thumped into him, out of breath from his amazingly fast and forceful action. His arms came around her waist as she looked helplessly up into his exotic, mysterious eyes.

“I can be romantic.” He tucked one of her hands up around his neck, taking the other lightly in his as he began shuffling her around the dim room in a slow dance.

“Ian, there’s no music.” How had she ended up next to his hard body, nestled so close against his muscular chest and rippling abs? He was like a drug, lulling her into compliance.

"I can fix that." Ian pointed one finger at her small stereo, switching it on with his mind and turning the dial to a slow jazz station. In seconds, soft, sexy sounds emanated from the small stereo unit and he took up the rhythm with his feet once more.

"Telekinesis too?" she asked, a bit in awe of this amazing man who held her so close to his perfect body.

Ian shrugged and she felt the slide of his solid muscles over bone under her hands. He was like Michelangelo's David, he was so hard, yet so beautifully formed.

"Over the years, my powers have increased. The telepathy and telekinetic abilities are something that grow over time along with the other psi abilities."

"You guys are amazing."

"Not quite so amazing as you, *cara*. Have you always been telepathic?" He steered her around the small room expertly to the low, erotic tones of the jazz music, his body in perfect alignment with hers. She felt his every word deep in her veins, pulsing through her body.

"My mother could always pick up on my thoughts, even as a baby, she said. Some of my earliest memories are of her speaking to me in my mind." She remembered those times in her youth fondly as Ian held her close. Something about his hold was so protective while at the same time, provocative.

"And your father?"

Jena shook her head. "He didn't have the ability and he didn't quite believe my mother and I did either, no matter how many times we did something unexplainable in front of him. He was a hard case."

"He's gone then?"

The soft ache she'd had since her father died ceased to hurt quite as much while Ian held her safe in his strong arms. "He died in a car wreck about ten years ago. It's why I decided to go into medicine."

"And your blood anomalies had no influence on your choice?"

She stopped dancing to pull back and look up at him. "How did you know about that? Did you guys have me investigated? How did you get my medical records? I thought those were sealed!"

"Whoa, hold on, *cara mia*. I was guessing. But I'm right, aren't I?"

All the fight went out of her. "How did you guess? I thought I hid my problems pretty well."

"Perhaps from most people, but I've been around a long time and I'm trained to be observant." He stroked her hair, soothing her with his touch. She found herself burrowing into his chest, seeking his strength.

"A long line of my ancestors had the same problem I do. At least that's what my mother says. She's got it too and she's lived longer than most, but she had me very young and has always been a bit healthier than I am. Most of the family tree I've been able to trace didn't live past about thirty-five, so I'm starting to worry about the future."

Ian wanted so badly to reassure her. If she truly were demi-vampir, he knew his brethren would do all they could to protect her and prolong her life. Such had been done in the past when creatures had been discovered who lived with one foot in both the mortal and immortal worlds. It was a cruel twist of fate that would allow a full vampire to find his mate, only to have a child that was not fully either mortal or vampire.

Most true mates underwent the conversion before having children. Only once in a rare while, tragedy struck, leaving the child and all their children for generations—as might well be the case with Jena—half and half.

But Ian needed to know for certain before he raised her hopes. He had to taste her blood. It was a deep-seated desire, both to satisfy his curiosity about her origins and perhaps offer protection, but also because he desired her more than any woman he had ever met in all his long years. She intrigued him on so many levels and had since the moment he'd first seen her.

"So what gave me away?" Her voice was small, her head resting just under his chin, against his chest. She was tired and wrung out emotionally after the rigors of the night, he could tell. He wanted nothing more than to ease her sadness and bring her joy. But first he had to convince her. He would force nothing from her. She would give—and give freely—he swore it by all he still held holy.

“The aversion to silver, the fair skin that probably burns easily. Your penchant for working the night shift. The lights on in your house at all hours of the night. Your excellent taste in wine.” He rattled off the list, injecting a bit of humor into his voice. She needed a friend right now, but she would know how much he wanted her beneath him before too much more time had passed. He would choose his moment though, to ease her into the idea of becoming his lover. Such things had to be finessed in this day and age.

She chuckled and he felt it against his heart. Contrary to legend, Ian did have a heart and it still beat. His skin wasn’t cold. No, his base temperature was actually a little hotter than a normal human, thanks to the changes that had been made to his blood and tissues on a cellular level when he’d been turned. The blood that flowed in his veins now was laced with a substance some claimed was not originally of this earth. It gifted him—or cursed, depending on your point of view—with immortal life and certain limitations, such as an inability to walk in the sun, eat food, or touch silver.

“You really want to get a taste of my blood?”

Ian sucked in a breath as she leaned back to look deep into his eyes. Slowly, he nodded.

“All right.”

Was she saying yes? So much for finesse. It looked like the direct approach worked after all with this spectacular, unpredictable woman.

“But I want something in return.”

Ian’s exuberant joy was tempered by her words. He would give her anything, agree to any terms, if he could just have her essence, and with it her delectable body.

“What do you desire?” He knew the fire that flared in his veins flickered in his eyes as she touched him. She moved her hands up around his neck and into his hair, tugging downward.

“I want the fairytale, Ian. At least for tonight. I want this Valentine’s Day to mean something more than disappointment and disillusionment. I want to make love to you all night long and feel like you really want to be

here, with me, in my bed. I want to believe...just for a little while...that a man like you could actually want a girl like me. Just once, before I die.”

Her words drilled into his core and nearly broke his heart. Ian drew her close against his chest, hugging her, and dipping his head to nuzzle her ear.

“I can give you that,” he breathed into the delicate shell, “but *cara mia*, it won’t be an illusion.” She gasped as he bit down gently on her earlobe before trailing his lips down her neck. “I’ve wanted you since the moment I first saw you.” He used one hand on her lower back to pull her softly rounded hips into his body, pressing his hard cock against her, rubbing insistently. “Feel what you do to me? It’s been like this since the moment I first breathed in your delicate scent. You enchanted me that first night, *cara*, and I’ve dreamed of this every moment since.”

“Ian,” she gasped as he licked her throat. “Ian, kiss me. Please.”

He growled low in his throat. Satisfaction tore through him at her breathy moan.

“Your wish,” he dragged his lips up to hers, “is my command.”

Careful of his lengthening incisors, Ian claimed the kiss he’d waited weeks to initiate. Never before had he wanted to drink in a woman and never let her go, but he felt that way with Jena. She was special to him already, and her taste flooded his senses with unbelievable fire. She was sweet and delicate, her shy tongue dueling with his after a little coaxing, setting him ablaze.

When his teeth nicked her lip, he drew back at her gasp.

The sight of the little red droplet forming on her plump inner lip was nearly his undoing, but he managed to control himself long enough to lean forward and lick it away with his tongue. He just couldn’t resist.

That tiny taste was enough to send him reeling. She was a feast for the senses, her essence flooded him with power the likes of which he had never known before. Ian staggered back as her beautiful face scrunched up with concern for him.

“Ian?” Her hand went to his elbow, supporting him while she walked him into the living room. “What’s wrong?”

He stopped her when she would have pushed him down to rest on her pretty flowered couch. He tugged her back into his arms, where she belonged, but allowed her concern to wash over him like a healing balm.

“Are you okay?”

“I’ve never been more alive, *cara mia*, not even since before I was turned.” He knew a grin was splitting his face, but he couldn’t contain his joy. Just that little taste told him all he needed to know about her origins. Her blood contained trace amounts of the substance that made his own blood so different—just in a slightly different form and in much lower concentration. She was truly half in his world and half in the mortal realm.

“Why are you looking at me so strangely?” She had a hesitant smile on her face that he longed to kiss away, but he had to share his good news with her first.

“It’s your blood.” Her hand immediately went to the scratch on her lip, her delicate finger tracing over the tiny wound. “Even from that tiny taste I can tell you are what we call demi-vampir, Jena. Somewhere in your family tree is one of my kind who mated with a mortal and produced one of your ancestors. It doesn’t happen often, but every once in a while, something prevents true mates from completing the bond and even rarer, a child results who is like you, demi-vampir.”

“What?” Ian could see the thoughts racing behind her eyes, her scientifically trained mind trying to grasp what he was saying. “Are you sure?”

“As certain as I can be. Jena, honey, this means that you won’t have to fear dying young any longer. I, and my brethren, will protect you and nurture you. We can help you live a normal mortal life span, if that is your wish, or you can be easily changed. Legend even holds that a demi-vampir, once turned, still retains some ability to walk in the sun, among other things.”

Her eyes narrowed in thought. “I don’t know if I want to be a vampire, Ian. I mean, it’s okay for my friends—they have someone to share eternity with—but for me alone? I’m just not sure about that at all.”

“Well, you don’t have to decide anything now, *cara*. All this means is that you can stop worrying about your future health. We know what afflicts you now and we can take steps to see you through the rough patches.”

Ian was thrilled by the way she clung to him, burrowing into his chest as if she wanted to take up residence. But there were other things to see to this night. Pleasure being chief among them.

“Where’s your bedroom, sweetheart?” He kept his voice pitched low, letting her know it was still her decision, giving her an out should she decide to withdraw.

Jena’s beautiful eyes mesmerized him as she drew back to meet his gaze. Very deliberately, she looked to the doorway on his right and then back. Then she smiled a sexy, engaging smile as she pulled slightly back from him and led him by the hand to her room. She barely had the door closed behind them before he had her back in his arms.

Chapter Four

Jena could hardly believe what Ian had just told her. First, to learn that he truly desired her had been a naughty dream come true. If she were being brutally honest with herself, she'd admit that Ian had made her cream her panties the moment she first saw him...and every time since.

Then to feel his amazingly hot kiss. That kiss had nearly knocked her right off her feet. But she wouldn't have minded that at all, as long as Ian landed on top of her. She had to suppress a giggle of pure excitement as she led him into her bedroom. This was her inner sanctum, her place to retreat from the rigors of the day and dream of a man like the one who stood before her now.

She knew she couldn't keep him, but Ian was the stuff dreams were made of. His body was hard muscled and his gaze followed her every movement with an intensity that made her heart pound and her breath catch. It had been like that from the first. Ever since she'd met him, he'd starred in all her erotic flights of fancy. And tonight she would live them, one by one, for as long as he would allow it. This was her night. She vowed to make the most of it.

The bombshell he'd just dropped about her blood had nearly floored her, but Jena didn't want to think about it just then. It was enough to know that there was hope. Ian had given her that. He'd given her hope that her condition wouldn't be fatal quite as soon as it had been for her ancestors. And perhaps there was hope now for her mother as well. If the vampires were willing to help her, they would probably also be willing to help her mom. She'd have to ask Ian—later. First, there was the much more pressing matter of fulfilling a few dearly held fantasies.

"I want you so much, lass." Ian's dark voice breathed into the hair at her nape as his lips and tongue caressed her neck. "I want to hear you scream my name in pleasure as I come inside you and drink your sweet essence. I want to put my mark on you so you'll never forget me. Ever."

"Damn, Ian. When you play a part, you really take it all the way, don't you?" Oddly she felt a little cheated that his ardent words were just part of the fantasy she'd demanded from him. Suddenly she wished her words unsaid. She should have just let events unfold as they would. By asking for the dream, she'd made herself unsure if anything he said or did was real. She'd wonder all night, and for years to come, if the things he was saying were what he was really feeling or just what he thought she wanted to hear.

Jena stepped back, tugging out of his arms.

"What is it?" Immediately his hands cupped her shoulders, not allowing her to step away. "What's wrong?" His gentle voice sounded through her heart, cracking it open and finding its way within.

"Can you forget what I said earlier? I don't want you saying things tonight that you don't mean. I thought I did...but...I don't. Can we start over?"

Ian tugged her closer, his unexpected strength making her stumble just a tiny bit, but he was there to catch her with his hard body. He demanded her attention as fire leapt visibly in his eyes.

"I don't have to start over, *cara*, because I haven't said anything to you tonight that I didn't mean. I have never, and will never, lie to you."

"But—"

He placed one long finger over her lips, stilling her words. "You wanted me to pretend, but what you're getting is real. I don't have to pretend because I do want you—more than any woman I've ever known. I want to fuck you and feast on you 'til the sun parts us and then I want to come back for more tomorrow night. You'd better rest up and eat your Wheaties because you'll need your strength. I'm giving you fair warning right now."

"But how can you—?"

His lips stilled her worried words this time and when he drew back, she was his to command. His magnetism had always drawn her, but now focused on her exclusively, she could barely control herself. She was beyond caring if his words would prove false in the harsh light of morning when she was alone once more. For this moment, and the hours to come, she would suspend disbelief as much as she could and just enjoy the wonder of him.

“Make love to me, Ian.”

He swept her up into his arms and placed her gently on the bed. Luckily it was large enough for both of them, though he was a tall man. The bed in his home was larger still, and he would introduce her to it as soon as possible, but for tonight, this first time, he would take her here, amidst the lace and frippery of her feminine retreat.

Another man might've been intimidated by the womanly surroundings, but Ian delighted in the idea that he was conquering her pretty rose colored bedroom just as he conquered her soft pink flesh. He wasted little time on her clothes, pulling her top off over her shoulders and tugging at her skirt. The front closure on her lacy bra gave way under his questing fingers and the thin cotton of her panties was no match for his decisive pull.

She was naked.

And so incredibly beautiful.

Ian was amazed she had such power over him. Her light skin called to him, her warm scent begged him to breathe her in and never let go. Gingerly, he touched her, cupping the smooth roundness of her breast, watching with genuine enjoyment as her nipple pebbled and strained upward in his hand, calling for his kiss.

He bent and licked the pointy tip, reveling in her sighs and the tender feel of her fingers sifting through the hair at the nape of his neck. She held him to her, encouraging him with her panting breaths and eager fingers as he sucked her nipple deep, using just a hint of the teeth that were even now lengthening to scrape along her delicate skin. He would leave no mark, but he would tantalize her in a way she'd never forget.

She would never forget him, or this night. He would see to it. It was a need deep inside him, to put his mark on this woman and brand her for life. He didn't question the need. It just was. And it was close to overwhelming.

Ian took a moment to rid himself of his clothes in short order, not leaving the bed. He knelt above her body, tearing at his shirt and throwing it across the room as her gaze followed his every movement. When his chest was bare, he lay back on the bed at her side, encouraging her exploration with a few nudges and a wicked smile. Jena didn't let him down.

Her little hands roamed over his chest as he tugged at his pants, finally succeeding at getting them off when she turned the tables on him. Her pouty lips circled his nipple and then that devilish tongue of hers peeped out to tease him, but he wouldn't let her have her way...this time.

No, this first time was all about getting inside her as fast as possible. The hunger was riding him hard and he knew he had little control left. If he wanted to make this good for her at all, he had to be in control of every movement.

He might give her a turn later at calling the shots, but not this time.

He flipped her onto her back and spread her legs, kneeling between them. She was open to him and very vulnerable in this position, but a quick check of her expression told him all he needed to know. She was with him.

"This time it's got to be fast, but I'll make it good, baby. I promise. I just can't wait."

"Don't wait, Ian." Her breathy sighs pushed him forward, his hard cock seeking its home between her slick thighs.

"I'm sorry, *cara*. I can't wait anymore. I need to be inside you."

And with a long, hot shove, he was home. Inside her. Welcomed into her depths with a feeling of warmth he'd seldom felt in his long life.

"Ian!" Jena wrapped her luscious legs around him, using her thigh muscles to pull him closer. Ian couldn't resist. He leaned down over her, capturing her lips with his in a kiss of heat and discovery as he began moving, powerful and sure, within her.

He pumped her slow and steady, now that he was where he wanted to be, he could take the time to make sure he was with her every step of the way. She was so responsive, it took little to make her climax, once and then again. She came so beautifully, her energy bathing his senses as he drew it all in.

Ian had fed off of many women in the centuries of his existence, but never had an orgasm given him such a feeling. It made him want more. And more.

Ian drove steadily, delighting in the feel of her pussy clamped around him, her inner muscles milking him as he moved faster and faster. The fire was overtaking him, drowning him in the heat of her sexy body and he was a willing victim. Her orgasm rippled through him yet again, recharging his psi energies and pushing him onward.

Ian rubbed his chest along her soft body, loving the feel of her tightened nipples as they rasped over his skin. She was so soft, so delicate, yet so explosive in his arms. She was perfect.

Only one thing would make this experience even better.

Her blood.

Ian licked his way up her neck to the pulse he could feel pounding just under the surface. He could just hear the faint sound of her heart, tempting him as it pumped her rich blood through the network of veins and arteries he knew so well. All it would take was a sip. Just a taste of her amazing demi-vampir blood.

He had to guard against taking too much. He didn't want to hurt her and he knew with such passion flowing, he could easily get carried away. No, he'd have to be very, very careful.

Just a taste. That's all he wanted. He needed to taste her essence as he came inside her lovely body. It was imperative.

Leaning in, he licked over the spot he chose, just over her pulse.

"Give it to me now, *cara*," he ordered in a soft voice, just beneath her ear. "Now I make you mine."

"I'm yours, Ian. Yours!"

Her whispered words spurred him on as he bit down as gently as he could manage. At the first taste of her flowing blood, he knew.

He came hard inside her tight channel, flooding her womb with his seed as her essence flooded his mouth and senses. Senses that were screaming at him in triumph.

She was his.

Jena thought she knew what to expect from a vampire's bite after the experience with Sebastian, but Ian's slow, sexy sucking was nothing like what Sebastian had done to her. It was also nothing like anything she had remotely imagined or dreamed.

It was better.

And more intimate.

She felt him in the marrow of her bones...and in her mind.

Ian?

Oh, dear God in heaven! His words sounded through her mind differently than before. This time she didn't just hear his words, but she felt his wonder, his amazement, his humility and joy. It stole her breath as she peaked yet again under the triple assault of his hot, hard cock, his sucking mouth, and his overwhelming feelings of awe.

She picked up more than that as his climax began to ease. She heard the words and saw the images of his life. She shared in his past and realized dimly that he was doing the same. He was in her mind!

Ian!

I'm here, my love. I'm here now and I'll never leave. We'll never be apart ever again.

Oh, God, Ian. What is this?

Don't you know? Can't you see it in my memories? Can't you feel my hopes come to fruition, my prayers of eight hundred years answered in a single moment? He drew back and stared down into her eyes. She saw herself reflected there. It was an odd sensation, but it felt so...right.

Are you trying to tell me—?

You're my one and only. My mate. The one woman in all the world, and all the centuries, who can complete me. Don't you feel it? Don't you feel me within you, a part of you, in every possible way? He stroked his long cock gently inside her, reminding her of his presence not only in her

mind, but in her body as well. *I love you, Jena. More than life. And I will love you to the end of my existence.*

Oh, Ian! She clutched his shoulders, tears leaking from her eyes, but they were tears of joy. She felt the truth of his words, felt his emotions as he felt them, as she guessed he was feeling hers.

Ian kissed her nose, then licked away her tears. *That's right, my love. I feel what you feel, just as you feel what I feel. Isn't it fantastic?*

Amazing. It's amazing, Ian. I never realized... She trailed off as she got caught up in his emotions, just scratching the surface of his memories of the seemingly endless years he'd searched in vain for her. His wonder at finding her was off the charts and it humbled her to think this magnificent man—this knight of old—could be so thrilled with the idea of having plain old her in his life. *Oh, Ian. I love you too. So much!*

I know. The cocky arrogance was back, but she could feel the sentiment and indulgent love behind his words. He was such a special man. And she was his mate. The idea would take some getting used to, but she didn't mind that one bit. She'd love delving into this man's mind, his heart, and his incredible sexual expertise. After all, she had a lot of catching up to do!

"Hold that thought, love. First we have to secure the room against the sun and then I'm going to barricade the door, take the phone off the hook and spend as much time as I possibly can making love to you."

Chapter Five

Ian pulled swiftly from her body and went over to close the heavy drapes, inspecting them for light fastness. She could hear his thoughts and he apparently *heard* her too when she told him the curtains were indeed sun proof. She'd had them made specially since her skin had always been so fair and she couldn't spend a lot of time in the sun.

Ian returned to her moments later. He rested his broad back against the headboard of her full size bed and nestled her into his arms, resting his chin lightly over the crown of her head. She sighed and snuggled against his warmth, feeling him taking up residence in her heart and very soul.

"I can hardly believe this is happening. I mean, when Sebastian saved Christy in the hospital, it was a shock to learn that vampires existed, but then I found out about Lissa and Kelly. I never dared dream I'd be a match too."

Ian seemed to ponder her words. "I know some of our researchers were already looking into why and how the three of them congregated together as such close friends. Finding a cluster of mates so close like that seemed statistically impossible before, but now, after finding you and knowing your true nature, it begins to make more sense."

She shifted a bit in his arms to look up at him. "How so?"

"Your power probably drew them, my love." He leaned down and kissed her sweetly, then pulled back again. "Even demi-vampir have some echo of the true vampire's influence. Fate plays a role too, of course, but I'm not surprised those three women—destined to become vampire mates—would be drawn into your orbit. Tell me," he stroked her

shoulder and down her back, “were any of them friends before they met you?”

Jena had to think back. “Christy was my roommate and I introduced her to the others. I met Carly, Lissa and Kelly in calculus class and we formed a study group. I don’t think they knew each other before that, but they’ve been as close as sisters ever since.” She resettled her cheek against his warm chest, just above the reassuring beat of his heart. “I met Sally about a year later in a martial arts class and she just jelled with the rest of the group even though she’s a bit older than the rest of us. After that, the group of us were pretty inseparable, even though we were majoring in different things.”

“It’s as I thought then. You are the link that drew those women together. I wonder—”

“If Sally is also some vampire’s mate?” She finished the thought for him. “Now wouldn’t that be a kicker? Especially considering her line of work. Sensible cops like Sally probably don’t deal well with the supernatural.”

“You might be surprised.” Ian turned her, teasing her skin with the light dusting of chest hair that rubbed her in all the right ways. “It’s a matter that definitely should be explored—but later. Right now I want to make love to my beautiful mate once more before the sun rises.”

“Ian, do you think—?”

“That your potent demi-vampir blood will allow me to walk in the sun?” He shrugged but there was an almost painful mix of hope and resignation in his eyes. “We shall see. But I dare not get my hopes up. We’ll take this slow. The first step, which we’ll take tomorrow night, will be to notify Marc LaTour, the Master of this region, about our mating and your family history. I trust him. He’ll help us figure out how to protect you.”

“Protect me?”

“Honey, if word of your demi-vampir nature gets out, every unscrupulous vampire in the world will be looking to bite you. The idea of seeing the sun again is very tantalizing. Even if your blood doesn’t

work like that, just the idea that it *might*, will bring them flocking to your door.”

“Can’t we just keep it a secret? I mean, I’ve lived this long without any problems. As long as we don’t tell anybody, I can probably continue living as I have.”

He paused, seeming to consider her words. “Yes, that’s true, and I definitely do want to keep it a secret as much as we can, but we have to tell Marc. For one thing, it’s my duty. For another, we’ll need his help to establish protection for your mother. And for yet another,” he lay down facing her on the wide bed, “we might be able to use this to our advantage, for the protection of both vampires and mortals alike. If I do gain some ability to move about when the rest of my kind cannot, it could be a major advantage. One that the Master Vampire will need to know about in order to utilize.”

“Hmm, that’s my man. Always the soldier.” She stroked his tightly muscled shoulders. “I trust your judgment, Ian, but I’ll admit I’m a little scared of all this.”

He kissed her deeply, then pulled back. “I won’t let any harm come to you, my love. It would literally kill me if anything happened to you.”

“You know that goes both ways, don’t you?” She stroked his cheek. “It’s so odd. I’ve only really just gotten to know you, but you’re in my heart already. I *know* you, Ian.”

“That’s the way it is between destined mates—or so I’ve heard. You can talk to your friends about it now. They’ll tell you it’s how it’s meant to be.” He moved over her as he spoke, his words trailing across her skin in little, warm puffs of air. “But we have time now. Time to learn each other and love each other. I know I’m looking forward to it. Almost as much as I’m looking forward to coming inside you a few more times before this night is through.”

Jena all but purred at his words, shifting under him in welcome. “I think that could be arranged.”

Ian paused, staring down into her eyes intently. “You feed something in my soul that no one ever has, Jena. You are my world.”

“Oh, Ian.” She battled the tears that wanted to form behind her eyes, her love for this special man welling up inside her, nearly out of control. He felt it of course, just as she felt the steady wonder of his words through their connection. She was so much a part of him now. She couldn’t explain it and understanding it was beyond her at the moment, but they were joined in more than just the obvious way. “I love you.”

His lips claimed hers then as his body covered hers. His weight was welcome, though he used his forearms to brace most of his heavy bulk off her. Still, the tantalizing brush of his chest, the rasp of his legs over and between hers, all these things only heightened her pleasure.

Ian felt what she felt. Her pleasure heightened his own in a way he had never before experienced. So this is what his newly mated friends had discovered. The perfect union of souls, the communion of spirits that brought more fulfillment than anything he’d ever known. He could happily live on this abundant, exuberant energy for the rest of his life and never go hungry.

If Jena would let him.

If she chose to stay demi-vampir and never be converted to full vampire, he would live out her lifespan with her and leave this realm with her when she departed. It was just that simple. He could not live without her and would follow when she moved on to other realms.

Jena stopped his shower of kisses with her gentle palms on either side of his head, pushing upward to get his attention. When their eyes met, he knew she’d walked in his thoughts and not liked what she found there.

He tried to head off her serious words. “I’m sorry. Let’s not ruin this moment with thoughts of the future, my love. It was wrong of me to dwell on such thing at a moment like this.”

He saw as well as felt her think on his words as he rubbed his lower half against hers, reigniting the fire he’d let flag. Her hands tugged downward now, bringing his lips within a breath of hers.

“Don’t let it happen again, lover. We’ll talk about that other stuff...when the time comes. But not now.” She trailed her lips over his,

her lower body reaching upwards as if yearning for him. And he felt the deep need in her thoughts that reflected his own.

All that mattered now was this, their coming together in passion and...love. For the first time in his long life, he'd found a woman who loved him and he loved her in return. It didn't seem possible that he could be so blessed, but he didn't question it. No, the time for questions was over. Now was a time for action.

"Later," he agreed as he moved his lips down her body, stopping here and there to worship at her soft spots. "We'll talk later."

He paused for a long time at her breasts, toying with her ripe nipples, teasing them with his teeth in a way that made her squirm deliciously. He felt her responses and he used his own mental powers to influence her reactions, to increase her sexual fire. He made her come just from his lips on her body, loving the little climax that fueled his own ardor. She was so responsive to him, it was gratifying to feel the love along with the passion for once. It was a heady mix that fueled him more than he ever would have thought. Love tasted divine to his senses and he wanted more.

His goal for the evening became clear. He would keep her coming for him all night long. Ian smiled wolfishly as he thought of the orgy of the senses to come. By morning, neither of them would be able to walk. He'd be completely drunk on their power, and she would be blissfully exhausted.

"Mmm," she wiggled deliciously under him as he moved lower, "I like your plan, Ian."

He started, knowing she'd just read his thoughts as easily as if they were her own. Perhaps she was even unaware of doing so. It felt so natural, even now, he was just barely aware of her warm presence in his mind as he was in hers. She was comfortable, and so very welcome. His heart poured love into their connection, and she smiled at him so serenely he felt overwhelmed by the power this small demi-vampir woman had over him. Still, he wouldn't have it any other way. He would rather have one night with her, than all his centuries alone.

But he was getting maudlin again and he had an objective. One from which they would both reap the benefits, should he achieve his orgasmic goal.

Ian scooted lower on the bed, spreading her legs wide as he settled between them. She was open to his gaze and she was devastatingly beautiful to him.

Even though he had pleased many, many women over his centuries, it had been a long time indeed since he'd taken any real time to fully immerse himself in his lover as he so badly wanted to do with Jena. He wanted to worship every inch of her skin, pay homage to every freckle and tiny scar. He wanted to learn her body and study every dip and valley he held so dear. The lesson would begin tonight and last for years, and he would be a diligent student.

And he would teach her a few things as well. For all that she had lovers in the past, Ian could easily read her responses, and memories for that matter, to know that Jena still had quite a bit to learn about giving and receiving pleasure. He would be a dutiful master. And she'd love every minute of his tutelage.

The fingers of one hand teased her nipples as his mouth hovered, breathing hot air down over the sensitive folds of her sex. His other hand spread her pussy wide as he lowered his lips to kiss her softly at first, then with more fervor.

Her taste was divine. Her scent and feel was all that was right in the universe, and he never wanted to be parted from her again. This was *his* woman. The one created just for him. Fate had brought them together and he would allow nothing and no one to part them ever again. It was his destiny to protect and cherish his mate. And love her. Oh, how he loved every last thing about her. He would spend lifetimes proving his love and exploring the amazing new feelings she brought out in him.

Ian had always considered himself a hard man, but when confronted by Jena's soft heart and commanding personality, he found himself as pliable as clay. She could shape him into anything she chose, and he would conform gladly, but he knew she was well aware of her power over him and her soul was too pure to use it against him. Her love for him

would prevent her from ever hurting him, just as his love for her did the same. Together they were invincible. Each would protect the other. Forever.

Or how ever long they had.

Ian growled at himself, knowing he was heading into dangerous territory with his thoughts again. He refocused instead on the wondrous taste of his mate. His. Mate.

Never had he thought he would speak those words, but here she was, just where he wanted her—spread wide and waiting for his possession. He exerted a little mental push and sucked on her distended clit, teasing it a little with his tongue.

“Ian!”

He loved the sound of his name on her lips when she came.

He shifted back, lifting her up and flipping her onto her stomach. Running his large hands over the pale globes of her heart-shaped ass, he marveled at the perfection the fates had gifted him with. She was gorgeous.

And her ass would look even better after a bit of his loving discipline.

“Ian?” Her voice quavered as she jumped a bit, quite obviously reading his thoughts.

He bent to kiss the small of her back as his hands massaged her butt cheeks with a circular motion.

“Don’t be afraid. I’d never hurt you.”

“But...but you want to spank me?” She sounded lovingly confused as he nipped her fleshy cheek with just slightly distended fangs, though he was careful not to break the skin.

“You’ve never been spanked by a lover.” He didn’t ask it as a question, he could read it in her memories. “Never played the truly submissive role.”

“No.” Her reply was breathless and he could read excitement and the desire to try in her mind. Deep down, this beautiful, capable woman wanted to be submissive to her lover. She just hadn’t known it and had never found a man strong enough to do it. Ian had no doubts about his ability to lovingly master her pleasure, though he would never try to

dominate her in daily life. Still, he was just barbarian enough to want to take the lead in the bedroom—or wherever they made love—and if he was reading her right, she was more than willing to submit.

“Could God have given me a more perfect mate? I think not.” Ian chuckled as he raised her arms above her head. “Don’t move your hands now. Keep them just where I put them.”

“Okay.” Her voice was shaky with both excitement and a hint of anxiety. He noted the way her little fingers curled into the bedding, scratching and straining with her rising anticipation.

He kissed the nape of her neck, loving that she was unsure, but willing to trust him. He loved her. Period. He let that thought flow through their connection and was gratified when she relaxed a bit under his hands. He stroked down her back, enjoying the soft feel of her skin against his rough hands. He kneaded her tense muscles, giving her an impromptu back rub that went down her legs and back up to the fleshy globes of her ass...and between.

One hand dipped into the dark recesses between her legs as his other hand arranged her long limbs, spreading them wider to accommodate his searching touch. She rewarded him with a sigh of delight as his fingers slid home within her tight channel, testing her wetness. She was so ready for him, but he had one more thing to show her before he took his pleasure.

Holding the fingers of one hand deep within her, he used his other hand to swat her ass. It wasn’t a light blow, but neither would it do any injury. The stinging swat made her jump, but he kept his fingers within her, riding her throughout. He loved the way she clenched on his hand and would give anything for her to do the same on his cock.

Patience, he counseled himself. He’d get there in time. First he had to be sure she was okay with this and that she’d enjoy it as much as he did.

He delivered a few more stinging spanks, loving the way she responded, crying out his name on excited sobs. He also noted the lovely pinkening of her ass cheeks. They were as beautiful as he’d imagined and more, with her amazing blood rushing to the surface to soothe her stinging skin.

"You like that?" He nearly had to bite his lip to keep from chuckling. She was on fire in his arms, as responsive as he could've hoped. She was most definitely enjoying this little game and it was only the first of many he had to teach her. Sex between them would only get better—and more adventurous—with time. Ian looked forward to it with glee.

"Ian!" She nearly came as he delivered another blow, but he held her back from the precipice, removing his fingers from her wet channel as she cried out in protest. But he wanted to be inside her when she came this time, and he wanted to come with her—deep, hard and buried in his mate.

Moving quickly, he stuffed a pillow beneath her hips, raising them just a bit, and took his place behind her, between her spread legs. Shoving home, he impaled her on his cock in one smooth move as she bucked upward and nearly screamed with satisfaction. He was so hard and ready, he would come very quickly, but then she was just as close, so it would all be okay.

Urgently, he moved within her, sliding in and out, establishing a torturous rhythm that drove them both higher. He held her hips and watched the way her miraculous body accepted him. She was so special, so alluring, so ultimately feminine to him. She was all he'd ever wanted and all he would ever want.

And she was all his.

She accepted his quirks and was willing to learn. He liked that in a woman, but he *loved* it in *his* woman. He made sure that thought communicated through to her as he plowed more forcefully into her welcoming sheath. His hands massaged her pink cheeks and tugged on her hips, getting a little rougher as they both neared the edge.

Ian placed a single, strategic swat on her sweet ass that made her tighten on him in a way that could not be ignored. Collapsing down over her back, Ian sank his teeth—now fully distended—into the curve of her neck, allowing just a hint of her sweet essence to coat his tongue as he drove them both over the edge.

It didn't take much.

His mate's blood was far more powerful than any other's. Her orgasm powered through his soul in a way he'd never felt before and would never feel again with any other woman.

Only her.

For all eternity.

Or as long as she would give them.

After a long, long, satisfying climax, Ian began to relax. She had wrung him out and as predicted, he was more than a little drunk on the energy that came of their joining.

He grunted a little as he moved off her, taking his weight from her in an effort not to crush her. She was so precious to him, so fragile...so mortal, regardless that she was demi-vampir. He would spend the rest of his life seeing to her health and safety regardless of her decision, though he hoped and prayed she would choose to spend eternity with him, exploring their love.

Ian rearranged their limbs when he found the energy to move again so that she rested against him, spooned into his body. Where she belonged. She was already fast asleep, and he couldn't love her more.

Chapter Six

Ian stared at his lover's beautiful face as he felt dawn break in the east. For centuries, the creeping light of dawn had been his signal to seek shelter away from the damaging light of the sun. It had sapped him of energy and sent him into a sleep that was as close to death as he could come. Only dire circumstances had been able to rouse him when the sun ruled the sky, and then only to a semi-conscious state.

But Ian greeted this new dawn with more vigor than he'd ever felt. It sizzled through his veins in a dance of glory, though he counseled himself silently to not get his hopes up. A few sips of demi-vampir blood might give him a boost in energy, but it didn't necessarily mean he'd be able to go sunbathing anytime soon.

Though Ian would sacrifice a great deal to just be able to glimpse the earth bathed in sunlight one more time, he would not risk the new happiness he'd found with Jena. Joined as they were now, if one of them felt pain, the other would too, and the bond would only grow and deepen over time. They were one now, never to be apart again in this realm.

It was his greatest joy. Greater even than the fantastical, forbidden idea of seeing the sun again after over eight hundred years.

"Mmm, what time is it?" Jena's groggy voice reached his ears as he contemplated their future.

"Dawn."

Jena sat up, wiping sleep from her eyes. "I need a shower."

Ian pulled her into his arms and kissed the top of her disheveled hair. "I love how you look, all rumpled from making love with me."

Jena chuckled and pushed away. "You're sweet, but I'm a wreck." She pulled at the sheets, trying to disentangle herself. "Ew, and so is this

bed.” Jena stood and pulled the sheets off, tossing them to the floor as she headed toward the attached bathroom. “There are clean sheets on the top shelf of the closet if you want to freshen up the place a bit. If not, I’ll do it when I get out of the shower.” She stopped by the bathroom door, her hand on the knob. “You do want to sleep here with me today, right?”

She looked so lovely, standing there, gloriously rumpled and nude, her body showing every sign of their loving the night before. Her thighs were slippery with their cum, her nipples and other soft spots pink from his attentions.

Ian couldn’t stay away from her.

He moved across the room and swept her into his arms, kissing her deeply. When he pulled back, she was dazed and breathless, just the way he liked her.

“I wouldn’t dream of leaving you today, my love.” His words were spoken softly into the shell of her ear. “Or any other day.”

“Ian!” She spasmed in his arms as he moved her up against the bathroom door, lifted her legs and wrapped them swiftly around his waist. Sparing only a moment to make certain she was ready, he pushed into her, joining them yet again in a fast and furious fuck up against the bathroom door.

He moved hard against her, unable to take his time now that he had his woman in his arms and his cock where it most wanted to be. His arms supported her light weight as she surrendered to his mastery, crying out as he plunged deeper and deeper into her tight, wet heat.

This wasn’t the torrid, teasing loving of the night before. No, this was even more primal. This was a claiming, a marking, a statement of ownership. And it worked both ways.

Never before had a woman owned a piece of his heart or been part of his soul. Never before had he found himself so lost in a woman, he ceased to be aware of the rising sun. Never before had he needed to come inside his partner so badly, it was a physical ache.

Ian felt his balls tighten the moment before he bit down on her neck, sipping lightly, knowing he’d been rough with his teeth the night before

and wanting to at least make that up to her while his cock pummeled her pussy from below. But Jena was with him. She was crying out with every thrust, trying to move with him even though he held all the power in this position. She urged him on with her tightening inner muscles, holding him when he withdrew and clamping down on him when he slid home.

As his teeth pierced her flesh and the amazing taste of her blood blossomed on his tongue, he thrust within her sheath one last time, holding tight as he came in a rush. She climaxed once more, with him, screaming low in her throat like a jungle cat, milking his cock with her spasming walls as he drank of her essence and filled her with his seed.

Ian licked her neck, sealing the small wounds as Jena wound down from that incredibly fast peak. She held him with arms that felt like limp spaghetti, unsure if her legs would even support her after that amazing, continuous orgasm.

"Oh, baby. I think I'm going to like being with you if that's what I get first thing each morning." She sent him a lascivious smile and winked as he drew back, rewarded when he chuckled and kissed her playfully on the nose. He needed to laugh more and she was just the woman to see to it.

"I'd give it to you morning, noon and night, if I could."

"Hmm." She licked the seam of his lips, sidetracked to his stubbly jaw as she kissed her way to his ear, sucking the lobe into her mouth briefly. "So what time is it now?"

He seemed to still, his muscles tensing a bit though he continued to hold her.

"You know something? I don't know." He spoke as if this was some kind of big news and Jena drew back to study his shocked expression. He met her gaze and a smile started in his own. "I'm always aware of the position of the sun somewhere in the back of my mind, but you just blew it all to hell and back. I have no idea what time it is."

"Well," she raised up just a tiny bit to look over his shoulder at the bedside table and the alarm clock that rested there, "what would you say if I told you it was almost eight o'clock in the morning?"

“Damn.” The single word was laced with awe. “I’ve never felt this good—this awake—so late in the morning. My body’s usually shutting down by now.”

He let her legs slide down toward the floor, but retained his grip on her so she wouldn’t fall. She was grateful for his support. She’d melted into a puddle after that last orgasm and wasn’t quite recovered enough to stand on her own just yet.

“So my blood packs a punch then?”

He swooped down to give her a smooching kiss. “Undoubtedly. But it’s more than your blood. It’s you, Jena. It’s the love between us that heightens everything when we come together.” He kissed her softly, lovingly. “Let’s take that shower, then spend the rest of the day in bed.”

“Oh, I like that plan.” She pecked him on the cheek, then turned in his arms as he stepped back to allow her to open the bathroom door.

But she’d forgotten the window.

The bathroom window was wide open. And the sunlight was streaming in, dappling the sunny yellow shower curtain and sending shafts across the matching bath mat and towels in the towel rack. She heard a gasp from behind her and moved to shut the door, but Ian stayed her arm.

“Ian?” She turned to look at him. He was frozen in place, his eyes watering, but whether in pain or something else, she wasn’t sure. She felt within to see if she could use their new connection to learn what was going on, but all she could sense was shock and wonder laced with agony. “Ian, let me shut the door.”

“No. It’s okay.”

“But it’s hurting you!”

He pulled her into his arms. “Only a little.” He kissed her cheek. “Only a little. My God!” He squeezed her tight and she felt the wetness of his tears roll over her skin as he held her close. “My love, you’ve given me the greatest gift anyone could ever give. After eight hundred years of darkness, you’ve given me the light.”

Chapter Seven

With some experimentation, they discovered that Jena's blood gave Ian the ability to withstand some small amounts of sunshine, which was more than he'd ever been able to do before. He was like a child, wanting to see and do everything—testing his limits at every possible moment. Jena had to hold him back, often distracting him with sex as a way to keep him out of danger and safe in her bed. Where he belonged.

It was a good trade off. She knew he was aware of her ploy, but he humored her and pleased them both in the process. It was a truly win-win situation.

The only difficult part for her was when they visited Kelly and Marc LaTour's home the night after they'd first joined. Kelly was one of her best friends, of course, but Marc had always been a little frightening to her. He was the Master Vampire of the region and had held that position for quite a long time. The man was so imposing, the only time Jena saw his icy demeanor thaw at all was when Kelly was near.

When his new wife was nearby, it was clear how much he loved her and that made him somewhat more human, though he was still a little scary. Jena knew she was welcome in their home, but in truth, she hadn't visited too many times since Kelly and Marc's wedding. Kelly had been turned in a very violent way, but it was clear Marc loved her with every breath in his body.

When Ian and Jena stepped over the LaTour's threshold that night, their hosts seemed to know right away that something was very different.

"Good Lord." Marc's calm voice cut through the tense silence as all four of them faced each other. "And then there were four." Ian burst out

laughing at Marc's cryptic words while the women shared confused looks.

Ian settled his arm around her shoulders and pulled her in close to his side. "Jena is my One, but that isn't the end of our news. We'll require the private room to relay the rest."

"That serious?" Marc's aristocratic eyebrow rose. He'd been an English nobleman before being turned to vampirism and he still reverted to his old mannerisms every now and again.

Ian nodded grimly as the four of them moved off toward the back of the house. There was a set of stairs leading downward and Kelly took Jena's hand for a quick squeeze as Marc led the way downward to a room Jena had never seen before. He flicked a bunch of switches and sealed the heavy door shut before speaking again.

"Okay. We're secure. Now what's so earth shattering that we had to come all the way down here?" Marc turned on them, all business, but with just a tiny glint of humor in his dark eyes.

"Jena is demi-vampir and this morning I saw sunlight for the first time in eight hundred years."

The silence in the room was deafening.

"Good Lord!" Marc collapsed into a chair while Kelly stared, probably receiving information by taking a walk through her mate's memories, Jena realized.

Jena started to feel very uncomfortable at being the center of such attention, but Kelly reached out, coming over and giving her a big hug. Kelly was a good friend and that hadn't changed after she'd been turned. Kelly still had a generous heart and probably always would. It was just the way she was wired.

"I'm so glad you've found love, sweetie. I wish Ian and you every happiness."

"Thanks, Kel." Jena truly loved her friend and was glad she was there. She had so many questions to ask her now that they each had a vampire mate in common. There was so much to learn.

"Now what about your mother?" Kelly pulled back with a friendly smile. "I bet she's like you, huh?"

"There's another one?" Marc's voice sounded behind Kelly.

Ian nodded, filling Marc in on the particulars. Marc's decisiveness impressed Jena as he immediately made plans with Ian to see to her mother's safety. It turned out, they both knew a very experienced enforcer named Julian who was near enough to her mother's home in New York to go and watch over her. Marc made the call from a secure phone and set the wheels in motion, swearing the enforcer to secrecy. Both men vouched for Julian when Jena sought their reassurances, but Ian's word was good enough for her.

She took a moment to sift through just a few of his memories—a skill she was getting better at as time went on—to get a better idea of what this Julian guy was all about. One thing she was able to learn from Ian's memories was that Julian was a very handsome man. Her mother would have to watch out with a hunk like that watching over her every move.

Marc asked Jena to call her mother and warn her about Julian's arrival. Jena didn't really relish the idea of breaking all her news to her mother in front of witnesses, but she knew the phone line, at least on this end, was secure. There was no real reason to think her mother might be in danger...yet. But if somehow word got out about her demi-vampir state, that could change in a hurry. The idea truly frightened her but Ian reached out and squeezed one of her hands, pouring comfort and confidence through their link and she felt reassured as she dialed her mother's number.

The call went about as well as could be expected. Jena's mom, Lillian, had a kind of radar where she was concerned and wanted to hop the next flight out to see her, but Jena convinced her to stay put. She told her about Ian—and Julian's imminent arrival—and Lillian jumped to all sorts of motherly conclusions that had her laughing out loud. That seemed, perversely, to reassure her mother and they rang off with a promise to call again the next day.

"Well?" Kelly wanted to know as Jena hung up the phone, still smiling and shaking her head. She looked up at her friend and chuckled.

"My mom is now convinced that I'm mixed up with the mafia."

Chapter Eight

Over the next week or two, Jena managed to convince her mother that Ian was *not* a member of the *Cosa Nostre*. Apparently the handsome Julian had more influence than Jena would have credited. Her mother had always been an eminently sensible woman, but when she mentioned Julian's name there was a certain wistfulness that communicated itself even over three thousand miles of telephone line.

They'd made plans to get together. Julian was flying her out on his private plane, in fact, which made Jena start to wonder just how rich this band of vampires she was now involved with was. Ian was playful when she broached the subject, teasing her about being a gold-digger, but he knew she wasn't. She could read that reassuring truth in his thoughts.

She was getting better and better at sifting through his amazing memories, and knew he was reading her life story just as she was doing with him. He smiled indulgently at her when he caught her at it, often hugging her close and distracting her with kisses and nips that turned into bites and very nice orgasms.

They were getting better at that too. They made love everywhere in her little house, then moved to Ian's more secure home so he could spend the day in complete safety. Sometimes she had to go to work, and she hated the separation as much as she knew he did, but they were joined so fully now, all she had to do was think of him and he was there, in her mind.

The feeling was incredibly comforting. Of course, he played little games too, turning her on with his words and the lascivious images he would send to her, all while she was at work with no way to ease the

ache he stirred in her. She teased him back, though, and gave almost as good as she got.

One night, she was working the late shift when Ian started his teasing and she turned the tables. Ten minutes later, he locked her in her small office at the hospital, drew the shades and spread her wide on the edge of her desk. His cock was surging into her before she could even utter a protest. He could move unnaturally fast when the need arose.

Only after he'd seated himself within her tight depths did he allow her to speak.

"Know what happens when you tease the beast, sweetheart?" He forged into her as one hand held her hips, the other plucking hard at her nipples.

Jena shook her head in answer to his teasing question.

"You get bitten." He licked over her sensitive neck, preparing her.

Jena cried out. "Harder, Ian!" She tried to keep her voice low, but knew she was getting a little carried away. Ian always had that effect on her.

He answered her pleas, stroking in deep with each thrust until she was moaning against his chest, propped up by his strong arms. Her legs wrapped around his waist, claiming him as he moved his head down to kiss her lips. He trailed down her chin to her throat, sinking his fangs in deep as he thrust her to completion.

Ian was only a moment behind as he sipped at her amazing blood, licking her and relishing the essence of the one woman in all the world who could complete him. He was facing the door when he lifted his head, his cock still spurting within his woman. He licked his lips, knowing they were stained with her rich, red blood, and caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye.

The door was open only a sliver, but it was enough for Ian to see the Dick on the other side, spying on them. Doctor Dick Schmidt let the door close, but not before Ian got a good look at him. The piss-ant was a voyeur, it seemed, and he'd gotten an eyeful.

Ian pulled out and cleaned up a bit, helping Jena set herself to rights. He kissed her softly as he made sure she could stand on her own.

“Will you be all right? There’s something I have to take care of.”

Jena nodded weakly, sinking down into her leather executive chair. She looked thoroughly fucked and Ian had to suppress the grin of satisfaction seeing her this way always gave him.

“Where are you going?”

Ian sighed. He didn’t want her to know that he planned to silence the other man. By death, if necessary.

“Doctor Dick saw us. The little pervert must’ve unlocked your door and was peeking inside when I saw him.”

“I gave him a key for emergencies. Not to spy on me!” Though she flushed with embarrassment, her words were practical as she drew in a calming breath. “What are you going to do to him?”

“Anything I have to.”

Silence reigned for a moment before she stood and straightened her skirt. “I’ll go with you. We should check his office first. It’s two floors up.”

Ian said not a word as she led the way to Dick Schmidt’s office. When they arrived it was to find the good doctor dialing furiously as he clutched a small parchment-colored business card in one hand.

“Put down the phone.” Ian put all the influence he could into his voice. The doctor struggled against the command, but the phone settled into its cradle as Ian moved forward. He was pleased to note Jena closing and locking the door to the office behind them. Ian plucked the card out of Dick’s hand and glanced at it before tucking it into his pocket for further study. He knew the name well. Benjamin Steel was one of the few *Altor Custodis* agents Ian had been able to identify in this state, though he knew there were more. There had to be.

It was significant that Ben had given Dick his card. Could the *Altor Custodis* already know of Jena’s bloodlines? Probably. That ancient sect had watched and tracked supernaturals through more centuries than Ian had lived. They were probably watching Jena and her mother as well, which was as comforting as it was frightening. They watched and recorded, but they probably wouldn’t lift a finger to help if either of them

were truly in danger. Ian began to wonder if the silver bracelet Dick had tried to give Jena on Valentine's Day was more sinister than he'd originally thought. Had it been a test of some sort? Did Dick know or suspect what she was?

"Fucking vampire!" Dick accused in a wobbly voice. Ian turned his full attention back to the matter at hand. That certainly answered some of his questions. Ian shook his head and made a tsking noise.

"I honestly didn't think you had any imagination whatsoever, Dick. I can't say I'm glad to find out I was wrong." Ian tugged Jena close to his side, tucking her under his arm. It was an obvious claim of ownership that wasn't lost on the sniveling mortal man. Ian nearly laughed aloud when Dick's chin rose stubbornly.

"Get away from her. You scum-sucking vampire!" Dick actually reached for his pocket and came up with a small cross he proceeded to wave at him. Luckily it was made of gold, not silver. Little did the mongrel know Ian had been a devout Catholic all his long life. Crosses—as long as they were not made of silver—held no fear for him. In fact, they represented the God he'd sworn his life to many times over since he'd been born all those centuries ago.

But Dick was starting to really piss him off.

Ian put Jena behind him and turned to snarl at the other man, baring his fangs and allowing the fire to creep into his eyes. He knew it made him look like a demon, and perhaps that's what he needed in this case. A little show of otherworldly strength might help him take the measure of this man he had previously underestimated.

"Back off, doctor. I won't warn you again."

The hand holding the cross shook as Ian stalked forward. Gently, almost reverently, he took the cross from Dick's trembling hands and kissed it with respect before placing it aside, safely out of harm's way. It really was a beautiful piece, heavy with age and many blessings that sent soothing energy through Ian when he touched it.

Perhaps that was the reason he felt pity for the sniveling man. Perhaps it was the reminder of his faith that stayed his hand when he could so easily have killed the good doctor. Knowledge of his kind could

not be allowed to spread. It was their most sacred law and one he'd vowed to uphold.

Or perhaps his rare compassion was spurred on by the soft, feminine voice of love in his mind.

Don't hurt him, Ian.

Ian sighed as he used his considerable mental powers to overcome Dick's weak mind. The man slumped to the floor in a heap, unconscious. He turned frustrated eyes to his mate briefly.

"He knows, Jena. That's not something I can ignore. Our law says he has to be contained."

"Killed, you mean," she scoffed. "Look, Ian. Regardless of how I feel about him personally, he is a good doctor. He saves a lot of lives. It would be a shame to lose his talent in the world when there are so many sick people who need his skill. Isn't there something you can do?"

Ian pulled her close, kissing her forehead softly, then sighed dramatically.

"For you, I can move mountains, my love."

Doctor Richard—not Dick—Schmidt changed that night. Weak minded as he was, Ian found it easy to alter his memories and even improve a bit on his personality. Not long after, Richard traded in the land yacht he drove for a more economic, less ostentatious model and started doing charity work. He even donated some of his time and skill to Doctors Without Borders and set off on a voyage of self-discovery to the Third World.

Of course Ian made sure he was kept under observation by one of his enforcer brethren. Richard Schmidt didn't know it, and would likely never remember what had brought it about, but he would be closely watched for the remainder of his days.

Ian also made arrangements for an evening wedding at a beautiful, old Catholic church in town. He'd sworn an oath to God all those years ago as a Crusader and he'd never gone back on his word. Jena was also Catholic and wanted all the trimmings for her wedding, including the

beautiful old church where her mother could walk her down the aisle and tear up as her baby got married.

Ian was pleasantly surprised by his mate's mother, Lillian. Forty-seven she might be, but she was a beautiful woman in the prime of life. She welcomed Ian with suspicion at first, but once she saw how happy her daughter was with him, she warmed right up.

Julian was with her, of course. The charming enforcer had inserted himself into Lillian's life and looked like he was there to stay. Surprisingly, he hadn't told Lillian everything yet, but rather, had used his surprisingly strong abilities at mental persuasion to gain the woman's compliance.

Eventually she would have to be told about her heritage, but she was very healthy for one of the demi-vampir and Jena wanted to wait until after the wedding to break the startling news. Ian agreed. One thing at a time was enough to spring on the poor woman. Let her get used to him first, then he'd shatter her illusions of reality and explain how the world really worked.

Or perhaps he'd ask Julian or another of his old friends do it. Jena's mother was a looker, after all, and though she thought she was old in mortal terms, measuring by the lifespan of the average vampire, she was just a babe in the woods. Born demi-vampir, she should be given the choice to convert fully to the immortality she—or her ancestors, at least—should have had as her birthright.

Ian would take it up with Marc, but it could wait until after the wedding. And the honeymoon. Lillian's life wasn't in imminent danger from her demi-vampir condition, so they had time. Nothing was more important now, than joining his mate's life to his in the eyes of God.

When Ian first caught sight of his lovely bride, framed in the dark doorway of the lovely old church, his heart skipped a beat. She was so lovely.

The music started and she walked slowly down the aisle to him. The church was crowded with their friends, but he saw only her. When at last she stood beside him, he took her little hand in his. Her fingers were surprisingly cold with nerves.

I love you, you know. He sent his thoughts on waves of reassurance.

I love you back. Forever, Ian. She paused. *I mean that. I want forever with you.*

Do you mean—?

Yes. I want you to make me like you, but it'll have to wait until after the baby is born.

Baby? Ian felt faint. The implications were staggering.

Jena was still very much mortal. Any baby they had now would be demi-vampir, like her. Able to walk in the sun.

Stay with me, Papa. First we have to get hitched. No baby of ours will be born out of wedlock.

Ian felt tears gather behind his eyes, though he refused to let them fall. His woman was amazing. She brought him laughter and love, light and now...a baby.

While he would have preferred to wait until after she'd become immortal, God apparently had other plans. Ian would not argue with God, or Fate, or whatever had caused this miraculous moment to happen. All he knew was that he'd found the ultimate happiness in this realm and he would hold on to it—to her—for all he was worth.

Epilogue

By the next year on February fourteenth, Jena and Ian had fragile, baby, demi-vampir twins to look after. Leaving them with Christy and Sebastian for the night, Ian took Jena to the same little bistro where he'd spied on her with her date the year before.

"Nothing like coming full circle," he mused as he poured the wine. Jena was still demi-vampir and mortal. They'd decided that barring some unforeseen circumstance, Jena would stay mortal until the babies were a bit older. They weren't quite sure how becoming immortal would affect Jena's unique body chemistry, so they didn't want to take the chance of her not being able to be there during the day while the babies still needed her.

Ian was able to spend some time in the very early morning sun, but did even better in the late afternoon and twilight. With Jena's magic demi-vampir blood and multiple orgasms sustaining him, he fed only from her and was stronger than he'd ever been before.

"I liked it when you were watching over me, Ian. Though at first I found it a bit annoying." She toasted him with her wine. "You grew on me."

"Like a fungus, huh?"

She chuckled and tucked into the light meal she'd ordered while he just stared across at his good fortune. He still sometimes found it hard to believe this miracle had come to him. She was his salvation, his *raison d'être*. He didn't know how he'd existed for so long without her and couldn't envision a time when he could live without her. She was necessary to him now, in so many ways. Without her, he would cease to exist.

“Actually, I came to enjoy you glowering at me from the shrubbery and I missed you when you weren’t there. Last Valentine’s night, for example, when I went out to my car to meet Dick Schmidt,” he growled at the mention of the other man’s name, “you weren’t there. I never told you, I nearly panicked, thinking something happened to you. It worried me when you suddenly weren’t there.”

Ian reached across the small table, much as Dick had done the year before, but with much more successful results. She turned her palm into his, smiling warmly up at him.

“I’ll be with you always now, my love. For eternity.”

About the Author

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Gracie Evans wants a Valentines she won't forget. Luke Forsythe plans to give her exactly what she wants.

Overheard

Maya Banks

Gracie Evans is a woman tired of the men in her life not satisfying her in bed. She's had a string of boyfriends, but none of them have come close to satisfying the vivid fantasies she has. Two weeks before Valentine's Day, she breaks up with her latest boyfriend after a night of lackluster sex.

When her good friend, Luke Forsythe, overhears her talking to their friend Shelly about what she really wants, he's stunned. And very turned on. Gracie thinks there isn't a man alive who can satisfy her in bed. Luke aims to prove her wrong.

Warning, this title contains explicit sex, graphic language, ménage a trios.

In a heated Valentine weekend, Caleb and Jacqueline explore just how far their friendship can go.

Be Mine

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Caleb and Jacqueline have been friends for nearly two years since he was engaged to her best friend. But now the engagement is over and Jack wonders where they stand. Jacqueline wants to maintain their friendship, but would prefer so much more.

Caleb invites her to spend Valentine weekend with him at a bed & breakfast since he had made the reservations long before he and Claire broke up. Though the breakup with Claire was only a month ago, the relationship between them had been over long before that. Caleb wants Jacqueline and is prepared to do anything to get her.

And he doesn't just want her for the weekend, he wants her forever. Caleb uses every strategy in his erotic arsenal to convince her she is more than just his friend—she is the woman he loves.

Warning, this title contains explicit sex and graphic language.

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