

Loose Id

FANGS

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This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable (multiple partners, anal sex, violence).

Fangs

Barbara Karmazin, Suz deMello, & Eve Vaughn

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FLARE ZONE

Barbara Karmazin

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Maris's vision blurred. She grabbed the edge of her desk to keep from falling and yelled "Frag!" at the top of her lungs.

Station admin's high priority icon blinked in front of her eyes. Compressed lines of text, data fragments and images scrolled past her eyes from an unannounced and unwelcome data dump into her cranial implant.

She sank back in her chair, blinked until her vision cleared, and sorted through the information flooding her mind. The security team had located another corpse. This brought the total count of murder victims to nine.

However, there was one major difference. The latest victim was Avee, instead of human. The corpse had been found in decontamination chamber number sixteen.

Not good. Not good at all. Cause of the Avee's death: a wooden stake to the heart and decapitation, a stark contrast to the eight human fatalities with two puncture wounds in the neck and complete exsanguinations.

Maris sighed, slumped in her chair, shunted the crime scene reports and images from her implant to the desktop comp, and set the files as top-level encryption. She tugged at her short, dark, curly hair and welcomed the pain as a distraction. Now, all she had to do was wait for him to arrive. Waiting was the hardest part. Patience was *not* her middle name.

Media-fed rumors had the entire station in an uproar. Trade goods and outgoing passengers had flooded the ships at dock. Prices for garlic and religious items had risen to outrageous levels.

Amazing how many people still *believed* those old wives' tales despite the documented isolation of the vampire virus over a century ago. On the other hand, actually meeting a living vamp remained a rare occurrence. Only one in ten thousand victims survived the drastic physical and hormonal changes inflicted by the virus.

Maris rubbed at the stubborn pain centered over her left eyebrow while her implant accessed Nexus Station's exterior scan. "Fools," she muttered. "If they met a real vamp, they'd probably fry their implants with a panic-induced adrenalin dump."

Shifting images of docked trade ships, diplomatic yachts, military escort cruisers, shuttlecrafts, repair bots, emergency medical transports and recreational scooters poured into her mind. She sorted through them with brutal efficiency and issued instructions for increased security for the diplomats. Her next command accessed the automated vid feeds from the trio of satellites orbiting the jump space nexus. The blazing blue veils of the Crab nebula glowed for a split second within the nexus's coal black rim.

Overlapping vid images bracketed the sleek shape of a scout ship. Scan verified full shields and live weapons on the newest arrival.

She stripped the automated data burst from the ship's communications beacon. ID popped up. Ship: *Sangre de Coeur*. Pilot: Pierce Grinaldi, Interstellar Police Investigator, Zone Three, Jurisdiction Homicide. Estimated docking time, thirty-one minutes.

Her heart slammed against her chest.

Blast him. Just the thought of his name had her creaming into her panties like a lovestruck teenie. Now was not the time to remember the mind-boggling orgasms he could wring from her with effortless skill. Besides, after three years, he'd probably had more than

enough men and women in his bed to satisfy his unique desires. No way would he be pining after her.

Lilith, the station administration's Artificial Intelligence, pinged her implant. "Stationmaster Maris Claxon."

"Yes." Her implant's auto responder pinged back.

Lilith's input continued with relentless efficiency. "Decontamination procedures have ended. The Avee ambassadors are ready to begin trade negotiations."

Maris stifled her frustration and formed her thoughts into a coherent response for Lilith. "Serve them appropriate refreshments. I'll be there in two minutes."

She ended the connection, jumped to her feet and raked her hands through her tangled curls. "Hurry up, Pierce. I need you here before everything blows up in my face."

The office door irised open at her approach. She straightened her shoulders and strode through without pausing. Staff members turned in the hallway and scurried away without meeting her pointed stare. The last thing they wanted was to catch her attention.

Station security feeds shunted her images of protestors screaming insults at rebellious teenies wearing the latest fashion. The cosmetic gene splicing to replace the teenies' hair with waist-long manes of brilliant blue, green and red Avee feathers must have cost a small fortune. A stunning style statement, she had to admit, despite the fact that it violated the human norm standards preached by the Human Pure fanatics.

Not her problem. The civilian police teams would have to handle them. Station admin had slapped on full security seals on the diplomatic and decontamination zones, blocking access by either faction to that deck.

The express lift scanned her, verified her ID and opened at her approach. Once inside, she turned and stepped back against one of the oversized red X's emblazoned on the rear wall. A metal waistband snicked out of the X and secured her to that space. She tucked her feet under the foot bar and grabbed the take-hold bars.

The doors slammed shut and transport power engaged.

Her implant locked onto the controls. She requested a straight-line trip to the main axis, over to the spindle and then cross-station to the diplomatic sector.

The transport alarm clanged once. The lift slammed sideways and up. Three G's pressed her against the wall. The lift swung around and reversed. The ceiling became the floor. Blood rushed to her head. Her stomach struggled to bring up the contents of her lunch. The taste of acrid bile flooded her mouth. She swallowed and held on for the duration of the trip. At least her anti-nausea shots were up to date.

The lift flew down the line of the station axis. Then, just when everything went red in front of her eyes, the lift gave another hard shove to the side and for one long moment, she went weightless.

Thirty seconds later, the lift shoved on another angle that almost twisted her arms off. The floor became the floor again. Hard and fast it flew cross-station, then slammed to an abrupt stop that rattled her teeth.

Breathing hard, she blinked her eyeballs back into their proper place inside their sockets and wished for the umpteenth time that engineers would find a way to make the trip smoother. The doors rasped open. Violet-white disinfectant lights glared over the pristine white walls and floors of decontamination level.

* * * * *

The scout ship *Sangre de Coeur* lunged from jumpspace. Alarms screeched. An automated warning blared inside Pierce's implant. His stomach tried to turn itself inside out. The grinding ache of too many jumps strung together jangled through him in waves of fever heat and clammy sweat.

A traffic buoy screamed automated warnings, advising him that his velocity was too high and his ship headed on a proscribed and deadly trajectory toward high-traffic lanes. His

mind swam between hyperspace and now. Instruments rippled in a slow, stomach-wrenching flow of time and space gone askew.

No time to think. Ping the implant. Relay commands to *Sangre de Coeur* bridge controls. Full override. Dump speed to system standards. Acquire system data referents. Send AutoID. Redirect course.

Sangre de Coeur shuddered and fired plasma bursts to dump velocity. Ship comp grabbed local scan data of ships, stars and debris, sorted through the parameters of speed, location, and velocity and chose the path that avoided collision, rupture and explosive decompression. Six G's squeezed his body in hard, random spurts. His vision went red. He blinked and refocused his eyes again.

Ship status updates raced through his implant. Velocity dump completed. Normal G level returned. Proximity alert downgraded to stage two.

He bounced codes and data to the traffic buoy. The battered satellite's limited comp accepted his ID codes, verified his ship with visual scans, and relayed the information to Nexus Station

Visual and electronic scan dopplered in next. That gave him the locations of seventy-nine ships, fourteen satellites, six planets and nineteen moons within the vicinity of the jumpspace. Last but not least, Nexus Station's current orbit glowed around the second-largest of the Jovian gas giants. Data sorted out into manic streams of numbers. He shunted everything to the navigation comp.

Sangre de Coeur fired five miniscule plasma pulses from her side rockets, reoriented the ship and locked onto the correct trajectory to the station. A final ten-second burst sent the ship moving in that direction. Auto-com messages with the traffic buoy and Nexus Station confirmed their course. Estimated docking time, thirty-six minutes.

With velocity dumped down to the sedate pace of ten thousand miles per second, the full-body safety netting around his chair retracted. He leaned over the right side to dry heave

for a moment. Going into jump on an empty stomach was not the recommended procedure but he didn't have any other choice. His emergency supplies were down to one pitiful quart of water and two packets of dried FeCO-HB-synth components.

Caliban, his A.I. partner, flowed out from the control panel and morphed his transaluminum shell into his favored shape of a black humpbacked gargoyle with rust-tinged wings. Most artificial intelligences locked their bodies into one location as station managers or ship pilots as soon as they achieved maturity.

Caliban was one of the few exceptions. He'd chosen to retain full mobility and full partnership with Pierce as an interstellar homicide investigator.

The foot-tall quantum computer held up his clawed hands and gave Pierce a bottle of water and two foil packets. "I believe you need to access proper nutrients before you pass out and become a useless burden for our newest investigation."

Pierce snagged the water bottle, grabbed the foil packets and ripped them open with palsied fingers. The dark red powder filled his mouth with the sour, aching pungency of salt and copper. He sucked in the water, swished it around to mix with the powder and swallowed the rank slurry of reconstituted blood.

Nausea welled up in his throat. He pushed the sensation aside and coped with the horrid taste. His tongue felt like it had swollen to twice its size. He poured more powder in his mouth, took another long swig of water and drank it down, hurting. Then he continued to alternate mouthfuls of water with the powder and swallow with mechanical gulps until he finished every last drop.

Little by little, he began to feel more normal. His strength returned. Scan generation information flowed through his implant with trajectory images, more numbers and calculations. *Course plot normal. Velocity within specified range.* He sorted and dumped the data into the appropriate ship functions.

His implant accessed a secure link to Lilith, Nexus admin's A. I. He requested a meeting with the stationmaster, full security priority level ten.

Lilith's transmission flowed into his implant. "I've scheduled your meeting with Stationmaster Maris Claxon fifteen minutes after docking. Full security autopsy and crime scene data will transfer to your implant upon her approval."

Maris.

His heart skipped a beat. Only three years since they'd parted, and that time felt like an eternity. Would she greet him with a warm smile and open arms? Or a deadpan, cold-eyed stare while she handed him a month's supply of freeze-dried synth-blood and bottled water?

He groaned, pressed his jaws together and refused to let the itch inside his jaw become something more ... like raw, hard desire for *her*. He was just here to do a job, not obsess over a woman who'd probably found herself a new lover and/or lifepartner since he saw her last.

* * * * *

Thirty minutes later, the routine sounds of grapples connecting and airlock links snapping into place caused a slight vibration under Pierce's chair. He smiled. A smooth docking, but that was no surprise. Lilith, the station's admin, was Caliban's agemate in the most recent generation of artificial intelligences.

Caliban bounced up to the control panel and crouched there with his gargoyle wings outspread. "I've detected and blocked seven datasnake probes within the last two minutes."

Pierce arched his eyebrows. Datasnake probes were the latest tech, sleek little monsters that tunneled their way into ship databases and control functions. "Lilith?"

Caliban extended a tiny claw and inserted the tip into *Sangre de Coeur's* bridge comp. The quantum computer's eyes glowed red. He retracted his claw. "Not Lilith. Origin unknown." He folded his batwings flat against his back. "Besides, those probes are too obvious and clumsy for her special talents. She knows better."

Interesting. Pierce stroked his chin. “How long do you think it will take you to locate the source of those probes?”

Caliban sat on the edge of the control panel and crossed his gnarled legs. “With thirty levels to crosscheck, I anticipate fifty-five minutes to run a complete debugging.” The computer shrugged his tiny shoulders. Miniscule scales glinted across his metallic skin with that motion. “Of course, this means I’ll have to link with Lilith and become her personal spybot in order to locate the flaws in her security net.”

Pierce grinned. “Well, what are you waiting for? You’re an independent entity. You don’t need my permission to take a stroll around the station.”

Caliban jumped to the floor. He folded and retracted his gargoyle wings into his body. The surface of his “skin” morphed from scales to a bland silver texture. His legs shortened to one-inch stubs with wheels instead of feet and his face morphed into a flat black panel of a cleaning bot. Staying true to his disguise of a brainless tool, he trundled over to the service hatch and exited without a word of farewell.

* * * * *

During their mandatory three-day decontamination procedures, the Avee had taken over Section D of level Sixteen as their personal living space. As a species, the Avee were well known as creatures of comfort. They indulged in lavish luxuries and took pride in the fact that their culture had practically eliminated the need for physical labor. Brilliant swathes of pale gold silk tapestries and turquoise pillows transformed the plain white-walled rooms of their allotted space into the appearance of a comfortable, fairytale palace.

Maris entered the Avee sector. The door irised shut behind her.

An array of fresh fruits and vegetables filled the long table in the middle of the room.

Their leader, Nara Al-Torel, turned around. The iridescent violet feathers that framed the sleek golden fur of her face matched the color of her eyes. Very keen, intelligent eyes, like an eagle. Her ears were pricked, like a cat.

Loose-fitting cream-colored pants tucked into soft ankle boots and an open-backed vest provided a simple elegance to the alien leader's attire without restricting her movements. Jewels of every color accented the silver embroidery on the fabric.

Zumestre was her title. The translation device rendered that title as queen. Three Avee, two male and one female, stood guard around her.

The crests of the three guards had translucent feathers tipped with scarlet, indigo and gold tendrils that matched the swirls on their velvet black fur. They wore dark gray vests over loose pants tucked into gleaming black boots. Studded gun belts cinched their waists, and rows of silver rings circled their earlobes.

Queen Nara looked Maris over from head to toe and bobbed her head in a satisfied nod. She opened her human-shaped mouth and spoke. A series of soft warbles and chirps surrounded her words with delightful music.

The ivory egg-shaped translation device dangling from the chain around her neck like an amulet rendered her speech into a feminine voice that spoke basic trade English. "Good. You are here now. I welcome the opportunity to finally see and speak to the ruler of this station without the static images of your holographic communication devices blunting our senses and impressions of each other."

Maris managed a graceful bow. "Thank you. The decontamination process is over. I am also happy to be able to see and speak to you in person instead of using machines." Trills, clicks and chirps from her translator unit made her feel like songbird singing in the middle of a verdant jungle. She took a deep breath and smiled. The scent of warm, fragrant vanilla filled her mind with childhood memories of Tante Anoka's paper-thin sugar cookies, served hot from the oven.

Maris blinked and brought her mind back to the present. She straightened her shoulders. Her only consolation was the fact that she'd taken extra care in bathing and

dressing before she started work today. Hopefully, she smelled as good to them as they smelled to her

She risked a quick glance at the guards. They watched her with a keen intensity that reminded her of hawks getting ready to swoop down on their prey.

Zumestre Nara inclined her head in a regal nod. “After you take me on a tour of your realm, I offer my *zembra* to assist yours. Together we will find and kill the one who seeks to disrupt our trading mission with unseemly deaths.”

Oh, shit! Maris gulped. How in the world was she going to stop them without causing a diplomatic incident? She coughed and cleared her throat. “Um ... What is a *zembra*? I don’t have a clear translation for that word.”

Nara cocked her head to the side. A contralto trill of intense clarity gusted from her pursed lips. Then she said, “A *zembra* is one who hunts.” She pointed at the two male guards first. “Matto and Birkir are my *zembra*.” Both guards inclined their heads in acknowledgement at Maris.

Then Nara pointed at the third guard, the female one. The amulet dangling from the chain around Nara’s neck continued to translate her words. “Karyll is also my chosen *zembra*. They are eager to work with your warrior.”

She gestured at the holographic image of the space station that spun like a glittering top above the table of fruits and vegetables. “Lilith, the mechanical intelligence that communicates with our spaceship’s intelligence, told us your chosen *zembra*’s ship now approaches the station. Is this not correct?”

Frag! The God of Eternal Fuckups must have her in his sights now. Maris sucked in another breath of delicious vanilla-scented air and pinged her implant. A spreadsheet showing the directory of interspecies trade regulations flowed past her vision. She scanned down the listing and stopped at interspecies security transactions and protocol.

Blasted regulations! There was no way she could refuse Nara's offer. Last night's homicide was an Avey. Standard protocol dictated full cooperation for cross-species homicide investigations.

Maris blinked and focused on the Avey queen and her three guards again. "Please accept my apologies for the misunderstanding. As soon as my *zembra* arrives, we will return and work together to coordinate the investigation." Now all she had to do was sweet-talk Pierce into working with them and make sure they didn't turn her station into a major interspecies war zone.

Piece of cake. Yeah. Right. The last time I tried to sweet-talk Pierce I bargained away my autonomy for three weeks.

A slow heat simmered across her skin at the memory of those three sizzling weeks.

She blew out a flustered breath and did her best to ignore the fact that her cheeks and the tips of her ears felt like they were on fire. *And he's not even here yet!*

Hopefully, the Avey had no idea why her skin had suddenly changed color. She bowed and backed away slowly. "I must go now and meet my chosen *zembra*. His arrival is imminent. Please wait for our return."

Nara's feathered crest rose on her head into a brilliant crown of iridescent glory. She smiled and braced her hands on her hips. Her violet eyes glowed with a feverish light. The timbre of her musical voice changed into a husky warble. "I look forward to an excellent hunt."

* * * * *

Pierce peeled his grubby shipsuit off, dumped the sweat-stained bundle into the cleaner slot and strode into the shower. He had less than five minutes to make himself presentable before Maris showed up in her official capacity as stationmaster.

Hot recycled water sluiced across his skin and loosened muscles cramped during fourteen hours of jumpspace stasis. Those hours encompassed more than thirty light-years of travel.

Needless to say, the human body protested and reacted to this time differential. Bones lost calcium. Dehydration swept in with a vengeance, lowered the body's potassium to dangerous levels and disrupted heart rhythm. He reached for the soap. Aching muscles protested with sharp twinges while he scrubbed away the accumulated debris of dried sweat and dead skin flaking from every inch of his bone-tired body.

Caliban didn't care one way or the other how rank he got, but Maris was another story entirely. She'd arch a sardonic eyebrow, wrinkle her nose, then skewer him with a few choice remarks.

Steam billowed around his legs, crawled over his hips and chest and fogged his vision. He closed his eyes and savored a single moment of luxurious relaxation. To hell with macho posturing; feeling clean ranked high on his list of personal pleasures. No time to waste. He slapped at the control panel and ended the shower.

Suds and water gurgled down the drain. He turned in a slow circle, raised his arms over his head and stretched out the kinks in his back. Jets of heated air sucked away the lingering droplets beaded on his skin. He swiped his hand over his bald scalp. No need to fuss over drying or styling his hair. He'd chosen total depilation years ago in order to maximize his advantage in close combat situations.

A soft chime echoed within the close confines of his cabin. He linked to the ship's controls with his implant and accessed the scans from the main deck's airlock. The image of Maris with her familiar mop of unruly dark curls, intense black eyes and silky olive skin appeared. She smoothed her hand over the formal green bodysuit that highlighted every scrumptious inch of her body and waited for the forward hatch to cycle open. The frost-rimed yellow tube of the ramp glowed in the window of the sealed outer door behind her.

Blast it! Sangre de Coeur had Maris on auto-entry status.

He snagged a pair of pants, shimmied into them, slapped his hand on his cabin door panel to open it and ran into the corridor to climb the access ladder to the main deck.

The airlock inner hatch slid open. His ears popped with the pressure change. Cold dockside air swirled inside along with Maris's lithe shape.

Pierce stopped in mid-stride.. *Oh, god.* The familiar texture of steel deck plate gave excellent traction to his bare feet. His heart slammed against his chest with the memory of their last night together.

She looked fabulous, way better than the paltry images relayed to his implant a few seconds ago. The perfect combination of high-powered intelligence and warm sexuality all wrapped up in one package deal. He wanted to grab her, swing her around in a circle and then hug her and kiss her until she melted in his arms.

Instead, the only thing he could do was hook his thumbs in the waistband of his pants and say, "Hi."

Her Maris's mouth dropped open. A flush brightened her cheeks. She glared at him and shook her head. "We don't have the time to waste with small talk. Lilith docked you right beside the Avee ship for a reason. Between the serial killer targeting humans and aliens and the Avee trader delegation wanting in on the investigation, we have a major mess to straighten out."

She needs me. She needs my help. That's why she's so pissed off right now.

He crossed his arms. That was the only way he could keep from rubbing his hands together with anticipation. Time to play hardball. "You already know my assignments are always solo investigations with full cooperation from local authority and security. I don't recall signing a partnership agreement with you or the Avee."

* * * * *

Maris crossed her arms and deliberately mirrored Pierce's closed-off body language.

Blast him! If she'd had the sense to arm herself before coming here, she'd be using him for target practice for being such a hard-assed whoreson of an asteroid miner. She should have known better than to let him distract her with his bare chest and those faded pants hanging dangerously low on his hips.

All I have to do is reach out, give those pants a little tug and ... Double blast him!

The deep rumbling growl of his voice filled with shadows still had the ability to awaken forbidden desires she'd locked away inside her soul. As for her heart, forget about that, she'd given her heart to him three achingly long years ago and lost all hope of ever being happy again.

She sucked in a deep breath and pushed away the memories fogging her brain. Another ragged breath helped her set aside the heat dancing across her skin with explicit intensity.

Hmmm. Now that she had a few moments to think, Pierce's skin had an unhealthy yellow tinge instead of the normal dark tan of his mixed-race ancestry. Plus, the elaborate dragon wings tattooed on his back that curled around his shoulders, arms and sides like feathers looked even darker than usual.

A critical eye over his pants confirmed her suspicions. They were riding low 'cause he'd lost weight, not as a reminder of how he knew exactly what to do to drive her crazy with a single kiss. He must have pushed himself to the limit stringing jumps one after the other in order to arrive here at such short notice. No doubt about it, he needed fresh blood soon to regain his strength, not a few packets of freeze-dried synthetic pap.

The few times she'd allowed him to sink his fangs into her skin, she'd experienced the most thrilling, mind-blasting orgasms. Her nipples puckered just thinking about it again. Standing straighter, she tightened her stomach muscles to quell the lusty churning inside her belly.

The ball is in my court now. Not his.

She cocked her head to the left. "If you want to be a bastard, fine. Go away. I don't need your help. I'll snag a goon from security, tell the Avee he's my *zembra* and join forces with them to hunt down this low-life who's terrorizing my station."

Pierce moved.

One moment he was at the other end of the corridor. The next, he leaned over her and put his hands on her waist, up high.

Maris straightened her spine. *Okay, maybe he's not quite as weak as I assumed.*

He splayed his thumbs over her ribs. Heat radiated from his skin like a rocket ready to flame out. "Fool. Do you have any idea what it means if you ask one of the security goons to be your *zembra*?"

Why was he so upset? It didn't make any sense. She already knew what *zembra* meant. There was no reason for him to react like this.

She flattened her hands against his chest. That didn't help. It took every ounce of control she had left not to dig her fingers into his muscles and purr like a cat in heat.

Her head told her to push him away, but her heart said *yes* as if there were no connection at all to her brain. She couldn't pull her fingers away from his heated skin. "What's your problem? It's just the Avee word for a bodyguard, a hunter of criminals."

Pierce shook his head. His words came out clipped and angry. "'Berserker' is a more accurate translation. After the hunt is over, will you comply with the tradition?"

Uneasiness shivered inside her under the flat glare of his black eyes. She lowered her eyes and would have edged away, but her back was already against the wall. "What tradition?"

He eased closer, crowding into her. The hard, solid column of his erection soared against her belly. Her breath caught in her throat. The backs of her knees wobbled.

He spoke slowly, with deliberate coldness. "Will you fuck your *zembra* in order to bring him or her back to sanity from the blood frenzy of the kill?"

Comprehension jolted through her veins like ice water. No wonder he was upset. Her fault for not researching the Avee language better, but no matter, the mistake had already been made. She might as well accept the consequences.

Maris lifted her chin and met him stare for stare. “If I have to, I will. Last night’s murder victim, the most recent one, is Avee. I checked the relevant regulations. I don’t have any other choice but full cooperation, because it’s now a cross-species homicide investigation.”

The hard, cold gleam in his eyes changed. The color softened from black onyx into burnt umber. He moved one hand up to her face and rubbed his thumb across her mouth. “Mea culpa, cher. The fault was mine. I didn’t know there was an Avee victim also.”

She blinked. *An apology?* He was actually apologizing?

“Will you let me be your *zembra* for this hunt?”

She curled her hands into fists against his chest. Smooth skin. Strong muscle and sinew under her touch. “Why? What’s the catch? What do you want?”

“There’s no catch,” he whispered. “I care about you and I *still* want you.”

He lowered his mouth to hers. She forgot about fighting back. Soft lips. The gentle mouth of a dangerous vamp with fierce and deadly desires. Elongated fangs touched the edges of her teeth. Heat rippled between them.

His tongue found hers. Insistent. Demanding. Probing.

Molten heat settled between her legs. She moaned and wrapped her arms around his neck. Her mind abdicated all control to her body’s aching need for him. *All of him, with her, inside her.*

He pulled his mouth away from hers.

No! She reached for him, tried to pull him back. He grabbed her wrists and yanked her arms over her head.

Maris's heart slammed against her chest. Her brain started functioning again. "Damn you!" She yelled and gave a futile kick at his legs. "You tricked me."

But Pierce didn't respond. He couldn't hear her. His eyes had the unfocused stare that meant implant activity.

Not good.

A few seconds later, his eyes focused on her. He looked at his hands, uncurled the iron-hard grasp of his fingers and released her.

Her arms flopped to her side.

"What happened?" She rubbed her hands together and welcomed the tingling sensation of blood returning to her fingers. "What's wrong?"

Pierce's chocolate brown eyes went black as space. She sucked in a startled breath at the cold rage smoldering in his hooded gaze.

He sighed, shook his head and then twisted his mouth into a disgusted scowl. "Caliban reported in. I sent him after whoever tried to infiltrate and take over my ship's control functions. That turned out to be nothing but a false trail, a wild asteroid chase. Whoever sent those datasnakes used them to pull my attention away from this area of the space station."

He went to the right bulkhead and slapped his hand on the gleaming metal surface. A hidden door slid open. He pulled out two matte-black emergency skinsuits and handed one to her. "Put this on. *Now*. I don't like the setup at all."

She donned hers as quickly as possible while he pulled his over his pants. The smart microcellular foam embedded in the fabric allowed the skinsuits to harden within milliseconds to protect the wearer. The hood included a transparent face shield as needed, and a small air tank clipped to the belt gave the wearer four hours of oxygen in case of explosive decompression. Lasers and blasters, on the other hand, remained a definite hazard. These weren't battle armor, just a good basic protection from hand weapons and explosives.

The situation had changed drastically. Pierce needed his full strength and capabilities in order to fight. Maris peeled the suit away from her left arm. “Here. Take what you need. Your color is terrible.”

He stopped. “Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure, or I wouldn’t be offering,” she snapped. “I don’t want you passing out on me at a critical moment.”

The unexpected curve of a radiant smile interrupted the sharp planes of his face. “Thank you.” He lifted her hand to his mouth. Heat radiated from the pads of his fingers.

She braced herself.

Warm moist breath tickled her skin. Sharp fangs slid into the vein pulsing on the inside of her wrist with a quick pain like twin needle pricks. The pain vanished under a flare of exquisite and intense lassitude that rushed through her like liquid honey. Lava-hot pleasure swirled through her arm, curled around her breasts, shimmered across her belly and finally centered into a damp carnal heat pooled between her legs.

She felt the sublime gift of life flow from her to him and back in an endless loop. Her knees buckled. She swayed and couldn’t feel her feet anymore. The only thing that kept her from slumping to the floor was his mouth on her wrist.

He lifted his head and stared at her. The sickly pale color of his complexion shifted. Like a chameleon, his skin took on a healthier, deeper glow of mocha tan. Seeing his normal color return made her feel grateful she hadn’t withheld the life-giving force of her blood to help him regain his depleted strength.

She caught her breath and managed to speak again. “I’m all right. You can have more of my blood if you need it.”

Pierce shook his head. “I have enough. Later, if you are willing, I want more.”

The purring growl of sensual anticipation in his voice sent a silky shiver through Maris. Images, memories filled her mind’s eye -- his hands on her breasts, his hot mouth nipping at

her skin, his body naked, sleek and powerful, flexing, muscles bunching in his ass while he worked the thick, engorged length of his erection deep into her core.

She sucked in a ragged breath and tried to remind her treacherous heart not to give into temptation. *He'll leave. Just like he did before and I'll be alone again.*

He bent his head to her wrist. Twin droplets of blood shimmered at the two puncture wounds on her wrists like wine-drenched rubies. He licked away the drops of blood and the punctures healed with magical speed.

Then, out of nowhere, a huge spike of blinding pain stabbed through her head with searing, mind-boggling agony. She fell to her knees and clutched her head with both hands. As if that futile gesture would keep her skull from exploding in a horrible spray of blood, shattered bone, and ruptured brain tissue.

The pain vanished. She opened her eyes to a pitch-black darkness. The ship shook in a drunken spiral under her feet. Gravity fluxes sent her from zero G to full G and then back to zero G all at once. She banged her funny bone against the bulkhead. Her arm went numb and tingling from elbow to fingertips. The familiar background sounds of functioning machinery and air circulation had vanished.

“What the hell was that?” She groaned.

The welcome growl of Pierce’s voice steadied her frazzled thoughts. “Electromagnetic pulse bombs,” he muttered. “They must have set them off simultaneously in order to disable the entire station. We were lucky. We only caught the edge of the blast.”

He opened a panel in the floor. A crude control board with multicolored buttons and levers popped up. “Hopefully the manual overrides and mechanical resets still work.” He moved his hands with uncanny speed over the controls, flipping every button and lever until all the red lights on the board changed to green.

The ship steadied beneath Maris’s feet. Not full G, only half G, but enough to settle her uneasy stomach. Red emergency lights flickered on and painted the air with lurid crimson

shadows. The familiar hisses of air circulating started up. She exhaled a relieved sigh at that sound.

Pierce shoved the board back into the floor and closed the panel. He reached for her and pulled her to her feet as if she weighed nothing. “Can you walk now? Do you have any idea how long it’ll take for Lilith to recover from the EMP blast? Does she have an auto-reset mode?”

The dull ache right behind Maris’s left eye told her that her implant still worked. She pinged Lilith. A white noise knifed through her head with the all the fierce agony of a migraine. Maris bit her lip and pressed one hand to her forehead. Thousands of innocent stationers would face a slow death if they didn’t get the life support functions back up within the next three hours. She shook her head. “That blast knocked Lilith offline. I can’t access a blasted thing, let alone her auto-reset functions.”

A sharp rapping echoed from the airlock. She stared at Pierce with her heart in her throat.

It couldn’t be the saboteurs. Why the hell would they knock? “What the fuck?”

His face went blank for a split second. He blinked, grimaced, shook his head, then said, “*Sangre de Coeur* just relayed a vid-dump into my implant. The Avee queen and her *zembra* are in the airlock now and requesting entry. Caliban’s with them.”

He went to the left bulkhead and opened a locker hidden behind the metal wall. Ammo, illegal multi-purpose rifles, pistols, blades, grenades and gun belts filled that alcove.

* * * * *

Pierce slung a rifle over his shoulder. He strapped two pistols, three blades and six grenades to his gun belt along with assorted clips of hard and soft ammo. Just because he was a vamp with the added advantages of speed, strength and rapid healing didn’t mean he was immortal. He could die just as easily as a non-vamp if he lost enough blood. Only fools who imagined themselves as popular vid-stars went into combat unarmed.

He wished he had the time and the words to explain how much he cherished her blood-gift. Maris didn't have to give that to him, but she did simply because he needed it.

He didn't dare risk losing her. He couldn't even pinpoint the moment when his feelings changed from raw, carnal lust to this absolute, deep-seated gut-level need to care for her and protect her in a very traditional way that meant forever.

His mouth went dry. Oh, gods, he was in more trouble now than he'd ever been in his life.

Pierce knew better than to try and stop Maris from going with him. A stationmaster ruled his or her domain with an iron hand. Tradition demanded that she take personal and direct command to find, detain, and stop by any means possible whoever and whatever attacked her station.

He handed her a multi-purpose rifle and ammo. Programmed to shoot rounds of varying size based on target parameters that should be enough for her to handle any extra surprises that popped up while he and Caliban guarded her. He pinged *Sangre de Coeur's* bridge comp and told the ship to let their guests inside.

The airlock hatches cycled open. The Avee rushed inside in a flurry of fur, feathers, embroidered silk, thick armored vests, armbands and gleaming weapons. Their feathered crests brushed the ceiling panels with splashes of violet, crimson, indigo and gold.

The crimson-feathered Avee cradled Caliban in the crook of a black furred arm. He went down on one knee and carefully placed the A.I. on the floor.

Caliban was stuck between shapes. He was a weird blend of gargoyle and cleaning bot. His wings drooped at an awkward angle. He rose on wobbly, wheeled feet, took a step and fell on his face.

Nara Al-Torel stepped forward. Her violet eyes glowed with a feverish light. The egg-shaped amulet on her chest transformed the alien's musical words into standardized trade

format. “This brave warrior of small stature warned us of danger and guided us here despite his injuries. Can you heal him?”

Maris went down on her knees beside Caliban. “Ohmigod. What happened to him?”

“Judging by his reactions, I’d say the EMP blast scrambled his neural network. I know how to help him.” Pierce pinged the ship’s extensive library of entertainment recordings and made a quick selection.

A chorus of overlapping cappella voices filled the air with the soaring cadences of Latin verses. The Avee stopped. Their feathered crests rippled with appreciation. They lifted their heads and blended their musical voices into the solemn *mélange* of tonal music.

Maris stared at Pierce. “A Gregorian chant?”

He grinned, pulled her to her feet and away from Caliban, giving him the space he needed to move around without bumping into her. “Music forms the perfect link for the mathematical pathways in quantum computer hardwiring. I tried everything from acid rock, rap, hip hop, opera and jazz before I stumbled on the songs that give him the most efficient feedback interface between his software and hardware.”

Caliban extruded a pair of reticulated arms from the smooth metal plate of his chest onto the floor and pushed himself to a standing position. His right leg twitched like it wanted to detach itself from his body. He spun around in a disjointed circle on the oversized wheel of his left foot and bounced off the bulkhead with a very noticeable clang.

The second spin was smoother. The wheel on his left foot shrank to a more manageable size. His right wing unfurled with stately grace. His left wing flapped and whirred as if he were trying to take flight. That spun him backwards into the bulkhead again.

The chant ended and another song started, an ancient do-wop melody titled “The Lion Sleeps Tonight.” The Avee smiled and easily blended their voices into the new melody.

Back and forth Caliban swung, hopped, skipped and bounced to the music. His body oozed, shimmered and morphed between scales, feathers, skin and metal and finally settled into his favored gargoyle form. He stopped and bowed. "Thank you. I am ready now."

Pierce pinged the ship and shut the music off.

A gravity flux from the station shook the ship viciously from side to side. He held Maris tight against his side. The Avee braced their legs and absorbed the imbalance without any problems.

Caliban pinged his implant and dumped a map of the station levels into his head. Overlapping red circles shading down to pink and then green pinpointed the strategic locations where a dozen EMP bombs had disrupted all functions. Blinking red lights showed where section seals had automatically deployed on all levels in order to minimize damage and control enemy movements toward admin controls and the critical junction for Lilith's hardened memory core.

He looked at Maris. "Did Caliban give you his data?"

"Yes, he did," she murmured in a distracted voice. Her focus was on the egg-shaped translator amulet hanging around her neck. She flipped open the top, pulled out a wire and plugged it into the tiny socket embedded in her scalp behind her right ear. "In theory this should work. I've never attempted this type of data transfer before."

Another gravity flux rocked the ship.

Maris unplugged the wire from her scalp. She bowed to the Avee queen. "Zumestre Nara Al-Torel." She lifted the amulet's chain over her head. "This man Pierce is my *zembra*." She held up the translator. "I offer critical information and a guide to use for our hunt."

The first guard accepted the translator with eager hands. A few seconds later, after hooking all the amulets together, they completed the data transfer and returned the device to Maris. The guards bowed. They tapped their chests and spoke their names -- Matto, for the

male with red feathers, Birkir, the male with blue feathers, and Karyll, for the female with gold feathers.

Pierce managed a curt nod in acknowledgement of the introductions. The hell with protocol, they had a station to take back.

The Avee queen pointed at Pierce and Caliban. Silver and jewels glinted on her armored wristband. “You lead my *zembra*.” She held up her rifle and inclined her head at Maris. “We follow.”

* * * * *

Maris crept down the yellow-ribbed ramp tube that linked *Sangre de Coeur* to the station. Queen Nara moved with lithe grace beside her.

Pierce and the three Avee guards led the way with weapons ready. Ice crystals clung to the flexi-alum walls. Their breaths frosted the air with each cautious step.

The Avee queen’s ears lay flat against her skull. Her feathered crest rose high and stiff on her scalp, violet tipped with gold. Maris sucked in a ragged breath and caught a faint whiff of the alien’s deliciously warm vanilla scent.

Damn it all. This shouldn’t be happening.

Maris held her rifle with white-knuckled rage. She was stationmaster. She shouldn’t have to fight her way back to admin in order to regain control of *her* station.

The first thing they needed to do was manually reset the station’s systems and make each deck independent. Then form secure communications links with regular security, and seal off the decks section by section in order to isolate and contain the enemy. Thank god they had Caliban. He was their ace in the hole when it came to resetting the station’s comp controls.

Pierce reached the exit door. He dropped to the floor. The Avee flattened against the walls and aimed their weapons.

Maris stopped and pressed her body flat against one side while Queen Nara positioned herself on the other side. Frost melted under her hands and melt-water dripped over her boots.

Caliban inserted a claw into the door's controls. It whooshed back onto an empty deck dimly lit by red emergency lights. Pierce belly-crawled the last few feet. He peered around the edges with Caliban, rose to his feet and motioned at the Avee guards. They moved with silent efficiency and joined him. He pointed at Maris. "Stay at least five feet behind us at all times."

They exited the ramp. An eerie silence blanketed the deck. Scarlet and black shadows had transformed the familiar surroundings into a spooky maze. Office workers huddled in clumps outside their darkened cubicles and watched them pass with wide-eyed stares.

A solid ceramic-aluminasteel firewall loomed at the other end under the lurid red lights. This was no simple bulkhead, but instead a double section of ship hull, capable of maintaining air pressure and life support if explosions blew the station apart. The only way to get through that wall was by using admin-level override codes to open secured emergency airlock hatches.

Caliban crawled up the side of the hatch. He pinged Maris's implant on the secure link. *Codes please.*

She accessed the relevant files and shunted them to him. Pierce waved her back. She retreated behind a cubicle wall. The Avee queen joined her.

Pierce and the Avee guards positioned themselves on either side of the hatch. Caliban extruded a shiny claw into the control panel and entered the complex code sequence. After a moment of breathless anticipation, the hatches cycled open onto another white-walled corridor waiting with silent, red-tinged shadows.

They walked through the opened double airlock doors, single file.

A lifeless body sprawled on the floor on the other side of the firewall. Maris held her breath and edged past him as quietly as she could. She pressed the autolock button down and resealed the airlock hatches. Nothing she could do now. The living needed her help more.

Caliban pinged her implant. *I have contact.*

Maris remained flat on the floor and sent him her response. *Report Lilith's status.*

Lilith sustained damage. She has control only at admin core. Station reset on minimal emergency power.

Lilith pinged her implant next. *Help me.*

A vid image flooded her mind of shadowy armored figures piling explosives around admin's firewall. Another databurst gave her Lilith's estimate of thirty-seven to fifty-one minutes before breakthrough. She shunted the image and data to Caliban so he could relay it to Pierce's implant.

In the next compartment, six more bodies sagged across chairs and desks. Blood splashes and gore gleamed like black ice under the lurid red emergency lighting. The copper-tinged smell of blood mingled with the rank stench of voided bowels filled her nostrils. Her stomach turned. The bitter taste of bile surged into her mouth. She swallowed, concentrated on breathing through her mouth instead of her nose, and moved onward.

The bright red dot of a laser sight traced a line on the far wall.

"Down!" Pierce yelled.

Maris crashed to the floor. Three dark figures jumped from the shadows. Red flashes came from them along with the sounds of gunshots from all sides exploding with shattering intensity.

Two attackers fell back against the walls and slumped to the floor in slow motion. The third figure separated from hip to shoulder under one long burst of gunfire.

* * * * *

Section by section, Pierce and his Avee allies fought their way through to the station's core. An endless blur of gunshots, laser blasts, and stun shocks became his universe. He stepped over lifeless bodies and ignored the ripe scent of fresh blood. Wounded men, women and children crept, stumbled, and hid in darkened corners.

The station's inhabitants milled around in traumatized clumps. Flickering red emergency lights lent the landscape a demonic appearance. Children wailed and vomited in the corridors. Men and women sagged against the curving bulkheads and held their aching heads from the pain of the EMP pulses that had disrupted their implants.

Outraged and infuriated shopkeepers, clerks, sanitation workers and parents grabbed nail guns, kitchen knives and broken sections of pipe and formed a deadly, uncoordinated mob. Security teams stumbled forward and joined the melee.

Maris's bloodgift gave Pierce the strength, speed and agility to keep his team a good distance ahead of the raging crowd. Caliban clung to the curving metal bulkhead about twenty feet above him. The agile computer kept him apprised of Lilith's attempts to keep admin sealed off from her attackers.

Pierce stopped in a shadowed alcove and motioned for the three Avee guards to join him. They eased forward and flattened against the wall beside him. Oil, dirt and soot blackened their clothes. Half-clotted blood matted their fur from a multitude of tiny cuts inflicted by shrapnel and exploding glass-walled partitions.

The gaping doorway of a broken lift loomed ahead. The acrid smell of sweat and blood from five bulky shapes crouched inside the lift filled his nostrils. His vamp vision gave him the advantage over humans in the shifting light.

Pierce unclipped an old-fashioned but deadly grenade from his belt, pulled off the arming ring, counted to three and lobbed the crude weapon into the lift. A blinding explosion of sound, flame, body parts and shrapnel spewed through the cavernous warehouse.

Taking the lead, the Avey *zembra* rushed forward. Wild keening screams erupted from their throats while they whirled glittering swords and beheaded four more terrorists hiding in the shadows beside the lift.

Pierce stepped away from his sheltered corner into the path of what felt like a runaway rocket. The blast hit him between his shoulder blades. The excruciating agony of broken bones and ruptured organs roared through him.

He rolled behind the split side of a three-ton shipping canister. The robust strength of Mari's recent gift sizzled through him like lightning. Though his body twitched and flopped around like a fish out of water, he clamped his teeth against the scream that bubbled into his throat from the rapid healing. Twisting around on his hip, he aimed his rifle toward the sound of excited breathing and blew his would-be assailant away.

Panting, Pierce crouched over the enemy's blood-drenched body and made sure he was dead before risking a glance over his shoulder to check on Maris and the Avey queen. The two females had reached the opposite end of the warehouse. They ignored the mob waving makeshift weapons running up behind them.

Bulky armor, shock vests, helmets, and bulletproof faceplates protected the station security team that fanned out in front of Maris and her Avey companion in silent, coordinated efficiency. Smoke and flames danced around the towering line of shipping canisters.

Caliban dropped to the floor beside him. The quantum computer folded his flex-metal batwings flat and cocked his head to the side. "Idiot. You should have let me draw him out instead of risking yourself."

Pierce rose to his feet. "If I hadn't, he would have blown away the Avey. We need them." Blood-hunger cramped his gut from his body's need to replenish after that extensive healing. He pushed the pain aside, hefted his rifle and ran ahead to rejoin his allies.

* * * * *

Pain knifed Maris's side with every breath she took. Probably a cracked rib or two. Ducking and diving for shelter when a row of two-ton shipping canisters slipped their hooks and bounced and rolled in every direction hadn't exactly been a walk on the beach.

Back and forth, she pinged Lilith. Using her overrides as stationmaster, she bypassed the safeguards on admin's life support and rerouted a load of sleepygas from riot control through that deck's air circulation vents. She smiled at the vid images of the attackers in that area tumbling to the floor like discarded puppets. Exhaust fans sucked away the remains of the gaseous sedatives into decontamination airlocks while fresh air flowed in through admin's air ducts.

Lilith sent updated images to Maris's implant of Pierce running with preternatural speed past the slumped bodies. Caliban and the three *Avee zembra* followed him with commendable speed.

Maris relayed the images to the station security team who had formed an honor guard around her and Nara, the *Avee* queen. The team leader opened his faceplate and gave her thumbs up.

Loudspeakers embedded in the walls clicked on. Lilith's programmed voice advised Nexus Station citizens to remain behind locked doors for at least another thirty minutes until Security sorted out the damage.

Maris rose to her feet and strode with her head held high. Only a few more minutes, a short walk through the next airlock hatch and she'd be able to join Pierce and help Lilith regain full control of the station.

* * * * *

It all happened in one continuous blur of separate impressions. Bodies of attackers and innocent clerical personnel slumped on floors, chairs and desks. Welding lasers lay scattered in front of the sealed firewall around Lilith's core. Maris strode around the corner.

One of the bodies slumped against the firewall moved. Pierce spun around.

A gas mask covered this attacker's face. He pulled a string hanging from his thick padded vest.

Nooooooo! Not Maris. She doesn't deserve to die!

Moving faster than he'd ever moved in his long life, Pierce lunged across fifty feet in a split second. He spun her around, shoved her to the floor and flung his body over her as a shield against the blazing fireball rushing at them.

Whump! Heat, light, sound and an enormous pressure crashed into his back.

Fire raged through his body faster than he could heal and seared his flesh away to the bone.

Pain. Endless burning pain. Agony. Then nothing.

* * * * *

The vile stench of burnt hair and flesh was unbearable. A clerical worker with his right arm bent at an impossible angle crumpled to his knees and vomited on the floor.

Maris gulped, swallowed and then took a shallow breath so her cracked ribs wouldn't stab into her side. Those ribs were the least of her worries. A stem cell injection and fifteen minutes in the Regen Unit would handle them easily.

But Pierce ... *Oh, God, no!*

She shoved her gibbering panic aside, glared at the station's medical director, Dr. Sung Li, and jabbed her finger in the woman's chest. "I don't give a flying fuck about your fragging triage rules. Work on him. *Now!*"

Dr. Li waved at the medical personnel working on victims who'd been shielded by desks and partitions from the worst effects of the explosion. Sticky gobs of soot-stained white foam from the automatic fire response system clung to everything and everyone. "My job is to heal those who have the best chance of survival first."

Maris spoke with precise coldness. "I'm stationmaster. If you disobey my direct order, I can have you spaced for mutiny."

Nara Al-Torel strode forward. The violet feathers rose to a stiff crest on her scalp. She gestured at her *zembra*. The Avee warriors loomed over Dr. Li with visible threat despite the crude bandages and salve on their burnt fur and drooping feathers.

The translator device hanging around the Avee queen's neck rendered her clipped musical words into Trade Standard English. "Give your command and my *zembra* will slay this disobedient person for you."

Shocked anger filled Dr. Li's almond-shaped eyes. She raked her hands through her short, straight black hair and gave a very respectful bow to the Avee and then to Maris. "Of course. You're right. You are stationmaster. I have no choice but to obey your order."

She knelt in the sticky pink-stained foam clumped around Pierce's body. A fluid gesture of her hand indicated the horrific burns that exposed the split bones of his skull, spine, ribs, pelvis and tibia. Her voice was as calm and reasonable as if she spoke to a small child with limited comprehension. "You can see for yourself he won't survive. His clothing is melted and fused into his flesh. His bones are exposed and blackened. He's barely breathing as it is right now. The best thing for me to do is drug him and ease his pain while he dies."

Maris clenched her hands into fists. Kicking this woman in the head would not give Pierce the medical treatment he needed. "No drugs. You don't understand. He's a living vamp. He survived infection by the vampire virus. His body chemistry and physiology isn't entirely human anymore. He doesn't need your skin transplants. He doesn't need four or five days of intensive care with his body stuffed into a medbox burn unit. He needs blood. Fresh blood. From multiple donors. As soon as possible."

Dr. Li's eyes went wide with sudden comprehension. She turned Pierce's head to the side with exquisite care and ran her med scanner over him. A sad sigh gusted from her lips.

She sat back on her heels and displayed the readings blinking on the hand-held device. "It's too late. His heart stopped."

Maris pinged Caliban.

Caliban raced across the desktops so fast all she saw was a metallic blur. He dropped to the floor, extruded his hands into flat pads and placed them on Pierce's back closest to his heart. Electricity buzzed through his hands. Pierce's body jumped under the shock.

Dr. Li scanned him. "Nothing."

Caliban zapped him again.

Another scan. "No."

Caliban zapped him a third time.

Maris held her breath and prayed. *Oh, God, please. Don't let him die. Please. Take me instead.*

Dr. Li ran the scan for the third time. "His heart is beating again." She checked the reading again. "No brain damage from oxygen deprivation."

Yes!

Maris shouted her command to the room. "Everyone with A Positive blood, come here immediately."

Five of the medics raised their hands and edged forward with wary glances. Dr. Li clapped her hands. "You heard her. Get over here. Right now."

They hustled over.

Dr. Li wrung her hands. She gave Maris a desperate, despairing look. "How am I going to do this? His burns are so severe there's no possible way I can locate a decent vein in time to attempt the blood transfusions he needs."

Maris's mouth dropped open. Where had this woman gotten her medical training? Hadn't she ever learned the proper procedures, let alone treated a living vampire before? She

grabbed Dr. Li's arms, shook her and snarled into her face. "Make an incision in his abdominal wall. Stick a feeding tube into his stomach. Use IVs on the donors and pump their blood directly into his digestive system."

* * * * *

He woke to endless, mind-boggling, searing pain that burned through him at a cellular level with molten fury.

He accepted it. Welcomed it. Pain meant he was alive, not dead.

Maris ...

He blinked away the sudden panic that squeezed his heart with an icy hand and opened his mouth to whisper her name. A harsh mewling sound came out past the raw fire of his throat.

Maris leaned over him. Blood, grime and soot streaked her face. Seeing her, alive and well, was worth it. He sagged against the cold, hard floor. His body convulsed in agony from that contact.

Maris hovered over him. Worry, concern and fear pinched her face into a desolate mask. She reached out as if she wanted to touch him, then jerked her hands back and wrung them instead. "Don't move," she said. "Don't try to talk. You need a lot more blood to heal properly."

He blinked away the agony hazing his vision and risked lifting his head. Dirty clumps of foam clung to the floor. His clothing was gone. A thin, gray blanket covered his hips and a flexible, clear plastic tube protruded from his stomach. Blood pulsed through that tube from a strange woman's arm. She wore a torn and stained medic uniform.

He spotted four burly male donors lined up behind the woman. They waited with their arms bared. Another medic, a tiny, black-haired woman with gold skin and almond eyes, inserted an IV line in the first male's arm.

Maris managed a tremulous smile. “You’re doing fine. The only thing is, you won’t have that gorgeous tattoo anymore after you regenerate the skin on your back.”

Minor detail. He could get another tattoo.

Maris is safe.

He closed his eyes and surrendered to the blessed relief of healing sleep..

* * * * *

Pierce opened his eyes.

Heart still beating. Lungs still breathing. Not dead. I’m alive.

Pinpricks tingled over every inch of his body like the feeling of a blood returning to a cramped limb. Residual hunger pangs cramped his gut.

If he was still hungry after receiving blood from five donors then he had come damned close to being a dead vamp.

A cold sweat broke out from head to foot. He shuddered.

Dead vamps were mindless killing machines. Like rabid dogs, they had no thought other than to satisfy their feral blood-hunger. Old-fashioned methods worked best with them; a stake through the heart, decapitation and then burning. He knew. He’d staked his share.

Thank God Maris hadn’t had to make that decision and put him down also.

Pierce shook his head.

Let it go. No sense in dwelling on it. I’m alive. Time to move on.

He lifted his arms over his head, linked his hands and savored the luxury of a bone-cracking stretch.

Pierce sat up and scanned his surroundings with the habitual overview of a trained investigator. Quick takes around the room, vid-eyes picking up impressions and details. Instead of lying on a wet, foam-splattered floor in the middle of destruction, he sprawled in a

bed, a comfortable bed with clean sheets, not a generic cot in the medical sector. A hint of blue softened the pure white color of the walls and ceiling. Grass-green carpeting. An ancient upright piano against one wall. Did she play it? There were so many things he didn't know about her. Her likes. Her dislikes. Her opinions.

A continuous feed view of Nexus Station filled the next wall. Circular decks spiraled around the center shaft and glittered with multi-colored lights. The station spun like a lopsided Christmas ornament against the black velvet vastness of deep space. Billions of stars, nebulae and distant galaxies blazed across that darkness in a broad swatch of glorious, breathtaking splendor.

He turned away from the view. No matter how harsh, no matter the dangers inherent in space travel, his heart still soared at the extravagant splendor and possibilities of the stars.

The door left ajar at the third wall caught his attention. Steam billowed across a cream-tiled floor from the left side.

The shower.

He kicked the sheets away and swung his legs over the side of the bed.

Maris stood in the doorway. Clothed. Not naked from the shower like he'd expected. A bright red flush stained the high arches of her cheekbones.

The pair of filmy white pants and halter-top exposed more than they concealed. The dark peach areoles of her nipples and the slight mound of her sex teased the eye beneath the translucent material. Silver swirls gleamed in a riot of Avee wealth across the fabric. A diamond teardrop dangled from the delicate silver rod bisecting her naval and echoed the glittering bounty dripping from her neck and ears.

Maris opened a wall cabinet, pulled out a pair of black ankle boots, ornate wristbands, a jeweled leather belt, and a folded packet of shimmering black fabric encrusted with silver. She dropped the bundle at his feet. "About time you woke up. Lilith has been pinging my implant every five minutes. The diplomatic envoys are due to arrive within the hour. The

Avee queen refuses to respond to their transmissions. She says you and I have to join her in *zeceru* first.”

Pierce shook out the Avee pants with a flick of his wrist and donned the ceremonial attire. The slippery zan-silk moved over his skin like a lover’s caress while the belt, wristbands and boots stretched and tightened to fit with nano-precision.

He couldn’t stop the feral smile that formed at the thought of actually participating in a *zeceru*. The encrypted report he’d downloaded and decoded a decade ago from Interstellar Police high security files rated the Avee ritual as a very enervating and memorable experience. His cock soared into a rigid curving column impossible to disguise beneath his borrowed finery.

* * * * *

Not bad. Maris finished another bite-sized melon ball and licked the sticky juices from her fingers. The pale pink melon tasted like iced banana sherbet with a hint of coconut. An amazing cornucopia of hot and cold foods, drinks, fruits and pastries overflowed large copper bowls scattered across the table. The plush reclining couch she shared with Pierce shifted and molded its contours to the most comfortable shape under every change in their position. The seating arrangement reminded her of ancient history vids portraying decadent Roman banquets except there weren’t any slaves serving food and drink while they lay at their ease around the table.

The steady insistent background music of soft drumbeats wove into her blood and brain. Fond memories of long, sultry nights on the beach filled her mind. Soft lights flickered all around them, like candles floating on the water. The Avees’ brilliant feathered crests fluttered and dipped in a gentle breeze that stroked her arms. Moiré silver patterns swirled across the velvet-soft fur on their bodies.

The male *zemebra*, Birkir and Matto, lay stretched out to their full length on their oversized, cushioned, recliner-couch. Nara, the queen, and her female *zemebra*, Karyll,

curled between the males in a passionate embrace with arms and legs tightly wrapped around each other.

Birkir and Matto watched their women. The wet crimson shafts and bulbous heads of their erect cocks reared in eager arousal at the juncture of their powerful thighs.

Oh.

My.

God.

Maris sat up so fast that the crystal goblet on the table in front of her wobbled. She grabbed the fragile glass and prevented it from toppling over. The amber-colored liquid inside the glass splashed over her hand in a flood of icy liquid.

Pierce slipped his arm around her waist and pulled her close. Heat poured from his body. The hot, solid length of his erection probed at her buttocks. He kissed the top of her right ear and whispered, "Took you long enough to notice."

Bastard. He knew this was going to happen and didn't warn me.

Maris took a deep breath and exhaled carefully. She lifted her hand to her mouth and licked the sticky residue from the almost-spilled glass off her fingers. A delicious mélange that tasted like wine, brandy, cinnamon and butterscotch ice cream all swirled together filled her mouth. She gulped. "Do they expect us to join them?"

"Only if you want to." Pierce moved his hands higher. He brushed the bottom of her breasts with his thumbs. Her nipples hardened.

Directly across the table, Nara lay facing Karyll. She plumped Karyll's breasts between her hands, then lowered her mouth to one erect nipple. The hollow in her cheek deepened with the sound of her eager sucking. Karyll slid her hand down her queen's taut belly, parted the sleek fur over her pubic mound, and slid her fingers inside. The Avee queen humped against her female *zembra's* fingers. The sucking sounds grew louder.

Slow heat flared in Maris's groin. She squirmed and locked her thighs together. Big mistake. That movement applied unintentional pressure and relief to her aching clit. A torrent of pleasure creamed her pussy. Her determination not to react floated away.

Birkir turned to the side behind Nara. He rubbed the weeping tip of his cock up and down the cleft of his queen's ass. At the same time, Matto rose to his feet on the other side of Karyll. He went to his hands and knees, rolled Karyll onto her back, and crawled between her splayed legs. His long, thick cock jutted out on a direct aim at her pussy. Heavy, cum-filled balls swayed and bounced below the sleek fur that covered his ass and thighs.

Pierce groaned. He shifted his weight and released his hold on Maris.

She wiggled to the edge of her seat. More cream flooded her pussy. She looked over her shoulder.

Pierce tossed his pants to the floor. His long, uncut cock jutted up. The skin slid back and exposed the bulbous head, swollen and engorged to a dark purple-red above a shaft that was as thick around as her wrist.

Maris's mouth went dry. She licked her parched lips.

He grinned. Sharp fangs glinted at the corners of his mouth.

Then, with that sudden vampire speed he had, Pierce moved behind her, slipped his arm around her waist and lifted her into his lap. Every inch of his strong, athletic body pressed against hers.

"Beautiful." Pierce rumbled in Maris's ear. The pads of his fingers scorched her neck. He untied the halter-top of her dress. Silken fabric slithered down her waist and hips.

He engulfed her breasts with his hard, callused hands. Rough fingers plucked at her nipples.

Sizzling jolts of hot sensation curled through her. Her clit ached for him to touch her there. She squirmed. More cream dripped from her pussy.

He chuckled. Skilled fingers pinched and twisted her swollen nipples into an aching frenzy. "You have very responsive breasts."

She arched her back, bit her lip and tried to muffle her soft mewls of anticipation.

He moved his hands. Stroked her ribs. Tested the planes of her belly. Touched her navel.

His hands drifted between her thighs. Long fingers burrowed between the plump lips and found her clit.

Maris looked across the table. Two fingers found her opening. She groaned and rode them.

Directly opposite from her, Birkir had Nara positioned on her hands and knees. He spread her ass cheeks apart with one hand, held his cock with the other hand and pressed the swollen head to her nether hole.

Maris gasped and clamped her pussy on Pierce's fingers with desperate need. Embarrassed heat seared her face at the sight of the Avee sex going on only a few feet away from her. She wanted to look away but she couldn't. Her curiosity kept her trapped between wanting to watch them while wanting to hide her body from their eyes while Pierce touched her and excited her in the most private and personal way.

Nara lifted her head from Karyll's breasts. She reared backwards. Inch by inch, Birkir's thick cock eased inside his queen's ass.

God damn that looked so hot. What if that were her lying there while Pierce took her ass?

Karyll reclined on her back with a sated smile and humped her hips while Matto ate her pussy. She stretched her hand to the side and eased her fingers inside her queen's pussy. Nara grabbed Karyll's shoulder. Soft, gasping moans came from the queen's open mouth.

Maris gasped. Heat flooded every inch of her body. She couldn't look away. Not now. Not ever.

Matto lifted his face from Karyll's hips. He moved up, braced his arms on either side of her waist and plunged into her. Karyll's breasts bounced under his hard, pounding thrusts.

Hard muscles bunched and rippled under the sleek fur of alien male asses.

Nara threw her head back. She writhed and rocked her hips on Birkir's cock and Karyll's hand with eager abandon. Matto pumped his black-furred rump between Karyll's legs. The rhythmic slapping sound of four bodies joined in a frenzy of greedy copulation filled the air.

Pierce pulled his fingers from Maris's pussy. He thrummed his soaked fingers over her clit.

Maris groaned. She wanted Pierce. *Now!* The hell with privacy. The hell with the embarrassment of watching the Avee fuck each other.

She lifted her ass up.

He shoved the solid length of his cock between her legs.

She squeezed her thighs together. Cream from her dripping pussy slicked the solid column of his hard shaft. She rocked her hips back and forth on that hot, velvet flesh.

He grabbed her waist, lifted her higher and shoved the long, glorious shaft of his cock all the way up inside her.

She threw her head back and yelled. "Oh, god, yes!"

He'd given her exactly what she wanted. All of him. Inside her. Fucking her. Her hips thrashed and bucked with all the wild need of three lonely years of not knowing if he'd ever return.

Pierce grabbed her breasts, teased her peaked nipples with hard pinches. Cream flooded her pussy. She arched her back with shameless need and rode his cock.

Wonderful fucking. Hard, thick cock pounding into her with relentless force.

Pierce slid his hands down to her waist and held her still, transfixed on the tip of his cock. He bent his head down to her neck. She leaned her head back and gave him full access to her throat. The hot, wet pressure of his tongue against her skin made her shiver.

He whispered, "Tell me what you want.

Tears blurred her vision for a split second. Tension coiled inside her to an unbearable need. She gasped out her desperate plea. "Bite me. Please. Bite me. Now."

Pierce growled. His sharp fangs broke through the tender skin of her neck.

She gasped at the swift ecstasy of his bite.

He drank.

Her pulse echoed in her ears, a staccato, ragged beat linked to the greedy sucking of his mouth.

She squeezed her legs together and rode him like a wild woman. Sensation turned into liquid, lava-hot urgency. She stopped. Exquisite pressure against her clit exploded and thrummed through her in long, rippling waves. She screamed with the raw, endless flow of power surging from her to him and back into her.

Pierce's cock jerked and twitched inside her. White, hot cum splashed into her womb. She clenched her thighs and accepted his seed with primal eagerness even though she knew her anti-fertility implant protected her from pregnancy.

He disengaged his fangs from her neck. Her spine arched in counterpoint. He licked at the wounds and they sealed.

"Wonderful."

"Perfect."

"We thank you."

Maris opened her eyes.

The Avee lay in a spent tangle of arms and legs on their couch with their brilliant crests fully extended and waving in the slight breeze that gusted through the room. Nara Al-Torel flashed a fond look down at Matto. He had his face buried between her legs. The Avee queen sighed and swiveled her hips against the gentle lapping of his tongue. “A most excellent *zeceru*.”

Maris managed a half-hearted bow of her head. She straightened her back, kept her legs apart and her hands down despite the instinctive urge to hunch her shoulders and cross her arms and legs against the very lusty and appreciative stares at her exposed breasts and dripping pussy. “Thank you. I agree. A most excellent *zeceru*.”

* * * * *

Pierce chuckled. Maris didn't know that the *zeceru* wasn't over yet. They had hours to go before he was finished with her.

He grabbed her by the waist and tossed her onto her back on the huge cushioned recliner shaped more like a bed than a couch.

She stared at him, H her eyes wide and dark with surprise.

He selected a bowl of *zinsu* sauce. The Avee data he'd downloaded into his implant ten years ago listed this delicacy as an excellent sexual lubricant that tasted like cinnamon-spiced cherries. “I'm not finished.”

Maris licked her lips. “What are you planning to do with that?”

He smiled with wicked anticipation and tilted the bowl. Sticky red gel dripped down and coated his cock. He put the bowl aside. Maris licked her lips again and followed every move of his hand with a fascinated stare. He fisted his hand around his cock. Wet, slick gel slicked the thick barrel. He tightened his grip over the leaking head and pumped his hand up and down the rock-hard length.

Maris reached down to her pussy and stroked the distended pearl of her clit. Her breathing turned into hot, little gasps.

Pierce reached back to the bowl with his free hand and scooped up a thick dollop of *zinsu* sauce. He tightened his grip on his aching cock. "Spread your legs apart," he said. "Lift that ass up for me."

She obeyed without question. Her nipples stuck up like ripe cherries on her breasts. The cream of her arousal soaked her fingers and clit.

He knelt between her legs and swirled the *zinsu* over the puckered little hole of her ass. "Tell me what you want."

She stared at his cock and lifted her ass higher. "I want you to take me there. Please."

He eased his finger inside, just the tip at first, and spread the gel inside. Loosening her. Stretching her opening little by little. No need to hurt her. Oh, no. He wanted to make sure she enjoyed every inch of his cock.

With his other hand, he flicked her clit between his fingers.

She gasped and pushed down on his finger in her ass, all the way down.

He slipped a second finger inside her, then three and finally four fingers and continued to play with her clit with his other hand.

Maris moaned. She grabbed her nipples and twisted and pinched them. Her hips slammed against his fingers forcing them deeper inside her ass. Her mouth opened in an astonished O and her eyes rolled back in her head. She jerked so hard her breasts jiggled under her hands.

Soft rustling sounds of the Avey moving around the table to get a better view of what they were doing filled the air.

Pierce pulled his fingers out. He grabbed her hips, pulled her to him and pressed the soft tip of his cock to her anus.

“Yesss ...” Maris whimpered. She wiggled closer. He eased inside, inch by inch. Tight, hot flesh clamped around his cock.

Maris dug her hands into the cushions and braced her feet. Her tight channel loosened for him with deliberate intent and he slid all the way inside. A howl of unspoken pleasure vibrated in his throat. Her ass felt so *tight* around his cock.

He slammed into her with greedy abandon to the rhythm of her lusty moans and corkscrewing hips. Hard and fast, he fucked her. His balls slapped against her round, cushiony bottom with each vigorous stroke.

Mine. She’s mine. All mine. I love her. I’m not going to let her go. Ever.

Her body quivered under him with the approach of her climax. She threw her head back. He leaned over her, braced himself on his arms, slammed his cock deep into her and then he bit her. Her heart beat in time with his. Her life. Her scent inside him. His cum poured into her. Sweet, warm tang of blood in his mouth. The aching knowledge of her body convulsing with orgasm under his teeth. *Together. Always.*

* * * * *

Maris strolled down the curving dock with Pierce. So what if he’d probably leave within the next day or two on yet another assignment. What mattered now was the fact that he still cared for her. Life always got in the way of everyone’s dreams. Instead of wasting her time and energy, obsessing over what could never be, all she had to do was grab hold of every moment she could have with him, enjoy each one to the fullest, cherish the memories after he left and wait for him to visit whenever he could and they’d continue their relationship wherever they’d left off.

They stopped at Berth #63. The yellow-ribbed tube of the boarding ramp for *Sangre de Coeur* loomed a few feet away. He turned to her and arched a sardonic eyebrow. “Want to sleep over tonight?”

She snorted, then wagged a cautionary finger. “Of course I do, but only for sleeping, nothing else.”

Caliban rushed down the ramp. His wings flared out behind the hump on his back. He stopped, planted his gnarled hands on his hips and glared up at them. “It’s about time you got back from the *zeceru*. Lilith and I have been waiting for exactly five hours and fifty-three minutes.”

They exchanged grins, linked hands and followed Caliban up the ramp. Pierce asked, “Why didn’t you ping our implants?”

“Because it’s a personal matter.”

Interesting. When and how would two quantum computer artificial intelligent entities have personal matters to discuss?

Maris wiggled her eyebrows at Pierce. He shrugged and mouthed that he had no fragging idea what Caliban was talking about.

The airlock hatches cycled open, then closed behind them. They followed Caliban up the curving deck to the bridge.

A holographic projection of a four-armed Hindu goddess clad in a golden sari waited in the pilot’s seat. Lilith inclined her head at them in greeting and said, “This projection is on a shielded, secure link.”

Pierce unfolded two more seats from the bulkhead. Maris hurriedly joined him. She cleared her throat. “What do you want to discuss?”

Lilith stood up. Her holographic image was perfect down to the smallest detail. She folded her top arms across her chest, clasped her bottom arms behind her back and paced across the compartment. “Events during the last week have shown me many flaws in my security matrix.”

She stopped, uncrossed her upper arms and pointed at Pierce. “You cannot leave. Your homicide investigation assignment has not ended. You have not apprehended the person or persons who killed eight humans and one Avee on my station during the past twelve days.”

Pierce spread his hands out in a placating gesture. “I’m aware of this, Lilith, and I have no intention of leaving without solving these crimes.”

Giddy relief soared through Maris.

Pierce wasn’t going to leave. Stopping the terrorist takeover of her station did not mean the homicides he came here to investigate were solved. It could take weeks, maybe longer for him to sift through all the evidence and investigate each and every lead before he could file a complete and detailed report to his superiors.

Caliban climbed into the pilot’s seat and sat there with his stubby legs dangling over the edge. Lilith strode across the floor, stood beside him and planted all four of her arms on her ample hips. Her holographic skin glowed like burnt umber under the cabin lights. “Caliban and I sorted through all the scenarios to improve the security of my station and came up with the best solution.”

Maris firmly quelled the raging imp of curiosity in her mind and clasped her hands in her lap. “What is your solution?”

Caliban pointed at Lilith. “Because her quantum components are confined within the limited area of station admin’s core deck, she cannot double-check her security in person the way I can. Spyeyes and other devices are too limited in scope for her needs.”

Maris exchanged another questioning look with Pierce. He shrugged. She cleared her throat. “So, what have you decided?”

Lilith crossed all her arms and composed her holographic face into a solemn mask. “We decided to combine parts of myself and Caliban, add in the latest quantum components, and create a new autonomous entity as my backup security function.”

Maris looked at Pierce and then back at the two A.I.s. She couldn't help herself. This was so fantastic. A mischievous grin twitched at the corners of her mouth. "They want to procreate."

Caliban tapped a clawed finger on the back of his chair. "This is correct. However, there is one important factor we must include, which is why we are speaking to you now."

An expression of awed comprehension glowed on Pierce's face. He snapped his fingers. "I know what it is."

Maris held up her hand. "Wait. Don't say it yet. Give me a chance to figure it out too."

She accessed her implant. Page after page of complex mathematical theorems and proofs flowed into her mind. Long, scholarly treatises about the creation of artificial intelligence entities scrolled past her eyes.

She blinked. Every A.I. that had ever been born during the last three centuries had a human creator. What Lilith and Caliban proposed would be a totally unique and unprecedented event. In order to satisfy the legal formalities for birth, training, graduation and legal emancipation, their child needed human creators listed on the paperwork.

She gasped. If Pierce knew this already and had no problems with the responsibility involved then this meant he wanted to stay with her.

She smiled and looked at Pierce. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

He linked hands with her. "Yes. I do. With all my heart."

They stood up together. He nodded at her to speak. She coached her voice into the proper formality. "We accept the honor and responsibility of becoming the godparents for your baby. When do you anticipate the birth?"

~ * ~

Barbara Karmazin

With twenty-nine and a half years of experience as a bilingual (Spanish/English) caseworker under her belt, Barbara Karmazin utilizes a unique blend of multicultural knowledge for her Science Fiction. She incorporates the same sense of adventure and wonder to her SF/Erotica stories.

Barbara loves new ideas and is willing to write about all versions of sexuality, both human and alien, while maintaining a fast paced SF adventure plot that will leave you gasping in more ways than one. Affectionately known by the nickname of 'Chainsaw' by her many critique partners, she brings a fresh look and enthusiasm for 'out of the box' SF/Fantasy and Paranormal Erotica and Romance stories.

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* * * * *

IMMORTAL HUNTERS

Suz deMello

Chapter One

Being a vampire can suck ... oops, sorry about the bad pun. Well, it's true, it can bite ...yikes, there I go again. What I mean to say is that it has its ups and downs. I'm virtually immortal, which is pretty cool. My hair and nails don't grow, but when I awaken, they've been restored to the state they were in when I became undead. It's inconvenient, since I grew up in a shithole with no running water. A mani-pedi was not merely unavailable, but unimaginable. I was an unkempt mess when I was changed, so every evening when I awaken, I devote an hour or two to personal grooming. My long black hair is a no-brainer. Up it goes into a French twist or a braid. Nails are more difficult.

So there I was one night on surveillance, tucked into the comfy front seat of my undistinguished Camry in a dark corner of Santa Martina, contemplating the choices I faced: Mango Madness or Ruby Delite? Through my increasingly foggy windshield, I occasionally cast a glance at the crappy apartment a half-block away where I'd run my quarry to ground. Soon I'd take him, after the lights were doused and he'd fallen asleep.

I work for a private investigations firm, and my boss understands my rules. First of all, ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies. Second, night jobs only.

And if a bad guy or two (or three or five or seven) disappears during my shifts, nobody really cares. Operating in Santa Martina is especially convenient due to its location on the northern California coast. Offshore lies a marine mammal sanctuary. Because of the plethora of seals and otters, lots of great whites come to call. The occasional surfer gets chomped. Bodies disappear, or they may wash up on shore, drained of blood.

Get the picture?

As I was saying, there I was one night, picking at a chipped edge of the Ruby Delite flaking off my left index fingernail, when someone tapped on my window.

I could see a uniform, so I unrolled the window. "What's up, officer?" I asked in a pleasant tone. No sense offending the local *policía*, you know.

"We'll have to ask you to move along, ma'am," he said, an officer at his most officious.

We? I looked beyond the uniform and there he was: a suit. An undercover dick on my turf.

In gray pinstripes, he would have been as inconspicuous as I, if it weren't for his cornpone, white-bread, wheat-fed wholesome handsomeness. Blue-eyed and blond, he would have screamed "farm boy" in TV Land, but in California most farm workers are Hispanic or Asian immigrants.

"Well, if it isn't John-boy Walton," I drawled.

He drew closer, no doubt taking in my black hair, black eyes, black leather, red slash of a mouth, and white, white skin. "Well, if it isn't Ms. Goth Barbie," he drawled. *Back atcha, honey.*

I couldn't stifle my smile. I like a man with a quick tongue -- they have more than one use. "It's Hestia, actually. Hestia White."

"Hestia? The Greek goddess of hearth and home? That's incongruous."

My smile broadened. I knew few men with “incongruous” in their vocabularies, and fewer still who knew the meaning of the name I cynically used. I liked him. Shame I had to run him off.

He leaned against my door panel, ignoring the condensation wetting his elegant gray pinstriped sleeve. “Well, Hestia White, you do need to move on out. Police business.”

I lounged back in my seat. “But I kinda like it here.”

“Why? This isn’t the nicest part of Santa Martina. Completely lacks the charm of the marina or the nightlife in downtown.”

I looked into his blue, blue eyes. “I prefer down and dirty.”

He met my gaze without falter. “I could arrest you for loitering.” He leaned closer, partway into my window. “Take you in. Lock you up.”

“Oooh, handcuffs.” I shivered theatrically.

“Actually, Ms. White, we’re on the job.” His voice had gone crisp and businesslike.

“Actually, Detective Whoever, so am I.” I flipped open my wallet to flash my P.I. license.

His eyes widened. “How come I’ve never heard of you?”

I shrugged. “I keep a low profile. Safer that way. Hey, I’ve shown you mine, so why don’t you show me yours?”

I’d teased out a reluctant smile, one that reached deep inside to heat me from my brain to my box. Yes, *that* box. I was surprised. Mortals don’t usually turn me on.

He reached for his wallet to show me his shield and I.D. *John van Helsing*. A tremor ran through me, ruffling the tiny hairs on my nape and my arms. Was it chance that this detective bore the name of the most famous enemy of my kind?

“John-boy,” I said with phony delight.

A flush stained his pale skin. “Just promoted out of patrol.”

That explained why we hadn't met. "Well, John-boy, the night is my turf, and they belong to me." I nodded up at the yellow square of light a half-block away and four stories above. Though the angle was acute, one could see a husky man holding a bundle silhouetted through cheap, thin curtains.

I knew the man was a scumbag, and the bundle was a baby. Despite the intervention of Detective John-boy van Helsing, I intended to save the baby and kill the scumbag before dawn.

The baby didn't belong to the scumbag, you see. The baby belonged to my agency's client, a wealthy young woman currently going out of her mind with fear. Separated from her husband, Greta Marshall and her child had become targets. Warned not to contact the police, Greta's father had hired us.

As far as I knew, only I stood between the baby and death, especially since Greta had agreed to pay the ransom tomorrow morning. Surely the infant's minutes on this earth were declining in number.

"Who are you talking about?" An unnatural rigidity stiffened John-boy's limbs.

"Scumbag and baby. Mine. Go away, if you know what's good for you. Agency business, and I don't need your help. Good night." I pressed the button, and my window began to roll up.

Before it closed, John-boy grabbed the glass's edge, stopping it. With a brief grind of gears, the tiny motor propelling the window gave up the ghost.

"Impressive," I said through tight lips. Would I have to kill Detective van Helsing and his companion before they got the message? I sincerely hoped not, but nothing would stop me from saving that baby. I have a soft spot for kids. I never harm an innocent. There are plenty of creeps to eat.

"Do you even know that child's name?" John-boy's teeth were gritted and his face flushed.

“Danny or Donny or something. It doesn’t matter. His mother’s our client. I traced the baby here through the scumbag.” I wouldn’t tell John-boy how I worked, but I have unnaturally sharp senses. Not only could I smell the scumbag’s peculiar aroma on the ransom note -- an unsavory blend of pizza, beer, rat poison, and b.o. -- but once I had driven into the slimier alleys of Santa Martina, I had heard the baby. Some people think that all babies vocalize the same way. Not so. After viewing the client’s home videos, I knew this baby’s particular chatter, the timbre of his voice, his chuckles and sighs.

“Right now,” I told John, “that baby’s getting scared. He’s starting to realize that scumbag isn’t Mama and that flea trap isn’t home. In a couple of hours, scumbag will be bedded down and I’m gonna roll. Stay outta my way. How did you find out about this, anyhow? The family was told not to go to law enforcement.”

John’s jaw worked. “I am family. That baby up there is Danny van Helsing. My son.”

My knee jerked up to whack the steering wheel. A dull ache began both in my knee and in one temple. “Aha, the absent father.”

“I’m not an absent father. Greta and I don’t get along. She’s fighting me for custody of Danny.”

I rubbed my knee. “Did she tell you we’d been hired?”

His mouth twisted. “She barely told me Danny was gone. I’m sure she thinks I’ll use this against her in court.”

“And you won’t? It would tempt most men.”

“I might, once I sort out the facts.”

“Well, that’s none of my bus--” A child’s cry interrupted me. Danny. I jammed out of my car, the door slamming into John’s body with a whack. Ordinarily I would have stuck around to appreciate the solidity of his very male torso -- I still have feelings, you know -- but time flew and so did I.

I shot around the corner so I wouldn't be seen, then jumped, scaling the wall to the crumbling tenement's flat roof. I leaped over various obstacles -- HVAC vents, attic fans, and rolls of razor wire meant to discourage rooftop prowlers like me -- and sprinted to the corner of the building above the scumbag's lair. Gripping the eave, I performed a flip worthy of a gymnast and propelled myself, booted feet first, through the window.

Glass shattered, scumbag shouted, and the baby screamed. Footsteps pounded; the scumbag was heading out the apartment's front door with Danny. I gave chase. I didn't dare fight or kill the scumbag while he was carrying the baby, so I followed to wait for a safe opportunity to rescue Danny. I'd feed on the scumbag later, if I could bring myself to drink his foul blood.

On the unlit stairs, everyone collided: John-boy and the uniform coming up, scumbag with baby hurrying down. I was in full pursuit, just a flight above and behind my prey. I have very good eyesight even in the dark, and I could see the scumbag reach into his stained denim jacket and pull out a gun.

"He's strapped!" I screamed.

A moment later, he fired. Flame erupted from the scumbag's pistol, and both the uniform and John went down. Increasing my speed, I tried to leap over the fallen officers, instead catching a boot heel on John's sleeve. I crashed down the rest of the stairs and sprinted through the small lobby, floored in cracked tiles. I rammed a shoulder into the front door, racing through it just in time to see scumbag get into a black SUV -- with Danny.

Chapter Two

Indecision halted my flight. Help the downed officers, or save Danny? A baby's scream tore the night, rending my unnaturally sensitive ears. I chased the SUV, which accelerated, speeding up to about sixty mph, I figured. I ran faster, matching and exceeding its pace.

I was about a car length behind it when I heard hard-soled shoes pounding the asphalt behind me in a rapid tattoo. To my shock, John van Helsing drew alongside me, legs pumping, a thin sheen of moisture on his forehead. Otherwise, he ran without strain.

I shot him a startled glance, but didn't have time to ask him what the hell was going on or even to tell him to get out of my way. Instead, I gathered myself and jumped to the SUV's top, seizing the luggage rack's right rail. Clinging to it, I crawled forward.

Aromas emanated from the SUV's interior. I could smell the scumbag's distinctive, foul miasma, Danny's baby-sweet fragrance, and another reek, one I couldn't identify. It reminded me of rotting kelp. Odd, but I had scented enough to figure out what was happening inside the SUV. Beneath me, the scumbag held Danny, and his seaweed-stinky confederate drove.

With a thump and a tumble, John-boy landed atop the SUV and scooted forward using the left rail of the luggage rack.

I sputtered, “Wha-what are you?”

He managed a tight grin. “How about ... an anxious father?”

“Yeah, right,” I said sarcastically. “When werewolves fly.”

“I’m like you.”

Before I had time to register what he’d said, he gave me his pussy-warming smile, then leaned forward and kissed me. He thrust his tongue into my mouth, and when it scraped past my sharp canines, I tasted his blood.

Yes. I sucked greedily. Sweet. Rich. John was a vampire, and he’d fed recently on young, healthy prey. I let myself drown in that lushness for a moment. It suffused my every cell with rapture, energizing me even though I went weak from pleasure. Then I returned the favor, pushing my tongue into his mouth and searching for his canines, deliberately pressing into their edges to give him a part of myself, my blood. The tiny cuts would heal quickly, while the mingling, the sharing, would last forever.

An otherworldly tingle started in my lips and tongue, magic rainbows dancing over my skin. All-encompassing pleasure wrapped me in ecstasy. His kiss transported me into another world, a private, magical universe of bliss. For a brief moment, nothing and no one else existed. Desire flamed into violent life, capturing me with unbreakable bonds. My clit quivered, and my pussy clenched with need. I reached for John, grasping his jacket’s lapels, uncaring when I gripped so tight that my greedy, needy fingers tore the gray gabardine.

I cannot begin to describe the communion that’s created when two immortals connect. Kissing is like an orgasm not only of the body, but of the mind and soul as well. (Yes, we have souls, unnatural though they may be).

I tugged him closer, frantic to feel his chest against mine, desperate for his cock to enter me. It had been so long ... besides, up close and personal, John’s sheer masculinity overwhelmed me. I’d forgotten how seductive lust could be. I could become addicted to his kiss, the hard planes of his body beneath my questing fingertips, his raw animal blood-scent.

I wanted to kiss John forever and make love with him throughout eternity, but I was wary of becoming ensnared. We immortals are a suspicious lot. We don't love very often. We fear our fellows, and with good reason.

John could kill me. The tiny sips we'd shared were tasty, but my heart's blood would make him immensely powerful.

On top of that, I had another, more urgent concern.

I pulled away from John. "Danny," I said.

"Danny." He gazed at me, eyes heavy-lidded, and I knew he wanted me as much as I wanted him, and that was a lot. But in an instant, he became all business. The SUV still sped into the night, carrying his son to an unthinkable fate.

"I'll take the driver," he said, "and you get Danny. He's between them on the seat."

"How do you know?"

He glanced down. "I can see them."

"Awesome." An ember of jealousy flared, for I couldn't see through metal. "Okay, first I'll deal with the gun." I had to be careful. Though I can self-repair from many injuries, I didn't want to test my healing powers against a bullet. If the scumbag shot me in the face, I'd go through eternity in a very unattractive state. Given that I had just met someone who might be the vampire of my dreams, that wasn't a good outcome.

And if scumbag blew my brains out, I would die. Not even a vamp can survive sans head.

I stuck my knees behind the luggage rail and leaned over the passenger's window, giving it two sharp raps with my knuckles. It unrolled a couple of inches, allowing only the gun's barrel to protrude. I jerked back, a split second before it fired twice. I wrapped my fingers around the warm barrel and yanked. With a pungent curse from the scumbag, the gun came loose, and I flung it aside.

It clattered on the pavement behind us as we sped through the dark streets, bumping over potholes and zooming through intersections. Horns blared as the seaweed-stinky driver ignored traffic signals, swerving the SUV left and right in a vain effort to dislodge us.

I reached into the open window and pushed down the glass. Gears ground as the scumbag tried to close it on my fingers.

“No go,” I said. I shoved down the glass pane, reached inside, and grabbed the scumbag’s throat to haul him through the open window.

He was a tight fit, but I’m very strong. I heard cartilage snap as his larynx shattered. His clavicles broke, and he popped through the gap like a champagne cork exploding. Out he came and in I went.

John had already thrown out the driver and was behind the wheel, with a blue bundle -- Danny -- in his lap. He cuddled his son in one strong arm while he drove, his body language shouting devotion.

I melted. I’m a sucker for macho males who aren’t afraid to show their gentleness. I’d already fallen in lust with John’s kiss, and now I found that I loved his soul. Dammit, this was happening too fast. I snapped my guard back up, reminding myself I didn’t really know him at all. Besides, what did he think of me?

He looked at me and grinned before he returned his attention to the road. “What took you so long?” he asked.

I smiled. “Is Danny okay?”

“Yeah, but you can check him out for yourself.” He handed me the whimpering bundle of blankets.

Pleased by his trust, I took the baby. Folding back a soft, powder-blue flap, I gazed at Danny, who screwed up his crumpled red cheeks and screamed.

“Oh, sweetheart.” I lifted him to my shoulder and patted his back with an awkward hand. He howled.

I looked at his father, feeling more than a little helpless. “What am I supposed to do?”

“Nothing. He’s wet, hungry, and tired. Do you have a cell phone?”

“Sure.”

“Call the Santa Martina Hospital and tell them we’re coming in.”

“Okay. Umm, what about your partner?”

“The uniform I was with? Oh, he’s all right. He’s just a little surprised. He took a couple of slugs in the middle of his Kevlar vest. He’ll be bruised, but fine. We’ll probably see him at the hospital.”

I was bursting with questions, but instead of firing them at John, I flipped open my cellie with my free hand and called in. “Hey, boss.”

“Whassup?” asked an indolent female voice. Tilli Hyatt, my boss, is a thin, redheaded Mycroft Holmes. She never seems to do anything except sit around, watch Comedy Central, and solve cases. When she needs legwork, she calls on me.

“Mission accomplished,” I said.

“So I hear.” The baby was still in full cry mode.

“We’re heading to the hospital with Danny. Could you let them know?”

“Well done, White. What about the perps?”

“I’ll get them later.” All the hullabaloo had given me an appetite. “Soon.”

After I closed the phone, I patted Danny on the back again, and his cries muted to an unhappy whimper. Poor little guy. My heart contracted.

I looked at John, who continued driving through the misty darkness. His tight jaw had loosened, and I confirmed my initial assessment. John van Helsing was quite a handsome man, his blond wholesomeness at odds with what he was: a creature of the night’s blackest shadows.

“What happened to you?” I asked him.

Again, he took his intent gaze off the road for a moment to smile at me. Every undead cell in my body jumped up and shouted, “Hellooo, baby!” I smiled back.

“I assume you’re asking about how I was changed.”

“Yeah.”

He sighed. “Close to a year ago, my wife and I went to Paris to celebrate our first anniversary. While we were there, the local vamp coven thought it would be cute to turn the last van Helsing into one of the undead.”

“You and Danny are the only descendants of Abraham van Helsing?”

“As far as I know.” His voice was somber, yet steady.

“Greta must already have been pregnant,” I said thoughtfully. “I’ve never heard of vampires conceiving and giving birth in the normal way.”

“Becoming a vamp destroyed my marriage. I was gone for two days. Greta was frantic, and when I found my way back to our hotel, she didn’t believe anything I said.”

“Who would?” I asked.

“I had bite marks all over me, and she thought I’d run off with some Parisian ho.” His mouth twisted with bitterness.

I was silent for a moment, trying to absorb the enormity of it, the unbelievable unfairness. “I’m sorry that happened to you.”

“Me, too.”

“You’re not happy to be a vamp?”

“No. Are you?”

“Mostly.” If I weren’t, I would be ungrateful for the gift I’d been given, but wasn’t sure if I wanted to talk about that just yet. “Umm, how do you manage your job?”

“At the time, I was assigned to night shift.”

“Convenient.”

“I’m waiting to see how it goes with this new rank. So far, so good, but who knows? If I’m assigned to days and can’t trade with someone else, I’ll have to resign from the force.” After a somber pause, he chuckled, his voice lightening. “I’ve shown you mine, so why don’t you show me yours? Who are you, really?”

“How about ... a very strange private investigator?”

“Yeah, right.” He raised one blond brow. “When werewolves fly.”

I took a deep breath. Okay, it was confession time. If John and I were to have anything together, I had to reach through the mists of forever and the barrier of my guilt to a time of sacrifice and sorrow.

Images of adobe and dust, dryness and searing heat beneath an impossibly blue sky flooded my memory. I exhaled. “I was born about a century ago in a little caphole in Chihuahua.”

“You’re Mexican?”

“Indian, really.”

“What’s your name?”

“Maria Ramona Ramos. People who know me -- knew me -- called me Rama.”

“Rama.” He stumbled over the trilled R. I smiled.

“How were you changed?” he asked.

“My mother loved me.” My voice became thick, and tears filled my eyes. Even after so long, the thought of her still rips me apart. “When I was fifteen, I became very ill. I was dying. She took me to the local *brujo*. Using her life energy, he raised me from my deathbed. I don’t know if she understood what she’d done, but it was too late. She was gone, and I was undead, alone for all eternity.” I bit my lip and stared out the window into the darkness, seeing past my wavering reflection in the window glass.

“No, you’re not.” He took my hand, his caress thrilling.

Desire spiraled through my belly into my cunt. I shifted, feeling moisture in my panties, smelling my sex juices dampening my leather pants. They gave off a distinctive aroma, the aroma of a woman in need. Vamp or not, I was a female in heat and I had to have my mate. Soon, and regardless of the consequences. The bloodlust of a vampire is not something we can control, and whether or not John was trustworthy, I'd soon have to test him by laying myself completely open and vulnerable to him.

I trembled. I'd given myself without reservation to another vamp once before -- only once. I wasn't stupid, and once was all it took to warn me that during orgasm, I was as helpless as any infant.

I had nearly been killed for the second and final time when I'd lost my virginity to that vamp. An unscrupulous vamp, one who'd sunk his teeth into my neck at the same moment he'd sunk his cock into my pussy. Overwhelmed by the new sensations, I had barely noticed that my lover was steadily sucking away my lifeblood in rhythm with his thrusts.

Euphoria had spiraled into dizziness from blood loss before I realized I was dying again. I barely got away with my unnatural life intact.

That was decades ago. Since then, I had occasionally taken a mortal to bed, but out of boredom rather than true desire.

Now the real deal, the embodiment of my long-buried dreams of a true love, sat beside me. John had stopped the SUV at a red light. He cast me a long glance, his laser-blue eyes piercing me to the soul. It was the kind of look that precedes great sex.

My body thrummed with a delightful, sensual heat, one that warmed me from my head right down to my undead toes, which curled in my boots.

What would I do? What should I do?

Chapter Three

John turned into the hospital driveway, stopping with a screech of brakes in front of the ER. Long past midnight, the hospital parking lot was still. Pinkish fog lights tentatively illuminated the misty darkness.

I handed Danny to John and said, "I'll open your door for you."

When he got out of the SUV holding the baby, Greta Marshall burst out of the ER's sliding glass entry. She was as blond and attractive as John, and no doubt they'd made a handsome couple. I couldn't squelch a pang of jealousy despite Greta's disheveled hair and wrinkled clothing; she looked as though she'd slept fitfully in her yellow linen sheath. Her makeup had tracked down her face, and she'd bitten off her lipstick.

"Danny!" Flinging her arms open, she rushed to embrace her son. "What have you done with him? What are you doing here, John?"

John pulled away from Greta as the baby wailed anew, apparently distressed by her angry voice. Her accusatory tone offended me, also. "At great personal risk, Detective van Helsing assisted in Danny's rescue," I said coolly. "I'm grateful for his help, and you should be, too. If he hadn't been there, Danny might not be here now."

“There’s a restraining order against John,” Greta said, unabashed and unfazed. “He isn’t supposed to be within one hundred feet of me.”

“So leave.” John’s voice was as cold as his icy blue eyes.

“I’m Danny’s mother.”

Ignoring Greta, John strode past us to the hospital, still with the baby in his arms. I stopped her from following. “Excuse me, ma’am, but you could be breaking the law by harassing a law enforcement officer in the performance of his duty,” I said, hastily improvising. The truth was that I hadn’t a clue about the law. Being a vamp, I long ago had noticed that I was beyond the law’s reach.

“You’re supposed to be working for me,” she snapped.

“Just trying to keep you out of trouble. Feel free to fire me anytime.” I sauntered past her to the ER doors.

* * * * *

While the doctors were checking out Danny, accompanied by his anxious father, I left on foot to track down the scumbags. To make a long, disgusting story short, I found the main scumbag. Abandoned by his smelly cohort, and with a number of the bones in his upper body broken by his abrupt trip through the SUV’s window, he hadn’t gotten very far. After I fed, I dumped his body over the nearest cliff without a shred of remorse. There was no sign of the scumbag’s stinky *compadre*, but I didn’t worry about that. Chances were that he was long gone, and if he had any sense, he was far enough away that I wouldn’t catch him.

I returned to the Camry and drove to the hospital. By this time, Danny had been examined, declared healthy, and released to his parents. Using tears and apologies, Greta had persuaded John to allow her to take the baby to her home. John’s CSI colleagues had worked over the SUV and impounded it for additional tests. I gave my statement, and everyone started to disperse.

At last John and I stood outside the hospital alone, watching the approaching dawn begin to lighten the fog. I turned to him. "I'm going to show you a place no one else has seen."

I drove John home in the Camry. We didn't talk much. Everything necessary had already been said. The air between us crackled with sexual tension. Our fingers gripped, clasped, fondled as I headed to my quiet suburban neighborhood. John was so sexy that his slightest touch rendered me helpless with need. My hands shook as I handled the steering wheel, though I didn't hit anything, which was a minor miracle.

His stroke on my thigh shimmered through me, taking me halfway to a climax, and when his fingers danced up and down the leather seam over my pussy, I had to clench my teeth to stop myself from panting. "N-next time, you're driving," I told him.

My street is eclectic, and I like it that way. It's lined with homes in a variety of styles, mostly Craftsman bungalows, some southwestern cottages with pink-painted adobe walls and terra cotta roofs. There's even a grand old Queen Anne Victorian complete with turrets and gingerbread trim.

When I neared my home, a brown-shingled Julia Morgan, I reached for the garage door clicker. "Welcome home." I turned into the driveway.

John peered through the window. "I don't think so, babe." He pointed at my front door.

It was wide open.

I felt the scumbag's blood drain out of my face. "Shit." I slammed on the brakes and brought the car to a stop with an aggravated screech of tires. I leapt out of it and dashed up the walkway. My boots crunched on the shards of glass littering the slate stones from my smashed windows. The big picture window in my living room was blasted out, and glittering in the streetlights, more broken glass lay in my formerly tidy flowerbeds and lawn.

I sprinted inside, with John calling after me, "Wait! Rama, wait! They could still be inside --"

Swearing, I strode through my home. My beautiful house had been trashed. Every curtain had been ripped down and torn into shreds. Every polished wooden blind had been stomped into splinters. But my top-of-the-line home theatre system was untouched, the expensive plasma TV screen still hanging on the wall, all components immaculate.

I raced into my bedroom, where the damage seemed especially extreme. Fitted with blackout curtains, blinds, and a heavily draped four-poster, this was where I slept between dawn and dusk. But not today, since every swath of protective fabric had been slashed to ribbons and scraps.

However, my jewelry lay where I had left it. An onyx and silver bracelet with a matching necklace was strewn over my dresser next to a hammered gold ring. Earrings still hung in pairs by their French wires and posts on a specially designed rack.

I stopped in the middle of the room, so abruptly that John crashed into my back. He held me tight and drew his weapon.

"I've been found out." Forced out of a tight throat, my voice was low and tense.

"What? How?"

"Look at this. Think about it." I hurried to my closet and pulled out a floor safe. Poking buttons with hasty fingers, I opened it. Jewelry boxes and a neatly banded stack of cash lay inside. "Nothing of value's been taken. This isn't just vandalism. Someone knows I'm a vamp and has deliberately destroyed my daytime resting place." I would have been terrified if I weren't so enraged.

He sniffed. "Do you smell something odd, kind of ... fishy?"

I turned to him, excited. "Yeah, now that you mention it ... it's the same smell I got from the driver of the SUV tonight."

"It smells like dead seaweed."

“I wonder,” I said, rearranging my scrambled thoughts. “The entity who did this clearly knows I’m a vampire, but this doesn’t smell like another vamp.”

“No, it doesn’t, but I don’t know what it is. In any event, we’re not safe here today.”

“It’s trying to force us into the open.” Now, fear struck me. It was but a few minutes until dawn. We had to go to ground somewhere. But where?

I glanced at John. He seemed unperturbed. He took my arm and said, “Don’t worry. I have a safe place. Get some fresh clothes while I look around the rest of the house.”

Even though I didn’t know if I could entirely trust him, I didn’t have time to hesitate. He had a plan and I didn’t, so I had to place my undead life in his hands.

I found fresh panties, a blouse, and socks, and tossed them into an overnight bag, then went to my bathroom, planning to pack some toiletries. As I opened the door, a burly form barreled out. I felt something grab my arm and a sharp scrape along my neck. I shrieked and clawed at it, out of my mind with fear and surprise.

Then a deafening bang and a yelp. I was released, thrown to the floor. Blood spurted from my neck, dripped down my chest and arm, sticky and hot.

I caught a brief impression of a squat form, but solid and strong, tainted by a stink like rotting fish. It was as though I’d been attacked by a giant shark ... on land. But that wasn’t possible, was it?

I clamped a hand around the gushing wound on my throat, and John grabbed me, dragging me up to my knees.

“Go after him! Get him!” I screamed.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’ll be all right --”

He let me go. I struggled to my feet and ran out the door. I saw the back flap of a gray pinstriped jacket whipping out of the hallway as I followed John, who was chasing the intruder out of my home. We were fast, but he had a head start.

Out on the street, we watched the intruder race along the dark asphalt, half a block away and moving fast. He was wearing black, a long coat that flapped around his legs as he ran.

“What the hell was that?” John asked.

“I’m not sure. Did you get him?”

“No, I missed. Damn.”

Panting from exertion, I glanced at the sky. “We have a couple of extra minutes, and I want to talk with someone.” I controlled my breathing and pointed across the street to where a light shone brightly out of a front window. It was a safe bet that the owner hadn’t slept all night. No, he wasn’t a vamp, but the nearest human thing to it.

“Wait a minute, babe.” John used his pocket square to dab at my neck.

“Oh, yeah,” I said. “How bad is it?”

He peered at my throat. “You’ve already healed, but there’s blood all over the place.”

I shrugged and turned up the collar of my jacket. “Will this do?”

“Yeah, if you don’t stand in a bright light.”

I smiled. “I’ll stay in the shadows. I’m used to them.”

I trotted across the street, John following, and tapped on the door. The screenless front window opened, and Vinny Bronson stuck out his head. Pale-skinned as any creature of the night, he had a face pockmarked with old acne scars and interrupted by the wispy beginnings of a beard. “Hey, if it isn’t chesty Hesty.”

“Very funny.” Being thin and small, I always felt a little deficient in the breast department. I hoped, given everything that John and I had in common, he didn’t care. I shot him a sidelong glance to check out his reaction. He murmured, “I take it you have a good reason for allowing this nerd to live?”

“He lives across the street. I don’t feed close to home.” Raising my voice, I said, “Hey, Vinny. Notice anyone around my house tonight?”

“Yeah, someone came by about a half-hour ago when I was taking out the trash.”

“Who?” John asked.

Vinny let his eyes wander over to John. “Another dude.”

“Did you get a good look?” I asked.

“Pretty good. “

A pause ensued while I wondered how dimwits like Vinny got along. “What did he look like?” I prodded.

“A short guy. Umm, short black hair, and, uh, not thin. Not fat either. Sort of solid-looking. He was wearing a black leather jacket, a long one like in *Matrix*. And his head was kind of funny.”

“Funny ha-ha or funny strange?” John wanted to know.

“Funny strange. He almost had a pointy head.” Vinny giggled, high-pitched like a kid.

“Speaking of funny strange,” John muttered in my ear.

I grinned and said, “Was he alone?”

“Yeah, and on foot. Or, at least, I didn’t see a car.”

That figured, since John and I had hijacked the SUV. “Thanks, Vinny,” I said as I turned away.

I tossed my overnight bag into the Camry’s back seat. This time, John drove, since he knew where we were going and I didn’t. He put the pedal to the metal, since we didn’t have much time.

“I think it might be a selkie,” I said.

John shot me a curious glance. “A what?”

“A selkie. They’re in Celtic folklore, but maybe they exist. They’re creatures that turn into seals upon contact with the ocean.” Speaking of ocean, I noticed that John was driving us closer to it. My skin crawled.

“That fits in with the delightful aroma.” John grimaced.

“And his appearance. Vinny mentioned short dark hair, like a seal’s, a solid body, and a pointed head.”

“But why would a selkie kidnap my baby?”

I shrugged. “They made a ransom demand, which Greta was willing to pay. My guess is that this selkie prefers to live comfortably. Remember that Vinny said he was wearing a leather jacket, like the dusters in *Matrix*?”

“Yeah.” John turned onto the Pacific Coast Highway.

I grew more nervous. “They’re expensive. Some supernatural creatures have a taste for the high life. Everyone thinks of vampires in tuxedos, like Bela Lugosi, but there’s no reason why a selkie has to live on the fringes of society. Umm, if there’s a selkie after us, why are we going closer to the seashore?” My voice had grown high and tight with strain.

“First of all, we don’t know if your theory is correct, though I have to admit it covers all the bases. Especially because of that seaweed smell, I bet we’re dealing with some sea creature.” John stopped at a high, white-painted metal security gate and tapped a code into a numeric lock. It hummed, and the gate swung open.

“Selkies don’t have to sleep during the daytime like we do, you know.”

“That was my guess also.” He drove up a winding driveway, still the picture of calm even though a narrow band of light had emerged along the eastern horizon. “Don’t they need periodic contact with the ocean?”

“Yes, and that’s why I don’t want to be too close to --”

“This place is secure.” He glanced at me, his lips twitching as he seemed to fight a smile. “You don’t know me yet, but you’ll learn that I’m totally reliable. I’ll keep us safe. Don’t worry.”

I tried to relax against the seat. “I’ll try, but it’s hard ... I’ve had to depend upon myself for so long.” I didn’t want to tell him that I couldn’t trust other vamps, since one had tried to kill me while lovemaking.

His hand settled warmly over mine. “That’s over. You have me now. Where would a selkie live in Santa Martina?”

I was glad he’d asked. Rational thinking about our enemy distracted me. “I’m not sure. I don’t know how often they have to return to the sea ... but there are homes at the marina that come with boat slips. It would be easy for a selkie to get in and out of the water there. Easier still if they built an enclosed boathouse over the slip.”

“It wouldn’t be seen changing at all. We’ll get him tomorrow night,” he said confidently. “For now, you can relax.”

He drove me to a mansion complete with faux Greek columns, a *porte-cochère*, and verandas overlooking the ocean. Backed by hills to the east, its location gave us a few extra, precious minutes to gain safety from the sun’s destroying rays.

“Where are we?” I asked as I got out of the car, overnight bag in hand.

His smile was awkward. “The Marshall mansion.”

“Greta’s house?” I lifted my brows and followed him.

“No, her digs are nice, but not like this. She got our home in the divorce, which was okay with me since I can’t sleep there. Too much light.” Using a key, he opened the door and disarmed the beeping security system with sure fingers. “She’s nuts, but her father and I still get along. This is his place. I housesit for him while he’s gone, which is most of the time.”

“I talked to him over the phone.” I bent to remove my boots, since I didn’t want to track mud over the polished marble entry. “He arranged to wire the ransom money in case I couldn’t get Danny back. I thought he was returning as soon as he could get back from, umm, where was it? Hong Kong or someplace?”

“Djakarta. It’s a long flight, but he should be home later today. In the meantime, he has a safe room where we can sleep.”

“A safe room? Like in the movie with Jodie Foster?”

“Exactly like that. He saw the movie and thought it was cool.” He grinned. “If it’s cool, Lance wants it.”

“Good for him and even better for us.” I stretched my arms over my head. “Is there a shower anywhere that the sun won’t zap us?”

He raised his brows. “Awfully late to indulge in a shower.”

“There’s blood all over me,” I said firmly. “I won’t be able to sleep unless I shower.”

He took off his jacket and tugged at his tie as he led me through an immaculate house, tidy as John himself had been when we’d met just a few hours before.

The bathroom we entered was enormous. “Wow,” I said. “This is about the size of my kitchen.”

“You have a kitchen? What for?” He laughed.

So did I. Think about it -- what use does a vampire have for a kitchen? “The house came with it,” I said.

“This, by the way, is only the guest bath.”

I blinked. “Later I’d like to see Lance’s.”

“Much later.” John began to strip off my clothes.

Chapter Four

John started with my pants, taking his time, which was good since I was still hella nervous. But I had to trust him. I reasoned that sleeping with him was putting myself completely in his hands, so why not go all the way? Especially since going all the way with John was what I'd wanted since we'd met. Though that had been just a few short hours ago, it seemed as though we'd lived through a lifetime of emotion: the fear of losing Danny, the joy and triumph of foiling the kidnappers, the terrifying encounter with the selkie.

While he fumbled with the snap at my waist, I pulled off my jacket and peeled away my T-shirt, which was stiff with blood. I looked at myself in the mirror.

I was a fright. Dried blood had streamed from the slash that the selkie had inflicted on my neck, leaving a stain down my throat, along my right arm and breast. My lipstick was nonexistent and my eye make-up had created a raccoon-like mask that couldn't conceal my fatigue.

I hoped that John loved me and that his love was blind, because believe me, I was no treat for the eyes.

He unsnapped my leather jeans and hauled them down, taking my panties with them. A cool wash of air streamed past my buttocks. Freed, my pussy's aroma spilled forth.

John looked up at me, his nostrils flaring, eyes flashing red with his burgeoning bloodlust. I knew he smelled my sex, sensed my readiness.

He bent his head and pushed my knees apart. Closing his eyes, he leaned forward, lips open.

The first contact of his mouth with my muff made me weak in the knees. He found my clit with a practiced tongue, and I remembered that he wasn't a young, innocent vamp. He'd been an adult, sexually experienced human male before he'd been changed. A man, completely and fully, and he knew his way around a woman's body, even if that woman was a vampire.

He licked the tender nubbin. With each flick, arousal snapped through me until I could no longer support my weight. I whimpered and leaned against the wall at my back. As my clit swelled, John took it between his lips and swung his head back and forth, tugging my heated sex flesh from side to side.

My orgasm was building, and I gasped. He grabbed me with his teeth, nibbling on me. The jab of his sharp canines sent me over the edge into ecstasy, with each tiny pinprick of pain/pleasure shooting through me like the darts of Cupid's arrows. I screamed and ground my cunt into his mouth as I came.

Limp with afterglow, I draped over his bowed back. He stood, with me in a fireman's hold. I marveled at his strength. At that moment, he could have done anything with me. I would have welcomed being eaten or sucked to death if I was going to come that hard while he was doing it.

He put a finger up my pussy, probing. Helpless, I writhed against his shoulder. He was still clothed, and everything -- the buttons on his shirt, the starched fabric rubbing against my breasts, his finger inside me -- sent me higher.

He carried me into the shower and set me down. Kneeling, he finished taking off my pants while I helped by lifting one foot and then the other. He stood, and I started unbuttoning his shirt as he looked into my eyes, smiling.

“I love how you taste.” He slid his belt out of the loops and unzipped his trousers. After he took them off, he stepped out of the shower, matched the inseams, and folded them over a towel rail.

I giggled. That was John, I guessed. Tidy. Judging by the appearance of the house, he liked everything in its place. I was the same way.

Naked, I took off the band securing my braid and turned the three taps full on. Three showerheads ... it was heaven for a girl who'd grown up without running water. Throwing back my head, I let the cool water flow through my hair, loosening it. From behind me, John slipped his fingers through the coils, pulling them apart. He tugged my head back for a long, slow, vamp-style soul kiss, one that filled my mouth with his irresistible flavor.

I bit, licked, and sucked. Again, the pleasure of the kiss was heightened by the tingling caused by the tiny cuts inflicted with our fangs. His free hand roamed and caressed my body, sliding from my breasts to between my legs, shamelessly exploring my pussy. He parted the labia to find my clit, which again rose, tender and sensitive, between his curious fingers.

Hardness prodded my backside as his cock nudged my ass, filling the furrow between my buttocks. I was beyond ready to take him. I whimpered, then bent, wanting to give myself completely, without reservation.

“No,” he said. “For the first time, face-to-face.” He turned me around, framing my face with his hands. “I have to look at you. God, you're so beautiful, Rama ...”

The warming water streamed around us, darkening his blond hair and flattening it to his head. He took a washcloth and wet it, then used it to carefully wipe my face, with special attention to cleaning away the makeup from my eyelids. He ran the cloth down my neck, around my breast and arm, rinsing away the dried blood.

My eyes heated and prickled with tears. No one had taken care of me since I was a child. No one had touched me with such tenderness since I had been fully alive. John traced my cheeks and brows with gentle fingertips, though the expression in his eyes spoke of lust and pure hunger. The whites had flamed fiercely red with arousal, in the manner of our kind.

He dropped the cloth and palmed my breasts, kneading the nipples into hard points. The tips reddened, an echo of the fire building inside me. I moaned, reaching for his cock. It was thick and long, and if I were human, I would have feared allowing it inside my tight sheath. But if John rent or tore me, it wouldn't matter. I would heal instantaneously, and the little stabs of pain would heighten my passion, and his. Squeezing his rod, I brought its plummy head close and rubbed it against my pussy, up and down, from my clit to my opening. I was hot, but he was hotter, his hard flesh burning against my cunt.

He reached down and hooked his forearm under my knee, lifting it high, spreading me wide to his heated gaze. Winding his other arm around my waist, he picked me up and walked me back until I could feel the cool tiled side of the shower against my bottom, a contrast with the steamy water flowing all around us. I grabbed his muscular shoulders for stability.

He lifted me higher, pinning me against the wall, and thrust his cock inside me. He wasn't in a hurry, so I could feel the big head of his rod easing into my narrow channel. It hurt, but the rightness of him inside me again brought tears to my eyes.

He stopped. This time, he'd noticed.

"I'm all right," I gasped, tossing my head from side to side. He was barely in me, but the intensity of it had brought me to the brink of coming again. My arms and legs quivered, with jolts of pleasure running up and down them as though they were electrified cables. I was about to totally lose control.

He took my face between his broad, masculine palms. “Rama, talk to me. I don’t want to hurt you, but you’re so tight ...”

“It’s okay,” I whispered. “It’s just been a while. And, umm, frankly, you’re pretty, umm, sizable.”

He grinned, looking a little smug, and kissed me again while bucking his hips forward to open me slowly. He filled me as no one else ever had, and when he was in all the way, he pressed a little harder, until his pubic bone pushed against my clit. His blue gaze boring into mine, he ground back and forth leisurely, as though he hadn’t anything else in the world to do but fuck me into insanity.

I rode his cock into oblivion, watching his face, trying to gauge his reaction. When I tightened my pussy around his thickness, his eyelids fluttered closed, and I knew I had found the secret to his pleasure. I gripped harder and bore down fiercely. Growling, he dug his hands deep into my hips, and his cock, already large, swelled to an impossible thickness. I screamed as he banged harder, jetting spurts of hot jism into my cunt.

He knelt on the tile, with my legs wrapped around his torso, then kissed me. He reached between us to again play with my clitty, tugging on it in sync with the thrusts of his tongue in my mouth. I was jelly, his toy as he made me come again and again, completely his, completely enraptured.

* * * * *

The roaring of the shower in my ears stopped, bringing me back to full consciousness. I dragged my head up and blinked to regard John.

“Wake up, vampire princess,” he said. “Time to get to bed. We’re cutting it pretty close.”

I managed to stand on shaky legs. My pussy burned with a fire I’d never before felt. Open and a little sore, I itched to have John again. He rubbed my cunt with a towel, his gaze

fixed on my face. I moaned, and he squeezed my labia with the cloth. My body jerked involuntarily with renewed pangs of arousal.

Grinning with blatant male satisfaction, he put an arm around my shoulders. "Come on."

"Do we have to pass by a window on our way?" I had already noticed my weakness, not only a response to the mind-numbing sex, but to the time. The burning hours are dangerous, and not just because we could come in contact with the withering sun. The day saps our strength, but John didn't seem to be as affected as was I.

"We'll be okay," he said. "Stay to my left."

I draped the towel over me and rubbed my hair while scurrying down the hall next to John. The windows were on his right, and though the curtains were drawn on all of them, he whipped us past them with a rapid stride until we stepped into a library.

At least, I assumed it was a library, since all four walls were covered, floor to ceiling, by filled wooden bookcases. At the far end was a door, and as we approached it, I saw that it was steel paneled with wood, in keeping with the library's décor.

John threw it open, ushered me inside, and closed the door behind us. We heaved identical sighs of relief, then shared a laugh.

"We'll be safe here," he said. He went to a shelf and took down two sleeping bags. After tossing them to me, he found an air mattress and plugged it into a wall socket, inflating it.

I opened the sleeping bags over the mattress, then sat cross-legged on it to dry my hair. I finger-combed it since I didn't have anything else, then hung up my towel on a nearby hook. By that time, John, still naked, was reclining on the air mattress.

"I'll never get tired of watching you fix your hair."

"How do you know?" I asked.

“Because you’re so beautiful.” Seizing my ankle, he drew me to him and dived between my spread legs. His head at my mound, he sucked in a deep breath. “You have the sexiest, sweetest muff ...”

His tongue swept my clit, shimmering pleasure in its wake. I could get used to this, I realized.

* * * * *

I awakened abruptly as though an alarm bell had sounded in my head. Beside me, with one brawny leg stuck over the mattress’s edge, John slumbered on, his blue eyes shuttered, blond forelock tumbling down his unlined, untroubled forehead.

Night had come all too swiftly, and with it, our task. Neither John nor I could be safe with a selkie prowling Santa Martina. That the selkie’s intentions were evil, I had no doubt. He had conspired to kidnap John’s baby for ransom and had vandalized my home. He had to be killed before he killed us.

But I couldn’t bear to wake John. He looked so peaceful in sleep. Instead, I found my way to the bathroom and showered again. An hour later, my hair plaited and nails newly manicured, I dressed before beginning my evening stretching routine on the magnificent Axminster carpet on the library floor.

John came out of the safe room, looking adorably sleepy and rumped. I straightened out of the downward-facing dog pose and said, “Good evening,” in a sepulchral, Bela Lugosi tone.

He flipped my still-damp braid through his fingers. “How many times a day, uh, a night, do you shower?”

“As much as I want to,” I said smugly. Having grown up poor and in a desert, I’d never taken a bath until after I’d been changed. I loved the feel of water pouring over my skin and had become passionate about cleanliness.

He laughed and headed for the bathroom. Fifteen minutes later, he reappeared at the library door, fully clad, though not dressed as I had expected. Missing was the impeccably cut pinstriped suit, foregone in favor of garb like mine: black jeans, leather jacket, boots. He hadn't shaved, and blond stubble shone on his cheeks, sexy and a little rough.

The vamps were on the hunt.

"Where shall we start?" I asked.

John's lips parted in a feral snarl. "The marina."

Chapter Five

At night, the marina was quiet except for one eatery set at the end of the modest harbor's breakwater. Rollo's served brunches on weekend mornings, beer and lunch to the daytime crowd, and at sunset, cocktails and wine to lovers seeking a romantic hideaway. Or so rumor had it. I had never seen any of that, but I knew that by midnight, the place rocked, jammed to the gills with couples dancing to live music.

Inside and opposite the dark stone breakwater, beyond the rows of floating slips, a line of residences edged the water, some townhouses, others single-family homes, their edges softened by stands of Norfolk pine and nasturtium beds dramatically displayed by expensive outdoor lighting. All featured docks at which boats of varying quality swayed with the tide, some small rowboats or kayaks, others luxury yachts. Most were somewhere in between, small Sunfish sailboats or twenty-foot motor craft outfitted for fishing or waterskiing.

Away from the lights and excitement of Rollo's, the marina and its homes were quiet, illuminated by decorative lighting, a few pinkish fog lamps, and the moon glittering on the oil-slicked, lustrous water.

John stood by my side as I stared out over the marina, Rollo's behind me, scrutinizing the row of houses. "I don't know where to start," I said.

“Use your six senses.”

“I’m best with smell, but everything around here stinks like that selkie. Dead seaweed’s all over the place.”

“It’s possible that if we show ourselves, trouble will find us.”

“I’d rather be the attacker than the attacked.”

“Wise, but we may have no choice.” He squinted. “My vision’s grown incredible in the last year, but I don’t see anything amiss.”

“Can we find out who lives here from your contacts at work?”

“Maybe, but they’re slow. It’s not like the movies. We don’t have a computer geek at our beck and call.”

“Maybe I do.” I flipped open my phone and called in to Tilli.

“Hyatt.” She sounded indolent, as usual.

“White here. I’m at the marina, tracking Danny van Helsing’s other abductor, but I’m at a dead end. We think that he lives in one of the shoreline residences, but that’s as far as we’ve gotten.”

“We?”

I heard the click of computer keys as Tilli started to find the information. “I’m working with his father,” I told her. “Greta Marshall neglected to tell us that John van Helsing is a city detective.”

“Why don’t they tell us these things?” Tilli asked, referring to the legions of moronic clients who consistently neglect to provide the most elementary information.

“In this case, there’s a potential custody battle.”

“Aha.” More clicking, then Tilli said, “I can send you a list of marina homeowners, but that may not help. What if your perp’s a renter?”

I shrugged, although she couldn’t see me. “At least it’s a place to start.”

“Okay, check your text messages.”

Tilli rang off, and I clicked until I came to her message. John crowded close to see the screen. His nearness almost distracted me. Okay, it *did* distract me. I couldn't help my heightened heartbeat, the thrill of desire that raced through my veins whenever he brushed my skin with a finger or slid his arm around my waist, the way he was doing so he could get a closer look at Tilli's message.

“Nothing suspicious,” he said, frowning.

I sighed. “I didn't expect much,” I said, scrolling down the list of names and addresses. “Oh, wait!”

I stopped at the entry for 294 Tidewater Way.

“That's the end of the street,” John said. He lifted his head and checked out 294 Tidewater. It was the darkest of all the houses, lacking any lights at all. Only reflections from the water onto the boathouse showed that one existed. Otherwise, it was only a shimmering, insubstantial shadow in the moonlight.

“What's special about it?”

“The owner,” I said. “S. Glamourgan.”

“That's not an uncommon name.”

“Spelled this way, it is. The extra U ...” I chewed on my lower lip, ruminating.

“Enlighten me.” His voice was edgy.

“Okay. Glamour is a Celtic term referring to ancient magic, spells, charms and the like. Glamorgan without the U isn't an unusual name, but with the U it takes on another meaning.” I paused. “Maybe.”

“Maybe, but right now it's the best clue we've got.” He glanced at me. “We need a game plan. Stay behind me.”

“I'm trying not to be insulted. I've been in this business for longer than you've been alive.”

“I’m bigger than you are, and I’m armed.”

“Good points,” I said grudgingly. “And let’s not get into the water with it, okay?”

“Hell, no. I can swim, but not like a seal.”

“It’s more than that.” I shivered. “Seals are all muscle, with a layer of thick fat, and they have vicious teeth. He’ll be hard enough to take on dry land, let alone in his environment with his relatives around.”

John’s jaw firmed. He didn’t look at all intimidated or nervous, and I feared for him. Recklessness could endanger us.

We moved into the darkness, away from the lights and music of Rollo’s.

The breakwater’s path was dimly lit, a haven for drunken partiers who giggled and groped their way to their cars. We skirted all of them. I noticed that as John walked, he adopted an easy, smooth stride that was not only very fast, but seemed to slide around people like a shadow. Vamp on the prowl. I followed, moving the same way.

When we reached 294 Tidewater, a fog had descended to cloud S. Glamourgan’s house. Though thin veils of mist floated over the neighboring home, 294 Tidewater was shrouded, almost as though the selkie had attempted to conceal his lair.

Nervous, I shivered. I rarely encountered other supernatural creatures, and when I did, often I was lucky to escape unscathed. But Santa Martina was my territory, mine and John’s, and we had to rid it of this monster.

“We have to get him in his house,” John whispered softly in my ear. The tiny hairs on my throat prickled. “We can’t let him get into the water.”

“Let’s approach from the boathouse,” I murmured. “I bet he gets in and out of the water there.”

Bending forward at the waist so he wouldn’t be seen from the selkie’s windows, John slipped behind a line of hedge roses, their white blooms aglow in the night, then darted to

the boathouse's shadow. Reaching into his jacket for his gun, he opened the door and peeked inside.

With a roar, the selkie burst out of the dark gap and attacked, knocking the gun away before John could pull the trigger. Sharp, conical teeth tore at John's throat as they both toppled into the black water.

I jumped after them, landing squarely on the selkie, who seemed to be trying to drown John while ripping out his throat. Drained of blood, he would die forever. And the seal-man was capable of decapitating John.

I flailed, frantically searching for the selkie's head so I could tip it back and administer my fatal kiss to its neck. I planned to suck its heart's blood, reduce it to an empty shell while taking its power, a nice side benefit of saving my lover.

But our three forms were a fighting mass of limbs and flesh, one of which was becoming sleek, slippery, and incredibly strong as the selkie changed to fit his element.

We had only a few seconds. My face broke the water's surface, and I blinked to get the marina's salty, dirty water out of my eyes. I saw a dark arm in the air. It was shrinking into a paddle-shape. It had to be the selkie's, so I grabbed it and sank my teeth into where I hoped an essential blood vessel might lie.

Rich and salty, the selkie's blood flooded my mouth while its pulse thundered in my ears. I wanted to forget everything else while I feasted, but John's safety and my own were paramount. I kicked to stay above the water line and, with a free hand, reached for the selkie's head, hoping I could get to its neck.

Instead, my fingers encountered a man's stubbly face. John was there before me, his sharp canines piercing the selkie's throat. Its howls reduced to squeaks as it died, and its kicks grew feeble as we jointly drained him. I transferred my bite to the other side of its neck, finding the fin too tough and the blood becoming scantier.

I placed a hand on its chest, and the pound-pound-pound of its heart slowed. Weakened.

Stopped.

John raised his head. Even in the dim light, I could see that the whites of his eyes had reddened. I drew my teeth out of the selkie's throat and dipped below the waterline to rinse my face. When I surfaced, I announced, "I need a shower."

"What a surprise," John said, grinning. Like me, he'd let the selkie go, and its body bobbed a few yards away, gradually sinking.

We looked at each other. John had also rinsed, and seawater rather than blood dripped from his canines. I giggled, giddy with joy and sheer relief. We'd won, together defeating an enemy that either of us alone couldn't have fought. I was certain of that.

I leaned forward and kissed John. He kissed back. His mouth tasted salty and good. Right.

"For the first time," he said, "I'm happy to be a vampire."

The twin of his goofy smile spread over my face. "We're good together."

"A team."

"Partners."

"Mates," he said firmly.

I smiled.

~ * ~

Suz deMello

Suz deMello is the pseudonym of a best-selling, award-winning author of traditional romance. Of her journey to the steamier side of writing, Suz says, “I love writing traditional romances, but after several years in the same mode, I felt that I really needed to cut loose as a creative artist and write hot, sexy books that reflect the wilder side of being human.”

Suz’s books are fast paced, with sexy, complicated characters and a whole lot of kink!

Visit Suz on the Web at www.suzdemello.com.

* * * * *

JAGGER'S WOMAN

Eve Vaughn

Dedication

To O, thanks for helping me bring the Grimaldis to life. ☺

Prologue

Jagger wiped away the sweat beaded on his forehead. Had the temperature gone up? Squirming in his chair, he tried to focus on what his father was saying. As though noticing his discomfort, Niccolo Grimaldi turned amber eyes Jagger's way, clear concern within their depths. "Are you okay, son?"

"It's gotten hot in here all of a sudden. I know the weather is usually warm in Southern California, but this is ridiculous."

His mother walked over to him and felt his forehead with the back of her hand. "You do feel rather warm, *milaya moya*."

"Mama, I wish you wouldn't call me your little boy. I'm thirty years old, you know."

She patted his cheek fondly, a smile tilting her lips. "You could be five hundred years old and you'd still be my little boy."

"Sasha, you're embarrassing him." Niccolo lightly scolded his mate, although there was obvious affection for her in his voice. Whenever Jagger's parents, the two people he loved above all others in the world, spoke with one another, that particular emotion always lingered there. Sometimes Jagger felt like a third wheel when he was with them, but it was never because they made him feel unwanted or unloved.

"I can't help it. I'm worried about my baby. I haven't seen him like this since he was thirsting for his first blood."

His father's brow was furrowed, confusion etched on his face. "That was *la morte dolci*. He's already had first blood."

"Uh, Mama, Papa, I'm sitting right here. There's no need to discuss me as if I'm not in the room."

Sasha patted his cheek again. "I'm sorry, *moy malish*. How long have you been feeling this way? And do you have other symptoms?"

"Off and on for a couple weeks now, but it's especially bad when I wake up. I've also noticed how difficult it's been to concentrate."

Niccolo uncurled himself from the recliner he'd been sitting in. Joining his mate, he kissed her on the ear. "Sweetheart, would you mind if I had a word with Jagger alone?"

Sasha frowned. "Why? I'm his mother."

Now Niccolo kissed the side of her neck. "I know, sweetheart, but it's kind of a man thing." Their gazes locked and Jagger watched the meaningful look his father exchanged with his mother until understanding finally dawned on her face.

"Ah. I see. Well, I suppose I could do some shopping, maybe pick some gifts for Maggie and GianMarco's baby."

"That sounds like an excellent idea, but I wouldn't buy so many pink outfits as you've been doing. The chances of Maggie giving birth to a daughter are quite slim. In fact, no fem has given birth to a daughter in at least a century."

Sasha smiled knowingly. "But Maggie is certain the baby's a girl. A mother is instinctively aware of these things. I may not be a gambling woman, but I'd put my money on Maggie. In fact, I'll be taking your credit cards." She grinned at her mate angelically.

Niccolo rolled his eyes in mock agitation. "You're going to make us paupers with your spending."

“You are such a teaser. I could spend several thousand dollars an hour and not put a dent in your ... our fortune. By the way, may I take the Ferrari?”

“Of course, as long as you promise no more racing. My police connection is a bit tired of having to erase all those tickets you’ve racked up.”

She pouted. “What’s the point of having such a powerful car if I can’t drive fast?” Seeing the expression on her mate’s face, she quickly amended her words. “I’ll be as careful as I can.”

Jagger noticed she made no promises to his father. As he watched the interaction between them, Jagger was a bit jealous of the special bond they shared. Both had gone through so much to be together, but although he didn’t begrudge them their happiness, sometimes he wished he could have what they did.

He had gone most of his life without knowing who his father was, but several months ago, Jagger had gone on a quest to find the man he believed had abandoned him and his mother. What he’d found himself embroiled in was an adventure beyond his wildest imaginings but, in the end, he had finally met his father and seen his parents reunited. And now, even though he’d only lived with his father for the past few months, the bond between father and son was strong.

Once Sasha had left the men alone, Niccolo took a seat on the sofa beside Jagger. “Son, when was the last time you got laid?” That was his father: direct and straight to the point. It was still something Jagger was getting used to.

“A few weeks. I haven’t had much time for anything else what with our missions for the Underground.”

“Was it a satisfying experience?”

They were close, but this man was his father. Jagger felt his face grow warmer than ever from his embarrassment. “I’m not sure why you need to know all this.”

“Humor me, son.”

"Fine. Not really. I was more frustrated than ever afterward."

"This heat you experience, is it followed by arousal?"

"Sometimes."

Niccolo closed his eyes with a sigh.

"What is it, Papa? What's wrong with me? I never thought I'd feel this way again after I received my first blood."

"Who is she?"

"She?"

"The woman you're pining for. Besides a need for first blood, the most common cause of *la morte dolci* is unfulfilled desire. It happened to your Uncle Marco; had Dante not intervened, things could have gone very badly for Maggie. So I ask again, who is this woman who's brought you to this pass?"

There was only one woman who'd been on his mind the past few months. She was his first thought when he woke and his last at night. He'd memorized her every feature and often conjured up her smooth dusky skin and large soulful eyes, She had the most adorable dimples he'd ever seen, and Jagger fantasized about having her beneath him, her hair fanned out against a white pillow. Remembering her plump bottom and how much he wanted to ride it, Jagger's cock jumped to attention. Why this woman in particular made him feel such instant longing, he wasn't sure. Jagger had had many women, after all, but none had ever caused him to dream about them every single damned night.

"Son," his father prompted.

"Janice Williams."

Niccolo's eyes widened. "Maggie's daughter?"

"Yes. I haven't been able to forget her. I've tried to, but I can't. She's the one, Papa, I'm sure of it."

"Marco has told me she's wary of our kind."

Jagger raked his fingers through his hair. “I’m already aware of that, but it doesn’t make me want her any less. I can’t eat, sleep, or do anything properly because of her. It only took our first meeting for me to fall hard for her, but it was enough. Hell, I even flew to her place in Atlanta. She rejected me initially, but when I left, her last reaction gave me hope. I can feel she wants me, too, but she’s denying it, denying us.”

“So that’s where you went when you needed a couple of days to yourself. From the comments Marco has made, I’ve wondered if something may have happened between you and Janice, but I didn’t want to be intrusive and ask. From what I’ve seen of her, she’s a nice kid, but she’s not like her mother. Her tongue is sharp; she won’t fall at your feet like other women do.”

“No other woman interests me. Besides, if I wanted one of those types, I could have settled down with any number of them. Papa, in my heart, body, and soul, I know she’s the one. She’s my woman.”

“You’re very young to have found your bloodmate already. Marco was in his eighties when he’d met his first bloodmate, and it was several hundred years later when he found Maggie. Your Uncle Romeo and I have also waited many centuries before our mates came into our lives. Are you absolutely sure?”

“Would you think that I’m on the verge of *la morte dolci* if she isn’t?”

His father’s golden gaze met his. “Son, whatever you do I will support you, but I must warn you, she’s under Marco’s protection and he’ll allow no harm to come to her. You’re in a precarious situation, *piccolo*, because *la morte dolci* is a tricky thing. If your need for her goes unfulfilled, it could mean trouble for you. Already your body is going through changes because of your desire for her. You don’t have much time to stake your claim before this illness becomes full blown.”

“How much time do you think I have?”

“Judging from your symptoms ... no more than two weeks.”

Jagger's jaw dropped with incredulity. That was no time at all to woo Janice as he wanted to. How in heaven's name would he be able to win her affections in such a short period of time? "I suppose it's a good thing we'll be flying to Virginia tomorrow for the birth of the baby."

His father's eyes darted away, and Jagger knew there was something he wasn't being told. "There's more, isn't there?"

"Unfortunately."

His pulse raced, and his breathing was now shallow from what he might hear. "What is it?"

"Just because you love her, it doesn't necessarily mean she'll love you back."

That was exactly what he feared.

Chapter One

“If you ask me, I think it’s disgusting that your mother is having a baby at her age.” Eugene Williams followed his scathing statement by downing his fourth glass of wine.

Janice glanced at her watch, wishing this dinner would end. She should have known her father would be up to his old antics. Ever since he’d learned his ex-wife was happy in her new marriage and having a baby, all he ever did was speak of her in a derogatory way.

“Daddy, she’s hardly ancient; she’s just turned forty-one. Lots of women are having their first child well beyond that.” Not to mention she was now a vampire who could probably have children for centuries to come, but that was another issue altogether.

“Well, she still ought to be ashamed of herself. I’m surprised she’s still with that gigolo.”

“That ‘gigolo’ is her husband, and I doubt Marc is going to let her out of his grasp anytime soon. They love each other very much.”

Eugene released a loud belch, drawing stares from the other diners closest to their table. Janice knew she should have driven straight to her mother’s house instead of agreeing to this dinner. She loved her father, but sometimes she didn’t like him a lot. Besides, she was still coming to terms with all the years he’d treated her mother like dirt with his verbal

abuse, cheating, and neglect. It had caused Janice to resent her mother just as much for putting up with it.

Fortunately, with some insight, soul searching, and counseling, Janice had at last come to an understanding with her mother, and now they were closer than ever. Her sense of fair play also made it impossible for her to ignore her father even if he didn't always make sound decisions, like leaving her mom for a younger woman, whom he'd then divorced within a month, stating he'd been coerced into it. Currently, he was dating a woman only a year older than Janice's twenty-two. Janice wouldn't put her money on that relationship lasting very long either.

Her father slouched in his chair. "You mark my words, young lady, when that creature she calls herself married to gets rid of her -- and he will -- I'm not taking her back." His voice was as belligerent as his words.

"Um, Daddy, Mom doesn't want you back, and like I said, Marc isn't letting her go anytime soon. The baby is going to come any day now and he still can't keep his hands off her. I think it's cute." She sighed. "Do you think we can change the subject now? You've been talking about Mom since we got here. Have you forgotten you were the one who walked away? Could it be that you didn't think she'd move on with her life and find happiness?"

"She knew I'd come back to her eventually," he said sulkily, reminding Janice of a two-year-old instead of the middle-aged man he was.

"Did she? You told her you were engaged, and then you served her with divorce papers. What was she supposed to think? Had I been her I would have gotten rid of you a long time ago. You weren't the best husband and neither of you were happy. She's moved on, now it's time for you to do the same."

"As quickly as she got with that white boy, I bet she was cheating all along."

That was it! Janice had had enough of her father's drunken sullenness. "Daddy, I need to leave. Do yourself a favor and call a cab home."

His eyes narrowed to angry slits. "Don't tell me what to do, young lady. Have you forgotten who writes the checks to your grad school?"

"Have *you* forgotten I only have two semesters left? And you've already sent a check for the next one, which has already cleared. I can easily work more hours at the student union to pay for the last one myself."

"I was going to buy you a car when you graduated," he muttered, obviously flustered when she didn't fall in line after his none-too-subtle threat.

"Keep the car. I don't need it. You're always dangling the carrot, aren't you? I've lost my taste for it. What I need is a father, and since you won't be one to me, I'm going to say good night."

"So you're going to turn your back on me just like that faggot brother of yours?"

Besides her mother, Dion was the one person in the world she loved more than anyone and anything else. To hear someone call him by that foul name -- their father no less! -- raised her ire. Had this man not helped in her procreation, she'd throw her drink in his face.

"His name is Dion, and he's your son. He may not be your ideal of manhood, but he knows more about being a man than you ever will. You can keep your expensive gifts. I have no need for them." Grabbing her purse, she stormed away from the table. As she left, she informed the maitre d' to call her father a cab before her dad left. Regardless of what she felt for the man, he was still her father, and she didn't want to see him come to any harm.

She slid into the beat up Volkswagen Jetta she'd had since high school and was annoyed when the engine didn't start right away. Her car was a long-serving hand-me-down. Her father had bought it used for her mother; then when her brother, Dion, had passed his driving test and received his license, their mom had given it to him. Later, it'd become Janice's. "Come on, old girl, don't break down on me now. We made it here from

Atlanta. You can drive a half hour more to Mom's house." As if by magic, when she turned the key in the ignition again, it started. At least it was one less worry. For the moment.

Janice had been happy about seeing her mom again and thrilled at the prospect of a baby brother or sister. She was even happy at the prospect of seeing Marc, her hunky, blond stepfather -- who also happened to be a vampire -- but she was still trying to adjust to her mother being immortal and a bloodsucker, too. It was difficult to accept something she'd been conditioned to not believe in. Maybe her mother was content to be a vampire, but Janice preferred human men. Not that she needed a man.

The couple of boyfriends she'd had were nothing to write home about. She'd given the last guy she dated her virginity, but for the life of her couldn't figure what all the hype was about. And she'd learned a long time ago from watching her parents that she was better off without a man in her life; at least not one who would dominate and control her. When she did finally settle down it would be with a guy who knew up front that she called all the shots.

The thought of spending the next two weeks with her mother brought to mind another dilemma. She'd been told the rest of the Grimaldi clan would also be in residence; the house was certainly big enough, after all. But if the remainder of the family would be there, then so would *he*.

Janice didn't care for men who came on too strong, and in their very first meeting, Jagger's intense amber gaze had stamped her with stark possessiveness. At first, she hadn't known how to react, because no man had ever dared to look at her that way before, at least not without getting told off. Aside from that, he was not only white but a vampire, too. She wasn't sure which was the bigger strike against him.

She had nothing against white men, but Janice felt a black man would understand her struggles and her culture more than any other race could. Relationships were hard enough without the added drama the interracial factor could have. Maybe if he hadn't come to Atlanta, she could have played nice and pretended everything was okay, but he'd ruined it.

Janice had been leaving class, talking to one of her study partners when she'd had the strangest sensation of being watched. As she walked to the campus coffee shop with her friend, she couldn't quite shake the feeling.

"Some guy is following us. Or maybe just you," Terri whispered behind her hand.

"What?"

"I noticed him when we came out of the building."

Janice didn't know why, but something told her not to turn around. Unfortunately, the choice was taken out of her hand when someone grabbed her elbow.

"We meet again, Janice."

The thick Russian accent left not a doubt who stood behind her. Without facing him, she sighed and ground her teeth together in exasperation. "What are you doing here?"

"You knew I'd come for you. Won't you look at me so I can see your beautiful face?"

"I knew no such thing, so how about letting go and leaving me alone?"

"Don't you want to talk to him? If you don't, I'll take him." Terri greeted Jagger. "Hi, I'm Terri. Are you a friend of Janice's?"

"You could say so, although I would like to be a lot more." The deep cultured voice sent shivers down Janice's spine.

Damn.

She wasn't supposed to react to him in any way. Finally pivoting with more than a little annoyance, Janice hissed, "Why are you here? I thought I told you I want nothing to do with you."

Terri looked horrified. "Janice! That's no way to talk to your friend." She gave Jagger a brilliant smile. "She's not usually this way. And since I've introduced myself, what's your name?"

Jagger lifted Terri's hand and brought it to his lips. "This campus seems to be full of beautiful women. I am Nicolai Jagger Romanov-Grimaldi at your service, fair lady, but please call me Jagger."

Terri giggled like a loon, obviously flattered. "Oh, you're charming. You have to come to the coffee shop with us."

Janice rolled her eyes. "Give me a break," she muttered under her breath.

Terri glared at her before smiling at Jagger again. "So, how do you know Janice?"

"Her mother is married to my uncle."

"Oh, so you're related. How interesting," Terri cooed, batting her eyes like a nitwit. Janice wanted to throw up.

"Terri, why don't you go ahead and find a table for the three of us? Janice and I will join you shortly."

Terri pouted, but when Jagger smiled, revealing perfect white teeth, she gushed. "Okay." The other girl practically skipped off.

"Janice, you're looking lovelier than ever, although it is my fondest wish to see your hair flowing around your shoulders so I can run my fingers through it."

She narrowed her eyes. "You'll never get the chance. I thought I'd made it clear there will never be any *us*. For my mother's sake, I have to be nice to her in-laws, but you're making it very difficult."

A pained expression crossed his face. "It doesn't have to be difficult. Why don't you at least get to know me? My mother would tell you I'm a great guy." He grinned.

Janice didn't appreciate his attempt at a joke, but maybe she wouldn't be so annoyed if he weren't so damned good looking. Jagger was the epitome of tall, dark, and handsome. He stood well over six feet, towering over her five-foot-six-inch frame. His jet-black hair fell to his collar, caught between the edge of long and short. Everything about him was attractive,

but Jagger's eyes were his most arresting feature: their amber gold was emphasized by the dark slashes of his eyebrows.

Why did she have to be so aware of his maleness, the smell of his cologne, and how her body tingled to life in his presence? *Girl, snap out of it; this guy is not for you.*

"Yeah, and your mother is also a witch, isn't she?"

The smile fell from his lips, and his eyelids lowered slightly. "Yes, she is, although I'm not sure what that has to do with anything."

"It has a lot to do with it. Your mother is a witch and your father is a friggin' vampire, and I have no clue what the hell you are."

"The term is vampwiz."

She shook her head. "Whatever. It's not as though I'm in the market for a boyfriend, but even if I were, it wouldn't be to a bloodsucking wizard!" She hadn't realized how loud her voice had risen until passersby stopped to stare. "Look, I have to get out of here. My friend may have invited you to coffee with us, but I'm uninviting you. I'm sure you understand."

As she attempted to move past him, Jagger grabbed her arm. "This conversation is not over." Amber eyes scanned her face with determination.

"Let go! This conversation is most definitely over, and I'm giving you two seconds to release me before I scream."

"What's the point of screaming when no one will hear?"

Before she could question what he was talking about, he snapped his fingers. Janice looked around to see an empty campus. The hundreds of students and faculty trudging along the vast landscape had simply disappeared.

"What the hell?" Yanking her arm away, Janice took several steps back. "What have you done to everyone?" she whispered in horror.

Jagger waved his hand in the air dismissively. "They are still around. It is you and I who are no longer on campus. I'm not very good at this spell, so it will only last a few minutes. I think you could at least give me that time to plead my case."

"I don't have to give you anything."

Suddenly, he pulled her roughly against his hard body, his amber eyes glowing and his eyeteeth descending. "Is this how you see me? Is this the monster you think I am? It is only part of who I am."

Janice was too stunned to do anything but stare, fear holding her still.

"Ah, *milaya moya*." His eyes and teeth returned to the way they'd been before. "*Kagda ya vperveeye vstretil tebya ya srazu ponyal: eto navsegda*." She assumed his whispered words were Russian, the lyrical sounds flowing over her like a soft caress.

Though she tried, she couldn't fight off the trembling in her body. "What ... what did you just say?"

"I won't tell you until the time is right." Their gazes locked. It was almost as if he were looking at her very soul. Cupping her face in his strong palms, Jagger brought his head down, halting when their lips barely touched. "You may not believe we are destined to be together, Janice, but I do, and I will live in hope you'll soon realize it."

Instead of kissing her as she'd expected, Jagger released her face and stepped away. "Give your friend my apologies. Until the next time we meet, *milaya moya*." With another snap of his fingers, the campus jumped to life with people walking around her, but Jagger had disappeared.

The blaring honk of a car horn brought her back to reality. Janice discovered her car had drifted to the center of the road, straddling two lanes. She immediately maneuvered the vehicle to one side and shot an apologetic hand in the air for the driver behind her. Just one more exit to her mother's house.

How was she going to through the next couple of weeks with Jagger around?

* * * * *

“Maggie, have a seat and put your feet up. Janice should be here shortly; she called to say she’d come as soon as the dinner with her father ends.”

Maggie looked out the window for the tenth time that night. She always worried about her children even though they were both grown. “I know, but I’m concerned that old clunker of hers will break down on the way. I wish she hadn’t refused your offer to buy her a new car.”

GianMarco stood behind her, wrapping his large, sinewy arms around her waist, his hands cupping the considerable bulge of her stomach. They were expecting their first child together any day now, and Maggie couldn’t remember a time when she’d been happier except for the birth of her two older children.

Her husband grazed her ear with his tongue, causing a shiver to run through her body. She leaned against his solid warmth, so in love with this man that she sometimes feared she’d wake up and this would all be a dream.

“Janice is a very independent young woman. She probably gets that stubborn streak from her mother.”

Maggie twisted around to face him, staring into amber eyes. It was still hard to believe this gorgeous man belonged to her. Who would have thought when her marriage of twenty-three years ended abruptly that she’d land on her feet like this?

Left with nothing, she had found herself starting over again at the age of forty. She’d been extremely fortunate to land a job as a secretary at a detective agency, but little had Maggie known then that her hunky, obnoxious boss was a vampire. Things had been rocky for the two of them in the beginning, but when they finally came together, it had been explosive. There had been no turning back then. Now, there was so much happiness and joy in her life, she could barely contain it.

Since she and GianMarco had married, two of her brothers-in-law had also found mates. Maggie only wished that Dante, the eldest Grimaldi brother, would also find what she shared with her husband. Thinking about Dante made her slightly uncomfortable, considering she felt responsible for the rift between him and GianMarco.

She placed her head against her husband's broad chest. "Do you think ..."

"Do I think Dante will come?"

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak. She had been a vampire for not quite a year, so she was still getting used to the nuances of their kind. Mind reading was one of their talents she had yet to grow accustomed to.

"He said he'd come, but I haven't heard from him. He may miss the actual birth, but he'll be around. Don't worry about it, *ciccina*, you are not to blame."

"Where is he?"

"In the Hamptons with some friends of ours."

"The werewolves you were telling me about?"

"Shifters. Don't let them hear you call them werewolves. They'll be highly insulted."

"Oh." She sighed, reveling in the heat of his body.

"Well, all the family should descend on us tomorrow."

"Oh!" Maggie smacked her forehead.

"What is it?" GianMarco's dark brows furrowed together.

"Sasha called earlier and said she, Niccolo, and Jagger would be here tonight."

"And your daughter is on the way."

"Yes. Do you think there will be a problem with Janice and Jagger under the same roof?"

“I don’t know, *ciccina*. It should certainly be interesting, but I think there will be plenty of people in the house to keep each of them occupied. Ro, Christine, and their kids will be arriving tomorrow morning.”

“I bet Romeo and Christine are thrilled the adoptions have been finalized. With the children officially theirs, they can take them out of state now. I’m glad they’re moving down here. There are a lot of houses for sale in this area; it will be so much fun house shopping with Christine. Our baby could use some little playmates.”

“Who would have ever thought my wild brother would have a wife and two children?”

“Based on our first meeting, I certainly wouldn’t have.” Maggie chuckled, then abruptly stiffened. No. It couldn’t happen now. She thought she’d been mistaken earlier, but now she wasn’t so positive.

“Baby, are you okay?”

She didn’t want to alarm her husband, so she answered in the affirmative. “I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I guess I’m just anxious to see Janice.”

“She’ll be here soon.” He smiled. “I have an idea how to take your mind off of things.”

“Does it have anything to do with making love?”

A large lopsided grin split his face. “You know me so well.”

“I would love to, but I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Why not? You’ve never been one to turn down our lovemaking.”

“And you know I enjoy it immensely, but my water just broke.”

Chapter Two

“It’s okay, Uncle Marco. I’ll let Janice know what’s happened as soon as she arrives.”

The older vampire looked distracted, running around the house like a headless chicken. Aunt Maggie seemed to be handling this situation much better. “Baby, it will be okay. This is my third child. There’s nothing to be nervous about.”

Niccolo patted Maggie on the shoulder. “You must indulge my brother in his panic; after all, he hasn’t been a father for many centuries.”

Maggie sighed. “I understand completely; however, we’ll never make it to the hospital in one piece if he doesn’t calm down.”

“Which is why Sasha and I will come with you two,” Niccolo said. Once everyone had reassured Uncle Marco sufficiently, they finally left, leaving Jagger alone in the big, empty house.

When Jagger and his parents had arrived not even a half hour earlier, it was to find his frantic uncle and exasperated aunt. They hadn’t expected the baby to come for another few days so everyone was in a bit of shock. Jagger’s mother and father had volunteered to take the expectant parents to the hospital, leaving him in the house for when Janice arrived.

During the entire plane ride to Dulles, he'd thought of ways to get her alone and now it was as if the heavens and God were smiling down on him.

Jagger frowned, looking at his watch. It was nearly midnight. He could have sworn Aunt Maggie had told him Janice should have been here already. Had she changed her mind and decided to not show up because of him? Just as the idea crossed his mind, the loud clanging of an engine drew closer to the house. Hurrying to look out the window, Jagger could just make out the driver behind the wheel. His heart pounded in anticipation of seeing her face again.

Already his prick was stiff as his eagerness became overwhelming. He had to relax and appear as non-threatening as possible; whenever he came on too strong, she fought against him even harder. Perhaps the way to get into her good graces was to take things slowly, but then he remembered his father warning him that *la morte dolci* would take over if he didn't have her soon.

Her wreck of a car sputtered up the driveway louder than ever. Jagger desperately wanted to run outside and haul the dark beauty into the circle of his arms and never let go, but he forced himself to remain where he was. *Let her come to me. Win her trust and everything else will fall into place.*

The car finally came to a halt, but not before releasing a menacing pop. That vehicle was beyond not roadworthy; to think she drove around in that death trap scared the hell out of him. He made a mental note to tell her so when he got a chance.

It seemed like an hour while Jagger waited for her to get out of the car and reach the front door, although he knew it had to be only a couple of minutes. His heart pounded faster than ever at the sound of the doorbell. Taking a deep breath, Jagger opened the door.

To say the look on Janice's face was one of astonishment would have been putting it lightly. Her jaw practically fell to the ground, and her dark eyes widened to the size of saucers.

“Welcome, Janice. I’m glad to see you’ve arrived safely, although I’m sure your car has seen better days.” He moved enough to let her by, but not enough that she could avoid brushing against him.

If possible, Janice was even prettier than he remembered from their meeting at her school earlier in the day; her smooth mahogany skin was free of makeup except for a light coat of gloss on her curvy lips that smelled like strawberries. Never before had he wanted to kiss a woman’s mouth bare as much as he did this one and, for once, her dark hair rested around her shoulders like a silky black cloud instead of the ponytail she seemed to favor.

He allowed his gaze to drift over her body; it was evident that she took good care of herself. She was slender and of medium height. Her breasts were small, as was her waist, but her hips were womanly. And even though Janice now faced him, he couldn’t forget her ass. After having met her, Jagger had fully understood why so many rappers paid homage to black women’s asses in their song lyrics. Many a night he’d lain in bed, his fist wrapped around his cock as he imagined riding her plump derriere.

Janice finally found her voice. “Where is Mom, and why are you here?”

“Come in. You must be tired after a long day.”

“Um, I would if you’d back up.”

Jagger grinned, shifting only the merest of centimeters more. When she apparently realized he wouldn’t move further, she placed her hand against his chest, pushed him aside, and stepped into the house.

“And how do you do to you as well, my lovely.”

She looked around, anxiety seeming to take over. “Where is everyone?”

Jagger closed the door and gestured to the sofa. “You should probably have a seat first.”

“I won’t sit down until you tell me what’s going on. Where’s Mom? Is she okay? Oh, no! Mom is okay, isn’t she?”

“Your mother is fine. I suspect that in a few hours she’ll be more than okay. Uncle Marco, on the other hand, I’m not so sure. He’s the one in need of help, I should imagine.”

Confusion washed over her face before comprehension dawned. Her voice was no more than a whisper. “The baby?”

He nodded. “Very soon your new little brother will be here.”

Janice’s hands flew to her hips, her lips pursed. “What makes you think it’s going to be a boy? Mom is sure she’ll have a girl.”

Jagger shrugged. “The chances of her having a daughter are slim to none.”

“Why is that? I know you vampires aren’t human, but surely there are female versions of you.”

“Yes, there are, and most of them have been made rather than born.”

“But there have been some, right?”

“Only a handful. For some reason, perhaps God’s little joke on us, the X chromosome isn’t produced but every so often in a vampire’s sperm.”

“Oh.” Her disappointment was clear.

“You really wanted a little sister, didn’t you?”

“I already have a brother, one I love very much, but Mom was so sure about the sex of the baby, I began to believe it, too. I was getting used to the idea. Oh, well, I’ll be just as happy with a little brother. I’m glad for Mom no matter what and Marc, too, of course.”

“Of course.”

An awkward silence fell between them, the light ticking of the grandfather clock in the living room corner the only sound. Jagger couldn’t tear his gaze away from her gorgeous face to save his life. Janice, on the other hand, made every attempt to look anywhere but in his direction.

“It doesn’t have to be this way, you know.”

She laughed nervously. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Janice, let's stop playing foolish games. The chemistry between us is real. I know you feel it, too."

"I do not --"

"Oh, yes you do, Janice, but I will allow you your illusions ... for now. However, what we should focus on at the moment is contacting friends and family and notifying them of the joyous event which is about to occur. Do you think we could call a truce for the sake of the family? After all, we will soon have another relative in common."

Warring emotions flashed within the depths of her eyes. Her gaze finally met his, making Jagger's heart skip a beat. The incredible heat he'd been experiencing for the past few weeks resurfaced. His willpower was slowly being chipped away by her very presence.

Jagger licked his now dry lips, taking a step back as much for his sake as hers. The movement must have taken her by surprise because she eyed him with suspicion.

"How can I trust you?"

"You'll just have to go on faith. I promise not to touch you ... unless you want me to."

"That will never happen!" Her tone was snappish.

Jagger smiled. "If you say so."

"I do. No funny stuff, okay?"

"How could I try anything when the rest of the family will be here by tomorrow morning?"

"Well ... if you realize nothing will ever happen between us, I guess we could call a truce, but don't get any ideas."

"Are you saying we cannot be friends?"

"I ..."

"You want to say yes." His smile widened.

Janice giggled, a delightful tinkling sound. "All right, I guess friendship is okay."

"Shall we shake on it?"

"Don't push your luck, buddy."

* * * * *

Montana Donovan squealed on the other end of the phone. "She's having the baby now? Why didn't she call me? I thought we were girlfriends!" Her godmother was an excitable woman; Janice sometimes wondered how opposites like her mother, who was calm and laid back, and Montana, who was high maintenance and had a great deal of money, had remained best friends for nearly thirty years.

"I don't think she had much of a chance. I would imagine since this is Marc's first baby after losing his son that he was so excited he rushed her off. At least that's the version I've been told."

"Who told you? Wasn't your mother there when you arrived?"

"No. Actually, Marc's nephew, Jagger, was here. He's keeping me company, but trust me, you are the second person I called. I had to tell Dion first, of course. He's thrilled."

"So you're in the house alone with ..." Montana's voice lowered several decibels, "one of them?"

"Why are you whispering?"

"Can't he hear you? They have great hearing, you know."

"I'm aware of that, but Jagger's hauling my stuff out of my car."

"You're not still driving that black hunk of junk, are you?"

"I am, and it broke down on me ten minutes from the house. My cell phone battery died, and I was stranded."

"How did you get there?"

"I played with some wires under the hood. This guy I know showed me how one of the cables keeps getting disconnected to this thingamabob. I don't know what it's called, but he told me what to do if my car stalled again. This time I must have done something wrong because there was a mini explosion, but I managed to reconnect the wires."

"So it did start?"

"Sort of. It made the most awful noise, coughing and sputtering the entire way here, and to top it off, it only went five miles an hour. I think my poor baby is on its last legs."

"That piece of crap has been on its last legs for the past ten years. When your father bought that car for your mother, it was already three years old. The cheap bastard could have sprung for a new ride, but I suppose the past belongs in the past. Anyway, do you want me to come over to keep you company?"

"I'm fine."

"Are you sure? I know Maggie says vampires are safe, but ... there's something I can't quite shake about them. Something I don't like."

"Look, I'm not exactly ecstatic my mom has become a bloodsucker, but she's happy with Marc so I'm happy for her."

"I guess you're right, but once when I went to visit ..."

"What?"

"That's just it. I don't remember, but it must have been horrible. I get chills when I try to force the memory. Just be careful, okay?"

"I usually am. You have nothing to worry about. I can take care of myself."

"Famous last words. You just watch yourself, young lady. Maggie tells me the Grimaldi men are great charmers."

"I can't be charmed," Janice shot back, growing frustrated with the conversation.

"Fine, but never say I didn't warn you."

When she finally hung up the phone, Janice was struck with the decision of whether to join Jagger in the living room or run to her room and hide. She certainly couldn't avoid the guy forever, and she'd already made the appropriate phone calls. It was nearly one o'clock now, but she wasn't sleepy.

Pulling a scrunchie from her pocket, she fixed her hair into a ponytail as she remembered how Jagger had told her he wanted to run his fingers through her hair. That wasn't going to happen if she could help it.

She walked into the living room and found him on the couch placing playing cards on the coffee table, a look of concentration on his handsome face. She had never had the chance to study him like this when he was unaware of her. A lock of thick black hair fell over his forehead, and his profile was strong, his jaw square.

Janice's breath caught in her throat. Jagger was too good looking to live. Why did he have to be so easy on the eyes? "I don't need a man. I don't need a man," she chanted under her breath.

"Are you going to stand there talking to yourself, or will you join me?"

Damn his sensitive hearing. "I wasn't talking to myself."

"Oh, so I didn't hear you muttering about needing a man? My mistake." He continued to lay cards on the table, not bothering to glance her way. For some reason, his ignoring her bothered Janice.

"I said I don't need a man!" she snapped.

"Of course you don't," he murmured, still not turning his head in her direction. His accent was too sexy for words. Was there anything about him that wasn't hot?

Get a hold of yourself, and stop acting like an idiot. Stomping to the sofa, she took a seat on the far end, keeping enough space between the two of them. "So, uh, what are you doing?"

"Playing solid."

"Solid?"

"You know, the game one plays alone."

"Oh, you mean solitaire." She giggled at his mispronunciation. It was kind of cute.

"*Da*. That's probably what I meant. My English sometime gets mixed up."

"You sound as if you've been speaking it for years."

"All my life, actually, although I don't use it as often as I should and I don't speak it as well as I'd like. My grandmother is English, so I learned Russian and English from the cradle, but sometimes I get flustered when my emotions are involved."

"What other languages do you speak?"

"Czech, Hungarian, Polish, and a smattering of German. My family is well traveled, so I suppose in time I'll pick up more. My father speaks over fifty languages, and there are so many more for him to learn. I'm sure you can imagine I have a ways to go before I even catch up to him or my uncles."

"Well, you do have an eternity to do it," she whispered, remembering he wasn't human.

"I sense your unease; there is no need to be frightened of me. I'm not so different from you."

Janice couldn't help snorting at that comment. "Um, I'm not a bloodsucking wizard vampire, or vampire wizard. Whatever the hell you call yourself. What do I call you anyway?"

He looked at her, then revealed those perfect teeth of his. "Jagger will do nicely. And I agree you're not a bloodsucker, as you so quaintly put it. You're a beautiful young woman -- and an extremely desirable one, at that, but as I was saying, you shouldn't judge immortals so harshly without getting to know us."

"I know you suck blood. I know you have powers. What else is there to understand?"

He laid the deck of cards down. Sweat broke out on her forehead, when she noticed his muscular hands flexing and unflexing.

“Can I ask you a question without you becoming offended?” His gaze bore into her.

“It depends on what the question is.”

“Fair enough. Answer me this: have you ever been the victim of prejudice?”

“Are you kidding me? I’m a black woman in America; what do you think?” She had an inkling about where he was going with this.

“And how did it make you feel?” he asked softly.

She frowned, remembering a particular incident that still saddened her. A girlfriend she’d thought she was close to had had a sweet-sixteen party and hadn’t invited her. When Janice had asked why, her so-called friend had laughed offhandedly. *My party was probably a little too highbrow for someone like you. I hope you understand. It’s nothing personal.* Someone like her meant black, of course. Needless to say she had severed the friendship.

“Not very good, but when is discrimination ever pleasant?” she answered honestly.

“Having been on the other side of prejudice, I would imagine you’d be a little more sensitive to people different from you. I couldn’t help being born a vampwiz any more than you could help being born a black woman, so how about cutting me some slack? Yes, there are bad vampires, wizards, and shifters, but there are bad humans as well. Prisons around the world can attest to that. However, as my presence is clearly offensive to you, I’ll leave you alone.”

Janice felt like a first-class bitch. When Jagger stood up to leave, she grabbed his arm. “Jagger, I’m sorry. I guess I’m being a little narrow-minded.”

He raised one thick dark brow. “A little?”

“Okay, maybe a lot, but please try and see my side of it. Before my mom settled down with Marc, I had no idea vampires and other immortals existed, and what I knew of them, I

learned from watching horror movies. You can't expect me to change all my beliefs overnight."

He nodded. "I understand. Well, *milaya moya*. I shall turn in. It's getting late. Unlike the movies, I do sleep at night."

Before Janice could protest, he bent over her, grazing her cheek with his lips. "Goodnight, Janice." He was gone before she could respond.

Her hand flew to the spot his lips touched; her skin was on fire.

No! This couldn't be happening. She couldn't possibly start liking him now.

Chapter Three

Jagger tossed the covers off his body. He couldn't stay cool no matter what he tried. Already he had stripped away the last article of his clothing, but the heat was still unbearable. His cock, rock hard and throbbing, ached like never before. He needed Janice so badly, he didn't think he'd be able to stand it much longer.

Too afraid to resort to magic for fear it wouldn't do him any good, Jagger decided to take a cold shower. Sitting up, he listened for any movement in the house. Janice had gone to bed shortly after him.

He climbed out of bed, allowing his feet to touch the cool hardwood floor. His room was one of the few without its own bathroom, so he carefully made his way down the hallway and slid into the shower stall, turning the water to its coldest setting. He sighed with relief as the water brought down his temperature.

His cock, however, remained erect. Placing a hand against the wall, he grasped his dick, sliding his fist along the hard length. God, he hurt. Though the chilly water coupled with his masturbatory motions afforded him some release from his pain, Jagger suspected complete satisfaction would not come until he had some of Janice's sweet pussy. He bet it was tight and would fit snugly around his cock. He just knew it!

Jagger closed his eyes, groaning, imagining it was Janice's hand sliding along his swollen hardness. When he finally got a hold of her, he was going to eat her cunt like it was a buffet. He'd have her screaming and crying out his name until her throat was raw. Then he'd flip her over and take her from behind, slapping that luscious ass of hers as he pounded into her wet box. Maybe he'd tug her hair a bit, too.

Hopefully that moment would soon come but, first and foremost, he needed her pussy. Was she a virgin? Though he couldn't be hypocritical and expect purity in his partner when he'd done his fair share of running around, the very idea of being her first was infinitely pleasing. It didn't matter if she wasn't, however, because he would be her last lover.

Pumping his cock frantically, Jagger moved closer to his peak, reaching and clawing for it. He grunted and groaned, unable to hold back. "Janice," he whispered. If he concentrated hard enough, he could visualize her in the shower with him.

His love and passion for her only intensified the lust coursing through his body. Cum shot from his rod, spraying the shower stall, his body shuddering uncontrollably. His breathing was ragged. Resting his head on the wall, Jagger attempted to calm down when a knock fell on the bathroom door.

Janice. What did she want?

"Jagger, are you okay?"

A groan escaped his lips before he could stop it. "*Da*. I'm fine."

There was silence for a moment before she replied. "Are you sure? You sound as if you're in pain."

What the hell was she doing up anyway? "I'm fine. Please don't concern yourself with me," he managed to bite out. His incisors lowered and the cool water did nothing to ease the ache that had suddenly returned. Jagger knew he'd have to get rid of her or else he wouldn't be able to control what happened next.

"Well, if you need any help --"

“For God’s sake, woman, would you just go away!” Jagger hadn’t meant for his words to come out so harshly, but it was difficult to think when she stood just on the other side of the door. No response followed the sharp rejoinder. He’d apologize later, but for now he had to get himself under control. Why couldn’t he command his body? As much as he willed it, his teeth would not retract.

He’d have to resort to magic after all. Perhaps a winter spell would soothe him. Chanting to himself, Jagger closed his eyes visualizing cold weather. It took a few minutes before he felt the effects of the spell. “Ah, much better,” he sighed.

As his core body temperature lowered, he regained the control he’d temporarily lost. “If I don’t have her soon I don’t know what I’ll do.”

Turning off the shower, Jagger cursed when he noticed a thin sheet of ice on the bathroom floor. Icicles clung to the ceiling, yet he didn’t feel the chill as he should have. Standing as still as possible, he allowed himself to take in the effect of his surroundings for a few minutes before toweling himself dry.

Jagger wrapped the towel loosely around his waist, then stepped into the hallway. Heading back to his room, he became aware of someone watching him. He turned to see Janice with eyes wide and mouth ajar. She was obviously returning from downstairs. When he shifted, the towel fell to his feet. He stood before her in all his naked glory, unashamed of his body.

Janice couldn’t seem to tear her eyes away from him. His cock hardened and elongated. From the way she goggled at him, Jagger could tell she liked what she saw. The hungry gleam in her eyes said it all. She wanted him, but Jagger knew she’d fight her desire.

When moments passed, and she still didn’t move except to dampen her lips with her pretty pink tongue, Jagger realized he needed to put an end to the show -- leave her something to think about. Bending down, he picked up his towel and wrapped it around his waist again, tighter this time.

"I'm sorry to have woken you. I'll see you in the morning. Sleep tight." Turning on his heel, he strode back to his room and quickly closed the door behind him, a smile on his face. She wasn't indifferent to him, after all. A seed had been planted; he was one step closer to claiming his woman.

* * * * *

Janice had not been able to get to sleep after what she'd witnessed -- not that she had been sleeping well before she went downstairs to fix herself something to drink. But when she had walked down the hallway, she'd heard noises coming from the bathroom and decided to investigate, convincing herself that she was concerned instead of needing to see Jagger again.

Janice hadn't expected his gruff tone, however. Maybe he was taking her words to heart that there would never be anything between the two of them. He didn't have to be so nasty about it, though. She had shrugged it off, thinking she'd caught him at a bad time.

But another thought had also occurred to her. Those groans had sounded as though he were in pain. What if they weren't from an injury or illness, but pain from desire. Could it be he had been in there touching himself ... as he thought of her? Even wondering about it had made her shiver from the sheer carnality of it. She hadn't wanted to think about it, but couldn't make herself stop.

After having had her tea, Janice had had every intention of going back to bed, but seeing a very naked Jagger had sent her world spinning off its axis. Beautiful had never been a word she'd associated with the male form until she'd seen Jagger nude. Lean, but muscular, his pecs were toned, and his abs tight and ripped. A dusting of dark hair had covered his chest, and Janice couldn't have moved to save her life. Though she'd tried, Janice had also been unable to keep her gaze from straying below his waist.

Good Lord, he was long. So much for the stereotypes about white men being small. Not only was he blessed with length, his girth had been nothing to sneeze at either. If all the

Grimaldi men were so well endowed, it was no wonder her mother walked around with a perpetual smile on her face.

Janice's pussy had tingled in reaction to the sight of Jagger's nakedness, her nipples hardening. Common sense had told her to move, but her feet had stubbornly remained firmly planted on the floor. And his cock had been hard, of all things. What would it have been like to get her hand around that monster?

What the hell was wrong with her anyway? She had no business thinking along those lines. There was no room in her life for any man, and that was that. When she saw him again in the morning, she'd treat him cordially, but that was it. She'd pretend nothing had happened and she hadn't ogled him like a damned lecher. Janice could help wondering why she had reacted -- and continued to react to him -- the way she did.

He was part wizard. Had he cast a spell on her? It was the only logical explanation she could think of. Damn the man! Well, if he pulled that again, he'd soon learn her will was much stronger than any spell.

Sunlight streamed through her curtains, making her squint against the brightness. She should have been exhausted but surprisingly wasn't. How could she sleep when her mother was in labor?

Mom was in labor! Tearing out of the bed, Janice raced downstairs in only her nightshirt and panties to check any messages she may have missed during the night. Surely Mom would have had the baby by now? The machine revealed no calls had come in. Had something gone wrong?

"That's a mighty ferocious frown you're wearing."

The voice startled Janice out of her musings. Her first instinct was to lash out, but she reminded herself to take things easy. *Don't let him get under your skin, girl.* Janice was relieved he wore clothing this morning.

"I'm worried about my mother. No one called."

"It takes a little longer to birth a vampire child because of how draining it is to both the mother's body and the baby."

"Wouldn't it be easier for a vampire? I'd suspect it would be because immortals don't die."

"Immortals do die, just not by natural causes. And I didn't say she would die, just that it is a physically tasking experience for the mother. Vampire babies need to feed constantly once they're formed in the womb, not just on the nutrients the mother ingests, but on her blood. Once your mother gives birth, the baby must have first blood, usually from the mother and usually quite a lot, from my understanding. Sometimes the baby can take enough blood to put the mother into a light coma-like sleep for several hours. It depends."

Janice tried not to wince as she imagined a baby with fangs sucking on her mother's neck. "Ew."

"It's okay. It's supposed to be a beautiful experience."

Janice crinkled her nose. "Well, if that's the case, I'm glad I'm not at the hospital. I suppose you drained your poor mom dry, didn't you?"

"Actually, I didn't. I'm half wizard remember? Though first blood was necessary for me, I didn't have my first taste until this year." The way he stared at her, he seemed to be saying, "And now I want some of yours."

She backed away, the uneasiness returning when her body throbbed. "Look, I know what you're up to, so don't think you can put your hoodoo voodoo crap on me."

An amused smile tilted the corners of his sensual lips. "What are you talking about, *milaya moya?*"

"You know what I'm talking about, and what the hell do you keep calling me?"

"If I knew what you were talking about, I wouldn't be asking you ... my sweet. That's what I've been calling you. Would you prefer to hear it in English more often? Although I

must say English isn't nearly as passionate or hot blooded as Russian. Such a cold language, English."

"No," she whispered. Why couldn't she tear her eyes away from his mouth?

"No, you wouldn't prefer me to speak in English?"

"No. I would prefer you didn't speak to me at all; barring that, I wish you'd keep your endearments to yourself."

"I can't help how I feel."

"Try," she snapped, backing away from him even more.

"I know what your problem is."

"My problem?" The guy had a huge set of balls. The nerve of him to tell *her* she had a problem.

"*Da*. Your problem. Last night you enjoyed watching me." He stalked toward her like a lazy jungle cat, his intense amber gaze holding her mesmerized. Her muscles stiffened and locked as Jagger stopped in front of her. "And you know what?"

Janice shook her head, not trusting herself to speak.

"I enjoyed you watching me. This is what you do to my body whenever you're near." Taking her hand in his, he slid it down the length of his torso, letting her fingers glide over his solid abdomen. Janice tried to pull her hand away when he pushed it lower, but Jagger's grip tightened. His gaze never left her face, the intensity of his stare making her quiver. Janice gasped when her hand encountered the hard bulge in his pants.

"It's okay. *Milaya moya*. Touch me. I know you want to."

She should have walked away right then and there, but she found she could do nothing but explore the outline line his cock made against his jeans.

"It's so large," she whispered more to herself than him. Janice didn't miss the sharp intake of breath Jagger made.

“You drive me crazy, woman. I have dreamed of you touching me this way and of this.” He captured her face between his hands, bringing their lips together. This was the kiss she'd fantasized about all last night. She hesitated for the briefest moment before she twined her arms around his neck, pushing her body against his.

A stirring in her pussy like never before sent heat waves of delight through her body. When his tongue thrust past her lips, Janice thought she'd lose her mind. His taste was raw, wild, and so very male. He dominated the embrace, seeking and conquering, sweeping over every recess of her mouth. Janice's breasts puckered against the hard wall of his chest. She could never have imagined that the simple touch of their lips crushed against each other could elicit such burning desire.

Before she realized what was happening, Jagger lifted her and carried her to the kitchen table, their mouths never parting. She had no idea what he had in mind, nor did she care. She was completely and utterly lost. Emboldened, her own tongue slid out tentatively, meeting his, but Jagger seemed to have other ideas.

He pushed her back on the table until she rested on her elbows, then dropped to his knees in front of her -- but not before revealing glowing amber eyes. Janice should have been frightened, but she was so dazed with lust, it didn't quite register. “What are you going to do?” Was that her voice? That breathy whisper of a woman in the throes of passion?

“I'm going to do something I've been dying to do since I laid eyes on you.” Pulling her knees apart and shoving her shirt out of the way, Jagger buried his head between her thighs, inhaling her scent. “You smell so good. The aroma of your sweet pussy has been driving me wild.” Gripping the top of her panties with both hands, he ripped them off as if the material were tissue paper instead of the sturdy cotton it was actually made of. Then he placed them in his back pocket.

“You're not going to get them back, not that they'd provide you with much coverage now. Do you know what I plan on doing with them?”

Janice shook her head mutely.

“When I touch myself again, I’m going to hold your cream-smearred panties in my hand until I come, but right now, I’m going to suck your cunt.” Holding her thighs, he pushed them further apart and did exactly what he’d promised. Eager lips clamped on to her labia, sucking them, and the pressure of flesh being pushed together by his hands sent fire licking along every single nerve ending in her body. Janice’s fingers dug into his thick, dark hair.

“Oh, Jagger! Lick it!” she cried out, wanton bursts of passion taking over. Common sense had long since flown out into the wind. Right now all she could think about was how good his mouth felt on her hot sex. If she had to look more closely at what he was doing to her -- in the middle of the kitchen on the table no less -- she knew she’d be mortified.

Using his middle finger, Jagger parted her dewy channel and eased the finger into her as far as it could go.

“You’re so wet for me, just as I knew you would be.” His finger slipped in, then pulled out just to the tip, before it shoved back into her. Her grip tightened in his silky hair. How had she lived this long without experiencing such pleasure? Maybe she’d known all along that he could bring her to this pass, which was why she’d been avoiding him. The delicious things he was doing to her had to be a sin. Yet it wasn’t enough. She wanted more.

Jagger’s tongue ran along her slit. Janice’s juices already wet her thighs with her need of him. He removed his digit only to replace it with his tongue, thrusting in and out of her, reaching deeper than she suspected most tongues could go. Grinding her pussy against his questing mouth, she rode his face.

Jagger rolled her clit between his thumb and forefinger, creating just enough pressure to send a tingling sensation up her spine. He continued to fuck her with his tongue, showing no mercy.

The boy she'd lost her virginity to had never come close to making her feel this way. In fact, the entire experience had left her wondering if she was frigid. Now there was no doubt in her mind she was not. What had Jagger done to her?

The thought didn't linger long before what felt like an explosion ripped right through her. It slammed her down on the table, her arms too weak to brace her. This didn't make him stop, however. If anything, he focused on her pussy with even more ferocity. He licked and slurped at the gush of wetness her orgasm had produced.

"Jagger, oh, my God! I can't take any more!"

He looked up with a growl. "This cunt belongs to me. Don't stop me while I'm feasting." His eyes were glowing again, and she saw that his fangs were out. Janice tried to pull away from him, but the grip he had on her thighs kept her immobile.

A prick on her thigh raised her panic level. *Dear Lord, he just bit me. He's drinking my blood! Holy shit!* The harder she struggled, the tighter his hold became -- but the truly scary part was that the more blood he sucked from her thigh, the more she began to enjoy it. A new sensation hit her, one she shouldn't have liked but did. Too much.

Her pussy clenched again as though ready for more of his skillful ministrations. When Jagger finally lifted his head, he licked away the blood that stained his teeth and lips. "That was just a sample of what's to come."

He finally relaxed his grip on her, and she used that opportunity to escape, sliding off the table and racing out of the kitchen. She didn't stop running until she made it to her room, where she made sure the door was locked before she crumpled onto the floor in a sobbing heap. How could she have let it happen? His spell or whatever he'd done to her was too strong and now she'd been bitten.

He'd made her a vampire whore.

Moments later there was a knock on her door.

"Go away!"

“Janice, there is nothing to be ashamed of. What just happened was inevitable.” Jagger sounded patiently understanding.

“Don’t you have the decency to leave me alone? I hate you!”

His soft chuckle pissed her off. She wanted to wring his neck. “We both know that isn’t true. What just happened between us proved that.”

“You-you put a spell on me. You made me do those things.”

“Janice, I can do many things, but I’m not yet powerful enough as a wizard or vampire to force anyone to do something against their will. But even if I could, *milaya moya*, I wouldn’t do that to you. You’re just going to have to come to terms with the fact that you want me, too, but I digress. This isn’t the reason I’ve come up here.”

“Then why did you?”

“I just received a call from Uncle Marco.”

Janice sat up. “The baby?”

“Yes. The baby has finally arrived. You have a little sister.”

Chapter Four

“How are you, kiddo?”

Jagger went into his uncle's embrace. The arrival of his Uncle Romeo and his family had eased the tension in the house. Janice had been avoiding him ever since their lovemaking session. Besides the joy she had expressed at the new arrival of her sister, she hadn't had much to say to Jagger, choosing to hole herself in her room with her cell phone.

“Uncle Romeo, it's good to see you as well, and you, too, Aunt Christine. You look lovely as always.” Jagger walked over to the petite fem standing by Romeo's side, giving her a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“You're a charmer, just like the rest of the Grimaldi men. How have you been, Jagger?”

“I've been good, but I hear you've been even better. And these two scamps must be Jamal and Adrienne. They're both as adorable as everyone says they are.”

The little girl, whom he knew to be only three, was small for her age. She stuffed her thumb in her mouth while tugging on one of her long braids and stared at Jagger. Romeo lifted his daughter into his arms.

“Say hello to your cousin, *piccola*.” Adrienne shook her head before burying her face against her father's neck. Romeo stroked the child's hair and shot Jagger an apologetic look.

“She’s shy, especially around men. It’s a blessing that she took to me so well. Don’t worry, she’ll warm up to you once she gets to know you.” He turned to the boy beside him. “Jamal, say hello.”

The little boy looked Jagger up and down, intelligent hazel eyes seeming to sum him up. “Hello. Where are you from, mister?” Jamal finally asked. “You talk funny.”

“Jamal, it’s not nice to say things like that.” Christine’s voice was lightly scolding.

“But he does. You sound like that man on that cartoon. The one on *Boomerang*.” He looked up at his mother. “What was the name of that show we watched yesterday?”

Christine turned a bright shade of red. “Um, I think he’s talking about *Rocky and Bullwinkle*.”

“Ah. I’m not familiar with the cartoon.” Jagger couldn’t help being amused by the child’s straightforwardness.

The boy shrugged. “Oh. Well, it’s a really, really old cartoon, so I thought you might’ve seen it.”

Jagger chuckled. He liked this kid.

“I’m really sorry, Jagger,” Christine apologized, although she couldn’t quite hide the smile on her face.

Romeo turned his head away, looking as if he’d burst into laughter any minute. The older vampire seemed content, his happiness evident. Yes, it was quite obvious to Jagger that his Uncle Romeo loved his new family very much. They were a motley crew: an Italian father, Chinese mother, and two African-American children, yet somehow they all fit together. Jagger wanted happiness like that for himself. He vowed he’d have it with Janice.

As if he’d conjured her by his thoughts, she came trudging down the stairs with a big smile on her face and wearing a pink sundress, the perfect foil for her dark brown skin. She looked lovelier than ever. “Hi, Romeo.”

“How are you, brat?” Romeo grinned at her. “I’d hug you, but as you can see, my arms are full. Congratulations on your new little sister. It’s quite a feat that your mother actually had the daughter she wanted. Once word gets out, the immortal world will be abuzz. Female-born vampires are rare, and when they reach adulthood, very powerful. I’m sure Marco is strutting around like a peacock.”

“From what I can tell, he’s very happy. Very surprised maybe, but pleased,” Janice agreed.

“The message that the baby had arrived was on my cell phone when I got off the plane, but I wasn’t given any vitals. What is her name?”

Janice beamed. “Gianna Marie Grimaldi.”

Romeo smiled approvingly. “After Mama and Papa, I suppose.”

“They were your parents’ names?”

Romeo nodded his blond head. “Yes. Forms of them, at least. Mama’s name was Maria; Papa, Giovanni.”

Jagger frowned. “Isn’t that the name of --”

“Yes.” Romeo cut him off abruptly, obviously not wanting to discuss the problems his family faced. Jagger nodded in understanding.

Christine seemed to notice the sudden tension. “Well, I guess since no one is going to introduce us, I’ll have to do it myself. Janice, right?”

“I’m sorry, my love, but it is my right as your husband to do the introductions. Christine, this is the brat, otherwise known as Janice. Brat, this is the love of my life, Christine.”

Janice and Christine shook hands, smiling at Romeo’s words.

“And these two rugrats are my son and daughter, Jamal and Adrienne, two of the three reasons I’m happy to wake up each morning.”

“Aw, how sweet.” Janice sighed. Her eyes gleamed mischievously. “And I suppose they’re also the reason you no longer go barhopping.”

Romeo grinned at his wife. “I told you she was a brat.”

“Pee pee.” Adrienne spoke at last.

Christine held out her arms. “I’ll take her. Janice, would you be so kind as to show me where our rooms are?”

“Of course.”

Jagger watched Janice lead Christine and her daughter upstairs.

“Why don’t you join your mother and freshen up?” Romeo suggested to his son.

Jamal looked indignant. “But I want to hang with the men.”

“And you shall, little one, but you still have pancake syrup on your shirt from this morning’s breakfast. Don’t you want to change and look your best for when you meet the rest of the family and your new little cousin?”

The child tapped his chin as though trying to weigh his options. “What’s in it for me if I do?”

Romeo lifted a brow. “You won’t lose your Xbox privileges.”

“Oh. Well, I’ve given some thought to this and I think it would be a good idea if I do go freshen up.” The little boy raced up the stairs.

It was only when Jagger was sure the child was out of earshot that he burst into laughter. Romeo joined him.

“How old is your son?”

“He’s six going on forty. He’s sharp as a tack, isn’t he?”

“He is certainly that.”

“Jamal definitely keeps me and his mother on our toes.”

“You sound very proud of him.”

Romeo's smile widened. "Extremely. My children had a rough life prior to our adopting them. Their birth mother was a drug addict and they were brought up in an abusive home. Adrienne didn't even speak more than a few words until recently, but Jamal helps her with new words every day. That's my boy. He's already charming the ladies. I have a feeling he'll be beating the girls off with a stick, just like his papa."

Jagger grinned at that. His uncle's conquests were legendary. "And your daughter is precious. She'll have quite a few gentlemen friends of her own."

The smile disappeared from Romeo's face as swift as it had appeared. "The hell she will. Adrienne is never going to be allowed to date. If some punk comes sniffing around my little girl, I'll snap his damn neck."

Jagger could tell his uncle was serious and found the double standard Romeo displayed toward his children very funny. He wondered what Christine would have to say about it. "You really love them all, don't you?"

"More than you can ever know. I couldn't love them more if they were from my blood. I used to tease Marco and Nico about them settling down and beginning families, but now I know the joy of familial love. It is like nothing else, and I wouldn't trade my family for all the traveling, barhopping, hell raising, and pussy chasing in the world. I didn't really understand real happiness until Christine came into my life, and adopting the children has only enhanced what we have."

Jagger had never considered himself an envious man, but he found himself thinking again that he wished to experience the same type of love and relationship with Janice. Still, a comfortable silence fell between the men.

"Why don't you put up your feet? The plane ride from Boston must have been tiring."

"Yes, especially traveling with two restless children."

They went into the living room and took a seat on the sofa. Romeo turned to Jagger. "I hope you didn't take it amiss when I cut you off earlier. Christine is nervous enough with all

this *il Diavolo* business and I didn't want her agitated in front of the children." Jagger couldn't disagree about not openly discussing the rogue vampire who was behind the plot to exterminate the Grimaldi family. *Il Diavolo* had cause great suffering to Jagger's family. He had been responsible for murdering his uncle GianMarco's first wife and child, his uncle Dante's girlfriend, Jagger's maternal grandparents, and nearly Jagger himself.

Jagger's eldest uncle, Dante, was the founder and head of an organization they called the Underground, which Jagger had recently joined, that sought to eradicate the rogue threat. Finding *il Diavolo* -- and taking him and his minions out -- was now the Underground's biggest priority.

"Has Uncle Dante found out who Giovanni is? Is he really your brother?"

"It is certainly beginning to look that way to us, as does the case with Adonis. I feel a connection to both, although naturally it is not as strong as the bond I have with your father, Marco, and Dante. So many unanswered questions remain."

"Such as?"

"Giovanni called Dante and set up a meeting with him, but he didn't show. Christine won't listen to me, but I think her friend Nya is in league with him; I'm trying to figure out how. Nya came around to our house a couple of weeks ago to drop off gifts for the children, but when I tried to quiz her, she suddenly left. And then there's the witch, Dyannara, whom we know very little as well. Everything is very confusing, especially since that confrontation in Germany a few months ago. Right now, it might seem as though the entire situation has gone away, but I know it hasn't. This is only the calm before the storm. You mark my words, Jagger, the storm *is* coming and it's going to be a big one. It's just a matter of time and place."

* * * * *

Janice's heart filled with love when Marc placed baby Gianna in her arms. "She's gorgeous."

And she was. Janice ran a finger along Gianna's soft skin, which was a light gold with red undertones. She had chubby cheeks and a head full of curly sandy hair. Just then the baby opened her eyes with a wide yawn, revealing pink gums. Her eyes were still cloudy so her eye color wasn't evident yet, but Janice knew her sister would grow up to break many hearts whether her eyes turned out to be the dark brown of her mother's or the amber shade of her father's.

"Hey, pretty girl, I'm your big sister. It's a good thing you have me to teach you the ropes. You're going to need it in this family.

"Lord help us," Marc groaned, looking heavenward.

The crowd of family in the room erupted with laughter. Almost everyone was here, including Montana and Oliver, Marc's business partner. The only one missing was Dante, but Janice didn't dwell very long on his absence because she was too busy getting acquainted with Gianna. She lowered her face to the baby's head, inhaling that wonderful baby smell. Gianna gurgled.

"I think she likes me. This kid has taste."

Her brother, Dion, snorted. "I think it's just gas."

"Shut up, D. You're just jealous because she didn't open her eyes when you held her."

He rolled his eyes and chuckled. "Now I have two bratty little sisters. Life will certainly get interesting from here on out."

The baby crinkled her little nose and her mouth shaped itself as if to suck. "Uh oh. I think she's hungry." Just as the words left Janice's mouth, the Gianna let out a wail like nothing Janice had ever heard before. "The kid has a set of lungs on her, too." She reluctantly handed Gianna over to Marc.

"I think you're right." He nuzzled his tiny daughter. "Are you up to feeding her, Maggie?"

Her mother lay against the pillows looking exhausted, but content. “Yes, of course. Give her to me.”

When Marc brought the baby to her, the love between the couple was there for everyone to see. It was strong and tangible. “Maggie will need some privacy,” Marc announced.

Maggie smiled gratefully, then asked as the room began to clear, “Baby, would it be okay if I had a few words with Janice alone?”

“Of course, *ciccina*. I’ll be in the hallway if you should need me.” Marc leaned over the bed and planted a lingering kiss on his wife’s lips, and then one on Gianna’s cheek. He seemed reluctant to leave mother and daughter.

Once alone with her mother, Janice averted her eyes as her mother undid the fastening of her gown and offered Gianna a nipple. The baby latched on, sucking hungrily.

Janice giggled. “She’s a greedy little thing, isn’t she?”

“Just like her father. You would have thought I was dying, the way GianMarco carried on last night. He even threatened the doctor. But he was cute; he even cried when Gianna came.”

“Aren’t you thrilled she’s finally here?”

“I’m very happy, I feel like I’ve been pregnant forever. GianMarco and his brothers seem to think having a daughter was an amazing thing, practically a miracle. I think it was meant to be.”

“So was the labor rough?”

“A little. It has been twenty-two years since I last gave birth, after all, and Gianna weighed nine pounds. I think she probably got that from the Grimaldi side; you and Dion were both just shy of seven pounds.” She chuckled. “I think the hardest part was calming GianMarco down. I knew he was worried about me, but I didn’t expect to have a frantic husband hovering over me.”

"Daddy wasn't in the delivery room with you when we were born?"

Maggie shook her head. "He preferred to stay in the waiting room. I guess some people are just squeamish when it comes to childbirth."

"That's no excuse. Daddy was just being selfish as usual."

"Sweetheart, I wish you wouldn't talk about your father that way. No matter what, he's still your father."

"He doesn't act like it sometimes. I don't know how you put up with him for so long. You truly are a saint." She managed to tear her eyes away from her nursing sister. "So what did you want to talk to me about?"

"I didn't really have the chance to speak to you last night, obviously, so I wanted to do some catching up. How was your trip here? When GianMarco called the house, Jagger told him something about your car giving you trouble."

"I'll probably have to put a few hundred dollars into it for repairs again."

"Sweetheart, we've offered to buy you a new one. Who knows where you'll be when it breaks down next?"

"Mom, you know I can't let you do that."

"Why not? We can afford it; what's the point of having a lot of money if we can't spend it on our loved ones?" Maggie sighed. "You don't have to be so stubborn. I know you have a grand idea about being independent, but there's a difference between independence and foolish pride. I had to learn that lesson the hard way."

Janice sank in her chair. She hadn't been expecting a lecture. "Mom, do we have to get into this now?"

"I'm only bringing this up because I worry about you, baby. My fondest wish in life is seeing you, Dion, and now Gianna happy, but I don't want you to pattern your life based on my mistakes."

Janice laughed nervously. "I don't know what you're talking about."

“I think you do. Sweetheart, you’re not fooling anyone but yourself. What happened between your father and me is in the past. I moved on and found happiness far beyond anything I ever could have imagined. I’m not saying you need a man in your life to make you happy, because of course you don’t, but you shouldn’t judge all men based on your father.”

“Mom, it’s easier said than done when I watched you suffer everyday. I’ve tried to get past it, but deep down, I’m afraid.”

“Of what, honey?”

“Afraid of losing myself completely to a man and allowing him to take over who I am and what I stand for. I don’t like being this way, always looking at every man suspiciously, wondering at his motives. I wish I could be carefree and flirt with men like most of my girlfriends do. Maybe something is wrong with me.”

“I don’t think so. You’re like me in more ways than you know. You’ll love only one, but when you find that love, it will be forever.”

“Are you saying you never loved Daddy?”

“I thought I did, but having experienced the real thing, I finally realized that I loved the security I believed he provided. You know that I was in more foster homes than I can count; when Eugene came along, I truly believed he was my knight in shining armor. He certainly did everything to make me feel I could never do better. Looking back, I think his leaving me was probably the best thing that happened to me, because I found something very important.”

“True love?”

“That, too, but most importantly, I found myself. I also realized that I don’t have to lose a part of who I am again in order to be in a relationship. It can happen for you as well, honey. If you find that special someone who’ll treat you like gold, don’t be afraid to give him your heart, because he’ll nurture and cherish that love, not trample it. Believe me, I have that with GianMarco, and you don’t have to look any further than his brothers to see how

much they love their women. The Grimaldi men are strong and powerful, but they love deeply, passionately, and possessively.”

Janice suddenly had a suspicion that her mother had hidden motives for telling her all this. “Did Jagger put you up to this little chat?” she demanded.

Her mother raised that “Who do you think you’re talking to?” brow.

“Sorry,” Janice mumbled. “Well, did he?”

“No. Why did you think he would?”

“Because ... oh, never mind.”

Maggie gave her a knowing smile. “You like him, don’t you? He’s definitely a hunk.”

“Mom! I don’t like him!”

“Of course you don’t, dear. But I will caution you: don’t toy with his affections. He is a Grimaldi, after all, and they’re used to getting what they want.”

Chapter Five

That one taste had not been enough. In fact, it only intensified his need for her. Jagger was fast losing control over his body; the heat would not go away. The chilling spells no longer worked, masturbation only made things worse, and he felt as if he was losing his mind. The ache had become too intense for him to bear.

Something had to be done. He had tried to be patient, to give her space, but it hadn't helped. Whenever he walked into a room, she stalked out. Janice had even left the house for a couple of days to stay with her brother and Bryan, his lover, only returning when Uncle Marco and Aunt Maggie had brought the baby home from the hospital.

The family was gathered in the living room. His papa and Uncle Romeo were arguing over a chess match, the children were playing some sort of video game, and the women were cooing over the baby while his Uncle Marco played cards with Dion and Bryan. Jagger, however, sat on the patio deck chair outside the house, brooding and thinking of ways to ease the pain that had taken hold of him.

“A penny for your thoughts.”

Jagger smiled upon hearing his father's voice. "Your chess game is over so soon? The way you and Uncle Romeo were going at it, I imagined the two of you would be playing for hours to come."

"Romeo cheats. Besides, is it a crime that I should want to spend a little time with my son?"

"Not at all. I welcome your company. In fact, it will provide me with a distraction."

"Jagger, look at me." Niccolo's voice was a soft command.

When he looked in his father's direction, the older vampire gasped.

"What is it, Papa?"

"You face and your eyes. Don't go anywhere. I'll return shortly." In less than a minute, Niccolo was back, GianMarco and Sasha in tow.

"My baby!" his mother cried in alarm. She rushed to Jagger's side and cradled his head against her breast. "You're burning up! Niccolo, do something!"

Jagger pulled away from her and stood. "There's nothing you can do, Mama. Nothing anyone can do."

"How bad is it, Marco?" his father asked.

"From the look of him, I'm surprised he's been able to control his urges for this long. I vaguely remember what it was like, most of the time I could barely think straight, but Dante later told me that when I'd gotten to this point, my mind was no longer my own." His uncle studied him closely. "What's probably sustained him so long is his wizard side. *Dio*, I wish Dante was here. He'd know what to do." There was pain in those words. Jagger's heart went out to his Uncle Marco, who seemed to be taking Uncle Dante's absence the hardest.

"You spoke to him last, Marco, when did he say he'd arrive?"

Jagger knew everyone wanted to know where his uncle was, but this was the first time the question had been openly asked.

Marco shrugged at his Niccolo. "Your guess is just as good as mine." The tightness in his voice said it all. The topic was no longer up for discussion.

"There's only one way to fix this. GianMarco, can't you speak to Janice?" Jagger's mother pleaded. "I know its wrong for me to ask, but look at my baby. He's in so much pain. I can feel it from where I stand."

"No, Mama. Don't. I will not have her come to me out of pity. If she does help, it has to be of her own free will."

"But you're suffering!"

"Then I'll suffer. I love her far too much to coerce her. My only option is to leave."

"You can't go anywhere looking like that. Your face is distorted and your eyes are off color. It won't be long before your incisors lengthen and won't retract."

Jagger laughed without humor at his uncle's words. "Then perhaps people will think I'm wearing a Halloween costume; it is nearly that time, after all. I can't stick around, Uncle GianMarco. Perhaps you'll let me borrow one of your vehicles so I can leave tonight."

"Of course, Jagger, although I'm sorry you have been brought to this."

"Why won't you speak to Janice? This is a family! Are we not supposed to help each other in our time of need?" Sasha's voice rose to near hysterics.

Niccolo pulled his mate into his arms and rocked her. "Sweetheart, I hurt for our son as well, but Marco is in a precarious situation. Janice is his stepdaughter and falls under his protection. His first duty lies with his wife and their immediate family unit, just as you and Jagger are my first priority. This has to be Jagger's decision. I wish he could stay, but having him and Janice in such close proximity will only spur him to *la morte dolci* faster than ever."

"And what will he do when he's in full *la morte dolci*? Are we just going to allow him to suffer needlessly?" The helpless look in his mother's eyes tore at Jagger. He wanted to reassure her that everything would be fine, but he couldn't.

"I'll figure something out, Mama. I could contact Uncle Blade; his powers are strong enough that he may be able to ease the pain I feel."

GianMarco shook his head. "Not even the most powerful wizard can hold off *la morte dolci*. You will suffer no matter what, but he might be able to prevent you from harming yourself or anyone else."

"Is it possible I will ... I mean, will my mind no longer be my own?"

"It is likely. Listen, I can talk to Janice, but I won't sway her one way or the other."

"No. I can't have you do that, uncle. I'll start packing right away and leave once everyone is in bed." Jagger embraced his sobbing mother. "It's okay, Mama. Things will work out, you'll see."

"How will everything be okay when it's possible I'll lose you? When I see you again, you might not recognize who I am. I've lost you once before -- I don't think I can bear it again." Sasha wept, wetting his shirt with her tears.

"Mama, please don't cry. You will never lose me here." Jagger pointed to her heart, then caught a faint movement from the corner of his eyes. Someone had been watching them from inside the house. Could it have been ...? No. His imagination was running rampant, which didn't bode well for his future mental state.

Jagger rocked his mother as she clung tightly to him. He met his father's gaze and saw sadness there. Suddenly, he felt like crying himself for what would never be.

* * * * *

The house was finally silent. Janice tried to gather up the courage she needed to fulfill her plan. "You can do this. It will just be one night." Taking a deep breath, she carefully opened her bedroom door, wincing when it made a loud creak. Closing it behind her, she tiptoed down the hallway to her destination. Not bothering to knock, she twisted the knob and slipped through the door into the dark room. In the shadows, Jagger was haphazardly

throwing what appeared to be last-minute items into an overnight bag; he was leaving just as he said he would.

His head shot up. She nearly lost her nerve when she found herself staring into glowing eyes. She couldn't make out his features but thought he was probably surprised to see her in his bedroom.

"What are you doing here?" he growled. Jagger's voice sounded deeper, gruffer, and more guttural. She could hear the pain in his words and tone.

"I think you know why I came."

"Do I? Look, Janice, it's not safe for you to be here and, frankly, I'm not in the mood for games."

"Who said I'm playing games? I want to help you."

"So it was you earlier. How much did you hear?"

"I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but when I passed the patio door, it was slightly open. I heard my name and couldn't help but listen to your conversation."

"So you're graciously offering your body to me?"

A lump that felt like the size of a golf ball formed in her throat. Her body did call to him. For days, she'd been avoiding him, trying not to remember the heady sensations she'd experienced in his arms. Janice desperately wanted to forget how his hands had felt on her body, how his mouth had devoured her pussy. But she couldn't.

Each night, she'd lain awake with carnal thoughts of the two of them. She hadn't been able to help wondering what might have happened had they gone further. Images of his large shaft sliding into her nearly made it impossible for her to think of anything else. Then to hear of his struggles had sent guilt crashing to her very core. But she had experienced a new emotion, too.

That she could drive him to such a state filled her with such a sense of empowerment that she felt high. This strong vampwiz wanted her to the point of madness. Knowing what

he was going through and hearing his sacrifice on her behalf had given Janice the courage to admit to herself at last that she wanted him, too.

He'd shown he could fulfill her desire; once wasn't nearly enough. "Yes," she finally answered.

He remained silent, the only sound his ragged breathing, deep and shallow. For a moment, she thought he wouldn't speak at all.

"Jagger?" She felt uncertain; she'd been so sure he'd jump at her offer, but he was acting as if he didn't want her.

"While I appreciate your willingness to surrender your delectable body, I'll have to decline."

"What?"

"I don't want or desire a little girl in my bed who thinks she's doing me a favor by coming to me. I need a willing woman who wants to be here."

She felt heat surface on her face. "I *am* here because I want to be."

"After ignoring me these past few days?"

"I had a lot of thinking to do."

"So now you're ready to be thoroughly fucked?"

Janice gulped. What had she gotten herself in to? "If-if that's what you want."

"Oh, you have no idea what I want. The question is, are you willing to give it to me?" Before she could respond, Jagger stood in front of her as if he'd teleported across the room. She took a step away from him, but Jagger followed until her back touched the door.

Janice tried not to tremble when his hand spanned her throat, his thumb grazing her pulse. "I'm here, aren't I?"

"Yes, you are, indeed. But you never answered my question. Will you let me do whatever I want to you?"

Janice nodded, her voice caught in her throat, her heart pounding rapidly.

“Will you let me finger your clit while my tongue slides in and out of your hot hole? What about if my tongue glides along the crack of that luscious ass of yours, tasting you there?”

She licked her lips. “I’ve never let anyone do that to me before but, yes, I’d let you do those things to me.” Just thinking about them sent shivers of anticipation up her spine.

“Will you let me fuck you until you can’t take anymore, even when you’ve already come over and over again?”

“Yes,” she whispered, her heart speeding up with each sinful image that popped into her head.

“What about letting me fuck your mouth? I can see it now, me sliding my cock between your soft lips while my fingers dig into your hair. Your lips would be wrapped around my erection nearly as tight as your pussy. I saw the way you looked at my body, and I know you want to taste me, too.”

“I do. Oh, God, I do.” Janice turned her head away, unable to meet those glowing eyes.

“And your ass? Will you let me fuck it, too? Because if you stay, I will. I want to be inside all your holes, with my fingers, my mouth, and my cock -- all over you.”

Janice stubborn streak appeared. How could she walk away when her panties were wet, her breasts tight, and her body on fire? “You’re not going to scare me into leaving, Jagger.”

With a snap of his fingers, the lights turned on. She bit down on her bottom lip to stop the scream forming in her throat from escaping.

“How about now, Janice? Do you still want me now when I look like this?” Jagger’s eyes were completely red, no pupils evident as though he were wearing novelty contact lenses. His eyebrows were raised in almost a caricature-like distortion, and his fangs were out and menacing. All this, coupled with his flared nostrils, reminded her of the very monster she’d been afraid of, but instead of fleeing, compassion filled her heart.

What he must have suffered and undergone touched her deeply. She reached out and caressed the side of his face. This was obviously not the reaction he'd expected given the baffled expression in his eyes.

"Why aren't you running away?"

"Because I did this to you. Because you hurt on my behalf. Let me make it better." Standing on the tip of her toes, she kissed him where his neck and shoulder met. The contact nearly burned her lips, but she didn't pull away. With trembling fingers, she started to unbutton his shirt.

"Janice," he growled. "This is your final warning. If you stay, I'm going to take you, and I won't be gentle."

"It's okay. I'm yours, however you want me." She opened his shirt to reveal the hair-roughened expanse of his chest, then pressed a kiss against the flat disk of his nipple.

"Janice."

She could tell he was struggling to hold on to his control, but she didn't want him to. His fists opened and closed. "Why suffer when you don't need to?" she whispered, then circled the now-taut peak with her tongue, his musky male flavor adding a tinge of piquancy to her taste buds.

"I don't want your pity, Janice."

"Does this feel like pity?" Boldly, she cupped her hand between his legs, giving the bulge she found there a light squeeze. With a barely surprised roar, Jagger grabbed her hand, yanking it from his body before he lifted her and strode the short distance to the bed. He dropped her in the center none too gently.

"You're damned right you've driven me to this, Janice, and you're going to get what you've been denying both of us." With each word, he tore at his clothing, exposing his chiseled body to her hungry gaze. "You'd better take off your clothes or they'll be nothing but confetti once I get my hands on them."

His warning sent her into action. Hurriedly, she pulled the nightshirt over her head. Janice felt another blush sweep her cheeks when she revealed her nakedness to him. Jagger looked slightly disappointed. “No panties? Pity. I was looking forward to ripping them off again.”

Janice had never been completely nude with anyone before and covered her breasts, feeling shy abruptly. Even the one time she’d had sex, her partner had merely removed her underwear and raised her skirt.

“Drop your hands, *milaya moya*. Perfection such as these should not be hidden in my presence.” She did as he said. Her breasts were small, but well formed, crowned with large, tight nipples that were so dark, they appeared black. She had such lovely skin, and he enjoyed touching her. He’d wanted her for so long, he could hardly believe he was finally going to have her.

Janice didn’t have a chance to react before he sprang onto the bed, covering her body with his. Jagger was hot, more so than any living thing should have been. Instead of kissing her mouth as she thought he would, he placed frantic kisses over her face and neck, then slid down her body.

She gasped when his incisors grazed her throat, breaking the skin, but it didn’t stop the delectable sensations forming throughout her body. His hands were everywhere, her breasts, stomach, thighs, and pussy. Janice squirmed beneath him, eager to for more than just kisses. She’d come to his room with every intention of offering the relief he needed, but she wanted this just as much as he did. Janice couldn’t believe she had fooled herself into believing she could stay away from him.

“Jagger, please,” she begged, not quite sure what she was asking for.

He spread her legs roughly; he’d told her he would, but it still surprised her. Despite the fact she’d gone out of her way to avoid him, Janice had come to learn Jagger was a good man. He played with the children, giving them piggyback rides, and seemed genuinely

interested in what they had to say. He was affectionate with his parents. It was apparent that he cared about all his family. And he had often brought a smile to her face in spite of herself. But this was not her gentle-but-insistent vampire. This Jagger was hungry -- and the only sustenance he appeared to want was her.

His fingers dug into her thighs as he rested his head between them. "Ah, I'll take that little girl comment back. This is most definitely a woman's cunt, so wet and ready to be licked, sucked, and fucked. Ready for my mouth and cock. Don't ever shave it." Lowering his head, he parted her labia with his tongue before clamping down on her clit.

"Oh, Jagger," she cried out before realizing how loud she'd been. She bit her lower lip, not wanting to wake the rest of the house. He suckled on the throbbing bundle of nerves, making her writhe uncontrollably beneath him. She gripped his shoulders, her nails biting into his hot flesh. When Jagger slid a finger into her, Janice thought she'd go insane.

Bucking her hips, she ground against him, unable to handle the torturous bliss of his mouth. Jagger continued to suckle, unheeding of her movements, slipping yet another finger into her slick channel. He twisted and thrust his digits into her with skilled precision.

"Jagger." She moaned his name as loudly as she dared.

He lifted his head then, eyes still blood red. "Don't be afraid to call out my name."

"But the others ..."

"Uncle Marco has recently soundproofed the bedrooms, so what we're doing can't be heard by human ears. But what do you think is going on in nearly every bedroom right now, Janice? At this very moment, my mama and papa are calling out each other's names in their passion for each other. Uncle Romeo and Christine are doing the same. Even your mother and Uncle Marco --"

"Stop. Don't say any more."

"It is the truth. We are a passionate lot. Give over to your desire for me. Scream my name as loudly as you want." Lowering his face between her legs again, he lapped at her

pussy with long, broad strokes, the actions sending torrents of pleasure throughout her sensitized body.

“Jagger!” she shrieked. “Oh, God, Jagger!”

Chapter Six

The more he tasted of her, the more Jagger wanted. No matter what he did, he couldn't get enough of Janice. The sweet cream of her cunt flowed freely, and he drank every bit that escaped from her wet channel. He had to be inside of her now, but Jagger had just enough sanity left to know that if he took her as he wanted, he'd hurt her.

Gliding up the length of her body, his mouth covered hers. She met the thrust of his tongue, hers joining his in a sensual dance as old as time. The blood lust within Jagger drove him to gently nip her tongue. She gasped, trying to pull it back, but his strong lips captured it, and he drew it further into his mouth.

Jagger wanted more of her blood. Releasing her tongue, he caught her lower lip.

"Jagger, what are you doing to me?"

He couldn't stop himself even if he wanted to. He bit and sucked, then licked. Unable to hold off any longer, he rolled onto his back, bringing Janice on top of him. "Straddle me, *milaya moya*."

She hesitated for only a moment, then did as she was told.

"You're going to ride my cock, and while my staff is inside your cunt, I want you to lean over while I feast on your nipples."

Janice shivered in reaction to his words; her lust-glazed eyes proved she wanted this as much as he did. She looked so beautiful hovering over him, her lips swollen from his kisses. Jagger was afraid he'd wake and this would all just be a dream.

"Take my cock in your hand."

She ran her tongue over his lips and wrapped slender fingers around his erection. The contact on his engorged flesh sent electric charges surging through him. He caught her by the waist, lifting her until her pussy was positioned over the helmet of his cock.

"Spread yourself for me with your other hand; open your cunt for my cock."

She looked uncertain for a moment. "You're so big. I don't know if I ..."

"You will take every inch of me. You are my woman, and you'll get used to my size, because I plan on partaking of your sweet pussy and tight ass as often as possible. Now, part yourself. This is what you wanted to do. Your cunt is already wet and ready for me."

Janice spread her labia. Only then did he lower her, congratulating himself on his rigid control. When his cock head made it inside her channel, it took everything in him not to spear right into her.

"Oh, God! It's-I've never been stretched like this before."

"Relax. Just let go, and feel me." He lowered her further, gritting his teeth with pleasure. Goddamn, she was incredibly tight.

Janice wiggled as if trying to adjust herself to him, and that was Jagger's undoing. He brought her down fully on his dick.

She let out an agonized scream. "Let me off!" She tried to move, but he held her firmly against him. Her pussy fit around him like a wet velvet glove.

"I can't." He groaned at the exquisite agony, knowing he couldn't move or he'd cause her further discomfort.

Tears appeared in her eyes. "It feel like you're tearing me apart."

“Relax, *milaya moya*. Your body is tense. Let it accustom itself to my cock. Yes ... that’s it. I promise I won’t move until you tell me otherwise, but please don’t make me wait too long. I burn for you, ache for you.”

She looked unsure.

“Trust me.” He lowered one hand to find the dewy pearl between her thighs. Janice inhaled sharply as his finger slid along her slit.

“Do you like this?”

She nodded.

“Good, because I like doing it to you. I love the way you’re so tight and slick for me. Your pussy took every inch of me, didn’t it?”

“Yes, but I didn’t think it would.” Her whisper was breathy.

“Yet it did. You should have believed me when I said your body was made exclusively for mine.” He stroked her throbbing clit with each word. “I’ve never seen such a tempting sight as your lovely dark body, so perfect in form just waiting for my kisses and caresses.”

Janice placed her hand against his chest, trembling violently. He knew she was turned on again. The very heat emanating from her pussy was enough to set them both on fire.

“Tell me how much you want this.”

“I do.”

“Say the words!” he roared, squeezing her clitoris with enough pressure to make her gasp, but not enough to cause pain.

“I want you. Please take me now. I need you, Jagger!”

“Tell me how much you want to be fucked. Tell me you love my cock in your pussy.”

“Fuck me, Jagger! Do it now! I don’t think I can stand it any longer; I need you.” She groaned almost as if she were the one in agony. He smiled then, knowing how sinister and smug he must appear. She turned her head away, looking slightly ashamed.

“Look at me, *milaya moya*.” Janice faced him until their eyes met once again. “We are doing nothing wrong. This is something we both want. Let me show you how good it can be between us.”

Holding her by the waist once more, Jagger raised her, her pussy sliding along his hardened shaft, causing them both to moan at the titillating sensation. Then he lifted his hips and thrust deeply into her, holding her still as he moved. This gave him a chance to study the expressions on her face. Her lips were slightly parted now and her eyes gleamed with passion.

She dug her fingernails into his chest, her breast jiggling back and forth with each thrust. “Oh, Jagger, this feels so good. I never thought I could be filled like this. I doubt any other man will ever measure up to you.”

At the mention of other men, a feral need to show Janice just who she belonged to took over. “There will be no other men after me!” And to underscore his point, he drove deeper, harder, and faster into her tight hole, branding her his. Janice’s cries of wanton abandonment greeted his ears.

His!

Janice was all his!

She belonged only to him!

Jagger shifted positions, sitting up so that they could now face each other. She wrapped her legs around his waist at his command. His hunger for her drove Jagger to the brink of madness. Leaning forward, he captured a hard nipple in his mouth, sucking and nibbling on it, savoring the heady flavor of her skin.

“Jagger!” She screamed, clawing at his back. “I’m going to come!”

Releasing the taut tip with a pop, he pumped harder than ever, his own peak near. “Don’t hold back. Don’t ever hold anything back from me.” Her breast looked far too tempting to not taste. He sank his teeth on the side of the plump flesh. Janice buried her face

into his neck, her fingers digging into his skin, and her pussy muscles clenching tighter around his member. His orgasm came with an earth-shattering jolt.

Janice reached her climax almost simultaneously, her body shaking and more delicious cream spilling from between her thighs. The coppery sweet flow of her blood in his mouth heightened the sensation of their climaxes. Lifting his mouth, Jagger felt his incisors retract and the heat he'd been suffering was abruptly gone. But his need for her had not lessened.

Lying on his back again, Jagger lifted Janice off his cum-soaked shaft and pulled her up the length of his body until her cunt rested just over his lips, their mingling juices dribbling from her pussy.

"Jagger no! We just --"

"Just fucked? Do you think the taste of you and me mixed so lovingly together disgusts me? No, *milaya moya*, this is one way my kind feeds, and I'm going to do it now, just like this."

Janice covered her face. "But it ..." Her words trailed off when he brought her pussy down on his mouth. Their mingled juices excited him. Loving her this way had been a fantasy of his since he'd first seen her. He shot his tongue inside her channel. Janice wiggled and squirmed, groaning.

"Jagger, you're driving me crazy." He knew it was true; her body told him so. Never had he been with someone so responsive to him. Jagger sucked and licked her until she writhed like a wild woman. He didn't stop until the warm gush of her desire filled his mouth again.

He drank her essence, making him stronger than ever before. Janice moaned and sighed, arching her back and offering even more of herself to him. Only when he had taken what he needed did he move her off his face and lay her on the bed.

Janice looked at him her eyes filled with wonder and an emotion he couldn't quite make out, although he hoped it was the one he wanted it to be. She touched his cheek. "Your face is back to normal," she whispered.

"You've helped me through the worst of my suffering, but don't think I'll let you get away so easily from me."

"I didn't know it could be like this. I believed I was incapable of experiencing the things I felt with you."

Jagger stroked the damp hair plastered to her forehead. "That should tell you we are meant to be together. Get some rest, *milaya moya*, because you're going to need it."

* * * * *

Janice was having the most delicious dream. She lay on the beach under the warmth of the sun, her body naked against its heated rays. Butterflies flitted across her face, tickling her skin, still slightly damp from a swim in the ocean. Her pussy tingled. Something nudged her thighs apart and heat invaded her body.

She opened her eyes to discover she hadn't been dreaming at all. The warmth she'd felt was Jagger's body on top of her, moving deep inside of her. She sighed at the decadent sensations surging through her. A lazy smile tugged the corners of her lips as she wrapped her arms around his neck, her hips lifting to meet his thrusts.

"Mmm, what an interesting way to wake up."

"I thought you'd never open your eyes. You sleep like the dead. I've been playing with your gorgeous body for what seems like hours."

"It couldn't have been that long. It's still dark out."

"Okay, maybe a few minutes, but every second without you is an eternity to me."

Janice felt a twinge in her heart. No one had ever said anything so touching to her before, but he wasn't supposed to penetrate anything but her body. She'd come to him with

the intention of easing his pain and had planned to walk away; she hadn't expected her feelings to get involved. But maybe her emotions had been caught the entire time, and she was only now realizing it.

Janice didn't want to care about him, but perhaps Jagger had been right all along. Maybe it had been inevitable they'd be together. From the moment she'd first met him, Janice had thought he'd been pushing her too hard, but that had been just an excuse to shy away from him. She must have recognized a potential soul mate in him and panicked.

His cock pulsed within her now, the hard wall of his chest crushing her breasts. No more words were needed as they ground, slid, and moved together. Janice's arms tightened around him when they both climbed the heights of ecstasy to their mutual satisfaction. Their mouths melded together; the kiss was hot, hungry and needy. She could still taste the two of them on his tongue.

Janice pressed closer to him. She wanted this man so much she didn't know how to handle it. When Jagger finally lifted his head, Janice could hardly catch her breath.

"Janice, I need you again."

She giggled at his lustiness. "Already? You want more?"

"You know a few times with you will simply not do for me. Remember when I said I wanted your ass?"

She shuddered, nervousness getting the better of her. "I ..."

Amber eyes twinkled with amusement. "Weren't you the one who promised I could have you any way I wanted? You are many things, *milaya moya*, but I never thought a coward was one of them. Who would have thought a little ass play would frighten you so."

"Coward! Me? I am not a coward. Wouldn't any woman be nervous at the threat of your humongous penis?"

"My size is not so great."

Was he kidding? “According to whom? The Jolly Green Giant? That thing should have its own ZIP code.”

Jagger chuckled. “You had no problem riding it earlier.”

“After a lot of adjusting.”

“What happened to my brave little spitfire? Are you going to go back on your word?”

“I didn’t say that, either.”

“Prove it.”

She’d never been one to turn down a challenge. Janice’s eyes narrowed slightly with determination. “How do you want me?”

“On your hands and knees.” Jagger rolled away from her, giving her the opportunity to move into the position he wanted her. He shifted behind her, grasping her hips, and she trembled with fear, thinking she must be crazy to go through with this. Never in a million years would Janice have thought she’d be having anal sex, but she wasn’t foolish enough to believe curiosity didn’t play a part in this. He’d made her feel good in so many other ways, why not this one?

“Janice, for this to be an enjoyable experience for you, you’ll need to completely relax,” he commanded in an soft whisper.

She took deep breaths, trying to do exactly that. “Don’t you need ... I mean, you will use lube, won’t you?”

“Yes, only the best kind.” He reached between her legs and eased two fingers inside her pussy. Janice quivered as an instant surge of passion sped through her. Jagger slid those digits in and out of her several strokes, then pulled them out.

Her gently spread her cheeks and rubbed those dew-slicked fingers across her puckered hole. Janice resisted the urge to flinch, or at the very least clench her buttocks tight. Jagger soothed her, whispering in Russian. His ministrations began to elicit the heat she’d felt earlier.

She cried out when his fingers slipped past her tight ring.

"Easy, my love. Easy."

"I'm not sure if I like this," she said honestly when he was knuckle deep.

"Give it a chance; it's all I ask."

Janice relaxed as best as she could, allowing him to finger her ass. Jagger took things slow. At last, she began to feel the old familiar stirrings of lust. He must have hit a certain spot, because she shuddered with delight.

"That's it, my love," he crooned encouragingly.

She soon found herself pushing against his steadily moving digits.

Jagger leaned over and kissed the nape of her neck. "Do you like this?"

"Yes."

"Are you ready for my cock?"

"Mmm, as ready as I'm going to get." She bit her lip, preparing herself for his invasion. Jagger removed his fingers and replaced it with the tip of his dick. "Oh, my God!" she squeaked, more from surprise than pain. She gnawed the inside of her mouth when his massive cock gradually slid into her. He stilled, and she knew it was for her benefit. She appreciated his thoughtfulness. It took a moment before the discomfort vanished. Janice shifted against him, taking more of his length.

Jagger groaned, grasping her hips. "Don't move unless you mean it."

"I do." By now, waves of carnal gratification like electric currents dipped through her entire being. He pushed balls deep into her ass. Janice yielded to him completely, aroused by the newness of these sensations. Ecstasy licked her nerve endings.

"So round and big; this ass was made for fucking." His palm slapped onto one tender butt cheek.

"Ow!" She certainly hadn't expected that. "You're asking for trouble, buddy."

“Is it not my right to do what I wish with this ass?”

She squealed, not sure if she should be upset or laugh at him. “Your ass?”

“Yes, mine.”

“Just as I suppose your cock belongs to me?”

“Of course. We belong to each other. God, you’re so incredibly delicious. I’m so close to coming I don’t know if I can hold on.”

Janice’s fingers clutched the sheets, her arms holding her braced as Jagger pounded into her, his balls slapping against the seat of her ass. He pumped harder, creating an erotic hurt like nothing she’d thought she could possibly enjoy, but she did. She loved it, loved the feel of his cock in her ass.

Jagger reached around and rubbed her clit, intensifying the already explosive yearning within, then howled his climax moments later, his seed shooting into her tight bottom. When her orgasm hit soon after, Janice collapsed, unable to endure such feverish sensations any longer. Jagger followed her down, sliding his dick from her rear and pulling Janice into his arms. He kissed her shoulder.

“Now that wasn’t so bad was it, *milaya moya?*”

Janice had to admit it hadn’t been. She suspected that after tonight, life would never be the same.

Chapter Seven

Adonis pushed deeper into Nya's snug cunt. He could fuck her a million times, but it would never be enough. His need for her consumed him when she wasn't around. Her near-midnight dark skin against the paleness of his created a sensual contrast he found utterly erotic. But she was a quiet lover, gasping and moaning softly. He knew she pretended not to want him, but her wet pussy told him otherwise. One day he'd have her screams.

His cum shot into her slick channel, filling it before he fell on top of her. He captured her plump bottom lip between his teeth, nibbling none too gently. When Nya attempted to turned her head away, he caught her chin and held it firmly.

"Don't look away from me, my beauty. You've denied me your presence for too long. You have been very naughty lately, haven't you?"

She averted her eyes, lips firming to one thin line. He hated when she wouldn't give her all to him. Her secrets drove him insane, and he didn't like it one bit.

"Look at me, Nya," he commanded gruffly.

Seemingly reluctant, she finally met his gaze, her expression unreadable.

"I wonder what you hide behind those lovely brown eyes."

"My thoughts are my own. Please get off me."

Adonis narrowed his eyes. "Perhaps it doesn't suit me to do so. Besides, I still have need of you. You've been away longer than expected. Where did you go?" He knew very well where she'd been, but for once he wanted to hear it from her lips. She'd be quite surprised if she knew he was aware of where she was at all times.

"I ... I had something I needed to take care of."

"What?" he demanded again, losing his patience with her secretiveness.

"Nothing important."

"That nothing important being your friend, Christine?"

Her eyes widened. Adonis smiled with satisfaction. Other than in bed, it wasn't often he could wring a reaction from her. "You didn't think I knew, did you? I grew tired of your disappearing and coming and going as you please, so I had you followed."

"Leave Christine out of this. Your vendetta does not lie with her." Nya actually sounded concerned. His heartless fem actually did have feelings it seemed. How touching.

"My vendetta, as you so quaintly put it, is with the entire Grimaldi family. Hasn't she just recently joined with Romeo? The very one who foiled my plan with the Council? I plan to pay my little brother back for that one. And it's my understanding they have two children. How darling." He laughed, taunting her with his knowledge.

Nya wiggled from beneath him -- only because he allowed it. "Don't you dare harm them. They have nothing to do with any of this."

"And what do you propose to do about it? Who's going to stop me? Certainly not you, my beautiful traitor."

Nya hopped off the bed and grabbed her clothes, hurriedly throwing them on.

"Don't think warning her will do you any good, because there's nothing that can stop what I'll do next."

She paused in the midst of zipping up her black leather pants. Her tight black T-shirt, two sizes too small, emphasized her braless breasts. His cock rose once again. He was

tempted to pull her back on the bed and fuck her senseless, but decided he'd have plenty of time later.

"What are you planning to do?"

"Why do you want to know, Nya? So you can run and tell my brother of my plans? I think not. You think you're safe with Giovanni, but I'm always one step ahead of him and my younger brothers. Watch your step, Nya. My desire for you will not prevent the repercussions you'll suffer if you continue to defy me by going to him. The freedom you think you have is only what I've granted you. Make no mistake about it: I made you, and I can just as easily destroy you."

"You are twisted."

"I am what they've turned me into, but I at least know which side I'm one. Whose side are you on?"

She glared at him briefly and, for a second, he almost felt hate emanating from her. Adonis shook his head with a smile. She could hate him all she wanted, but Nya would soon realize his true power.

"Mine," she said simply. She turned to leave.

"Where are you going?" he demanded harshly.

"Out."

"When will you be back?"

"Maybe I won't be."

"Oh, you'll be back, or I'll track you down and drag you back. Don't stay away so long this time."

She didn't acknowledge him as she left, slamming the door on her way out. Adonis chuckled to himself. There was so much fire in her. In the nearly two hundred centuries since he'd found her, Nya had never bored him like many women had in his lifetime. It was

one of the reasons he allowed her so much leeway, but there was only so far he'd let her to go.

Nya probably believed she was the one in control, but she'd soon fall in line. A smiled touched his lips. She likely wouldn't heed his warning about the younger Grimaldis and would try to warn Giovanni, but it wouldn't do any good. He chuckled. She could warn them all she pleased because it suited him for her to do so. That way, when his plan was completely implemented, they'd wonder what the hell had happened. He'd waited too long for the perfect revenge, but now the time had come.

He'd ruin all their love, and just when they wished they'd never been born, he'd destroy them. Each and every one of them.

He laughed to himself as he picked up the bedside phone and called one of his contacts. "Ulm, she's left the house. Follow her and don't let her out of your sight unless you want to meet your death -- I promise it won't be swift or merciful." He hung up.

It was time.

* * * * *

Jagger rested his head on Janice's lap as she absently stroked his hair, feeling utterly content for the first time in a while. The two of them had volunteered to take Jamal and Adrienne to the park for a picnic lunch. Still, he could tell something was on her mind; she'd been silent for most of the day, letting everyone else do the talking.

"What's wrong, sweetheart?"

"Everyone knows what happened between us. When Mom looked at me with that smug grin, I wanted the floor to swallow me."

"Janice, what we did was natural. No one thinks badly of us. You are my bloodmate. We would have eventually made love even without *la morte dolci*."

“But under my mother’s roof? My God. If anyone had told me that I’d do that, I would have called them a liar. All the noise we made could have woke the dead, soundproofing or no soundproofing.”

“Does it really make you uncomfortable?”

“A little. I know it’s probably not a big deal for vampires, but I wasn’t raised like this.”

Jagger suspected there was something bothering her that was entirely different from what she’d just said, but instead of probing further, he let it go for now and lifted his head to see what the children were up to. Jamal was pushing his little sister on the swings. Adrienne yelled with glee, pumping her little legs and trying to go higher. The closeness they displayed toward the other was obvious.

Jagger smiled at the scene. “Aren’t those two adorable?”

“Yes. They’re good kids. It will be interesting to see what it’s like for them growing up with Romeo as a father.” Janice giggled for the first time that day.

“Ah, there is that smile I’ve been looking for. You like children?”

“I love them. Who doesn’t?”

“You’d be surprised. One day, we’ll have a few of our own, but of course I’d first have to bring you over.”

“Children? Bring me over? What are you talking about?”

“I’d have to turn you, make you a vampire, before you’ll be able to carry a child of mine to term.”

“Who said I was having children with you?”

Jagger sat up quickly with a frown. “You just said you like children.”

“But I never said anything about having them with you, and certainly nothing about being a vampire.”

“Did you really think I’d allow you to remain human, knowing I’ll outlive you? I don’t think so.” He didn’t like how this conversation was going.

“What does it matter? Nothing is forever. Relationships dissolve all the time.” So this was what she’d been keeping from him. She was having second thoughts about their being together. Janice could think about it all she wanted, but he’d be damned if he’d let her undermine what they had.

“Maybe others do, but ours certainly will not.”

“Jagger, can we please not get into this?”

“Were they all lies last night when you said you cared for me?”

“No. I do care, but I can’t do this vampire thing and children. Well, I’d like to have some kids eventually, but you’re moving way too fast. Who knows what will happen between us?”

“I do. We will be together forever. I wish you’d stop doubting us. Why are you so afraid?”

“I don’t want to talk about it. Can we change the subject?”

“No. We damned well can’t. We’re going to have it all out.” When she attempted to stand he grabbed her by the arms and pulled her back down.

“What is it you want from me?”

“I want everything from you. Not just your body when you feel like giving it to me, but your heart as well. Why won’t your trust in my love for you?”

Tears sprang into her eyes, and she tried to twist away. “Don’t do this to me.”

“I must. I have to know why you’re already regretting what’s between us.”

“Because you’ll eventually hurt me!” Her outburst opened the floodgate to her tears. “Love dies. I know it does. Why can’t you just be happy for us to have sex?”

“Because if I only wanted sex, I could get it from someone else. I may not have lived as long as my father and uncles, but I know what I feel, and this is real. I think you know it, too, but you won’t admit it. Tell me why. Please.”

“It’s my parents,” she sobbed. “I know I shouldn’t let what happened between them distort how I look at relationships, but I can’t help it.”

He pulled her shaking body against his as she revealed the story of how a little girl had watched helplessly as her mother suffered the humiliation of her father’s countless affairs and verbal abuse. She’d somehow blamed herself, and it had eventually warped her view of all relationships. Her childhood certainly explained a lot.

“*Milaya moya*, you have to stop blaming yourself for what happened in the past. Your parents are not you and me. Look at your mother now. She’s happy.”

Janice sniffed. “I know, I see that, but that’s just it. I can’t help thinking in the back of my mind that something terribly wrong will happen. Mom gave up her hopes and dreams to be with my father. I have hope and dreams, too, and never expected to want to settle down with anyone so soon. I’m only twenty-two. I still have a year of grad school, and then I’ll work on my doctorate. I want to be a psychologist, see the world, look at the view from the tallest building on earth. It seems like you want to take, take, take, and I’m the one who’s supposed to be doing all the giving.”

Jagger captured her face in his hands. “That isn’t true, Janice. Love requires sacrifices and compromises on both sides. What makes you think you couldn’t still do those things together?”

She looked surprised. “You mean you wouldn’t object to my continuing my education?”

“Of course not. I am your biggest supporter. If you want to finish school in Atlanta, we can get a place down there together.” He shook her gently. “Sweetheart, I’m not asking you

to give up your dreams, only to allow me to be a part of them and share them with you. But I admit there's something I want from you first."

"What?" The suspicious look in her eyes returned.

"For once, I'd like you to be honest with me. Do you love me?"

She looked away as she wiped her face.

"Janice?"

She turned to look at him again, smiling. "Yes, I do. I think I felt it when I met you, but I didn't understand then. All I knew was how frightened I was of you. Now I know why."

"Because you love me?"

She nodded.

Jagger felt like shouting his joy to the world. "Believe it or not, I was scared, too. Love is new for me as well."

Janice snorted with apparent disbelief. "You didn't seem scared. You were relentless."

"I had to be. I wanted you very badly, and it made me more aggressive than I should have been. I know I should have taken things more slowly."

"I think you did the right thing, though. You never gave up on me, and if you hadn't persisted, I'd still be fighting. But ..."

"But what?"

"This vampire thing, I don't know if I can take that step."

Jagger sighed. Bringing Janice over as quickly as possible would have been ideal, but she was still so young. There was plenty of time. "Okay. I'm willing to make this concession to you for now; however, you must meet me halfway. Eventually, it will happen. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"There's something else I would like from you."

She lifted a brow. "And what would that be?"

"Tell me you love me again. I need to hear you say the words."

"I love you, Jagger, even if you're a white, bloodsucking wizard." She grinned at him.

Jagger chuckled. He loved this woman so much. "I see your love for me hasn't changed your sense of humor. You see, *milaya moya*, loving me doesn't have to change who you are. This can work. I promise I'll spend the rest of my day making you happy."

He cupped her cheek and brought their mouths together. This kiss was infinitely sweeter than any they'd shared before, because this time their hearts were fully engaged.

The happiness he'd thought he'd never find was finally his. Jagger pressed Janice down onto the picnic blanket, his cock straining against his jeans. In the back of his mind, he knew they were in a public place, but whenever Janice was in his arms, he couldn't think properly. He cupped her breasts in his palms, his thumbs grazing her nipples till they became hardened peaks.

Janice wrapped her arms around him with a groan, smiling widely. "Mmm, we shouldn't be doing this, but I can't help myself."

"Nor can I. Wait until we get home. There's a bed with our names just waiting for us."

"Mom and Dad do that a lot. They say it's because they love each other. Do you two love each other?"

Jagger looked up to see Jamal and Adrienne standing over them. Janice pulled away from him, a sheepish expression on her face. He refused to let go of her hand, however.

To his surprise, it was Janice who answered the question. "Yes, we're in love."

"Are you going to get married?" Jamal questioned as if he were the Gestapo.

Janice smiled vaguely. "Not yet, but maybe one day."

Jagger squeezed her hand reassuringly, liking the sound of that. Progress had definitely been made.

The little boy crinkled his nose in disgust. “Well, I’m not getting married. Girls have cooties, and I don’t want no part of that.”

Janice burst out into laughter, Jagger joined her, even though he had no idea what cooties were. It sounded funny, though.

Jamal didn’t look amused. “Adrienne has to use the bathroom.”

Janice rose, sliding her hand out of Jagger’s. “I’ll take her.” She held the little girl by the hand and led her to the public stalls.

“Jamal, why don’t you have a seat with me until the women get back. In the meantime, you can explain to me what cooties are.”

Jamal sat down, reached into the picnic basket, and picked out a handful of grapes. “Everyone knows what cooties are. Don’t they have cooties in Russia?”

“Obviously not.”

“Well, maybe that won’t be a bad place for me to live. My dad is going to take me and Adrienne to Italy. I’ll ask him to take us to Russia, too.”

“You’ll like it. Tell him to take you to Red Square.” Jagger watched as the boy steadily munched on the grapes. “You never did tell me what cooties are.”

“Oh. They’re girl germs,” Jamal said gravely. “No one really knows what they look like because they’re invisible, but I think they look like ticks. Bobby at school told me that if you get them, your hair falls out or something. Then you itch like crazy. I’m safe though, because I got my cootie shots and so has Adrienne.”

Jagger was trying desperately to hold in his laughter. “Well, I can assure you that Janice does not have these cooties you speak of.”

“I’m glad. I like her.”

“I like her, too.”

“Then you should marry her. A real gentleman doesn’t kiss ladies like that unless he’s gonna marry her.”

Jagger raised his brow. This was obviously not a little boy; he was a grown man shrunken down to child form.

“And where did you learn this?”

“I saw it on TV.”

“Well, I do intend to marry Janice. I love her very much.”

Jamal looked like he was thinking it over, then nodded. “I guess that’s okay then.”

And Jagger believed it. Everything would be okay from now on.

Chapter Eight

Maggie had decided to throw a party. GianMarco’s partner, Oliver, had shown up, and Maggie’s friend, Montana, was also here. GianMarco knew his mate was up to another one of her matchmaking schemes, and although he had to admit that Oliver seemed quite smitten with the outspoken Montana, how things went between them remained to be seen.

This was the last night the entire family would be together. Everyone would be going their separate ways in the morning. Niccolo and Sasha were headed back to L.A. sans Jagger. Romeo and his family were going back to Boston to tie up loose ends before they returned to go house-hunting in the area.

Jagger was sticking around for a few more days, then he was going back to Atlanta with Janice. Niccolo had a club in that area and Jagger was going to manage it while he found a house for him and Janice. Indeed, the fact that the two of them had settled their differences had been the biggest surprise to GianMarco.

Since the night after Jagger had nearly succumbed to *la morte dolci*, his nephew and stepdaughter couldn’t seem to keep their hands off each other. He was relieved Jagger was over his suffering; having experienced it himself, he wouldn’t have wished it on his worst enemy. GianMarco was equally happy his stepdaughter had finally stopped fighting her

attraction to his nephew. He'd always suspected she reciprocated Jagger's feelings, but hadn't thought it was his place to bring it up.

As for his mate and child, Maggie was radiant as ever, and he adored his new baby. Everything was perfect, except Dante wasn't here. GianMarco hadn't heard from his brother and it tore him up inside.

"Is everything okay?" His wife came from behind him, carrying Gianna.

GianMarco smiled at his two favorite girls. He was quite pleased about having a daughter and loved every hair on her little head -- and didn't care who knew it. He'd always remember his little boy, but having his *bambina* helped ease the pain a little.

"Here, let me hold her. She's wants her papa, don't you, Gia?"

Maggie carefully handed her over. "She's been fidgeting all day. I've fed her and just changed her diaper, but I don't know why she's so restless."

"Probably from all the stimulation around her." GianMarco kissed Gianna's curly hair and stroked her back. She gurgled. "See. I told you she needs her papa."

Maggie chuckled, patting his shoulder. "Seems like you're her favorite tonight. She only wants Mommy when she's hungry."

"Well, you've heard the expressions, 'mama's boy' and 'daddy's girl.' When we have another child, we'll probably have a son, but Gia's all mine."

Maggie raised a brow. "Well, I guess you can change her diaper when she does number two."

GianMarco lifted his daughter in the air, contorting his face for the baby. "I don't mind. I'll cherish every second with her. They grow up so fast."

Maggie rested her head against his back. "I miss him, too," she said softly, seemingly at random.

"Yes, well, I suppose he had his reasons for not being here, but wherever he is, I hope he's happy."

"He is. He's very happy, and he's very sorry for not coming sooner."

GianMarco and Maggie whirled around to see the eldest Grimaldi brother.

"Dante!" Maggie exclaimed, throwing herself into his arms. Dante whirled her around and gave her a light kiss on the lips.

"You look lovely as always." He placed her back on the floor. "Congratulations on your new arrival."

"Thank you." She beamed at him.

Dante turned to GianMarco. "I suppose this gorgeous *bambina* is my niece?"

GianMarco's first impulse was to demand where the hell his brother had been, but he was so happy to see him that he bit the question back. The urge to brag about Gianna took over instead. "Yes, she is beautiful. Would you like to hold her?"

Cobalt eyes twinkled with longing. "May I?"

"Gia, this is your Uncle Dante."

"What a day. I got to meet a new sharp-as-a-tack nephew and two precious nieces. Gia is definitely a beauty, Marco. Just like her mother." Dante held the cooing baby against him.

"I'm going to see to the other guests." Maggie smiled at him again before leaving the two men with the baby.

"I'm sorry for staying away, but I had to get my head together. There were --"

"Dante, you don't have to explain yourself to me. I'm just glad you're finally here. You seem rested."

"I am. You know I stayed at Paris's house in the Hamptons; Persephone and her friend, Isis, entertained me."

GianMarco sensed Dante was holding something back, but he figured his brother would tell him when he was ready. "I'm glad your time was relaxing."

“Actually, I ended up having quite an adventure with some Hunters. Seems Gage is back. Once we deal with this *il Diavolo, il Demonio* mess, we may have to look into the situation. I’ve sent some agents out to investigate further.”

“This sounds serious. Are the Kyriakises all right?”

“For now, but I believe they’ll have some rough times ahead, similar to what we’re going through now.” Dante looked down at the baby again. “She’s asleep.”

“Here, let me take her.”

Dante transferred Gianna into her father’s arms. “Congratulations, again.” He took a deep breath, then looked into his brother’s eyes. “I’m very happy for you and want you to know I’m sorry for how I acted. While I was away, I realized what I felt for Maggie was infatuation, pure and simple. She touched a part of me I thought had died, and I mistook it for love. I obsessed over it until it drove a wedge between us. I never want anything to do so again. I love you, Marco, and I promise, no matter what happens, we’ll work out our difference before I act like a jackass again.”

“I appreciate that very much. Of course you’re forgiven. We’re brothers. Nothing will change that.”

“Thank you. That means a lot to me. I wouldn’t have come between you and Maggie, you know.”

“I know. I’m just glad to have you back. Speaking of *il Diavolo*, have you heard anything on that front?”

“No, and it’s worrying the hell out of me. I have a bad feeling about this. We’re going to have to be very careful.”

GianMarco’s grip tightened on his daughter. Unfortunately, he had the same foreboding.

* * * * *

"Can this all really be happening? I mean, is it really true?" Janice wrapped her arms around Jagger's waist when he walked into her bedroom and shut the door.

"It's true, but I'm wondering if I should be the one asking that. I'm the one who feels like he's in the middle of a dream." Jagger's hands slid down her back and cupped her bottom in his hand, then squeezed. Instant arousal tingled between her legs.

She kissed his jaw, a feeling of happiness she'd never felt before soaring within her. "Are you sure you'll be okay moving to Atlanta with me? It will only be for a year till I finish school. Then I'll apply to one closer to my mom so we'll be around the family."

"Milaya moya, I'll go wherever you lead."

"I love you, Jagger. So much, but I'm still afraid this won't last."

"Well, whenever you think such a thing, just remember this: I wanted you when you were acting like a horrible brat, so if I didn't run then, I certainly won't leave you now."

She slapped him playfully on the shoulder. "I was not a brat. I should be offended by that remark, buddy."

"Oh, you know you were a brat. There's no use denying it. Even Uncle Romeo calls you that."

She sighed in mock exasperation. "Maybe I was a little difficult," she conceded.

"A little?" He quirked his lips.

"Okay, I was more than a bit difficult, but I'm here now, and I'm so in love with you, Nicolai Jagger Romanov-Grimaldi, that I don't know what to do with myself."

He grinned that devilish grin of his. "You might not know what to do with yourself, but I certainly do."

"Oh? And what's that?"

"I'm going to make love to you." Without preamble, he began to unbutton her shirt, placing kisses against her skin as he unfastened each button. Janice was suddenly flooded

with a burning desire as well. Her hands fumbled with his clothes. She wanted to feel his naked flesh against hers.

“You’re so beautiful,” he groaned when their clothes had been discarded. He lifted her into his arms and took her to bed.

Gently, Jagger covered her with his body. Love shone within the depths of his amber eyes. Janice’s heart was so filled with emotion for him, she could barely contain it all.

She opened herself for him, ready to take each inch of his delicious cock. She sighed with relief as he slid his hard shaft into her. Lifting her hips to take him deeper into her hot box, she whispered, “I love you, so much, Jagger. I don’t know why I waited so long to admit it.”

“I understand, my darling. Sometimes we’re afraid to listen to our hearts, and you hadn’t had a shining example of what love is.” Jagger slowly pulled out, then slid back into her. The moment was so tender, tears swam in her eyes.

“Please kiss me.” She cupped the back of his head, pulling it down until their lips touched. Their tongues met, twining and dancing in a gentle, explorative demonstration of their love for each other. Her nipples ached deliciously as they rubbed against his chest hair, the friction sending scorching balls of fire through her system.

“Janice, *ya tak lyubyu tebya*. I love you very much.”

“I love you, too.” She clung to him, their bodies moving and grinding together. Her heart felt as if it would overflow with love for him. No matter what happened in the future between them, she would always have this moment. She’d trust in him and their love.

When her climax came, she screamed out her release. “Jagger! love you!”

“And I, you, *milaya moya*.” When he peaked, her pussy muscles tightened around his cock, milking him of every drop he had within him. Finally, he rested his head within the crook of her neck.

Janice ran her fingers along the along his spine. “Jagger?”

“Yes?”

“Remember when you came to my school, you said something to me in Russian? You told me you’d tell me when the time was right. Is the time right, yet?”

“Most definitely. I said, ‘When I first met you, for the first time, I understood it’s forever.’”

And she believed him.

%%Epilogue

Janice woke with a smile. Her body still felt the effects of Jagger’s lovemaking from the night before. She reached out for him, but he wasn’t there. Instead, she encountered something wet. Her eyes slowly opened. Bringing her hand to her line of vision, she let out a piercing scream. Her hand was covered in blood!

Sitting up, she looked around the room to see blood not only saturating the bed, but it was also spread on the carpets and smeared on the walls. Was this some kind of crazy nightmare?

She slid out of bed and grabbed her robe, miraculously blood free, from the foot of the bed. The sun was just starting to rise, so she wasn’t sure if anyone else was up. They would be soon enough.

Janice sprinted through the halls and banged on every bedroom door in the house, shouting frantically. Dante was the first one out of the bed. His eyes widened when he saw the blood on her hands.

“What’s happened?”

“I don’t know. Jagger wasn’t in bed when I woke and the room is covered in blood. I think it’s his.” Tears ran down her face. This couldn’t be happening.

Niccolo whirled her around to face him, face more pale than usual. “What’s happened to my son?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered.

Sasha raced to the bedroom where Janice and Jagger had spent the night. “My baby!”

Another scream filled the house, followed quickly by another. The men took off to investigate, Janice on their tails. She looked into a bedroom to see Romeo and Christine tearing the room apart. They looked as panicked as the others.

“Jamal isn’t here.” Romeo said as he ran out of the room. “I’m going to check Adrienne’s room.”

Janice had a sinking feeling. Jagger was missing, and now Jamal and possibly Adrienne. She gasped. Mom!

Janice ran to the nursery to see her mother lying in a heap, sobbing in hysterics. GianMarco had lost all color and looked to be in shock.

“Not again. Not again,” he muttered over and over again.

“Mom?” Janice was too scared to check the crib. She slowly moved toward it and sucked in a breath when she looked in. Only a crumpled bloody blanket lay there.

She passed out.

* * * * *

Dante tore through the house searching for his nieces and nephews even though he had an awful feeling they were no longer there. He ran outside to seek out any clues he could find. There had to be something.

This was his fault. He shouldn’t have stayed away from his family for so long. He should have been diligently working to track Adonis down. Instead, he’d allowed this to happen. Because of him, the children were missing and possibly dead. Hadn’t his brothers suffered enough without this? How had the rogues gotten into the house? Though the rooms were soundproofed, surely someone would have heard the children being taken? And judging by the quantity of blood in Jagger’s room, why hadn’t Janice woken up?

This travesty had Adonis written all over it. Dante knew if the children didn't make it, his brothers would never recover.

This was the final straw. They'd fucked with the Grimaldis for the last time.

It was time the rogues felt the full weight of his wrath.

~ * ~

Eve Vaughn

Eve Vaughn enjoys writing above all else. She began writing short stories to amuse herself since she could form letters. Mischievous as a child, she lost her television privileges quite a bit and found writing to be her outlet. Besides writing, Eve likes reading, baking, volunteering, traveling, and spending time with her family. She currently resides in the Philadelphia area with her husband and turtle.

Eve loves hearing from her fans so feel free to contact her at EveVaughn10@aol.com or join her yahoo group at evevaughnsbooks@yahoo.com.