

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



MARLY CHANCE

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Been There, Bit That

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# ***BEEN THERE, BIT THAT***

**Marly Chance**

## *Dedication*

For my husband, JD. Thanks for the greatest Christmas present ever—our son. Thanks for getting up early again and again with the baby so that I could write this story—even though you were exhausted, too. Thanks for the hundreds of ways that show your love. Without your support and insightful suggestions, I couldn't have written this book. Sometimes in life truth is even better than fiction. You have been and always will be my greatest romantic hero. I love you.

A special thank you to Mom and Dad for their constant love and support.

And I'd like to thank all of the readers who have bought any of my books. You've given me a chance to share my imagination with you. I'm truly honored and I'd like to thank you from the bottom of my heart.

## *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

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### *Author Note*

I'm supposed to note something in this space? For real? Oh geez. Well, I'd like to note that this work is entirely fictional and not meant to be taken literally or to do anything at all other than entertain. All stunts were performed by trained professional vampires and fairies. Don't try this stuff at home, folks.

The story contains frank and explicit language, sexual situations, and mild violence.

That reminds me. I've always wanted to name two male characters "Frank" and "Explicit". And hey, the heroine could be named Anne. Major ménage à trois story potential there. It could work, I tell you.

Oops. That loud scream of total frustration you have ringing in your ears is from my fantastic and currently horrified editor, Nick Conrad. Pray for him. But I digress. Where was I? Oh, the note. Right. So please note that I hope you like this story and that you have fun. Best of luck to you in love and life.

~Marly

## Chapter One

*Been there, bit that. Have the scars to prove it. Geez. Vampires. They never play nice.* Unlike what all the books and movies depicted, real modern-day vampires were a whole lot closer to bloodsucking mobster families than some undead, ghoulish Draculas flitting around like bats. Sure, vampires could be cool in a *Sopranos* sort of way, but to Tamara, the reality was pretty harsh too. For one thing, modern vamps were more likely to *use* a bat on somebody than to turn into one. For another thing, “dangerous and surprising situations” occurred with alarming regularity.

Like the one she was in now. She sure couldn’t see a happy ending in her future. Tightening her hand on her glass of wine, Tamara took a quick swallow to stall and then said, “And here I thought that romance was dead. Explain to me again about how I’m supposed to engage in a sex threesome for the good of my country and my fellow vamps...because...I think I missed that part.”

Cheryl Turner, the greatly feared and respected head of the high council for over thirty years, regarded her with cold eyes. “Tamara, this is no time for your absurd sense of humor. The situation is serious.”

Tamara brushed aside the automatic irritation she felt at the familiar insult and set the glass down on the coffee table. She glared at the two male vamps seated across from her and challenged them, “You guys are in agreement on this?”

Dominic Garcione tapped one finger on the arm of the sofa but his lips curved in the slightest hint of a smile. “Of course.”

He looked so calm, so controlled. That was the problem with Dominic. He was the epitome of the self-contained, enigmatic vampire. He was the head of the Garcione vampire family of New York—very wealthy, very powerful and very Italian. Wearing

that black designer suit with his dark hair and dark eyes made him look like he could have stepped straight out of a mob movie.

But Tamara knew he was no criminal. He was far deadlier than any mobster had ever imagined. And the fact that he was every woman's darkest sexual fantasy didn't do much for her nerves at the moment either. She was going to have sex with this guy? *Not*. They were uneasy old college friends at best. He irritated her to no end. With the exception of one memorable occasion she was absolutely not going to think about, she'd avoided his brand of trouble for good reason.

She switched her gaze to the third part of the equation, her other old college buddy. Marc Devereaux was casually seated at the other end of the sofa looking as if he didn't have a care in this world. They might have been talking about the weather rather than a three-way sex power lock. His lazy posture and blond good looks were a direct contrast to Dominic's utter stillness and dark control. Only the intent expression in those chocolate brown eyes gave any indication that he was at all interested in the conversation.

He was a major charmer and she'd seen women from eighteen to eighty turn to blushing confusion under that southern charm. *Ha*. The reality was he was the head of the old Devereaux vampire family of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. No matter how he hid his power under charm, it was always there just below the surface. He was a deadly predator the same as Dominic—you'd just never see this one coming.

Inwardly wincing at her word choice, she said, "Marc, I can't believe you'd consider this. I thought we were friends."

Marc smiled and drawled, "Yes, *cher*, of course we're friends. Ought to make doing our duty downright enjoyable, don't ya think?"

The words washed over her like warm molasses and she felt a blush heating her face. Desperately striving for calm, she turned to the woman who had set this whole thing in motion and said, "I want to hear it again. Slowly and without all the vampire maneuvering, let's-all-be-badass crap. No lies. No manipulation." She sighed. "You

asked me here for help and I came despite my better judgment. I knew it had to be something major for you to issue that command disguised as an invitation. Give me the facts."

Cheryl's patrician face transformed into an icy frown and she looked remarkably like an irritated socialite disapproving of the day's menu. "Vampire politics are tricky, my dear. Our national council maintains control, but that control is built upon a delicate balance of power. As you know, East Coast and West Coast vamps tend to be cliquish but with the Jameson family coming to power in Vegas, things have polarized further. The bottom line is we're on the edge of a full-scale power war. Vanessa Jameson has formed a triad with Carlos Diaz out of New Mexico and Phil Gaytes from Seattle."

Tamara shook her head. "That's crazy. When? I thought triads were forbidden."

Cheryl nodded. "Three days ago. And yes, of course they are. Alliances are one thing, but power sharing by more than two individuals is forbidden because of the sheer amount of power involved. They've broken the law and they'll be sanctioned economically under that current law. The real question is how to control the power imbalance now."

Tamara tried to think it through. From what she remembered of the last inter-territory meeting she'd attended long ago, Vanessa was a power-hungry, corrupt, unpleasant woman. Vanessa with three times the amount of power she'd had back then was a scary thought. Tamara figured Vanessa wasn't the epitome of evil yet, but she was sure working hard on it. And Vanessa had formed a triad? Triple power? This was bad. Really bad.

And Phil Gaytes out of Seattle was in on the fun, too? Hearing that name again brought the old familiar sense of betrayal. The hurt was gone but some of the bitterness lingered. The irony of his union with Vanessa brought a wry twist to her mouth.

Tamara picked up the wine glass again, figuring it would keep her hands busy and cover the sudden surge of nerves. She could practically hear metal bars slamming down



to form a trap. "So the council's solution is for the East Coast to form a triad? Hey, I'm not great at math, but doesn't that turn one problem into two?"

Cheryl laughed politely, although it didn't seem to hold much amusement. "The council knows there's no way to destroy the triad without destroying three rulers of powerful families. Naturally, it would be better if that can be avoided. It's a slim possibility, but the only chance at all at this point is a balance of power. You'll form another triad just as powerful to keep theirs in check. They'll think twice about their actions if there's another triad out there who can act with as much power—and just as ruthlessly."

Tamara could see the logic in it but it was hardly an effective solution. "You know, this reminds me of the nuclear arms race—each side scrambling to have equal weapons and assuming that it keeps the other side from using what they have. Basically, no one does anything on the principle of—what's it called? Assured mutual destruction. I follow your logic. But forming triad after triad is a dangerous thing. You think you have potential war now? Just wait until you have that much power in the hands of a select few."

Cheryl looked pleased. "Yes, you've grasped the problems. But the council has instituted a new law. It goes into effect in less than twenty-four hours. Anyone forming a triad after that point will receive a death warrant. There will be no sanctions, no warnings and no arguments or votes before the council."

Her forehead betrayed the slightest hint of a wrinkle as she examined her wineglass absently. "Basically, it's the law we should have had in place before now, but certain members dragged their feet for their own questionable reasons. To be fair, only a few are born with the power to serve as a connector. It wasn't viewed as a pressing problem. Now, things have changed. Any triad formed after this point will be killed—and no one can quibble because ample warning has been given."

Tamara wasn't surprised at the harshness of the rule. Vampire justice wasn't exactly gentle. There was another big question though. "Let me ask you this. Who will you

have as executioner of any rogue triads? The law is no good if there's no one powerful enough to enforce it. A single vamp, even an experienced hunter, can't defeat a triad. You'd need..."

She froze. Here was the kicker. Yep. Mix vampires, sex, politics and power, and death was sure to be in there somewhere. "You'd need another triad to maintain control, keep Vanessa et al in check and possibly hunt and execute the rogues. Hell."

Weariness hit her. Things never changed. This was why she tried so hard to stay out of vamp politics. It was ugly, nasty and brutal. And not exactly good for your health either. "You want the three of us as enforcers, right?"

Cheryl's face showed no emotion at the allegation. Her voice was calm and controlled. "Yes, the vote has already passed and approval was given. The three of you would exterminate rogue triads or exceptionally powerful lawbreakers for the council if needed."

"Great. Just great." Tamara rubbed one hand over her face. "Why me? Dominic I can understand. Marc I can understand. They're both rulers, and they're used to wielding power and other...unpleasant...tasks. I'm not a ruler. I left politics and walked away from the family here in DC years ago. It's a well-known fact. I don't even attend political functions anymore, just the occasional social."

Dominic's voice held a surprising amount of sympathy as he said gently, "*Cara*, you're the daughter of a council member—with great power in your own right even though you've chosen not to lead. Your family ties to the council and your sense of...fairness and well-known distaste for vampire politics make you ideal."

Tamara closed her eyes. "Everyone knows how I feel about vamp politics and senseless killing. If I kill, people will assume it was because I had to. Not for petty political posturing or fun or profit, but because I had to do it." She opened her eyes and shook her head. "Oh this is priceless. I'm to become an enforcer and killer because I don't like to kill. That's so—"

Marc cut in, "Exactly. I'm sorry, *cher*, but the time for neutrality and distance is past. There's a war blowing our way and you have the power to stop it. You were born with the ability to share power and lead. Can you walk away this time?"

Tamara flashed him a look of resentment. "Do you understand what this means? We'll be the council's enforcement squad, vampire cops. And power sharing, forming a triad... Who knows if it will work? I'm not talking about the threesome sex to lock the bond. I'm not some cringing maiden. I'm talking about soul binding. We're risking a damn soul bond. Pardon me for feeling queasy. I like you both, but I don't want to love either of you. And I don't want to be the damn council's killer cop either."

Dominic placed his glass on the table beside him and leaned forward. "Perhaps you have a better solution? Something to avert war and chaos and death for hundreds of vampires and humans alike who might get caught between warring families? Something that won't upset your little pseudo-human life?"

Oh hell. Trust Count Logica to cut to the root of the problem and insult her at the same time. She drained the wine glass and placed it carefully on the table. Then she stood. Looking at the three of them, she felt a chilly sense of resignation combined with an overwhelming betrayal. Vampires. They never played nice. Friends or family, it didn't matter. They were vamps first and foremost. She'd found that out so vividly seven years ago that she'd walked away from almost all of it. Now they were dragging her back. She wasn't sure whom she disliked more at the moment – them or herself.

She stared at the three of them. They were beautiful and deadly and oh-so-patiently waiting for her answer. There was no way out, at least at the moment. She'd learned politics the hard way from a very early age. These three on the west coast weren't lying and the situation was a nightmare. And the clock was ticking. The triad would have to be formed tonight.

They had her neatly boxed. And they knew damn well she couldn't walk away. She needed time to think, but there wasn't time. She turned her back to them, feeling a moment of bitter regret for the life she might have had, her dream of a peaceful

existence without vampire complications. Some part of her was amazed her solitude had lasted these years at all. She'd known it would come to this type of decision eventually. She was who she was, and she was too powerful to be left alone. Or rather, too useful to be left alone. She felt a door closing inside herself as she struggled to accept the inevitable.

Now that the moment was here, she could only do the right thing. Stalling wasn't going to do her any good. Feeling her resolve harden, she knew what she had to do. She squared her shoulders and turned around. With an overly careless shrug, she said coldly, "Well, well. Who knew? Looks like I'm more my mother's daughter than I thought. Better pray none of us live to regret that fact in the end."

Pointing to Marc and then to Dominic, she said, "Clock's ticking. You and you, sex party at my house at eight. Bring your own body. Don't be late."

She spun on her heel and walked across the room. She reached the doorway just as she heard Cheryl's voice say softly, "Wait... I wish there was some other way... I...I...*am* sorry. And...thank you...Tammy."

The words, coupled with the familiar nickname, hit her like a blow. She paused and then said over her shoulder on the way out, "Don't thank me yet, Mother. You've always said disasters come in threes."

## Chapter Two

Tamara paced her apartment and tried to get a handle on her mounting hysteria. In the last three hours, no matter how she'd looked at the situation, she couldn't come up with another solution. Dominic and Marc were due to arrive in fifteen minutes and she was a wreck.

She walked to the mirror and stared at her reflection. Other than the color riding high on her cheekbones and the slightly wild look in her green eyes, she looked normal. She wondered if the bun was appropriate. Normally, she wore her long blonde hair that way because it was simple. Now she wondered just what hairstyle was appropriate for a ménage à trois power lock.

The key here was to remain calm and run the show. Dominic and Marc were a whole lot to deal with individually. The thought of sex with the two of them fired her blood in a way that was both a relief and mortifying. Normally she preferred her lovers one at a time. She might be very sexually experienced, but she was discriminating. She had a good, healthy appreciation for sexuality and she'd found long ago that anal sex was an activity she enjoyed occasionally. The mechanics of the threesome shouldn't prove too much of a problem.

However, despite some rather wild times in her twenties, she was thirty-four now and preferred sex to be with someone she cared about and respected. In general, she preferred multiple orgasms without multiple partners.

There was something to be grateful for in this situation though. Both men loosely qualified as old friends. At least they weren't complete strangers. They'd all known each other in college and both had made a play for her at one time or another. She'd managed to turn them down and maintain a casual friendship. Oh, they were both extremely attractive, compelling men. Even in college, there had been a definite buzz of

attraction that had forced her to walk a fine line with each of them. But she'd been careful with them in the past because she couldn't imagine either being a particularly easy lover to handle. At the thought, her heart rate picked up and she breathed deeply to settle her nerves. The doorbell rang.

Nervously wiping her hands on her shorts, she went to the door and opened it. Her mouth nearly dropped open. Dominic and Marc were standing on the doorstep dressed in jeans and T-shirts. She'd mainly seen them dressed up in recent years at social gatherings and had forgotten how amazing they looked in casual attire.

Dominic's T-shirt was black of course, but it set off his dark looks perfectly. Her heart jumped at the sight of him. She focused on Marc very quickly in defense. His white shirt said "Been There, Bit That" in big red letters with "Stoker's Restaurant and Bar, Baton Rouge, Louisiana" in small letters under it. Her mouth curved involuntarily at the slogan. Ohgawd, they were here. And color-coded even. How thoughtful. She nearly choked. It was show time. She swallowed hard and said, "Come on in."

Both men flashed easy masculine smiles, sending her pulse rioting even harder. Dominic went first and Marc followed him inside. She shut the door and motioned toward the couch. Suddenly her secluded little house tucked away in the wooded suburbs felt *a lot* smaller. What was the protocol here? She walked to the minibar and said, "Okay, guys, we need to set some ground rules. But first, name your poison."

Dominic said, "I'd like a Scotch—and for you to relax, Tam. We're all friends here. We're just going to talk awhile first."

Tamara grabbed for a glass and then reached for the Scotch bottle. Having her back to the two of them was helping. "Yeah. And you, Marc?"

Marc chuckled. "Whiskey, Jack if you have it. Straight. And you might consider a double for yourself, darlin'."

Tamara smiled weakly. "Yeah. I think I'll make mine a triple. Seems appropriate."

She poured the drinks and then carried them over to the seating area. The guys sat on opposite ends of the couch. She gave each man his drink, grateful that her hands

weren't shaking as much as her insides. She eyed the middle warily and sat in the chair across from them. She saw the amusement on both their faces, but was too wound up to care.

Taking a big gulp, she nearly choked as the fire from the alcohol hit her system with all the finesse of a bomb. Okay, smaller sips. That was key. Just like with most things. Moderation. Yeah, a threesome was *so* moderate.

Inwardly groaning at her wandering thoughts, Tamara decided the only way to go was forward. "Okay, look. First of all – the practicalities of sex. We're all vamps here, so there's no worry about blood-borne infections or sexually communicable disease. That simplifies things. Now, I'm on birth control. The yearly shot. I assume the two of you have had your shots, too?"

Marc choked on his drink. "You're such a romantic, Tam. Yep. I've had my shot."

Dominic laughed. "Me, too. So yes, we've had our shots. All three of us. I think that's the first time it's ever made me sound like a puppy though."

Tamara held back on the smile, although it wasn't easy. "Look, I know that was a bit abrupt. This is a bizarre situation. But I'm in charge here. Period. And I need to feel safe."

Dominic's head came up and his expression changed. "Do you, *cara*? Are you sure?"

Uh-oh. That look seemed to see right into her soul. Not good. Time to backpeddle. Fast. She struggled for words. "Um...so, okay, we've taken care of the practicalities. Now we need to talk about the power lock. How does it work? I can share power, I think – that should be easy – but I've never locked before."

Dominic still stared at her, those dark eyes searching her features. Tamara held his gaze as long as she could and then finally broke it to look at Marc.

Marc was looking back and forth between the two of them with a speculative expression in his eyes. He said, "We form a power bond with blood and sex. You're the center, *cher*, a kind of...what do you call it?"

Dominic broke in, "A conductor. We need to build as much power between the three of us as we can. Once we lock it, we can share power. We can work as a unit facing a threat or we can send power to the others in the triad from a distance. Doesn't matter. Each of us will have the power of three if necessary. You have to be the one to lock because you're the center. It should come naturally and you'll know when the time comes what to do."

Tamara frowned. "You've been doing your homework."

Dominic arched an eyebrow and shrugged. "It pays to be prepared."

Tamara looked at Marc. She knew the answer but had to ask anyway to be sure. "Okay then. I'll share blood with each of you, but can we do it separately by any chance?" She didn't mean to sound quite so hopeful.

Marc laughed so hard his shoulders shook. "No. Nice try though." He turned to Dominic. "Told you she'd ask that one as soon as her head cleared and it hit her."

Dominic laughed and shook his head. He took a drink and leaned back, watching her closely. "It's a triad and there's only one way to lock a triad. It has to be simultaneous to lock us both. Not like any blood exchange you've ever had with just a single vampire." Noticing Tamara's blank stare, he added, "Um, you have exchanged blood with a vamp before, right?"

Tamara bit her lip. "No. Too risky. Not even during my brief but infamous engagement. I've been tempted, but backed out."

Both men seemed to get more alert. Dominic looked surprised. Marc looked incredulous.

"Never?" Marc was the first to speak. "Not even once? *Cher*, that's...that's..." Words seemed to escape him. Finally he ended with, "Tragic."

Tamara laughed. She couldn't help it. "Guys, relax. I've been with human men, just not vamps. I'm healthy and very sexually active. Blood and sex aren't new."



Marc was still staring at her like she'd grown two heads. "But...never blood and sex with a vamp."

Tamara shot him a look of exasperation. "I don't want to end up tied to a vamp. I'm not interested in risking a soul bond. No thanks. I'm single. I'm happy. There are plenty of human men out there for snacks and fun without vampire complications. Why would I risk screwing up a good deal for a little extra pleasure?"

Dominic had been staring at her silently but suddenly he accused flatly, "That's why you ran from me at the party."

Oh man. This was one topic she didn't want to go near. She avoided Dominic's knowing gaze and said to Marc, "I'll be fine. I'm assuming it's just more pleasurable than sex with a human. That's not exactly a problem in our situation. We need to stay focused."

Dominic's voice was dead certain. "Oh I'm focused. Plenty. And I'm right."

Tamara turned to him. "Do we have to get into this? I didn't run from you. I don't run from anyone, ever. I *left* the party after talking to you. End of story."

Marc gave a snort that made her want to kick his Southern ass all the way back to Baton Rouge. He said, "Well, now, *cher*, I'm hurt. You never told me the story. And I talked to you right after New Year's. Thought we were old friends?"

Tamara gritted her teeth. "There was no story to tell. I talked to Dominic at the party at New Year's when I made my obligatory short appearance at Mother's. We danced. We kissed. I left."

Dominic sent her a look that called her a liar. "I kissed you and you left all right. Fast. I've seen Olympic sprinters move slower than you did that night."

The memory of that brief kiss flashed through Tamara's mind before she could stop it. It had felt so...perfect. He'd caught her by surprise while they were dancing when he'd touched his mouth to hers, and she'd felt heat all the way to her toes. Looking at him now, she could see that same heat in his eyes at the memory. Why did the man

have to drive her crazy? What was it about him that put her on edge and made her so nervous?

The phone rang and she could have danced with relief. A reprieve. She cleared her throat and spoke fast as she stood. "I have to get this. It could be important. In the meantime, why don't you two hammer out some details instead of yammering on about ancient history? Get naked or something. Play cards. Knit a sweater. I don't care. I'll be back." She left them sitting there and went to her bedroom to take the call. She heard her mother's voice on the machine and hurried to pick it up.

For once, that familiar voice held no false vampire front. It carried a genuine fear that shook Tamara more than anything else could have. Cheryl's voice was recording on the machine as she picked up. "Tamara! If you haven't formed the triad yet, hurry! Word of your visit to my place leaked somehow." Her voice hardened. "I'll find out exactly how later. Vanessa isn't in Vegas. She's on her way and my spies tell me it's with one goal in mind – destroying you before you get the triad in place."

\* \* \* \* \*

Vanessa Jameson pulled into the rest area, parked and jerked the keys from the ignition. Turning to the two male vamps in the car with her, she said, "We're sticking with this plan. Surprise is the key. They have no idea that we know about the triad plan or that we're this close."

Carlos Diaz, seated beside her, gave her a narrow-eyed look. "Staking them or beheading them would be safest."

Phil Gaytes echoed from the backseat in his irritating, know-it-all voice, "A lot safer. Although Garcione is a tough bastard. And Devereux is cagey. Getting close is the problem."

They'd been whining about the plan for hours and she'd had to pull the car over for a moment to remind herself that no matter how much she wanted to kill them, she needed them. Vanessa looked around the rest area, silently assessing. They were alone

with no other vehicles in sight. Other vamps or humans in cars might be great feeding opportunities, but they also might be enemies. She was out of her territory. Her nerves were stretched taut with excitement and annoyance, and she reminded herself to be patient. She would have what she wanted soon enough, if she just managed to keep from killing the two idiots with her.

The whining of the two male vamps was really beginning to get to her. She gave them a warning smile and could see by the sudden alertness in their eyes that they'd picked up on it. "I agree that getting close enough to stake or behead them is risky and tough to do. A bomb would be safest, but there's no guarantee that it will do enough damage or that it will kill all three of them. We've been over this before."

She sighed. There were times when she wished being a vampire was as easy as pop culture portrayed it. If she could dematerialize and reappear miles away, then she wouldn't be stuck with these two spineless wimps for hour upon hour traveling to DC from California. Even though they'd caught a plane flight part of the way, traveling too close to DC by air would have alerted too many other vampires to their travel and screw up the plan. Traveling by car the rest of the way took longer, but it was also less risky. She just hadn't counted on how annoying Gaytes and Diaz would be in close quarters.

She fumed and turned her thoughts inward, temporarily ignoring the two. Her goal was almost in sight. She intended to make her family the most powerful family in the country. Her father, may he burn in hell, had been such a terrible leader that he'd turned a once powerful, feared family into a bunch of mewling sheep.

The mockery of some of the other vamp families still fueled a burning fury inside her. For years before his death, her father had been a punch line at parties. He was the perfect example for how not to be a respected vampire. He was everything she hated – indecisive, bumbling, cowardly. Most of the time he was too wrapped up in his stupid archeology to even care about vampire politics or the welfare of his family.

If her mother had lived, it might have been different. She'd died in childbirth, though, leaving Vanessa in the apathetic hands of her aging husband. He was a scholar without common sense, all intellect and no brain or guts, with no interest in a child. He never noticed her efforts to please him. Never saw her or anything else beyond his books and maps. She was enraged that she'd ever for one moment wanted anything from him.

She had waited for his death for years, smiling on the outside, portraying the loving, dutiful daughter to outsiders, clucking over his health with grave concern, while inside she had counted the minutes until she could seize power from him. Vampires were stronger and healed much better than humans, but there were three sure ways to kill one—beheading, impaling the heart and power. She had considered all three methods countless times, searching for a way to get rid of him.

Sometimes she'd sit by his bedside, watching his chest laboriously rise and fall, his once healthy body now a frail shell. And she'd fantasized about how it would feel to take a knife from the kitchen and stab through that chest into his heart, to have the cold metal blade slice deep and end his pathetic existence.

Even now the thought of it brought a hot surge of pleasure. But she'd known the council would hunt her at any hint that she'd eliminated him, and she'd never be family ruler then. Killing fellow vampires was not scrutinized much, but killing a ruler without cause was a different matter. So she'd waited and waited until he'd finally, finally stopped breathing. And she'd endured the pitying glances, the sympathetic gestures, knowing one day she would show them all who should be pitied.

Nobody would mock them now. She had become a leader to be feared and respected by sheer cunning and ruthless elimination of her enemies. Forming a triad with Diaz and Gaytes was done with careful calculation to consolidate her power base. Now she only needed to eliminate any possible threats and there wouldn't be a family in the country with more power. She would be able to do as she liked, council or no

council, laws or no laws. And no one, but no one, would say the name Jameson with anything but fear and respect ever again. Ever.

Carlos' irritated voice interrupted her thoughts. "Vanessa, you're not listening. These aren't humans we're dealing with. We need to be smart."

Vanessa flashed him a hard look. "We'll kill them the old way. With power. If they haven't had time to form a triad, it'll be easy and we'll do each one separately, starting with her. If the bitch actually goes through with it and we don't arrive in time, we still have enough power between us to kill them. We'll find an opening and we'll take them out. It's the only way to be sure. We stick to the plan and play our parts."

Phil Gaytes leaned forward. "And what if they have more power than we do, Vanessa? What then?"

Vanessa gave him an icy smile as she put the keys back calmly into the ignition. "Then we'll be dead, Phil. And at least I won't have to travel back to California with you two assholes, will I?"

## **Chapter Three**

Marc settled back on the couch in the silent room and watched his best friend warily. He'd been afraid of this. After viewing the byplay between Dominic and Tamara, the situation was indeed more complicated than he'd anticipated. Finally he said, "We need to talk fast while Tamara's in the other room on the phone. You want her. How bad?"

Dominic felt a violent flash of emotion so large that it utterly shocked him. Keeping his expression composed with effort, he set his drink on the table with a little too much force. "Bad enough to kill you for touching her."

Marc shook his head. "Well damn. You want to tell me what we're doing here then?"

Dominic closed his eyes and resisted the urge to punch something. "Forming a triad."

Marc leaned forward and tried for a reasonable tone. "Listen. You and I, we've been friends all our lives. You're like a brother to me. When we were younger, we shared women..."

Dominic opened his eyes. "This is different."

"Yeah. Makes things tough." Marc took another sip of his drink and tried to think of some way to resolve this mess. The silence lengthened.

Dominic glared at him. "You want her, too."

Marc laughed. "Hell yes. Always have. But not like you do, pal. So what do you recommend here?"

"The triad is no good if one third kills another." Dominic fought the battle between emotion and logic. Finally he gave a weary sigh. "I'm not gonna kill you for doing the right thing."

Marc's face changed and the charm slid away without warning. "That's good, because I never planned to be the dead third, Dom."

Dominic tensed and said hotly, "Don't start something we'll both have to finish. Dammit, Marc, it's Tamara! I hate this!"

Marc's face relaxed and his smile held a world of sad weariness. "Yes, it's our buddy Tamara. That means if we have to do this, we need to make it right for her."

Dominic picked up his glass and took a healthy swallow. "I've been over it and over it. If there was any other way —"

"There's not. And time is short. It's going to happen and we'll all have to live with it later. It's one time. I won't touch her again. Unless it's at her instigation. Can you handle that?"

Dominic ran his hand through his hair. "With what's at stake? Yeah. I can. Because if we don't, a lot of innocent people are going die. And she'll no doubt be one of them."

Marc took a swallow of his whiskey and watched his friend's face. There was too much at stake here and choices had to be made. "I know O'Reilly from Boston is in town this week. He's less powerful, but he might do. It's a gamble. I could call him."

Dominic shook his head. "No. I think they've only met once or twice. She won't feel comfortable with him. She trusts you. She trusts us. I want it to be you."

Marc set his glass down. "Okay then. It's the three of us. Can you put your feelings aside for her? Dominic, this is no time for bullshit. The sex power lock won't work with lukewarm sex. She's naïve enough to think it's going to be easy. A little blood, a little sex. Simple body fluid exchange. You know what it takes to build the power. She's used to human men."

Dominic felt a strong surge of arousal. No, they weren't talking about a quick, easy tumble. This was a lot more. And it would be with the woman who had haunted his dreams for six months now. That one taste of her at New Year's, a simple kiss, had awakened long-buried feelings and needs that he'd been denying and fighting ever since. Well, tonight he could finally take her the way he had been aching to take her. And she would let him.

He leaned forward and said, "I will because I have no choice. Follow my lead. When we do this, we give her a night unlike any other. One she'll never regret and never forget."

Marc held out his hand. "Agreed. Friends?"

Dominic took it and shook. "Friends."

Tamara walked back into the living room and stopped dead in her tracks. They were shaking hands, obviously up to something. She cleared her throat loudly and saw both of them turn quickly to face her, identical expressions of innocence on their faces. Yeah, right.

She sighed. Time was the enemy now. "That was our illustrious ruler, calling to inform me that the trio from hell is on the way here to kill me before we can form the triad. Mother is not pleased. Can't say I'm thrilled either. We need to get this lock in place or we're all gonna be dead in a few hours, give or take. Mother has sent some goons to try to find and stall them, but they won't be effective for long against a triad."

Both men were staring at her so intently, faces suddenly wiped clean of expression, vampire composure showing not a single reaction to the reality of her words. She'd been hanging out with humans for too long. The lack of reaction made her nervous. "Well, guys, we need to get moving here."

She reached for the top button on her blouse and unbuttoned it quickly. Her fingers shook a little as she slipped the next button loose and then the next. Both men looked surprised. Oh, *now* they showed some reaction. She rolled her eyes. "I'm not about to



believe you two are shy. Perhaps you didn't hear me. We need to get naked fast. Snap, snap. Sex to have, power locks to form, triads to defeat. Kill or be killed. We're on a schedule here."

Dominic looked amused and it surprised her how much she liked that expression on his face. He held his hands out in a gesture to stop her, saying, "Whoa, whoa, babe, hold on a minute."

Marc shook his head, his slow drawl shaking with laughter. "*Cher*, no offense, but we're not exactly something you can cross off of your chore list."

Dominic walked forward quickly and caught her hand on the fourth button. At the contact of his hand on hers, she sucked in a breath and went still. Dominic stared down at her, the amusement on his face quickly dying. He pulled her hand from her blouse and turned it gently, palm up. Tamara felt her heart rate jump and swallowed hard. He bent and placed a strangely tender kiss to the center of her palm. The contact of his lips against the sensitive skin of her hand made her shiver.

He lifted his head and stared into her eyes. "*Cara*, the lock requires you to give yourself to us. Completely. We have to build the power between us, using sex and blood. This is not about rushing. This is about pleasure. Your pleasure. Our pleasure. We're going to take you. And it's going to be slow and more powerful and pleasurable than anything you can imagine. Forget Vanessa for now. This is about you. And about what we can make you feel. Surrender to it and to us."

Ohgawd. Tamara felt his words travel straight to her center. Yes, she'd known the lock would require intense sex. But the reality of it was sinking in. She was really going to do this. She was really going to bed with both Dominic and Marc. At the same time. Taking a step back, she jerked her hand out of Dominic's grasp. She was shocked to feel two hands come down on her shoulders from behind. Marc. He had moved while she was preoccupied with Dominic. She could feel his big body behind her and felt trapped between the two men. She said quickly, "Dominic...Marc...I—"

Dominic leaned down and caught her mouth with his. The contact of his lips on hers shook her. She reached out and her hands encountered the hard wall of Dominic's chest. His hand moved to her cheek, cupping it with obvious tenderness. That tenderness melted something inside her. His mouth brushed against hers again and again, warmly, slowly, luring her to respond. With a little moan, she gave up and brought her hands to his shoulders. She moved her lips against his, enjoying the contact, responding instinctively.

This kiss was just as stunning as the other they'd shared at the party. The touch of his mouth on hers sent pleasure singing through her veins. There was such attraction and power between them—she could feel his energy, that internal power deep within him. It seemed to call to her power and she jerked her mouth away, scared suddenly, refusing to give in to the temptation of it.

At the same moment, Marc touched his mouth to the back of her neck and the moist heat of it shocked her. She shuddered and then went still. Dominic's hand tightened on her face, still gentle, but it prevented her from escaping as his mouth came down on hers again. This time he captured her mouth forcefully, surely, demanding a response. As she felt his tongue trace her bottom lip she let out a moan, her knees going weak.

Marc's hands moved over her back, slowly spreading heat. They reached her waist, holding her steady, his mouth planting kisses along the side of her neck. She felt him pull her backward into his body. His hard cock pressed against her lower back and bottom.

Dominic's hand moved from her face to trace her throat. Her nipples were hard, aching, and she was very conscious of just how much she wanted to feel his hands there. He leaned closer and his mouth turned harder, devouring her now, his need for her obvious in the greedy pressure of his mouth against her. Ohgawd. She was going to burn alive. These two were too much for her. She was wet, so wet already, and they'd barely begun. She jerked back from Dominic with a moan and said, "Ohhhh wait!"

Dominic's eyes were black, dark with hunger. He smiled and it held pure predatory male satisfaction. "You're just as responsive as I remembered. I can't believe I let you brush me off in college. I was young and stupid. And then I let you leave that party months ago without me. I must have been insane. No more running, *cara*. Triad or no triad, I won't let you go again. This is long overdue."

Marc said softly next to her ear, teasing, coaxing, "Tam, the three of us are going to have soooo much fun." His hands moved from her waist and over her stomach. Even through the thin cotton of her shirt, his touch burned her, excited her. His hands moved higher and his thumbs made a lazy sweep along the undersides of her breasts. She sucked in a breath, staring at Dominic. He was watching her, silently waiting, his face betraying no anger, only intense male hunger.

Marc chuckled, although it sounded strained to her ears. He said huskily, "*Cher*, I think it's time you showed us your bedroom, don't you?"

## Chapter Four

Tamara stepped to the side, breaking away from both men. Taking a deep calming breath and ignoring her thundering heart, she said, "Okay. Let's go."

She felt both men walking behind her as she turned and entered the bedroom. She tried to imagine what the two of them were thinking and then nervously decided it was probably better that she didn't know. She walked until she reached the bed. It was huge and she'd loved it from the moment she'd spotted it at the antique store. The four-poster took up a good portion of the bedroom. It was custom built and much higher off the ground than most beds.

Now, the sight had her wincing a little. For some reason, having Dominic and Marc see it felt very personal. With her prior bed partners she'd always felt in control and somewhat...distant in a way. Dominic and Marc, on the other hand, made her feel anything but in control.

She heard Marc's choked sound from behind her and turned to glare at him defensively. "What?"

He was looking from her to the bed and back to her, his expression one of delight. "Oh, I'm just admiring your taste in furnishings, *cher*. Very...uhh...sturdy...roomy...and the height...that's...convenient."

Dominic's voice held a note of anticipation. "Very. Tam, I think you should know, sex between vampires gets rather...intense."

There was something in his voice that she couldn't decipher. A warning? Mixed with what? Going the high road about now and being the distant, sophisticated sexual woman was the route to go. She said, "Well fine. Intense is good. I don't mind intense. I don't mind playful or adventurous either. The bed is fine. Hell, we can use the floor. I

don't suppose it really matters. The main thing is to just..." Her voice trailed off as she saw the looks on their faces. "Right, this is not a thing on my to-do list. Gotcha."

She moved away from the bed, putting more distance between herself and the two men. "See, what I figured is this would all just sort of happen. We don't need to talk about how vampire sex is different. It's nerve-racking to talk like this. Let's just get it over with."

Dominic walked to her and she could feel the muscles in her body tensing. He looked down at her and raised one hand to her cheek. He said gently, "Tam, you're nervous. And that's okay. If you don't want to do this at any point, you just say so. And we'll stop."

He stroked her cheek. "Feeling like prey when you're taking on two male vamps is natural. That scared, excited feeling you have? It's normal. You're reacting to us, to the surge in power between us. To my hunger for you. To Marc's hunger for you. To your own excitement and hunger. You sense it and you're reacting. But you can stop us at any time."

The warmth of his hand on her cheek, the expression of concern in his eyes relaxed her. What exactly was happening with her? There was a lot of confusion going on inside her and most of it seemed to be caused by Dominic. He just...set her on edge. He was too uncontrollable, too outside her experience. But he would never harm her. She knew it absolutely. Neither would Marc. She nodded.

Marc walked to the two of them. Gazing at her silently, he finally said, "Tamara, I care about you. We care about you. Can you trust us and let go for a while? Darlin', this is going to feel good. Just let go. Let us take you." He moved until he was standing behind her. He put his hands on her shoulders and planted a soft kiss on her neck, right over her pulse.

He scraped his teeth over her skin there and the feel of it had her heart slamming in her chest. She cleared her throat and said huskily, "I'll try."

Dominic smiled and his hand moved from her face down her throat to cover her breast. The heat of his palm through the cloth of her cotton shirt felt so intimate and the swift, possessive move was shocking. She shuddered. Her nipples were hard and aching. The warm of his hand soothed that ache a little but it wasn't enough. She moaned.

At the sound both men tensed. Dominic leaned forward, hand still cupping her warmly, and kissed her forehead. He said softly, "I think you're wearing too many clothes, *cara*."

He moved his hand into her shirt suddenly. She wasn't wearing a bra and the movement caught her by surprise. His hand cupped her naked breast and she closed her eyes at the feel of his rough palm against her skin. His thumb moved lazily around and around her sensitive nipple, causing it to tighten and ache even more. Her knees went weak and she arched into his hand, wanting more. The heat was spreading through her now like wildfire.

Dominic's voice was lower, rougher than she'd ever heard it. "You're so responsive. You're gonna drive me outta my mind."

He pulled his hand away and she nearly protested. He exchanged a look with Marc behind her and then she was suddenly being pulled backward. She felt the wall against her back with something like relief. Leaning against it, she figured it was as good a place to rest as any until her legs were feeling less weak.

Marc had moved to her side and he took one of her hands in his. He smiled at her, that charming practiced smile that she knew so well, but there was heat there, genuine heat. When he kissed the inside of her wrist and then gently sucked, she gulped. Hazily, she could feel Dominic's fingers making short work of the rest of the buttons on her shirt. She knew it but was distracted by the way Marc was kissing along the inside of her arm, gradually moving upward. He was planting tiny moist kisses all along the sensitive skin, pausing occasionally to lick or to suck. He was doing it as if he planned

to taste every inch of her exactly the same way – slowly, leisurely. It was destroying her composure inch by inch.

Dominic finished the buttons on her shirt. She could feel the cool draft. He hadn't removed it, but instead left the shirt hanging, still covering her. He took her other hand in his and bent his head to her arm. His mouth touched the inside of her wrist. She knew her pulse was scrambling. She felt flushed, breathless. As his mouth made a journey up the inside of her arm too, she began to shake with excitement. She closed her eyes and her head fell back against the wall. Both men were busy planting kisses up her arms. When they reached the pulses in the crook of her arms both men suddenly sucked hard and that dual assault had her quaking.

They leaned back up and before she could protest each man held one hand against the wall. She was pinned, hands beside her head. She opened her eyes and saw two masculine smiles of satisfaction. She said, "Okay, so I'm thinking two mouths *are* better than one." And she smiled.

Dominic laughed, although it sounded strained. "Oh, *cara*, we're just getting started." He reached forward with his free hand and pulled the shirt back from her right breast. His expression hardened as he sucked in a breath. With a muffled groan, he bent his head and said, "Gawd, you're so beautiful."

He found her nipple and sucked it into his mouth hard. The moist, hot tug sent pleasure radiating all the way to her sex. She moaned, stunned at the power of it.

Marc moved her shirt back completely, staring into her eyes. She felt helpless, burning up under the fiery pull of Dominic's mouth on her nipple.

Marc said, "I've wanted to touch you like this for a long time. Too damn long." He bent his head and kissed her collarbone, mouth warm against her skin. His mouth trailed downward over the curve of her breast. Her left nipple was hard and aching and she was gasping, the touch of both men sending her reeling.

When his mouth finally reached her nipple and he licked around and around it, she bucked. Dominic's hand went between her legs in a move that stunned her into

stillness. As Marc sucked her nipple into his mouth, moaning, Dominic moved his hand to her sex, his hard palm sending shocks of pleasure all through her system. She was coming apart at the seams, desire raging through her blood. Both men's mouths worked her nipples greedily, sucking, tugging, sending pleasure arcing through her until she was left gasping from it, beyond thinking. They kept a firm grasp on her hands, keeping her pinned as their mouths continued the sensual torment, and that feeling of helpless vulnerability only heightened her arousal.

Dominic released her nipple with an audible pop and looked at her darkly. "You're so wet... I can feel you through these damn shorts."

His hand went to the button on her shorts. Dominic held her gaze as he unbuttoned them. When she felt her zipper being lowered, she shut her eyes.

Dominic said roughly, "No, look at me."

She opened her eyes then, startled at the possessive order. She felt his hand slide into her pants, under her panties. When his fingers reached her curls, she moaned and then whimpered, "Dominic...gawd..."

Marc muttered, "That's it, *cher*, let go." His tongue stabbed at her nipple, raking it, teasing it. He blew on it softly and then sucked it back into his mouth gently, so gently. His free hand came up and he began to toy with her left nipple, fingers gently tugging, just as Dominic's fingers began to trace her outer lips.

Tamara was fighting to maintain any kind of control at all. She could barely stand. If the wall had not been behind her, she'd have fallen. The touch of Dominic's fingers tracing her softness made her crazy.

Dominic leaned down until his head was right next to hers. His hand played gently between her legs as his hot breath tickled her ear. He said softly, "I want you. I've wanted you since we were kids, from the time you were eighteen years old when I saw you at that college dance. I wanted to walk right up to you. I wanted to touch you like this. Put my hands on you. Taste you." He slid one finger between her folds and found her wetness. Tamara cried out.



He circled her slick opening slowly. "I wanted to be inside you." One long finger suddenly probed deep into her sex, making her moan low and raw. The feel of his finger there, pushing into her, was not enough. She needed to feel his cock filling her.

He moaned too and said roughly, "I wanted you then and I never stopped. I want you now. You're so tight. My cock is hard for you. I'm aching. Let me take you."

His hand moved, the palm creating enough pressure on her clitoris to send shivers of pleasure through her like starbursts. She moved her hips helplessly, needing more of that heat. He gave it to her, pressing against her, matching her rhythm. She was climbing, scaling toward that sexual peak so fast that she was almost over it before she could realize what was happening.

Power shot through her like a thunderbolt, no longer held in check. Her control slipped. Her incisors sprang down in her mouth, fully extended, the bloodlust intense. The heartbeats of both men suddenly pounded loudly in her ears. The scents of male and sex were in the air.

She was a vampire. There was no escaping it. And in that moment, with the power fully on her in a way she'd never experienced with a human man, she knew what she'd been denying for seven long years. This was part of who she was. And it felt good and right to finally let it fully free.

Both men felt the change in her. Marc paused, breaking all contact with her abruptly and stepping back.

Dominic hesitated, staring at her, thinking Tamara in full power was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen in his life. He removed his hands slowly, reluctant to leave her. She stared at him with heated dangerous eyes, power literally lighting her, making her glow. That power of hers was calling to him like a moth to the flame. He could feel his own roiling inside him, straining, eager to answer. He nearly lost control. With real effort he fought the urge to release his power and mate with her. He let go of her completely and pulled back.

Tamara stepped out of her clothes and sandals completely and stood proudly before the two men, naked and completely unashamed. Then she smiled. “Well, isn’t this getting interesting?” There suddenly seemed to be a whole lot of benefits to vampire sex. She could feel everything so intensely now. Every whisper of sound, every scent and even the lightest touch – all of her senses were heightened.

Her power was pumping through her veins, that wonderful rush intensifying her pleasure and arousal. The intoxicating lure of mingling power suddenly called to her like a beacon. It struck her forcibly, too, that she was truly free to not hold back for the first time. With a human man, she had to be careful of her strength, and careful to shield her power. She had to protect him even as she mated with him. And she had to make sure that she only took enough blood to satisfy her need and not enough to kill.

With these two though... Things were decidedly different. They weren’t about to run screaming from the bedroom in fear at the sight of her fangs. She wouldn’t have to seduce them or muddle their memories later. For another, their strength matched hers. They were every bit as strong as she was – actually, stronger. Yes indeed, this could get interesting.

She walked toward them, feeling the sensual sway of her hips, knowing both men were on the edge of losing control and reveling in the thrill of it. She put a hand on each of the men’s chests. With a subtle caress she felt those hard muscular chests through the thin cloth of their tee shirts with feminine satisfaction. Their heartbeats sped up and made her hunger flare sweetly. She said softly, “I think two of the people in this room are way overdressed for what I have in mind.”

She leaned forward suddenly to Marc. As her head moved toward his throat he tensed, a muscle working in his jaw. She licked just under that jawline and down to the pulse beating at his neck. The feel of his racing pulse made her hunger rear up inside her, straining to bite. She pulled back and saw him swallow.

Dominic was watching her with hot dark eyes. She leaned toward him and did the same thing. She licked slowly, enjoying the salty taste of his skin, and then hovered

over his pulse, blatantly teasing him. As she felt the thing race against her tongue, she nipped him oh so gently. The last of his control broke with a nearly audible snap.

He grabbed her then, eyes gone hard, power exploding and coming off him in waves. His fangs descended. He said harshly, "*Cara*, playtime's over." He lifted her then, just picked her up and carried her to the bed.

The movement had her stomach doing a mad flop. Setting her on the bed so fast she barely had time to blink, he jerked his shirt over his head. Tamara looked at that gorgeous muscular chest, lightly covered with black curly hair and felt her mouth go dry. He was darkly beautiful and he looked exactly like what he was—a powerful male vampire in his prime. His hands went to his jeans as he kicked off his shoes.

She saw Marc standing very still and was surprised to see the glint of his fangs too. She'd been so preoccupied with Dominic that she'd nearly forgotten him. Nearly. He held her gaze and slowly took off his shirt, watching her with those heated brown eyes that seemed to know exactly how much it excited her to see him do it.

When he tossed the shirt in a chair, she gulped. He was big. More muscular than Dominic, although not by much. Somehow seeing him with his shirt off brought the fact crystal clear into focus. His chest was hairless, the muscles rippling in the dim light of her bedroom and she watched, mesmerized, as he gave her a sexy half-smile that sent her temperature into overheat. And it occurred to her as she watched him unsnap his jeans that three just might be her new favorite number. Triple heat. Triple pleasure.

Dominic moved and her eyes traveled back to him. He was nude now, his powerful body moving toward her on the bed. She instinctively scooted back and then caught herself, frowning. Still mentally stunned by the brief flash of full-body nakedness searing her brain, she gave in to curiosity and looked. Her eyes slid down to his cock.

Oh. My. Gawd. Her heart stopped. He was...well...wow. Her mind scattered and she hazily realized she really ought to pretend some degree of sophistication. Anatomy was just anatomy. But man... His cock was big, extending upward along his stomach. Not flee-for-your-life scary, but fill-you-unlike-you've-ever-been-filled-before endowed.

Her mind conjured a picture of him plunging it into her sex and she had the sudden urge to call for oxygen. Her lungs weren't working properly. This man had her more turned on than she'd ever been in her life.

He sat down on the edge of the bed and said huskily, "Tam, for a vampire, you have the most expressive face I've ever seen. Why don't you climb into my lap here and we'll put some of those thoughts into action."

Gulp. She moved and he watched her alertly, his eyes traveling over her body with the same greed that she'd been eyeing his. Awkwardly she climbed into his lap, deciding at the last second to sit astride his thighs and put her knees on the bed. As she finally moved into position, she felt his arms go around her and was amazed at how warm he felt. Being this close to him was a shocker.

She stared into his eyes. They were bottomless black, so dark and intense. When she continued to squirm, he closed his eyes and his hands moved to her waist.

He said through gritted teeth, "Tam, you're killing me here. If you don't get comfortable, I'm gonna start forgetting vocabulary words. Like slow. Gentle." She squirmed. He groaned, "Foreplay."

She laughed and then ended on a moan when he began to massage her hips gently. It felt wonderful. She could feel her body loosening, her muscles relaxing. She sighed. "Foreplay? Isn't that what we've been—" Her words were stopped by the sudden swoop of his mouth on hers.

Dominic couldn't go one more second without tasting her. She was warm and close, so close, in his lap. It was maddening. He wanted to be inside her more than he'd ever wanted anything. She was still glowing. Her body felt soft and hot against his, and her lips were full. She tasted exactly like...Tamara.

He pressed his mouth harder against hers, eager for more. She moaned again and the sound made him wild. He wanted to hear those moans over and over. He wanted her wet, squirming and hot. He wanted to be inside her as far as he could go, buried deep and hard. He fought the impulse to take and focused on trying to go slow.

She opened her mouth wider, her tongue sliding along his, and the velvety feel of it made him want to scream with frustration and pleasure. She was his. This woman was his and he'd never give her up, never stop kissing her. Some ancient instinct kicked in and demanded that he claim her now before she could get away.

Tamara was drowning in heat and fire. The kiss turned wet and deep and hot. Dominic pulled her to him tightly and her body came into full contact with his. Her breasts pressed against his chest and she whimpered at the feel of that curly hair teasing her aching nipples. She could feel his cock firm against her stomach and arched upward, pressing her lower body into him, center to center. The pressure of his hard cock against her clit sent shudders of pleasure through her. She would have gasped but Dominic was still kissing her. The overwhelming strength of the passion between them sent a twinge of fear through her.

His hands moved to her back, running warmly over it, soothing her as if he could sense it. He eased back a little and kissed her forehead, a butterfly-soft kiss. It startled her and she felt her already rioting emotions wrench at the tenderness of it. Passion she could handle. This tenderness was disturbing. Dominic continued pressing sweet kisses over her face, her eyelids, her cheeks, murmuring in Italian. The sound of it soothed her, moved her, and she knew she was melting under his care like wax under the sun.

His hands moved to her hips again and gently rocked her. The sudden burst of pleasure at the pressure of it was intense. Again and again he rocked her against him as she moaned. She was climbing toward orgasm again, rocking motion by rocking motion. She moved her hips helplessly, caught in the rhythm, seeking more of that delicious pleasure.

Dominic said in a low rough voice, "That's it, *cara*. Fly with me. That's it." He continued to guide her, his hands warm on her hips, his mouth planting kisses on her cheek and then her jaw. Then finally, he moved to her neck. He sucked there gently, his mouth closing over her pulse at the base of her neck. She moaned harder and said, "Help me. I need...more."

He muttered, “Yessss,” and then lifted her up. Tam felt the sudden probe of his cock at her entrance. He moved and the hard tip of him pressed inside her. She tensed and he paused.

He sucked in a deep breath as if in agony and said, “Relax, Tamara. It’s me. Relax and rock with me.”

His mouth pressed again to her neck and sucked a little harder. Tamara moaned. Yes, it was Dominic. Her friend Dominic. Annoying, beautiful, sexy, maddening Dominic. She relaxed and he thrust upward suddenly. With one hard stroke he stretched and filled her completely. It felt so good. Almost too intensely good. She clung to him desperately, gasping. The feel of his hard cock deep inside her was overwhelming. Then her power flared and she nearly lost her mind.

Her power brushed against his. They were both skating the edge of control and those little losses of it resulted in power spills. Each time his power touched hers, she felt a shock go through her. Not electrical, but close. It felt incredibly good, better than anything she’d ever felt. The desire to let go and share—to mingle power—was singing to her. Tempting her.

Dominic’s hands on her hips lifted her upward and then he slowly slid her back down. She arched, crying out at the hard length of his cock sliding along sensitive nerve endings. Again and again, she moved upward and then back down, squeezing and holding him deep inside.

He pulled back and looked into her eyes. As she moved down his cock again, he shuddered and muttered, “Marc, now or there’s no triad.”

Marc. Right. *Marc*. Tamara froze. She’d forgotten about him again. How in the world could she have forgotten him? When Dominic slid her upward again and back down the question was answered. She shook with pleasure and hunger and arousal. Her whole body trembled with it.

Dominic's hands on her hips tightened and then on the downstroke he paused, his rigid cock buried deep, and he held her absolutely still. When she tried to move up again, his hands held her captive, his eyes challenging her.

Marc was moving behind her. She could hear a wet sound, of... She sucked in a breath. Marc must have grabbed the bottle of lubricant on the bedside table. She turned her upper body back toward Marc and moved her head until she could see.

Marc was standing, his body tense, his hand moving over his hard cock, sliding, the wet noise loud in the silent room. Those chocolate eyes were hot, the lids lowered a little, the movement of his hand over his cock obviously bringing him pleasure. He stared at her, his mouth just barely turning up in a smile. He set the bottle of lubricant back down and teased, "You like what you see, *cher*?"

Marc leaned down and kissed her mouth suddenly, hard. His mouth devoured hers, driving all thought from her head. His tongue thrust into her mouth, probing, tangling with hers until she moaned. He jerked his mouth away suddenly, breathing hard.

Dominic touched one hand to her face, bringing it back to him. He trailed that hand down her cheek and neck and then covered her breast possessively. His eyes were black, something hot and dangerous moving in the depths of them. There was something in that look that felt more primitive and possessive than his cock buried so deeply in her core.

Marc trailed one finger down her spine slowly, kissing the back of her neck. Tamara felt like she was drowning. Dominic's fingers began to tease her aching nipple, his eyes still focused on her face, watching her. Marc's finger trailed down and dipped between her cheeks, teasing, probing gently, readying her. Eventually one finger became two.

Tamara trembled, the pleasure pulling at her control, her body aching to move. Marc probed deeper, fingers moving in and out in a slow, steady rhythm. She concentrated on relaxing into the sensation, into the dark forbidden pleasure of it. She

leaned forward, desperate, and took Dominic's mouth with a hunger that bordered on violence.

He met her lips with that same greed, responding, allowing her to take what she needed. His hand moved back to her hip and he flexed inside her, moaning. She kept kissing him, tasting him, the roughness of the kiss a heady contrast to Marc's teasing touches.

Suddenly she felt Marc slide his cock between her cheeks. He was slick and hard, teasing her with the head. She tensed even as she shook with excitement.

Dominic broke the kiss and trailed his mouth hotly down the side of her neck. He muttered, "Relax, Tam. Relax for him."

Marc's mouth moved from the back of her neck to the side. Marc kissed and sucked one side as Dominic kissed the other. Tamara felt tension coiling inside her and ached for more. Marc's cock moved forward, pressing and easing into her and she grabbed Dominic's shoulders hard for support, her nails digging into him as if to anchor herself, moaning long and low.

When Marc began to rock slowly, she gasped at the stretching fullness. Both men were inside her now and the pressure was intense. She shuddered, beyond any kind of coherent thought.

Marc slid forward all the way finally, very slowly, and then back again, carefully. He moaned as he moved, his mouth settling over the pulse pounding like thunder at her neck. His hands moved to her breasts and he played, the sensations pushing Tamara closer to the edge and causing her to tighten around Dominic's cock.

Dominic muttered something that sounded like a curse. He leaned back as Marc leaned forward, each of them angling their bodies to allow the other to move. Tamara braced herself, balanced between the two, too far gone to do more than moan in helpless pleasure as they moved.

Marc paused, letting Dominic set the rhythm, adjusting his movements so that the three of them moved as one. In and out of her both men moved, again and again.



Tamara sank into the pleasure completely, lost and completely staggered by the intensity of it.

She could feel power spilling out of her in waves, over and over, and was helpless to control it—not even wanting to try. And each spill of power caused an answering flare of power from the two men. Each time the powers touched, it jolted all three of them, until the pleasure was too great to separate from pain.

Tamara began to whimper helplessly. Just when she felt she couldn't stand another moment of the delicious torment, suddenly Marc's teeth sank deep into her neck, causing her to cry out. She tightened her grip on Dominic, feeling the strong pull of Marc's mouth, sucking her blood hungrily.

The three of them froze. Pleasure. Pleasure so thick and hot that it swept everything away hit her and she wavered, teetering on the edge of an orgasm, gasping, unable to move. Marc's power slammed into her full force and she reeled, stunned, confused, unsure what to do. And then some ancient instinct deep inside seemed to whisper seductively, "Open."

She opened for it, accepted it, accepted him, and his power flowed into her in a rush. It was unlike anything she'd ever experienced. He was flowing into her, the essence of him, the power of him and she was taking it, even as he took her blood. She could hear him in her head murmuring her name over and over with pleasure. He lifted one hand and placed his wrist against her mouth. She needed no further prompting. The hunger was like a living, breathing thing inside her now. She needed to feed. She bit and tasted the sweet, hot, metallic tang of his blood.

As she drew it into her mouth and greedily swallowed, her power spilled into Marc. He lifted his head, releasing her neck, crying out. His big body shook with the force of it and in that moment, two separate powers crashed, mixed and then became one.

Before Tamara could adjust to the wonder of it, Dominic's teeth sank into the other side of her neck. She braced unconsciously for the surge of power, even as she greedily

swallowed Marc's blood. There was no time to think or to separate sensations—there was only raw instinct now. Pain and pleasure. Hunger and sex.

She barely felt the suction of Dominic's mouth against her neck as his power hit her. It was too much. He was more powerful than she'd thought. She struggled to accept him. Marc pulled his wrist from her mouth and suddenly Dominic's wrist was against her lips. His pulse was racing, jumping.

She opened her mouth and sank her teeth deep. And then she opened wider inside herself, accepting him and finally, accepting the total power of him. As their powers clashed and then mingled, she sucked greedily. When at last he wrenched his mouth from her neck, she continued to suck, feeling the tremendous buildup of combined power and reveling in it. She felt drunk on power and pleasure and blood. He jerked his wrist from her mouth and she muttered, "No!" in protest.

Dominic's voice was guttural. "Lock, *cara*. Now. Do it now." He arched his hips, his cock pressing into her so deep.

Tamara closed her eyes and mentally began to build a lock. It was incredibly hard. She started with Marc first and reached for him within her mind. He was there and he helped her by staying focused, silently giving her the space and acceptance to lock his power in place within herself. His trust and understanding touched her somehow.

This man truly cared for her. The essence of the man was clear in her mind and in that moment the bonds of friendship strengthened even as she forged the lock. She heard his mental sigh of relief as the lock closed into place and a joyful, proud, "Way to go, *cher!*" that would have made her laugh at any other time.

She turned her attention to Dominic and felt a split second of fear. She reached for him, trying to trust, wondering if she could. She found him reaching back and was astonished at the strength and beauty of him. Dominic didn't just care for her. It went beyond that. Was it love? For a brief moment her soul touched his and she gasped at the fleeting sensation of utter joy, too stunned to understand what was happening. She jerked back from him in panic and cried out, "No!"

Dominic said, "Yes!" but it was too late. She was already moving away, back into herself, back into the power. Tamara focused hard, building a lock fast, so fast, anxious to get it in place. Dominic said nothing more, merely helping her as best he could. At last the lock was in place.

As the two men began to move inside her again, Tamara let out a long, low moan and felt her body shake. It was too much—the combined power filled her in a way she could never have imagined. The joy and intimacy of it were staggering.

The three of them shared the pleasure and the power, building it between them. It was triple the heat and triple the pleasure. Tamara felt the tension break and screamed as her orgasm hit her like a tidal wave. Wave upon wave followed, each just as intense as the last. She heard the groans of the men as their orgasms followed hers. And the pleasure became a nearly unbearable thing.

When the last of the waves receded, Tamara struggled to suck air into her lungs. Marc was collapsed against her back, but Dominic was breathing hard, staring at her with eyes that seemed to know too much. There was no going back. It was done. Three had become one.

Marc kissed the back of her neck and said with obvious regret, "I hate to mention this now, but Vanessa is close. I can sense the power of the other triad, can't you?"

"She's within a few miles. I don't want to move, but we'd better get ready." Tamara sighed and mentally tallied. On the plus side she'd just had the best sex of her life. The power lock was in place. They were strong individually, but the power of the triad was formidable now.

On the negative side, she had no idea if their combined power would be enough to keep them alive when they faced the other triad. The little death of orgasm might actually be followed by the big death. Damn. Trust reality to get in the way of great sex.

## **Chapter Five**

Tamara, Dominic, and Marc stood outside the house on the lawn, hastily dressed and ready for the confrontation. It was dark but the full moon shone brightly enough for them to see Vanessa climb out of the car. As she slowly approached the house, Carlos Diaz and Phil Gaytes followed in her footsteps.

Tamara's eyes were drawn immediately to her former fiancé. Time had changed him very little. He'd gained some weight, making his gangly frame more muscular, and there were a few lines on his face, but he was still the same nerdy, sweetly serious-looking guy she'd found so endearing years ago. Looking into his eyes, she noticed how empty and hard they were and felt nothing except overwhelming relief that she hadn't married him. And maybe some disbelief thrown in that she'd never seen past his charming façade to the politically grasping vampire underneath.

She mentally rolled her eyes at the stupidity of youth and turned her attention back to the evil redhead in front of her. Vanessa and the men stopped about fifty feet away. Facing the chillingly composed woman, Tamara was suddenly very glad that she'd formed a triad. If she'd faced these three alone, she'd have been toast.

The air was thick with tension as the two groups stared hard at each other. No one made any sudden moves. The night had gone still, and even the animals had enough sense to remain quiet. Hiding her fear, Tamara searched for something, anything, to say that would break the standoff. The silence stretched out and everyone's nerves stretched with it. The danger level escalated simply because the tension was too great. So Tamara cleared her throat and said the first thing that popped into her head.

"Vanessa, you've read too many vamp books and are starting to believe your own PR. That whole evil undead vamp thing was useful for scaring and confusing humans

but it went out years ago. There's no need for all this plotting and mayhem. Get with the program."

Vanessa's face showed no surprise but Tamara knew she'd caught the other woman off guard. Big time. She could feel the shock of the two men beside her, and could tell they were holding back laughter.

Vanessa's eyes turned mocking. "So I traveled all the way from the West Coast to hear this drivel. I suppose now I should turn around and head home after accomplishing nothing?"

Tamara shook her head. "No, you've accomplished something. I just had the best sex of my life and you stepped on my afterglow. I really hate it when that happens. I'm totally bummed out. Mission accomplished. You can leave now."

Vanessa sneered, "You're an idiot. Weak and flip and too squeamish to deal with your own kind. You're the perennial *nice* girl. I'm amazed you got through the three-way. We were sure you would back out. Phil and I have laughed in bed more than once about how frigid you were with him."

Tamara rolled her eyes. "You and Phil vastly overrate his charms. I was being cautious and not rushing into a vampire relationship."

Phil spoke up softly, his voice cutting, "We were engaged three months and you acted like a damn virgin on prom night the whole time. It turned my stomach."

Tamara felt Dominic and Marc stir beside her, but she sent them a cautioning glance. She looked Phil in the eye and spoke coldly. "Well, for some *odd* reason I just couldn't completely trust you, Phil, and when possible I prefer to have sex with someone I trust. Then I found out you were whoring for my mother. I felt like hurling a few times myself when I found out that little tidbit. Go figure."

Phil smiled but it never reached his eyes. "She wanted that alliance with my family badly. It would have been a profitable union for both families. Instead you acted like a child and ran away. I see you haven't changed much."

Tamara snorted. "You mean I acted like a grown woman who dislikes being used as a pawn for political gain by you or my mother. And I'm not sure why we're raking over ancient history here anyway. Thanks for the recap. Have a nice trip back."

Diaz spoke for the first time. "We're not here for any history lesson. We're here to kill you."

Dominic's voice was colder than Tamara had ever heard it. "Well that's a damn shame. I'm going to hate littering Tam's nice lawn with your ashes."

Vanessa opened her mouth to speak but abruptly shut it again. Suddenly she turned her head to the right and stared into the shadows of the woods. Whatever was out there clearly alarmed her more than the triad in front of her.

Tamara felt a huge jolt of unease and turned her head toward the woods as well, searching. Something was wrong. Very wrong. All of her primal instincts, initially focused on Vanessa and her gang, were suddenly shouting that the true danger was not here but out there. She scanned the woods as she said, "Dom, Marc..."

Dominic said softly, "I know. Something is out there. Something very powerful. And it's hunting us."

Vanessa gave a curt nod. "I can feel the power coming off of it. And it's not any kind of vampire power. This is...different. What the hell have you done?"

Tamara kept her eyes on the shadows. "We haven't done anything. And you're right. It's not a vampire. That thing is definitely something else."

Tamara hoped Vanessa would show some sense. Multitasking in this situation would be a bitch. She'd prefer to handle one threat at a time. And at the moment, the creature in the woods was a bigger threat. "What's it going to be, Vanessa? Do we deal with this threat together as vampires or do we kill each other before it can do the job?"

Vanessa clearly hesitated for a split second then agreed. "We're going to walk forward now until we're all standing to face this thing. Killing you can wait. Whatever this is, it's getting closer."

Vanessa moved until she stood next to Dominic. Phil and Carlos moved to stand next to her. The six of them stared out into the darkness, alert for any movement.

Phil said, barely above a whisper, "When I was a kid I heard stories about a slayer. Not one of our own hunters but a creature who kills powerful vampires. He's supposed to be of fey origin. Some kind of dark faery."

Tamara shook her head. "We've all heard those types of stories. But faeries aren't real. They're myths."

Marc spoke even more quietly. "Sure. Supposedly vampires are myths. But we're here and real. And so is that thing out there."

Suddenly Tamara heard the soft footfall of something behind them. She spun around just as the other vampires did the same. Standing in the distance was a man. Or at least something with the figure of a man. He'd circled around them so fast it had happened in a blink, which was really saying something. Getting the drop on a vampire wasn't easy. Getting the drop on six of them was downright impossible.

He was beautiful—so beautiful that it almost hurt to look at him. He raked a gaze over the group as he approached. His mouth moved into a slow smile. And in that moment Tamara felt cold black fear shudder down to her very toes. This thing wasn't human or vampire or anything else she'd ever known. Instinct told her she was facing something ancient and possibly immortal. It was fascinating and terrifying at the same time.

He waved a hand and the four male vampires froze in place instantly like statues. They were clearly breathing but it looked like they couldn't move at all. Tamara realized she'd been holding her breath and let it out slowly. She moved her hand, testing. She could still move. It looked like Vanessa could too. Vanessa had taken one step back and stopped. So he'd only immobilized the guys. Why?

The man spoke almost gently. "So much power and yet such primitive fear. You may relax. I have no plan to kill any of you tonight. I've come to offer either Vanessa or Tamara a gift. Only one of you may have it."

He turned his gaze from Tamara to Vanessa. "You seek power. You've dreamed of it. You've killed for it. And you've craved more, always more. I can give that to you, sweet girl. You have only to accept it. And me."

Vanessa swallowed hard. There was something pulling at her. Something dark and deep and greedy. He could give her power. Real power. The kind she'd always wanted. She didn't know exactly what he was but his words rang with truth. She hesitated. "In return for what?"

He shrugged. "You have only to reach out for it. I give it freely. If you accept it, you accept the pain of knowledge. A small price, that."

Tamara shook her head. His voice held the engaging lilt of Ireland. This guy might actually be a freaking faery. She felt something deadly and seductive reaching out to her, tempting her. A voice whispered in her mind. He was offering her more power than she'd ever dreamed. With that kind of power no one would dare to cross her or try to manipulate her.

The most painful memory of her life suddenly ran through her head. She was sitting alone in the dark, shattered and crying, after overhearing her mother and Phil discussing their plans. Her own mother had used her. What kind mother did that? What kind of love was that? And Phil, he didn't love her. He'd used her to try to unite the families. Her whole life people had either stayed away from her because of her mother's position or they'd tried to get close to her because of her mother.

She'd thought Phil was different. He'd seemed so different. She'd loved him. She'd actually dropped the humor and been vulnerable with him. It had been so hard to trust. And he'd tried to use her just like all the rest. He didn't love her. Never had. And her mother? This was the final inescapable proof. Her own mother didn't love her. Couldn't love her. She only loved power and her vampire politics. Tamara felt stupid and betrayed and used.



The overwhelming memory of that pain had her reeling inside. The voice whispered in her mind again. *Power is the answer.* With power, she could have it all. No more feeling like a pawn in other people's games. She could have whatever she wanted, any kind of life she wanted. Best of all, she could hurt anyone who had ever used her or tried to control her. She could destroy anyone. Anyone. She could make them suffer.

The thought brought her up short. No, absolutely not. Destroying people? Destroying lives? That wasn't who she wanted to be or what she wanted. She spoke up. "No. I don't need your help to control my own life. That's not who I am. Quit whispering in my damn head because it won't work. It will never work. Vanessa, don't do it. This is a load of crap. The pain of knowledge? He's talking in riddles."

In spite of her fear, she glared at him. "Nice try. Whatever you're offering, I'm not buying it. Fuck off, faery."

The creature stared at her with deadly calm. "How quickly you reject the only power to save your life—or the lives of your friends."

Tamara winced in acknowledgement. "I do want to save myself and my friends. But I won't strike a deal with you. I don't know what you are but I can feel that power reaching out to me. And it's not exactly benevolent. It's rooted in destruction."

The creature merely nodded. "Perhaps your own. Time will tell, won't it?" He turned to Vanessa. "Give me your answer."

Vanessa felt the seductive lure of his offer and yet she still hesitated. "I don't trust you. Who are you? *What* are you?"

He sighed. "You're growing tiresome. I've many names. Most call me Coir. But it hardly matters. I offer what you seek. Either you accept the gift or you don't. Time grows as short as my patience. Decide. Do you want the power or not?"

She could have the power she'd always dreamed about. She didn't trust this creature. Not one bit. She didn't believe for a moment that he'd give her a gift and expect nothing in return either. But it was so tempting. Her goal was within reach. She

could practically taste it. His eyes glinted dark as pitch and something in them suddenly had her shivering.

Fear. She felt real fear. It had been so long. The feeling was familiar and intolerable. Nobody scared her. Nobody made her this afraid or intimidated her. She felt vulnerable and the emotion threatened to bring back a host of memories.

Staring hard into his eyes, she tried to decide what to do. For a split moment her mind flashed back to herself as a child of fourteen, sitting alone as usual, shaking and crying. She'd felt unloved and unwanted. The entire world was like some secret club and no one had ever given her the codeword or the special handshake to make them like her. She fit in nowhere. She felt like nothing. Less than nothing.

When they bothered to notice her, the other kids had always ridiculed her and bullied her. They had laughed at her family. She'd come home from school and hidden in the corner of her father's study, silently crying and wondering why she could never make anyone like her. Not even her own father could stand being around her.

She hated him. She hated all of them. But someday it would be different. Someday she would have power. They would notice her then and they'd respect her. No one would hurt her. No one would mock her. Her body shook as the pain and fear melded and forged into hot burning rage. One day they would fear her. And they would all pay. They would pay for every drop of this pain.

No one would ever make her feel vulnerable or scared again. One day she'd have the power to make them sorry. One day she'd make sure they knew what it was like to be treated like worse than nothing. Whatever she had to do, whoever she had to hurt or kill, she'd do it. She'd get the power. And in the end it would be enough. Better than acceptance. Better than love. Better than anything.

Vanessa pushed the childhood memory from her mind and stared hard at the creature in front of her. Hatred ran through her all over again, hot and furious. He'd made her remember. And she hated him for it. The overwhelming need to kill him was

fierce and immediate. She stared at him, standing so dark and beautiful in the moonlight. And slowly, Vanessa's shaking hands curved into fists by her side.

She'd take what he offered. Whatever power he had, she'd get it from him in whatever way she could. And then she'd find a way to kill him. Slowly and as painfully as possible. She'd watch him beg. She nodded. "I'll take what you offer, Coir."

He nodded as if expecting that answer. "So be it. 'Tis done." In the blink of an eye he was gone. Just gone.

Vanessa felt incredible power slam into her, so much power, so much darkness, so much cold that the world went black.

The last thing she saw was a searing white light where he'd stood.

Tamara ran forward and cried out, "No!" but it was too late. The light blinded her. She shut her eyes in defense. When she opened them, all of the vamps were exactly where they'd been standing before Coir arrived. The men burst into action, rushing toward where the faery had stood. But not Vanessa. She was lying on the ground as still as death.

Tamara walked to Vanessa's prone body and tried to see if she was breathing. "Ah hell. What in the world—"

Vanessa coughed and raised her head weakly. "What was that? What happened?"

Tamara shook her head. "He hit you with a power bomb or something, I guess. I don't know. I'm not an expert on faeries. This is crazy."

Vanessa made an effort to sit upright. "He wasn't lying. He gave me power." Pure joy ran through her. She felt different, almost drunk. The creature had fulfilled his promise. She might be weak right now from that overwhelming slam of power he'd given her, but she could feel it deep inside, roiling like a dark, icy river. She needed rest. A lot of it. And maybe some healing. But after that? Well, she'd see just how far this

power would take her. In spite of the weakness of her body, she felt strong inside. No, she felt...invincible.

She flashed a warning look at Tamara, who shrugged and moved away to give her some room. Vanessa stumbled to her feet as Phil and Carlos quickly helped her stand. They seemed to be somewhat affected by her power surge too. Phil looked white as a sheet. Carlos' entire body was shaking. She turned to face Dominic, Marc and Tamara, wondering if they'd attack now that the threat of Coir was gone – and before she'd have time to recover.

Phil was obviously worried about the same thing. He said suddenly, "This is ridiculous. There's no sense in all of us dying." He turned to Vanessa. "We got here too late. They've already formed the triad. I prefer making money to fighting anyway. They can keep the East Coast territories and we'll keep the West. That's still a large chunk for all of us. I say we all walk away tonight."

Tamara tried to think it through. The faery thing had thrown them all off. There was no way to know exactly how powerful Vanessa was now. She looked shaky but it might be misleading. She knew Dominic and Marc must be weighing the next move too. Should they attack now? Or should they wait and find out more about the faery thing?

And what if Vanessa didn't choose to wait to attack? Just how powerful was she? How powerful was the triad now? Apparently Dom and Marc were thinking along similar lines because neither of the men said anything, merely waited for Vanessa's response.

Tamara held her breath. It was a chance only if Vanessa would take it. Maybe they could avoid the confrontation. They all might live tonight if Vanessa just cut her losses.

Vanessa smiled, already looking more controlled. She gave an abrupt nod. "Fine. Stalemate. You stay out of our way and we'll stay out of yours. Come to my coast and you'll be dead before you take two steps over the border. Believe it."

Tamara said tartly, "Agreed. But we'll be watching. You break any more laws, abuse either humans or vamps, and we'll hunt you. Believe that."

Phil turned to go. Tamara felt a wave of relief that his slimy ability to do the most politically expedient thing had actually worked to her advantage for a change. Vanessa and the male vamps walked to the car and then drove away. When the car was finally completely out of sight, Tamara let her shoulders relax.

Marc shook his head. "That was easy. Even with that...that...whatever he was. It was still too easy."

Tamara sighed. "Yeah. I know."

Dominic muttered something about finding and killing Coir. She looked at him and his face softened. He searched her eyes. "Marc is right. This isn't over. It won't be over until we kill Vanessa and the others. And we *will* have to kill them eventually. If not, they're going to kill us. You know that, don't you?"

She moved back from him but nodded. Weariness hit her and she ran one hand tiredly through her hair. "I don't want to do it but I'm realistic enough to know she's not going to let it go."

Marc said grimly, "I'll make some calls and check up on this Coir. Whatever we're dealing with here, we'll need to know."

Dominic said, "I'll do some checking, too." The words might have sounded mundane but the tone was pure steel. Dominic was pissed about being frozen in place, there was no doubt about it.

Tamara said, "Right. Good idea. But for now? I'm going to bed. It's been one hell of a day."

Dominic's big body tensed.

Tamara shook her head at him. "Let me amend that. I'm going to bed now. *Alone*. When I'm thinking clearer, I'll see what I can find out too. But right now, all I want to do is sleep."

Marc suddenly enveloped her in a hug. She pulled back from him in surprise.

He merely smiled. "*Cher?* In spite of all that went on tonight? Parts of it were fun as hell. I hope you think so too. I know that tomorrow I'll go back to teasing you and you'll go back to rolling your eyes at me. The sex won't happen again. But that's okay."

She started to speak but he put his finger to her lips and continued gently, "You're going to wake up in the morning and you'll wonder how to act around me. How to deal with what happened between all three of us and how to brush me off in a nice way. You don't have to feel uncomfortable or uneasy around me, okay? For one short time I was privileged to be your lover. And it was a helluva time. But before that I was your friend. That's the bottom line. I'll always be your friend."

Tamara smiled at him, oddly touched. He knew her better than she'd thought. "Thank you, Marc."

He nodded and kissed her cheek. "No, believe me, darling. Thank *you*." He winked. She laughed.

Marc turned to Dominic. "I'll wait in the car."

After Marc left, Tamara could feel Dominic's steady gaze on her. Giving up, she turned to face him. "I don't suppose you want to go back to being friends, do you?" It was a long shot but she had to ask.

Dominic laughed. He pulled her into his arms and kissed the daylights out of her. His lips pressed hungrily, his tongue seeking and finding hers. She responded without thinking, reeling from the onslaught. When he finally pulled back from her, they were both breathing hard.

She shook her head to clear it. "Listen to me. You're impossible. We're impossible. I don't want this. I don't want to get involved with you. You're a vampire. And a blasted political leader to boot. I'm not getting involved with you." She broke away from him and started toward her door. Her legs were shaking again. And not from fear this time. From sheer exhaustion and the aftermath of that kiss.

Dominic let her walk until she reached her porch. Then he said, "I hear you. I just intend to change your mind, sweetheart. You look exhausted. Get some rest. If you need anything, I'm at the hotel. Call me if you want. Or reach out to me if you feel like something doesn't seem right. Even if you just feel uneasy. You can draw power from both of us now. Don't hesitate to use it if Coir shows up again. I'll see you soon."

Tamara said wearily, "I will. I will. I'm going inside now. Good night." She went inside and shut her front door. She turned the lock and then leaned back against it limply. When she heard the sound of Dom's car leaving, she breathed a long sigh of relief.

It had been a quite a day. She'd dealt with her mother *and* her ex-fiancé, which was a big enough bummer any day of the week. She'd had fantastic threesome vampire sex and become the conductor in a triad. She'd rejected some kind of terrifying faery guy and had faced off with Vanessa's trio. Despite the outcome tonight, odds were good that she'd still have to kill Vanessa before Vanessa killed her. She was so tired that she could barely keep standing and her body ached in all kinds of interesting places.

Yep. It had been quite a day. Dominic and her love life—or rather, *sex* life—would just have to wait. She'd deal with him and the crazy way he made her feel later.

The memory of that kiss flashed through her mind again and washed over her. She closed her eyes in dismay as conflicting emotions followed. Dammit. Oh yeah, he could wait. But somehow she didn't think Dominic was the type to wait long.

## **Chapter Six**

Three days later, Tamara sat drumming her fingers on the arms of a chair in the hallway outside a boardroom. From the road, VPR Inc. looked like a hundred other corporate office buildings in the northern Virginia area. But it wasn't. She'd gone through eight levels of security to get to this hallway. There were two rather large hard-eyed vampire guards in pinstriped suits posted outside the shut door, staring at her suspiciously. The building might look all innocuous and corporate but the truth was straight vampire. People lost their heads in boardrooms across America probably daily. But in this boardroom it sometimes happened literally. She wasn't looking forward to going in there.

That phone call from Marc had woken her up bright and early this morning and she still felt grumpy and tired. She'd had some time for thought but not a lot. The three of them had been commanded to appear before the council to discuss the events from two nights ago. Oh joy.

Explaining the whole faery business was going to be interesting. She might as well tell them that Bigfoot or the Easter Bunny had shown up and whammied Vanessa. They weren't going to believe any of it at first. If she hadn't been there, she wouldn't have believed it either.

She ought to be less surprised about the concept of another secret society of nonhumans but she couldn't help it. Vampires were unbelievable to most humans, she supposed, but the two species had coexisted together for centuries. Vampires weren't that different from humans in some ways.

There was a lot of debate regarding the origin of the vampire but general consensus in the vampire community was that it was simply evolution. A random human genetic mutation had produced the first vampire and natural selection had taken hold from



there. The predatory craving for blood occurred only after full puberty and was tied directly to hormones. The greater healing abilities and strength were also just products of survival of the fittest.

As for the mind stuff? Well, there were flashes of that in human culture as well. Humans had their psychics and people with other extraordinary mental abilities. Even the vampire killing power was really just an extension of the human concept of pyrokinesis. A vampire literally used focused mental heat and burned the victim from the inside out much like spontaneous combustion. It was all logical. And even scientifically grounded.

But faeries? Geez. Faeries were another stripe entirely. Faeries weren't logical. They were all mystical and whimsical and crap. Maybe they did exist. The guy from the other night had certainly *felt* like she'd always imagined one would feel. A very scary faery. He definitely wasn't human or vampire. And he was certainly real enough. So she now had to open her mind to the possibility that faery myths, like vampire myths, might be rooted in fact. And that opened the question of other mythical creatures. Geez. With her luck a werewolf or a zombie would come knocking on her door next. No doubt the Loch Ness Monster would put in an appearance soon too.

The elevator pinged and the doors opened to reveal Dom and Marc. Despite the sudden onrush of anxiety, she plastered a smile on her face. She'd talked to Marc a few times but had managed to dodge Dominic like the plague for days now — no easy task.

She searched their expressions. Marc looked like his usual self with no sign of awkwardness or unease. Dominic looked normal too although there was something in his eyes when he looked at her that made her heart skip a beat. She stood up and wiped her palms together. "Hi. Looks like we have some explaining to do, huh?"

Marc shrugged. "It might be useful to talk with them. I'm coming up empty in the information department. It's possible that they may know more about the faery situation than we do. You can never tell just how much the council knows about what."

Dominic kept his eyes on Tamara, his expression unreadable. "None of my sources have had any luck tracing Coir so far. I'm still checking around."

Tamara ran a hand through her hair. "I haven't had much luck either. It would help if I knew how to spell his blasted name. Hearing it with that accent isn't the same as spelling it. And I don't even know if that's his first name or his last name. I ran a few internet searches and found some random things on faeries in general but there's almost too much information really. Most of the sites delve into mythology. There's a lot of absurd stuff out there and it's full of contradictions. It's hard to try to weed out any kind of solid information. How can we even know the difference?"

"Right now we can't." Dominic's voice was matter-of-fact. "All we can do for now is tell the council what we saw. I called your mother and asked if Vanessa would be here at this meeting today with us. She said that Vanessa and the others are all seriously ill and won't be able to attend. It sounds very convenient for them to me, but your mother told me that she has reliable verification. They made it back to the West Coast but they're really sick and no one seems to be able to figure out the problem. None of the doctors have a diagnosis. The three of them are holed up together and recovering at Vanessa's for now."

"Well, I guess that buys us some time in dealing with the three of them," Tamara said. "It simplifies things somewhat. But I'm still dreading the council's reaction. Faeries aren't exactly common knowledge. I feel ridiculous talking about it. Plus they may think we made this whole thing up in an effort to cover up something we did to cause Vanessa and the others to become sick. A lot of them will be nervous about our power anyway. I don't want them to have any excuses to try to get rid of us."

Dominic laid a hand on her arm. "Nothing is going to happen to you or to us. Whatever the reaction is, we'll deal with it."

The door opened and yet another guard stepped into the hall. "The council will see you now."

Gulp. Showtime. Tamara wiped her hands on her skirt and threw back her shoulders. She wiped all expression from her face. Rule number one in both vampire politics and swimming—don't bleed in the water. It tended to attract predators. Any sign of weakness would be a huge mistake with this group. She nodded to Marc and Dom. "I'm ready. Let's do this."

Tamara walked into the boardroom. She'd seen the room before, back in the days when she'd been curious about her mother's job, and the room hadn't changed much since then. The floor was hard expensive tile and her high heels made a loud clicking noise as she walked. There were two very long rectangular tables with the ends meeting to form a V. Seated along the outside of the tables and facing inward were the council members, all dressed for success and regarding her coldly.

She could feel Dom and Marc behind her as she made her way forward. Witnesses testifying before the council were required to stand between the tables as the focal point of the inner part of the V. It was deliberately intimidating, but then the entire room had the chilly ambience of wealth and power. It wasn't meant to be cozy or inviting.

To her right she saw a man dressed all in black standing casually relaxed by the wall. He was a vampire and a hunter, there to mete out the council's justice. She knew he had a sword in a sheath strapped to his back for dealing with vampires and a gun in his waistband for dealing with humans. He wasn't cozy or inviting either.

Tamara heard the guards close the main door behind them just as she reached her place. Dom and Marc stood on each side of her and it was reassuring to feel the warmth of them so close. She looked past everyone until she saw her mother seated at the top right of the V. There was no hint of warmth to be seen in her face, just a small flicker of acknowledgment and then that was gone too. The silence stretched out.

Her mother spoke first. "Vanessa Jameson, Phil Gaytes and Carlos Diaz were called but are unable to testify before the council. We'd like to know what happened on the night of May third. You may begin."

Tamara cleared her throat to answer but Dominic beat her to it. "We formed the triad as the council requested —"

One of the male council members interrupted. "Silence. I want to hear from the female. The injury to the other three occurred at her house." He turned his head slightly toward Tamara and those glacial blue eyes pinned her. "One of those injured is your former fiancé. Correct?"

He was already implying she'd been behind the whole thing. This guy was looking for a way to make it sound like she'd started the fight. Tamara chose her words with care. "Whatever happened to the others wasn't caused by anything we did. We formed the triad *like you asked*." She let those last three words sink in for a second and then continued, "Vanessa, Phil and Carlos came to my house shortly after that. They were uninvited and were going to try to kill us. They didn't get the chance to try though because —"

Sigh. Tamara hesitated. Here was the part that she was dreading. "Because as we stood in the yard outside my house about to fight them, something else showed up instead. We could feel power coming off of him and it wasn't any kind of vampire power. He wasn't human. And he wasn't a vampire. He was something else."

The man raised an eyebrow but showed no other response. Finally he said, "What do you mean?"

Double sigh. "His power felt entirely different. And his accent sounded Irish. He called himself Coir. He said he'd come to offer either Vanessa or me a gift."

She could tell by his expression that her interrogator wasn't going to let it go. This guy really didn't like her. At all. His alliance with Vanessa was obvious. But he was surprisingly open with his antagonism. One of her mother's enemies, no doubt. But what the hell was his problem?

Now that she thought about it she was pretty sure he was from North Dakota. And that he'd been panting after her mother about five years ago before her mother had

dumped him rather publicly in favor of another lover. Yeah, this guy sure didn't have the Turners on his Christmas card list. *Thanks, Mom.*

His voice was mocking. "You say he wasn't a vampire and he wasn't human. What was he exactly, Ms. Turner? A ghost perhaps? A leprechaun?"

Tamara kept her gaze and voice steady. "I have no idea. If I had to guess, I'd say he was a faery."

The guy smiled broadly, showing a lot of teeth. "A faery. I see." His voice remained overly serious but his eyes looked downright triumphant. "Are you aware of the penalty for lying to the counsel, Ms. Turner?"

The penalty? Oh yeah. That would be immediate death. By beheading. Courtesy of the dude in the corner with the nifty sword. A little hard to forget. Tamara said firmly, "I'm telling the truth."

There was total silence for a moment and then a murmur went through the crowd. Her mother said loudly, "Silence. Let her continue. You say he offered a gift?"

Tamara nodded. "Yes. He said we could have the gift of power. All we had to do was accept it and accept him. I told him no. Vanessa told him yes. Then there was a bright light where he'd been standing and suddenly he was gone. He just vanished. Vanessa fell to the ground unconscious. After she woke up, the three of them left. They looked very shaky but they were all alive—they didn't seem sick or mortally injured. Oh. And before they left, Vanessa advised us to keep out of the West Coast territories or they'd kill us. We told her if they abused any humans or vamps, we'd kill them."

Another round of loud murmurs went through the crowd. People were whispering to each other, some loudly while others more quietly. But there was quite a bit of talking going on.

Dominic said suddenly. "With the council's permission, I'd like to speak."

Her mother fired a warning look at the North Dakota vampire as if telling him he'd gone far enough. She nodded. "The three of you may talk freely."

Dominic stared at the council members unflinchingly. "She's telling the truth."

His gaze went directly to the North Dakota vampire. His voice remained soft but the menace underneath was unmistakable. "If you want to kill her, you'll have to kill all three of us. I stand by what she says. We stand by what she says." He stared at the vampire as the silence stretched out uncomfortably long. The hostility between the two vamps was palpable.

Then he returned his gaze to the rest of the council and continued. "That's what happened. We don't know if the creature was a faery. His power wasn't like ours. I don't know what happened to Vanessa and the others to make them sick, but she accepted whatever this guy offered. It's on her head, not ours. What we all need to consider is that he surprised six vampires—and held all four males immobile with his power while he offered his gift. We need to find out more about Coir."

Marc spoke up as well. "It's the truth. Faery or not, like it or not. What I'd like to know is have any of the council members ever heard of something like this? Surely if faeries exist there's been some hint of it through the years other than stories. Someone must know something."

One of the council member said, "Those are all campfire stories to scare small children. Ridiculous rumors of dark faeries. None of it is real. No one knows anyone who has ever actually disappeared or been killed by a faery."

Suddenly the oldest council member cleared his throat loudly. Tamara recognized him from some of the territory socials. He was from Georgia maybe. Or Florida. She couldn't remember exactly but she remembered he had a wonderful wit and he'd been kind to her. She also knew he was regarded very highly by the majority of the vampires, both East and West Coast. Whatever he had to say, they would listen.

He was old—very old—but his voice was deep and had the lyrical sound of the South. "Back years ago, there was an incident. I heard about it from my grandfather. He said one of the most powerful vampires in his territory vanished one day and was never seen again. The only thing they ever found out for certain was that he was last heard

talking with a mysterious stranger, a man who sounded Irish, right before he disappeared.”

Every person in the room remained completely silent as he seemed to stop for breath and then continued. “There were rumors that he’d been killed by a dark faery. My grandfather said that there were sometimes stories of faeries appearing in connection with the deaths of powerful vampire leaders even further back than that. He made me swear to never talk with one if I ever saw one and never accept anything from one. I was only fifteen years old at the time. I know most folks discount faeries as superstition or myth but he was completely serious. He made me swear on the life of my mother to have no dealings with them.”

What he said was pretty far out and scary but Tamara could have kissed him. His words had certainly made an impression on the other council members. There was silence in the room again but this time it was respectful.

Her mother finally spoke. “There’s nothing that we can do in this situation but search for information. I’d like the council to discreetly check into this Coir person. Faery or not, he may be a threat to all vampires and we need to know what he is. As for the situation regarding the two triads, a balance of power has been created. No more triads will be formed. The members of the triad who have fallen ill are in no position to create trouble. If either triad causes trouble, they will be dealt with at that time. These three can be dismissed.”

The North Dakota vampire objected. “I think there needs to be a decree first. If these three set foot in the Western territories, they’ll pay with their deaths. It’s the only way to keep the balance—keep the triads apart. The penalty will be the same for the West Coast triad if they enter Eastern territory of course.” He smiled at Tamara but there was an ugly smugness in his eyes.

Again there was discussion, some of it loud. Finally her mother said, “It’s time to vote. All in favor respond now.”

There was a chorus of “Yes.”

She looked at Tamara in warning but for once there was more than distance in her face. There was actually a flash of what might have been terrible relief or even love. It lasted only a split second and then she seemed to catch herself and mask it. "The decree is passed. None of you will enter the Western Territories. If you do so, I will order your immediate death."

She paused as her face grew hard and her voice became colder. "If you think you can rely on a personal relationship to the council, you are mistaken. No mercy will be given. If you think the enormous power of the triad makes you immune to decrees by this council, you are mistaken. The council will find a way to see justice carried out. We always have and we always will. Never doubt it. The other triad will be informed of the decree as well. You are dismissed."

Dismissed indeed. Tamara stared at her mother with more than a little irony and tried to keep her feelings from showing on her face. Nice seeing you too. I miss you too. I love you too. I really do. She sighed and turned away to go. *And by the way? I know you couldn't help it. But thanks a million for the death threat, Mom.*

Tamara, Dom and Marc left the boardroom. They stayed silent until they reached the sidewalk outside of the building. Tamara took a deep breath of fresh air and deliberately relaxed her shoulders. It smelled like it was about to rain. She glanced up at the sky overhead and noted the heavy clouds. Too bad she hadn't been able to find a parking place close. "That went well overall, I think. Better than I expected anyway. What's the name of the old man who just saved our collective ass?"

Marc smiled. "His name is Perry Chandler. He's from Georgia."

Tamara said, "God bless him. I've seen him at parties and I like him. But after the way he came through for us in there, I have to say that I really, really like him. *Lots*. I may marry him and have his child. "

Dom's mouth quirked in the hint of a smile. "I have to agree. Minus the marriage and childbearing part." He turned serious. "I'm not sure what else we can do at this



point other than continue to look into Coir. Vanessa and the others are too sick to cause trouble for now. But if they recover we may have a whole new problem to deal with. I'm not sure how much power they'll have. Or what kind. We need to know in advance."

Marc agreed. "I'm headed back home in the morning. I'll put some people on it but I'm planning on checking personally too. Somebody has to have heard of this Coir guy. I'll see what I can find out. I have a meeting next month here in Crystal City. I'll keep in touch by phone with you both until then."

Dom nodded. "I'm headed home soon too. I've got a lot of business trips lined up in the next couple of months that bring me back here to DC. All three of us need to stay in close contact. If we find out anything, we will let each other know. If we hear anything about Vanessa we'll have to act fast."

Tamara felt like groaning. She didn't like having the faery mystery hanging out there. And she sure didn't like the Vanessa problem hanging over her head either. But until they came up with some new information, there wasn't really anything they could do. "Okay. We'll all try to gather information and keep each other informed. It's frustrating but that's all we can do."

There was silence for a minute. Marc cleared his throat. "I'm heading to the car. Dom, take your time saying goodbye. I'll make some phone calls on my cell while I wait for you there." He turned to Tamara and grabbed her in a big hug. "Take care of yourself. And I'll see you next month."

Tamara smiled and hugged him back. "You too. Stay out of trouble."

He laughed. "Right. That could happen." Then he walked off.

Tamara gave a mental grimace. Dominic wasn't about to just hug her and walk off like Marc. She'd been avoiding him for days and he probably was none too happy with her at the moment. Time to deal with it. "Dom, I just want to say —"

Dominic stepped closer and put a warm hand against the small of her back. "Let's find some privacy. I'll walk you to your car."

Tamara fell in step with him, extremely conscious of the gentle pressure of his hand on her back. "Fine. What I need to say should probably be said with more privacy anyway." There weren't many people on the street around them but there were a few business types walking by and talking into cell phones or smoking cigarettes. Less people around for this discussion couldn't hurt.

They were silent until they reached the lot where she had parked. There was no one in sight. Everyone was inside the office buildings going about their regular day, she guessed. The isolation gave them more privacy but it also made her a little nervous too.

She hit the remote on her keychain, unlocking her car. Then she turned, ready to face him. Dominic walked right past her to the passenger side and got in. She raised an eyebrow a little but shrugged and got in as well. In the close confines of the car, she felt overwhelmingly aware of him next to her. To give herself time to think, she fiddled with the car keys and then just put them in the ignition without starting the car. She turned to face him and began nervously, "I think we need to get something straight..."

Dominic lounged in the seat next to her, his face calm but otherwise unreadable. He waited but she didn't continue. "You were saying?"

She took a deep breath. "I'm sorry for dodging you the last couple of days. I know it was rude. But I wanted time to think." She searched for his reaction but couldn't see one. So she plunged on ahead. "We're both adults. I know there's something between us. But I don't want any kind of relationship with you other than friendship."

He spoke gently. "Why? Talk to me, Tam."

She avoided his eyes then and stared out through the window in front of her. Rain was beginning to fall softly, oddly matching her mood. Big drops splattered on the windshield. "It's complicated. I don't want a relationship with someone in vampire politics, particularly a leader. Been there, done that. Got the Mommy issues to prove it. Basically, I don't need another relationship in my life where I always come second. I want more for myself. I deserve more."

She could sense Dominic's nod. The rain was coming down harder, the steady drum of it a little sad but soothing. "I know I'm stuck in the middle of politics now because of the triad. You guys brought the problem to me and the triad was my choice. But I don't want my life to be any more complicated than it already is. Can you understand that?"

There was nothing but silence. She turned until she was facing him again. He was regarding her steadily but there was a gentleness in his eyes when he spoke that surprised her. "I do understand that. But do you really think that we can go back to just being friends?"

"Marc and I have." Tamara wanted to believe it could be that easy with Dom.

Dom shook his head. "You like each other. There's affection between the two of you, but nothing that runs deep. It's easier between the two of you because there's nothing else strong enough there to complicate it."

He reached out and tucked a wayward strand of hair behind her ear. "It's not the same, Tam. I can't forget the feel of you or the taste of you. I'm not going to stop wanting more. And the truth is, you're not going to be able to stop wanting more either."

Tamara was very afraid that he was right. "Gawd. Why can't things ever be simple between us?"

Dominic smiled. "I don't know. We can't go back. And we're in a triad together. We have to deal with each other whether we're comfortable about it or not. Trust and time are the keys here. All I'm asking is that we spend some time together. A few dates. Nothing too traumatic. Casual fun. Maybe the attraction will burn out. Maybe it won't. We'll see what happens and take it from there, okay?"

The rain was falling hard now. She couldn't see out the window anymore. The windows were a little fogged. She thought about what he'd said but her mind seemed to be going in circles. Finally she shook her head ruefully. "I'm sure there are other arguments I could make. But I feel pretty drained from the council and I'm fresh out of

logic at the moment. The reality is we're sort of stuck together because of the triad and that means we have to work out some kind of relationship that we can both live with. But I'm capable of saying no if I don't like the direction we're heading. I guess a few casual dates won't kill me. That's all I'm agreeing to though. We'll see how it goes."

The rain fell hard against the car, making it seem as if they were in their own little cocoon. Tamara smiled at the thought, in spite of her tension. She felt Dom's hand cup her cheek and he exerted a gentle pressure until she faced him again.

He was close now, his lips suddenly a whisper from hers. He paused. "Forget about complications for a while. There's no one here but us." He kissed her mouth softly and then hovered over her lips again. "No other vampires." His lips brushed hers. "No politics." Another lingering kiss. "No faeries and no humans." A longer kiss this time, his lips pressing more firmly. "Just us. And the rain."

His mouth moved to the side of her neck and she suppressed a moan. Oh man. He worked his way down to that sensitive spot at the base of her neck and sucked gently. The pleasure of it made her muscles go weak and somewhere south, parts of her began to ache. He lingered, taking his time, and she felt like she was drowning in sensation. The sound of the rain, the warm moist pressure of his mouth, the gentleness of his hands, all of them wove a seductive spell around her. She let go a little and put her arms around his body, leaning into him. The small move seemed to set something off inside him because his mouth suddenly pressed harder. His right hand trailed down to her breast, barely skimming it, a light teasing touch. She moaned aloud this time.

Dominic's hand continued downward to her stomach and then to her thigh. Even through the business suit she was wearing, she could feel the heat of his hand. Every nerve seemed to come alive under his touch. Her head fell back and she tightened her hold on him. He continued kissing her neck and his lips lazily wandered to the vulnerable skin in the V of her blouse. The feel of his mouth pressed between her breasts made her nipples tight and hard. Her heart pounded and she wondered if he could feel it. He probably could.

Some hazy part of her brain stayed utterly focused on his hand. It roamed to her knee past her skirt and then reversed to slide under it. His fingers traced upward with agonizing slowness along her sensitive inner thigh to the top of her stocking. Without thinking, she parted her legs a little more. She couldn't move much because her skirt was fairly tight. But she was wet and aching for his hand to touch her sex. She wanted him to slip those fingers under her panties and bring her some relief from this ache. She needed it.

He pulled his hot mouth from her chest and looked into her eyes. His fingers teased further up her thigh. Tamara held completely still. He was so close to her panties now that she was ready to scream in frustration. He dipped the rough tip of one long finger under the lacy edge and paused. The tension was unbearable. She looked down and saw his hand between her legs. The intimacy of it rocked her. Really rocked her. She sucked in a breath and looked back to his face. He was watching with dark intense eyes and an expression that looked like he wanted to eat her alive.

There was a knock on the window. Both of them froze for a split second and then they sprang apart. The windows were fogged so it wasn't possible to tell who was knocking. All Tamara could see was the shape of a person. She sat up straight and pulled down her skirt, aware that her face was hot as fire. Geez. Just like a couple of teenagers busted for necking in a public parking lot. How embarrassing was that at her age? *Please gawd don't let the person knocking on the window be my mother.* That would cap things off nicely and make her day complete.

She turned the key in the ignition and rolled down the window. She saw with some relief that the person standing there was a middle-aged guy in a business suit holding an umbrella to ward off the rain. She could feel his power and knew he was a vampire. She should have felt his presence earlier—they both should have—but they'd been a little, errr, distracted.

His eyebrows rose a little when he saw her face but he merely said, "I'm glad I found you before you left. I have a message from my father, Perry Chandler. He would

have spoken with you before you left the boardroom but couldn't do it discreetly. He has something that he'd like to loan you."

Tamara knew her surprise must be showing. "Loan me? Listen, I really appreciate your father speaking up in there. I'd like to thank him. Why don't you get in the car out of the rain and we'll talk?"

The man shook his head. "Thanks anyway. I need to get back to him. He's not in great health these days and I help whenever and however I can. I need to get back to the boardroom before the council session resumes. He sent me to try to catch you and give you this."

His hand went to his pocket. He leaned forward closer to the window and reached toward her. She held her hand out, unable to see what he was giving her as he slipped something cold and hard into her hand. It was roughly shaped like a sphere and not much larger than the size of a quarter. She closed her fingers around it instinctively even as she asked, "What is it?"

He said quietly, "It's an ancient talisman. His grandfather gave it to Dad, but Dad didn't think the council should know about that. He's loaning it to you. He says it will protect you from faery magic. You can give it back to him after you next see Vanessa. And he said to tell you that she may be sick but her kind doesn't die easily. She'll be back. Stay alert and keep the talisman with you at all times."

Tamara kept her hand closed around it tightly and nodded. When Perry's son began to move away from the window, she said, "Wait!"

He stopped. "Yes?"

She said, "Do you believe this thing will really work?"

He seemed to think about it. And then he shrugged. "I believe in my father. The real question is, do you believe it will work? Good luck, Ms. Turner."

She said, "Thank you. Please tell your father thanks too." He nodded and walked away.

She turned to Dominic and said, "Life just keeps getting stranger."

Dominic smiled. "What exactly did he mean by talisman? Is it an ancient necklace or a sacred cross or what?"

Tamara opened her hand and held it up. She looked at it silently. And then studied it closer. "It looks like a rock."

She blinked. "Okay. " She blinked again. "My ancient talisman is a plain reddish brown rock. It's pretty. And I'm sure he means well." She tilted her head. "But yeah. It's still a rock."

She looked back at Dominic and said weakly, "Well. Isn't that super. One of the most powerful vampires alive plans to kill me. But now I'm armed with this handy dandy loaner anti-faery magical rock. I feel so much better. Yep. My day is complete."

## **Chapter Seven**

Dominic hung up the phone and muttered a few choice Italian curses. He glanced at the clock and realized it was already past seven in the evening. He'd been in the office since five this morning. Everyone else had already left. He ran his hands over his face. His eyes were tired. Hell, his brain was tired. And once again, he'd come up empty regarding Coir. It had been two long months since the council meeting and yet no one could find out anything about the guy. It frustrated him beyond belief.

Dominic thought back to that night when Coir had waved his hand and somehow held him immobile. He'd done it so casually. Every muscle in Dom's body had been screaming with the effort of trying to move. And yet he'd had to stand there and do nothing. All he could do was watch helplessly as Tamara dealt with that...thing. He didn't know if Coir was a faery and really didn't care. All he knew was that Coir had held four grown vampires motionless for several minutes with just a careless wave. It was hell on a man's ego. But all ego aside, it was a lot more than that. Coir was a threat to Tamara.

Everyone had a weakness. He needed to find out what made this guy tick. And then he'd find a way to deal with him. He didn't want him anywhere near Tamara again. It made his blood run cold just thinking about it. He tilted his head back and rolled his shoulders, trying to ease the tension from stiff muscles.

It had been a long day. He'd put in a lot of them lately. He'd been working overtime trying to keep on top of things. Most of his spare time had been spent either with Tamara or trying to get information on Coir. He'd put members of the extended family on it but so far they'd come up blank. He'd been through three of the top detective agencies in the country and they'd found nothing either. All he had to show at



the moment for his efforts was a hefty bill on his desk from the last agency. Glancing at it again, he grimaced. Well, he could afford it at least.

He was a wealthy man and knew he was lucky to be born into a family with both money and privilege. But the money wasn't really that important to him. He'd started his first job at sixteen in the mailroom of his pop's capital venture firm. He'd worked his ass off to learn the ropes and work his way up. It was important to take care of his family. It was important to him to continue his father's legacy. And he enjoyed the competitive challenge of running several different businesses.

But he knew that contrary to popular belief, money really couldn't buy everything. It could do a lot to make life more comfortable and he knew that from firsthand experience. But all the money in the world hadn't mattered a damn to Dom when his father had lain dying in that hospital bed. He'd trade every last dime he had to have one more day with him. Just one more day.

A knock on the door made him jerk in surprise. He'd been so tired and lost in thought that he'd ignored his senses. There was a vampire on the other side of the door. He sat up straight as the door opened and his youngest brother, Paul, came in. Paul was smiling and it lifted Dom's mood a little. He couldn't help smiling back. Everyone smiled around Paul. He was the carelessly easygoing brother, always making people laugh.

"Dana's seat is empty and her computer is off. I figured I'd just knock and barge on in unless you were on the phone." Paul noticed his brother looked tired. He took a seat in front of Dom's desk and leaned back. "Are you done for the day?"

Dominic ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah. I've done all I can. I'm pretty beat. I think I'll call it a day."

Paul said, overly casually, "I hear you're working overtime these days. When you're here, that is. Seems like you're spending a lot of time in DC lately."

Dominic chose his words carefully. He wasn't fooled by the casual tone but went ahead and matched it. "Business has been good. I've had a lot of meetings in DC. I closed another deal with Winnaker last week."

Paul nodded and suppressed a smile. "Congratulations. Joe says you're trying awfully hard to close on a pretty blonde in DC, too."

Dominic sighed. Their brother Joe couldn't keep a secret if his mouth was glued shut. He shook his head. "Joe has a big mouth."

"Yeah. He does." Paul gave up and openly laughed. "I was talking to him the other day and he told me you were seeing Tamara Turner. And he said that when he was at your house and used your phone, he actually saw the word *Tamara* doodled on a memo pad and circled about twenty times. Did you draw little hearts around it, too?"

"Forget about it." Dominic rolled his eyes. "If you've come here to give me a hard time, you're gonna have to do better than that."

Paul grinned. "But it's rare that I get the chance to really bug you about a woman. You're usually so private. By the time I find out you're dating somebody, they're history. This is a big moment for me. Don't ruin it."

Dominic picked up a paperclip and threw it at his brother, hitting him in the chest. "Cut it out. She's a friend. You know that."

"Oh sure. A friend. I get it." Paul nodded. He picked up the paperclip and tossed it back, hitting his brother in the arm. "Maybe I should check your desk. Are you sure you don't have a touching ode to her eyes written down somewhere? How about a small poem? A haiku even?"

Dominic groaned. "We're seeing each other. End of story. Don't you have someplace you need to be? Anywhere other than here?"

"Yeah. I need to go home. But Sherry told me to get all the good stuff from you before I did. She's waiting on pins and needles to hear." Paul grinned. "She was starting to lose hope that you'd ever settle down. I love the woman, but she's relentless when it comes to details. I'm supposed to find out how long you've been dating and how

serious is it and whether you're exclusive." He laughed. "Besides, it's so much more fun to stay and torment you. Why would I leave?"

"Two months. Yes. And yes. And you should leave in order to keep me from strangling you. Bye bye. Goodnight. Too bad you can't stay." Dominic shook his head. "Remind me to smack Joe in the head next time I see him."

Paul cocked his head and really looked at his brother. Dominic always worked hard and played hard, though he rarely showed it. But he looked worn out and even a little depressed tonight. Fun was fun but it was time to get to the real purpose of his visit. "You look tired, Dom. I'm enjoying giving you a hard time about Tamara, but I have to ask. Are you sure you're okay? Is there something more going on?"

Dominic hesitated. Normally, he kept a lot of stuff to himself. He loved his brother and trusted him completely. But he wasn't sure how much he wanted to say. Paul must have heard about the triad by now. He debated a moment and then finally told Paul the short version about the triad, the council, Vanessa and Coir. Paul's expression went from thoughtful to grim to worse.

When Dominic finished, Paul said flatly, "Whatever Coir is, we need to find him."

Dominic nodded. "Exactly. I've done everything I know how to do. I've spent a lot of time and a lot of money. But the guy is a shadow. There's nothing out there. I can't get a line on him anywhere."

Paul tapped his finger absently on the chair. "I'll see if I can turn up anything. In the meantime, it's good that you're sticking close to Tamara. Vanessa will be back. That's for sure. And I don't like that guy showing up out of the blue at Tamara's house either. She's a good lady. She came up to me after Pop's funeral to offer her condolences and talked with me and Sherry for a while. She was teary-eyed and trying to help as best she could. Offered to sit with the kids to give us some time alone. We turned her down but still it was nice. I like her."

Yeah Dom liked her, too. A lot. He tried to hide his expression but Paul was too observant and knew him way too well.

Paul leaned back in the chair and smiled again. "Ha! I saw that look! I can't believe it!" He started laughing. "You really are hung up on her. Oh man. This is great."

Dominic groaned. "Let's not go there again."

Paul looked up at the ceiling. "The man never learns. I'm his brother. If he tells me *not* to go there, then I have to go there." He looked back at Dom. "Sherry is going to demand to know if you've soul bonded."

Dominic sighed. "I'll answer if you agree to shut up about it."

Paul gave an exaggerated sigh. "Okay, okay. I can tell I've pushed you far enough. Now give it up."

Dominic tried to figure out exactly what to say. "Well, we've soul touched and hell, I don't know. How am I supposed to know? Every time two vamps have sex they touch souls a little. It's always just part of the fun. But this was...different. It was more. I can't explain it. I've never soul bonded. How am I supposed to know the difference?"

Paul eyed his brother a long moment and then stood up to go. "Believe me, you'll know the difference." Because his brother looked so utterly confused, he tried to put it into words. "It's not about the sex exactly. With Sherry, we had touched souls before, but there came a moment when it felt like, like, well, almost like being inside each other. Like there wasn't just me or just her, but that there was one us. Permanently. When it really happens, you'll know."

Dominic raised an eyebrow. "Now who's turning poetic?"

Paul grinned. "Just wait. You'll find out." He turned to go but half turned back. "Keep me posted. And I'll let you know if I find out anything. In the meantime I'll go away and quit bugging you. Just promise you'll call me if I can help."

Dominic smiled. "Thanks, bro." Paul gave him a wave and Dominic watched him walk out of the door. He waited and listened. He knew his brother very well too.

Within thirty seconds he heard Paul say loudly, "It's so sad. He'll never learn." And then he sang out as he walked away down the hall, "Dominic's in loooooove. Dominic's in looooooooooove."

Dominic dropped his head onto his desk and laughed until his shoulders shook. Then he yelled back, "Hey Paulie? Bite me!"

## **Chapter Eight**

Vanessa arched her naked back and closed her eyes. She felt wonderful. It had been a rough couple of months, she mused, but her strength had returned. She was strong now, stronger than she'd ever been. And the delicious extra power was running through her. She could feel it.

She'd been worried when they'd gotten so sick. They'd barely made it back from the East Coast to Vegas that night. Whatever Coir had done to her had zapped every bit of her strength and sucked the power from Carlos and Phil too. All three of them had lain unconscious for eight solid days. At least she'd been alert enough to call her doctor before she passed out. He hadn't been able to do a thing to wake them but at least he'd kept them hydrated and alive.

It had been a strange and slow road to recovery. At first she'd felt tricked. The faery had tricked her and taken her power, leaving her deathly ill. But then she'd felt the first inkling of power coming back. And then more. And more. Until finally it flowed inside her like a raging river. Stronger than ever before. Stronger than she'd ever dreamed. It was almost time. It was almost time to make them all pay. She had to be patient. Surprise was the key. Timing was everything.

Speaking of timing. She felt the hot moist lick of Carlos' tongue into the soft folds of her sex, distracting her. She raised her head a little. "You have to stop." She watched lazily as Carlos' head kept moving between her legs. He was particularly good at making her come this way. In spite of his annoying personality, he was useful in the bedroom. And he was particularly good at this little game. She arched her back again, gasping, pressing hard against his mouth. "I said stop. I can't. Stop it. Ohgawd. Stop."

He sucked on her clit and ran his hands over her breasts, pinching her nipples. She moaned and bucked. Almost there. Almost there. Just a little harder. Just a little more.

She grabbed the bedsheet in her fists, clenching tight. "I said stop. I don't want this. Ohgawd. Stop. No!"

Carlos laughed a little and then moaned against her sex, the throaty vibration making her moan and shake. She struggled, hitting him with one fist, and managed to catch the side of his head. He gave a grunt of pain and his hands moved to her wrists, pinning them roughly to the mattress. He was physically strong and she couldn't lift her hands. He raised up over her quickly and rammed his cock into her long and deep in one hard thrust.

She screamed, "Yes!" as pleasure so intense it bordered on pain washed over her. She arched even harder against him, the pressure against her clit sending electric shocks of pleasure every time. He pulled out and then slammed into her harder. And harder. Repeatedly. He bit her neck and sucked but the small pain was drowned out by the thrill. She bit him back, sucking greedily. Hot salty blood filled her mouth and she swallowed down as much as she could.

Suddenly Vanessa felt her soul reaching for his and knew what was coming. She tried to recoil but it was no use. Their souls collided. It was like hitting a wall in a sense. This was no gentle brush of souls. There was nothing gentle about it. Their souls slammed together as roughly as their bodies. The pain of that impact made her cry out. Pleasure and pain mixed until she couldn't tell one from the other. Then she came long and hard, screaming until her throat hurt. Carlos gave a shout and poured into her. When it was over she lay there with her eyes closed a minute. She was breathing hard.

Finally she raised her head and looked at Carlos. He was smiling at her with smug greedy eyes, looking ready for round two. He enjoyed their mock fighting almost as much as she did. Maybe more. It was a game between them, nothing more. They both knew that if she'd really wanted him to stop, she could have killed him in a heartbeat. She was more powerful than he was and her temper wasn't always easy to check. It was a dangerous game. But the rough edge of danger only added to the turn-on for both of them. Carlos seemed to find the possibility of death during sex strangely arousing.

If it fed his ego to overpower her and make her come, she didn't care. She got off on it. Let him think what he liked. She got what she wanted, which was a great orgasm. And since she scared the shit out of him outside of the bedroom, he could play at being the big strong conqueror in bed all he wanted. As long as it pleased her.

She heard a rustle and looked to her left. Phil was sitting in the chair by the bed, fully dressed and reading the newspaper. Their sexual antics hadn't distracted him one bit. He's seen it all before, had played her game many times, and wasn't interested anymore. He looked bored.

He glanced up suddenly. "Are you done? Are you finally ready now to talk about the plan for Tamara and the others?"

She smiled. "Yes, I am. I told you. We need the element of surprise. You need to quit whining and learn patience. But yes, I think it's finally time."

Vanessa dreamily let the image of Tamara's death fill her head. It wasn't just that Tamara was in the way of her goals. There was something about the woman that made her incredibly angry. Tamara was that stereotypical perfect nice girl next door. Everything always came so easily to her. No doubt she'd probably been the fucking prom queen in high school. From the top of her blonde head to the soles of her feet, she didn't have one clue about the real world. She'd been protected and fawned over her whole life. Everyone loved sweet perfect little Tamara.

Pure rage reared up inside and Vanessa shoved it away. Patience was the key. There was a time for rage and a time for planning. Now was the time to plan. But she gave in to temptation and let the images of a pathetic and begging Tamara fill her head.

Once they killed her, the triad would be broken. Dominic and Marc would fall like dominoes. Vanessa slowly sat up. She had some decisions to make. Should she kill Tamara outright or take some time to enjoy it and really torture her first? She closed her eyes dreamily one last time. Sex with Carlos was fun. But torturing Tamara? Now that would be even better.



\* \* \* \* \*

Tamara shook her head at Dominic. She saw him smiling at her and couldn't stop the answering smile on her lips. "I like you like this."

He raised an eyebrow. "Like what?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Relaxed. Just being yourself. You can be so intense and mysterious and all Dracula. I don't mind that. But I kind of like it when you just chill with me, too." Suddenly she became self-conscious about how silly that probably sounded and looked away.

He grinned wider. "Hey Tam?"

She looked back at him.

He said with emphasis, "I'm glad. I like you, too."

She turned her head away quickly and changed the subject. "I can't believe you brought me to a twilight picnic in the woods."

He laughed. "And why not? You love it here. I knew you would."

A slight breeze ruffled her hair and she tucked the strand behind her ear. They were relaxing on a blanket next to the lake and it was beautiful. "I suppose it's because you're just so...New York. I figured you'd be out of your element in the woods, but you're not."

"Well, we do have mountains in New York." Dominic shrugged. "My family used to take these trips about every other year. The three of us kids were jammed in the back of the car. Pop, he hated driving and rarely drove in the city, but it was like a point of honor with him when it came to those mountain trips. Antonio Raffaelo Garcione would not be defeated by a mere piece of metal. He was determined to prove he was a good driver."

He chuckled. "Then he would threaten to pull the car over and stake us every twenty miles or so for fighting and distracting him." He shrugged and grinned. "You know how my dad was. When he got emotional he'd lapse into this long burst of

Italian. I think we learned most of the language in a car at sixty miles per hour on Interstate 87."

Tamara laughed. "I can see you and Joe and Paul in the backseat shoving and bickering and driving him crazy on a long car trip. Your poor dad."

Dominic grinned. "Yep. We all had fun once we got there though. Fishing and hiking. And of course, he taught us lessons about predators and prey and survival in the midst of it. I have really great memories of the mountains." He looked out into the distance, over the placid lake to the trees beyond.

Tamara saw the sudden sadness on his face and remembered that he'd lost his father last year. She had attended the service. The memory of Dominic sitting there at the funeral with his brothers, his body stiff and straight despite the anguish in his eyes, tugged at her heart. She covered his hand with hers. She said softly, "I'm sorry. You miss him, don't you?"

"Thanks. Yes, I do. It sneaks up on me at times just how much." He turned his hand over and laced their fingers together, squeezing gently. His face changed and he laughed. "I can't see your mother taking nature trips."

Tamara dissolved into laughter. "Noooo, Mother doesn't enjoy the woods. She's metropolitan through and through. Doesn't like the quiet or the lack of amenities. And of course it's so undignified for the high ruler to fall flat on her face over some log that has the mistaken gumption to trip her up. She can't threaten to kill it."

He laughed but then hesitated. "*Cara*, she won't be here forever. We're so physically strong that I think vampires forget that sometimes. We start believing we're immortal or something when we're not. There are a lot of things I wish I'd said to my father before he died. I don't want you to have the same regrets."

"I know." Tamara sighed. "I love her, Dominic. I really do. And I know she loves me. We're just very, very different. It's complicated."

Dominic gave her a questioning look. "And the engagement to Phil?"

Tamara pulled her hand out of his but held his gaze. "It was a long time ago. I really have forgiven her, even though it still annoys me sometimes to think of how stupidly I fell for it in the beginning. She made a bad mistake and I think she knows that. But it was the final straw. There was a whole lot of hurt there already, even before the plot with Phil."

Dominic nodded. "It must not have been easy growing up as the daughter of the high ruler of the council."

She never talked with anyone about her mother, other than very superficially or jokingly. Everyone knew the topic was off-limits. Tamara searched his face and saw only compassion and interest there. She said slowly, "Well, it was unique. I spent most of my time alone actually. Not many families wanted their kids to get close to me and risk offending the high ruler in some way. On the other end of the spectrum, I learned early and quickly that there were a lot of users in this world. But it wasn't a terrible childhood or anything like that. Just an unusual one."

Dominic said gently, "I want you to know that I wasn't criticizing you, Tamara. I respect your mother a lot but—no offense—she's not exactly warm and nurturing. I can understand that your relationship with her is complicated."

Tamara shrugged. "Mother is larger than life. An incredible woman. Smart and focused. She's done a lot of good in her position for an awful lot of people. But I always knew that politics were everything to her. Or at least, that felt like the most important thing. I was always lower on the priority list."

She hesitated and then said, "I think I had to get some distance from her for a while to see more clearly. It's only in the last few years away from the family that I've begun to realize a few things. Maybe she hasn't had a whole lot of choice in some ways. She had responsibilities not only to the Turner family, but to all the families. I wasn't the only one depending on her. As a kid, that was hard to understand though. Now I can understand it, even though I still resent it at times."

She shrugged and flashed him a look. "Becoming part of a triad recently has changed my perspective a little, too. Sometimes in life we do things because we can make a difference. The right choice isn't always simple or even fair. Things are different for me now in a lot of ways. Even though it's been quiet so far, the triad has forced me to think about the future. I have a responsibility to the triad and to the council, not just to myself. If I ever have a child, figuring out how to balance those responsibilities will be harder."

She realized just how openly she'd been talking with him and searched for a way to lighten the mood. She gave him a flirtatious smile. "Of course, there have been some major benefits to this whole triad thing."

He laughed and reached for her hand again. "Ahhh yes, I've heard of this great triad, enforcer of the council laws. Vampires far and wide talk about it in fearful whispers."

His face turned serious. "Tell me—has anything else changed in the last three months, *cara*?" He brought her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to her wrist.

She felt her heart rate jump and suddenly found the air thick with new tension. She swallowed and attempted a teasing reply. "Umm...yes, I've been dating one of my own kind. He has this intense Drac vibe at times but he's actually a very fun guy. He even takes me on cool picnics."

He caressed her hand with his thumb and opened his lips against her skin, sucking gently. She held back a moan, feeling lightheaded.

Dominic raised his head and stared at her with hungry eyes. "You're so beautiful, Tamara. I can't forget that night."

Her mind flashed to his body against hers, his cock filling her, how good it felt. She trembled and said huskily, "Ohgawd, Dominic. Neither can I."

He released her wrist and she felt the warmth of his arms wrapping around her. He bent his head and brought them lip to lip. The contact sent her spinning. She moved closer, aching for more. Again and again, his mouth moved against hers, tasting,

teasing. She swept her tongue along his bottom lip and heard him groan. His arms tightened and his tongue snuck between her lips and stroked against hers.

For Tamara, time stopped. Her world narrowed to him, to what he was making her feel. Her nipples tightened and they ached for his touch. When he cupped her right breast, she moaned louder. It felt so good. His thumb circled the hard nub again and again, toying with it through her shirt. She let her hand drift from his back forward and down to his thigh, eager to touch him too. Muscles rippled and tensed under her fingers. She touched his hard cock through his jeans. He broke the kiss and she gasped, breathing hard.

He said roughly, "I want you more than I've wanted anything or anyone in my life."

But then his hand stilled abruptly and he tilted his head, listening. Tamara instantly removed her hand. She went on alert and strained to hear whatever had caught his attention. Although things had been quiet in the months since they'd faced off with Vanessa, they were aware that it could all change in an instant.

Tamara listened and waited but there was only the silence of the night around them. Nothing. And then, she heard the slight rustle in the trees over to her left. A twig snapped. She couldn't feel any power out there yet but it might not be in range of her senses. Her concentration wasn't exactly great at the moment. Geez. Could it be Vanessa? Or worse – was the freaking faery back?

She moved back from Dominic and they both waited, ready to deal with the danger. Tamara searched the trees, zeroing in on the intruder. It might be an animal, but it was hard to tell. The moon had gone behind a bank of clouds and not even her acute vampire vision was much help. She caught a whiff of something but couldn't place it. Animal maybe, but what? She heard the faint sound of a rapid heartbeat. Whatever it was, human or animal, it was close now.

Dominic and Tamara turned toward the sound, waiting. A feral cat broke through the tree line. It was hard to say who was more surprised. The animal caught sight of them and stopped, instantly baring its teeth. It hissed.

Dominic said flatly, "Beat it, pussycat. Your timing sucks. I'm not amused." He bared his fangs.

The cat turned and ran for its life. As she watched it flee in abject terror, Tamara grinned at Dominic. "He was upwind and didn't catch our scent. I guess you showed him not to stumble into the wrong clearing, tough guy."

Dominic's face broke into a sheepish grin. "Well, his timing did suck."

Tamara agreed with that sentiment wholeheartedly. "You got that right. He must have been attracted to the food." Thunder rumbled in the distance. Mingled relief and disappointment filled her that the mood had been broken. She wanted him, but she was still leery of getting too involved with him.

Dominic smiled at her. "I know. It's about to rain. We need to repack this stuff and get back to the car so that I can take you home. You have an early appointment at the gallery tomorrow. And I have a plane to catch, too." He pulled her close, wrapping his arms around her again. Then he leaned down and brushed his mouth over hers gently.

Even that quick touch had her tingling all over again. Her heart ached and she realized she missed him already. Things were getting complicated.

Dominic gave her one last lingering hug and then released her. He said simply, "I hate to go. I'll be back soon, *cara*."

She couldn't decide if those words were a promise or a threat. She bent to pick up the basket and thought it over. She'd agreed to see him on a dating basis and they were both enjoying it. She could handle him. There was no reason to get confused or twisted up inside. She knew how to play it smart. She just needed to remember to keep her head on straight and not get in too deep with him. Keep it casual. Keep it fun. That ought to be easy enough. Especially since they weren't having sex. That made it a lot easier to think clearly and not muddy the waters. It was actually good that they hadn't

had sex since the triad. It kept things simple. Right? She shoved the frustration and confusion away.

They kept the conversation light as they drove back to her house. Dominic walked her to her door and then wrapped her in his arms. She relaxed and just enjoyed the moment. Dominic's cellphone beeped. Tamara jumped and pulled out of his arms. She watched as he frowned.

Dominic was more than a little annoyed at yet another interruption. He reached for his cell phone and looked at the display. Why would Joe be calling tonight? And he was using the emergency code 911 after his number. He said to Tamara, "I'm sorry. Joe is paging me. He never calls when I'm out of town and never with that code. Do you mind if I use your phone?"

Tamara said, "No problem. I hope everything is okay." She unlocked the door and walked inside. As she turned on the lights and laid down her purse, she said, "Go ahead and call him. Take as long as you need. I know you're worried."

Dominic flashed her a grateful look and picked up the receiver. He dialed, hoping the emergency was business and nothing personal.

Tamara watched as Dominic said, "Hi, Joe. What's up?" His expression blanked. "What? When? What are you talking about? Slow down. Explain it to me again." His face went grim as he listened for several minutes. "I'll catch the first flight out. Keep looking. I'll see you soon."

He hung up the phone and said to Tamara, "Paul was at work yesterday and went to lunch. He never came back. He never came home last night either. Sherry is frantic. She reached out to him and felt him once, just a flash. She's positive that he's been hurt. Neither one of them are telepaths. She can't speak to him mentally to find out where he is, but she should be able to feel him at least. They're soul bonded."

He stared at her and Tamara's heart wrenched at the anguish in his eyes. He spoke almost absently. "This makes no sense. She can't feel him. She had that one quick

impression of pain and then nothing. That's all she knows. Joe has searched everywhere but no one has seen or heard anything. Not one thing."

Tamara put her hand on his arm. "I don't understand. How could that happen? Where could he be?"

Dominic straightened his shoulders, his mind already moving to what he needed to do. Paul had to be alive. He had to be. He said grimly, "No one knows. There's no sign of him. He disappeared sometime after noon yesterday. There's no trail to follow. No one has a clue what happened. One minute he was going through his regular workday as usual. Everything on the surface was normal. Then he just vanished."



## Chapter Nine

Tamara paced and wished she could do something useful. Dominic had left over an hour ago and was probably in an airplane headed back to New York right now. She knew he was torn up about Paul and doing his best to find him. Once he reached New York, he'd wake up half the city if he had to. He'd find his brother.

If anyone could find Paul, it was Dominic. He was brilliant and driven. She'd never known anyone so determined or so protective of the people in his life. He could be absolutely ruthless at times too if the situation called for it. She said a small prayer, hoping that whatever had happened to him, that Paul was still alive. She just wished she could *do* something. Pacing was getting her nowhere.

Her mind went back to the council meeting and Perry Chandler's story. She'd been trying not to think about it too hard, but she couldn't get it out of her head. A powerful vampire had disappeared after talking to a dark faery. Could Coir have something to do with Paul's disappearance? She hoped not. She prayed not. They had no information on Coir. And she had no idea how to find Paul if Coir had done something to him. At least if a human or vampire had him, they should be able to find out where he was and get him back. Alive she hoped. If they were in time.

There had been nothing from Vanessa for months now. It was too quiet and Tamara knew it. Rumor had it that Vanessa was no longer sick. But she had kept a low profile and hadn't tried anything yet. Could Vanessa have taken Paul? It was possible. The question was, how could Tamara find out? She rubbed her eyes and tried to think. Was there anything that she could do tonight? She should talk to Marc. No doubt Dom had already called Marc from the airport or the plane.

Just as she thought it, the phone rang. It had to be Marc. Well that was excellent timing. She rushed to it and yanked it up. "Hello, Marc? Have you heard about Paul?"

The voice on the other end wasn't Marc. A man said instead, "This is Paul. Tamara? Tamara, don't do it." His voice was slurred and he sounded barely coherent, but she knew it was Paul.

Tamara gripped the phone so hard that her fingers went white. She said, "Paul? Where are you?"

Paul screamed in pain. She nearly dropped the phone in shock. Just the horrible sound was enough to make her knees weak. She sank back against the wall even as she yelled into the phone, "Paul? Ohgawd Paul? Where are you?"

Vanessa's voice was cold as ice. "Now that I have your attention, listen carefully. You're going to come to a warehouse at 627 Amber Street in Los Angeles. Alone. Unarmed. You're not going to tell Marc or Dominic or anyone connected to them that you're leaving. You'll go to the airport and catch Flight 458 to LAX at ten-thirty. It's the last one out. The flight leaves in less than two hours. You don't have much time to get there and get on the plane."

Tamara frantically tried to remember the details even as she said, "Vanessa, wait! I'll come, okay? I'll come. Just let Paul go."

Vanessa laughed. "Right. Don't interrupt me again. Your mother has people at Reagan National Airport at all times. I know you've traveled plenty. You know some of those people. You're going to make sure they see you getting on that flight to the West Coast. You're going to make absolutely positive that they know you're coming here of your own free will. Your phone has been tapped and so have Dominic's and Marc's. I have people watching your house. I have people at both airports and on the plane. You screw this up in any way, try to get help from anyone, and no one will ever see Paul again. I'll deny all of this. And you'll never find a trace of him. Time is slipping away. See you soon."

Tamara started to say, "Vanessa," but the last thing she heard was Vanessa laughing and Paul's voice yelling, "Don't come!" Then the line went dead.

She leaned her head back against the wall and tried to breathe through the panic. She felt dizzy with fear. Then she took three slow deep breaths. One. Two. Three. She couldn't bear to think of Paul in pain or how Dominic would react or whether Vanessa would kill Paul before she even got there. She pushed the fear and panic away and tried to think. She needed to stop feeling all this emotion and use her head. Reason it out.

If Tamara went to the West Coast, she'd be signing her own death warrant even if she rescued Paul and survived the encounter. Not that it would matter. Vanessa planned to kill her long before the council ever could. And because she would be going into Vanessa's territory, Vanessa could claim she'd been provoked and killed Tamara in self-defense. She would never let Paul live long enough to tell otherwise.

Paul would stay missing. Dominic would never know what happened to his brother. He'd also never know for sure why Tamara had gone to the West Coast to confront Vanessa alone. He might put two and two together easily enough. But it wouldn't matter. He wouldn't be able to prove it. And by then Tamara and Paul would be dead. It wouldn't be long before Vanessa made another move to take out Dominic and Marc.

Vanessa could have just come out here and killed Tamara, but this plan was smarter. It made things easier, too. Vanessa might not be that worried about the council but she obviously wasn't going to test them if she didn't need to. And with this plan, she didn't have that complication. It was neat and fairly clever.

Tamara needed a plan. Fast. She needed to pull herself together. She slowly rose to her feet. Vanessa wanted a fight. Well, she certainly had one now. How dumb did she think Tamara was? Following Vanessa's plan exactly would be too stupid for words. She didn't have a lot of options though. She would go to the coast. She'd find Paul. But she had a few modifications to Vanessa's plan. She glanced at the clock again and thought some more. Maybe it would work. It was her only shot.

She went to the drawer and grabbed some stationery and a pen. Then she began to write. It all hinged on timing. And on trust. And on love. Oh man did it hinge on love. She swallowed hard and began to write a note. She started with one word – “Mom.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Tamara barely made it to the airport in time. She’d been met outside her house by two of Vanessa’s vamps. They hadn’t bothered to be secretive about tailing her. They’d simply nodded to her, taken her cell phone and then gotten in their car and followed her to the airport. Once she parked and got inside she rushed to the ticket counter. The plane had plenty of empty seats left. She asked for a ticket on the flight and paid with a credit card. So far, so good.

As she stepped away from the counter with her ticket in one hand and her purse in the other, she looked around. She had to get through security. But first she had to find one of her mother’s employees. She reached out through the mass of humanity and counted. She could feel the energy of eight – no, make that nine vampires. At least two of them probably worked for her mother. Another two or three were probably Vanessa’s guys.

She went in the direction of the energy closest to her and got lucky. What was the man’s name? David. Yeah, David something. He was tall, a big bald guy with skin the color of dark coffee and observant brown eyes. He worked for her mom, but he also worked airport security. A good man. A smart one. Maybe this would work. Maybe.

Tamara walked toward him and forced a big smile on her face. She stumbled just as she reached him, slamming into him hard. He caught her automatically, his face registering his shock. She slipped the note in the pocket of his jacket and stepped back quickly, making a big show of straightening her clothes. She said, “I’m so sorry, David. It’s late and I’m more clumsy than usual.”

David looked at her strangely. “Are you all right, Tamara?”

She nodded firmly. "I'm fine. Just taking a trip to the West Coast. I'm staying with an old friend for a few days. It should be fun."

David's eyebrows rose. "The West Coast? You're going to the West Coast. Tonight?"

She made an airy gesture. "I have an old friend there." She saw one of Vanessa's guys hovering closely and shrugged. "I'd better get going. Say hello to your wife for me and hug those sweet kiddies. Take care."

He nodded now but his eyes were puzzled. "Tamara, have you talked to your mother about this? Are you sure this trip is a good idea?"

She said, "No, I've been kind of out of pocket lately. Buried too deep in my work. But I'll definitely call her when I get back. I'd better run or I'll miss my flight. See you later."

Tamara walked away and prayed it was enough. Vanessa's guys would think she'd slammed into David to make sure he'd remember seeing her. To them it would seem like she was doing exactly what Vanessa wanted her to do. They hadn't seen her slip David the note or they'd have reacted.

Surely David would find the note soon. He was a smart man. He'd known something wasn't right. He didn't have a wife. Or kids. And he'd known she'd slammed into him deliberately. She'd dropped clues and done all she could. He had to find the note. He had to. Soon.

She got through the security line and made it onto the plane with only minutes to spare. The flight attendant was announcing the last boarding call as she handed him her boarding pass. Tamara sat down in her seat and stared blindly out the window. She might be dead in a few hours. The thought was a strange one. Everything felt surreal.

She was headed alone to the West Coast. She hadn't even packed a bag. There had been no time. All she had with her was her purse. She opened her purse and took out Perry's ancient talisman. She curled her hand around it, gripping it hard until the rough surface bit into her skin. She could draw on the power of the triad and get power from

Marc and Dom when the time came. But Vanessa had been smart. It was more difficult to draw on their power from so far away. The more distance, the weaker the bond. Getting her over a thousand miles away on the opposite coast from Marc and Dom was pretty damn smart.

The plane taxied down the runway and took off. She watched the lights of the city grow smaller and fade into the distance. And as the plane carried her closer and closer to Vanessa, she held that talisman in her hand tightly. And she thought of Dominic. And her mother. And Marc. And Paul. The longer she thought, the more holes she found in her plan. The more things occurred to her that could go wrong. She shook her head, pushing the negative thoughts aside. She didn't want to die. But if she did die in a few hours, she would go down fighting.

Fuck Vanessa. And fuck Coir. She had an ancient talisman. She had her own power and the power of the triad. And she had a good brain and common sense. She'd find a way to help Paul and stay alive. And she'd take care of Vanessa once and for all before Vanessa hurt anyone else.

Her hand began to hurt. She'd forgotten how tightly she'd been holding the talisman. She forced her stiff fingers to open and looked at it. She studied it in the dim light of the plane. Her mouth curved ruefully. Yep. Still a rock.

## Chapter Ten

Tamara stood outside the warehouse in Los Angeles and stared. The location was pretty remote – which was exactly what she expected. She'd paid the taxi driver a small fortune to drop her off. He'd given her a look like, "Crazy lady," and said, "Are you sure you don't want me to wait?" She'd thanked him but told him no. Vanessa's goons had trailed the taxi in their own car but stayed far enough back to be discreet. When the taxi disappeared from view, they pulled up and parked. At the moment they were standing about a hundred feet away, leaning casually against the car. They looked faintly bored.

She'd had way too many hours on the plane to think. Her nerves felt raw and her stomach was in knots. She looked around but other than Vanessa's guys, she didn't see anyone else in sight. She let her senses drift and felt the presence of at least four more vampires in the warehouse. Vanessa would be there, along with Phil and Carlos. Who was the fourth?

Maybe Paul. Could the fourth vampire be Paul? She hoped so. She really hoped so. She was faintly surprised Vanessa didn't have more people in there, but it made sense in a way. The less people around, the less witnesses who might someday betray her to the council.

Tamara straightened her shoulders. She'd either be dead in a few minutes or not. No sense putting it off any longer. She put the talisman in the pocket of her jeans. She wiped her nervous hands while she was at it. With a small prayer in her head, she went to the door and opened it. She stepped through the doorway a couple of feet and stopped.

The warehouse was filled with rows of boxes and old office equipment. Stacks of computers and parts were lined up along the walls. The place looked like it wasn't used

much. The air smelled stale and dusty. There were overhead lights that worked at least. The floor was dirty concrete.

The center of the room was clear of any boxes or equipment. Carlos was sitting behind Vanessa in an office chair, with his feet propped up on a rather battered looking desk. He nodded to her and smiled smugly.

Vanessa and Phil were standing over a body on the floor. Tamara's heart leapt to her throat. Paul. The body on the ground was Paul. Just as Tamara realized it, Phil kicked him hard in the ribs. Paul moaned but didn't move.

Phil said, "I told you he's still alive."

Vanessa sounded annoyed. "That's enough. How much did you give him to knock him back out again? He's been unconscious for too long. I want him incapacitated, not dead. He may still be useful."

They both turned and looked at Tamara. Phil smiled even more smugly than Carlos had. Vanessa absolutely grinned. "Well now. You've finally arrived."

The two vampires from outside stood waiting in the doorway behind Tamara. Vanessa nodded to them and said, "You can go for the night."

They pulled the door of the warehouse closed. The metal made a clanging sound as it closed that grated on Tamara's already stretched nerves. No one said anything until they heard a car start up and then pull away. Then Vanessa finally spoke. "I'm glad you can follow simple directions."

Tamara shrugged and just dropped her purse to the floor. "I did as you asked. Why don't you let Paul go?" She knew there was no way in hell that Vanessa would do it, but she was stalling for time.

Vanessa walked forward but kept a little distance between them. "Even you aren't naïve enough to think I'm going to do that." Vanessa smiled. "You look scared. Doesn't she look scared, Carlos?"



Carlos shook his head. "Vanessa, don't be stupid. Don't play around. Just get it done."

Tamara forced a laugh past her dry throat. "Is Carlos running the show now, Vanessa?" She challenged Carlos with a mocking look. "What's wrong, Carlos? Can't keep your bitch in line?"

Vanessa's head whipped to Carlos. "Shut up. I've planned this for months. I'm entitled to enjoy it."

Vanessa turned to Tamara. "You can stop smiling now. But feel free to cry all you want."

Suddenly Tamara felt a jolt of power slam into her, much like a hot burning punch to the chest. It knocked the breath out of her. She swayed a little but managed to stay on her feet. Despite the pain, she felt like cheering. She had hoped and counted on Vanessa wanting to play with her first. Stall. Stall. Stall. The trick was to keep Vanessa angry enough to want Tamara to suffer but not angry enough to kill her instantly.

She took a deep breath and finally said. "Geez, Vanessa, you throw like a girl. You have to focus, see. It's all in the snap. When you release the energy, you have to shoot it out like —"

Tamara shielded but felt another jolt of power slam into her and this one knocked her back a step. She bent over at the waist, trying to breathe. It hurt. Ohhhhhman it hurt. She had burned her hand once on the stove when she was little. The pain was searing and relentless even after her nanny had run cold water over her hand. This felt like that burn. Only it was a lot worse. And it was inside her body, not on the skin. The talisman didn't work worth a damn.

She blinked back tears of pain and slowly stood up. She deliberately smiled. Then she focused and sent power right at Vanessa. Instead of landing, it seemed to bounce right off. Aw crap. This was not good. Not good at all.

Vanessa laughed. "That's pathetic. Our faery friend was generous with his little gift. I didn't even feel that."

Tamara shielded as best she could but the next jolt still slammed into her like a freight train. She went to her knees. Tears sprang to her eyes and she fought to stay focused. She reached out for Marc and Dom. Power flowed into her suddenly and part of the searing pain ebbed away. She knew they were taking part of the pain into themselves and sending power to her. She stayed on her knees but hit Vanessa with three more rapid shots of power.

This time it had some effect. Vanessa sucked in a breath as if she'd felt at least part of it. But it wasn't nearly enough to do major damage. Then she smiled, a slow satisfied smile as she sent more power at Tamara.

Tamara put all her energy and focus into shielding this time but it was no use. The power hit her so hard. The pain was unbelievable. For a minute her whole world became nothing but pain. She was burning, burning up on the inside. She could feel Dominic and Marc pouring power into her but the pain was so bad. She let out a breath that came out more like a moan. She wasn't going to last much longer and she knew it. She was dimly conscious of Vanessa and Carlos laughing.

She saw movement on the floor out of the corner of her eye. Phil was standing still with his hands in his pockets, watching the show. Paul was lying behind him on the floor. She was surprised to see Paul's hand move. He was either awake or waking. She needed to keep the others distracted. Carlos had the best chance of seeing Paul from his angle.

She looked up at Vanessa and forced out as cheerfully as possible, "I think you've had enough. Vanessa, would you like to give up now?" She focused and sent power slamming into Carlos.

Carlos gave a grunt of pain and surprise. He muttered a curse. Vanessa held up a hand and said, "Don't. Don't let her draw you in. She wants us to finish her off. It won't be that easy."

Carlos eyes were furious. "Finish her or I will."

Tamara braced for the pain but Vanessa's power went through her shield and into her body like a hot knife slicing through butter. She screamed, unable to stop the sound from coming out of her mouth. She was on her knees and her head dropped almost to the floor. For one long minute she couldn't move. Finally, with a strength she didn't know she had, she lifted her head and straightened until she was back up on her knees. She was having a hard time thinking clearly. Desperation and panic were bubbling up but she shoved them away. She reached her hand in her pocket and brought out the talisman.

Vanessa's eyebrows lifted. "What's that? What's that in your hand?"

Tamara saw Paul rise to his knees. He looked dazed but he was getting up. Vanessa and the others still hadn't realized what he was doing because they were focused on Tamara. She felt for Dominic and Marc and knew they were getting close. Soon they'd be close enough for Vanessa and the others to sense. Time. She was running out of time.

Tamara opened her hand to show them and gasped out, "It's a talisman against faery magic."

Vanessa looked surprised. "A talisman? An actual talisman?" She began to laugh uproariously. When her laughter finally stopped she said, "Guess what? It doesn't work."

Tamara straightened up further. "Yeah. I noticed." She could still see Paul out of the corner of her eye. He was standing unsteadily now, but he was standing. She needed to keep them watching her. She gathered her strength.

Tamara called out, "Die, you hateful bitch!" And she threw the talisman as hard as she could at Vanessa.

It hit Vanessa in the forehead over her right eye. Vanessa stood there, obviously frozen in disbelief. Blood trickled down from a small cut on her forehead. She blinked and touched the wound in amazement. "I can't believe you did that. You hit me with a rock."

Tamara said weakly, "It seemed like the thing to do at the time."

All of the sudden, Vanessa's expression changed. Tamara watched as her eyes widened. Carlos sucked in an audible breath and so did Phil. Vanessa's face went pale. Tamara was surprised to see Vanessa bring a hand to her chest and gasp. Something was happening. The rock had done something to them. She didn't know what it had done, but it had hurt them in some way. Particularly Vanessa.

She caught blurry movement from her peripheral vision. Paul was trying to lift up an old computer monitor. The thing must be at least twenty years old or more because it was huge. He picked it up with shaky arms.

Vanessa yelled to Carlos. "There's someone outside! You should have been paying attention! What the hell –"

Paul slammed the monitor into the back of Phil's head. It made an incredibly loud crashing sound. Phil reeled on his feet, screaming and holding his head. He was alive, but the blow had done some ugly damage and stunned him temporarily.

Everything happened fast but time seemed to go into slow motion for Tamara. She was only vaguely aware as Dominic and Marc jerked the warehouse door open and burst into the room. She was busy focusing like she'd never focused in her life. She took every bit of power inside her being and shot it straight into Vanessa. There was nothing but a weak shield this time. The faery power was gone. And a lot of Vanessa's power seemed to have gone right along with it.

Vanessa screamed and went to her knees. Tamara kept the power streaming into her. Vanessa suddenly crumbled to the floor, her body shaking. Tamara felt sweat dripping down her face and her head was pounding but she refused to stop. She kept shoving power deeper into Vanessa. Then deeper.

She watched as Vanessa burst into flames. She heard screams from Carlos and Phil and knew that Dominic and Marc were killing them. But she never took her eyes off Vanessa. Vanessa finally stopped screaming and her body seemed to explode into ash.

It was finally over. Vanessa was dead. Phil was dead. Carlos was dead.

Tamara stayed on her knees, badly hurt and too weak to stand, but alive. She let her aching head fall down onto the cold concrete floor and began to weep. Then, mercifully, she passed out.

## **Chapter Eleven**

Two months later Tamara stood waiting in the den of her mother's house. Jacob, her mother's assistant, came in and said, "She'll see you now."

Tamara said, "Thank you," and stepped out into the hallway, past three rooms, until she reached the office door. She took a deep breath and walked through the doorway. Her mother was sitting behind the desk as usual, not one silver hair out of place, her brow wrinkled in concentration as she stared down at some papers.

Tamara sat down in a chair in front of the desk. She waited. Her mother didn't look up. Finally, she cleared her throat.

Her mother said, "No need to make that rude noise. I'm well aware of your presence. One minute."

Some things never changed. Tamara said nothing in response and just leaned back in the chair. She knew from experience that one minute could sometimes last for fifteen or even thirty.

Suddenly her mother looked up from the papers. She put down the pen she was holding and focused cool eyes on Tamara. "You asked to see me today."

Tamara felt like groaning. Why was it so hard to talk to her mother? Even now? She searched for how to start. She resisted the urge to be flippant and said instead, "I wanted to say thank you."

Her mother actually looked surprised. "You're welcome. How are you feeling?"

Tamara smiled. "I'm feeling fine. Totally healed. It was rough at first and it took a while. But I'm doing better."

"That's good to hear." Her mother stared at her. "How is Paul Garcione doing? I understand he wasn't in good shape when you found him."

Tamara had a brief mental image of Paul lying on the floor in that warehouse but pushed it away. "He's doing much better. He was drugged and beaten pretty badly but he's healed very well. I know he'll never forget what happened, but he's putting it behind him. He has the support of his family. And he's bouncing back to his old self. I heard him teasing Dominic the other day about something and the two of them were laughing together. I think he's going to be fine."

"And you?" Her mother's face softened a fraction. "What about you, Tamara? Are you going to be fine after what happened?"

Tamara nodded slowly. "I am. I didn't want to kill Vanessa but in the end I had to do it. And I'd do it again. I don't feel good about it. But I can't honestly say I regret it either."

Cheryl nodded. "You may very well have to do it again in your role with the triad. But you should never feel good about taking a life. I'm glad you don't. I'm also glad that you're moving on with your life."

"You've helped with that. I don't know how many favors you called in or how many bribes you made or how many people you leaned on, but I know you were behind the council vote to let us live. You made sure that Paul testified before the council. And you made sure that there were more yes votes than no when it came time for the vote. Thank you, Mother." Tamara clasped her hands together. "I mean that. I know you were behind it."

Cheryl smiled. "You've learned more about politics than I thought."

Tamara laughed. "Well, I had a good teacher." Her laughter died away and there was a long silence.

Cheryl finally said, "Thank you for sending me the note that night when you were in trouble. I wasn't aware that you trusted me that much."

Ah, the note. Finally they were going to talk about it. Tamara groped for words. "I had to find a way to let Dom and Marc know what was happening. And I knew you could do that. I'll be honest with you. Because of your position as high ruler, I wasn't

totally sure that you would help me. But you did. And you got them private air transportation to the West Coast. You helped in quite a few ways, big and small, to get them there to help me. You really came through for me, Mom. I know it put you in a bad spot as the high ruler because of the decree. But you came through for me anyway when it mattered. I just want you to know that I appreciate it."

Cheryl nodded briskly. "It certainly made things awkward with the council. But not impossible. I haven't gotten where I am today without handling difficult situations. It went fine. I'm glad you trusted me enough to write the note. I could hardly leave you to die. And in spite of your defiance of the decree, I'd prefer not to have you executed either."

Geez. Someone should put that line on a Hallmark card. *I'd prefer not to have you executed.* Made you feel downright warm and fuzzy to hear words of love like that. Some people sent flowers to say "I love you." Not her mother. Then again, her mother had sent Dom and Marc to help her and had managed to stop the council from trying to chop off their heads. So that wasn't so bad either. Tamara shook her head ruefully and said aloud, "Right. Well. Thank you, Mom."

Cheryl glanced down at the paperwork on her desk and asked, "Was there something else?"

Apparently not. Tamara shook her head. "I guess I should be going." She stood up to leave but only made it two steps.

Cheryl said suddenly, "You've been spending a great deal of time with Dominic Garcione lately."

Uh oh. Where was this going? Tamara said cautiously, "Yes, we're dating."

Cheryl picked up her pen and held it in her hand but continued to look at Tamara. "Not all political leaders are the same. Some are able to balance the demands of family life against political responsibility better than others. Dominic strikes me as being good at achieving that balance."

Now it was Tamara's turn to be surprised. "Yes, I know."



Cheryl shrugged. "I assume you've given it thought. It would be a good union for both families. I'm not unaware of that fact. However, I've chosen not to interfere in your personal life regarding Dominic. I haven't spoken with him or encouraged him in any way."

Tamara laughed. "Mom, Dominic isn't the type to make that kind of deal. He's not at all like Phil. I already know that. And I'm not the same person I was seven years ago either. But thanks for telling me anyway. Just don't expect a wedding invitation any time soon. We're seeing each other but it's not at all serious. I care about him. He cares about me. We like spending time together. But we're keeping it simple and casual."

Cheryl smiled. "Casual and simple? I see. Well, I'm glad that you seem happy about it." She glanced down at her paperwork again and tapped the pen on her desk.

Tamara shook her head. "I am. I'd better go." She walked to the door but some fragile hopeful part of her couldn't resist saying awkwardly over her shoulder on the way out, "I love you, Mom." There was nothing but deafening silence in response. She dared to look back at her mother. Cheryl's head was down and she was already deep in concentration over those important papers.

Tamara continued out and down the hallway. She was nearly all the way down the hall when she heard a quiet, "I love you too, Tammy."

For the first time in a lot of years, Tamara went out of the front door of her mother's house with a smile on her face.

She walked to her car and got inside. Then she sat there and ran a hand through her hair. Well. Dealing with her mother was always interesting but it had gone better than she'd thought. Now if only things with Dominic were as simple as she'd just told her mother.

Simple and casual? She'd actually said that in the same sentence with the name Dominic Garcione? What a huge whopping lie. What in the hell was she going to do about Dominic? She needed to get her head on straight. No need to get so freaked out. She was a grown woman. She could handle Dominic. Couldn't she? Sure she could.

She started the ignition. She'd deal with Dominic. But right now she had something to do. She needed to go see a very nice old man about a rock.

\* \* \* \* \*

"He's driving me crazy!" Tamara pointed the paintbrush at Marc and wagged it like a finger. "And if you laugh again, I'm gonna impale you with this thing. It's not that funny."

Marc lounged lazily in the chair and continued laughing, obviously unconcerned by the threat. "Well, tell me, *cher*. What has you crazier? The fact that he's trying to seduce you or the fact that it's working?" He cocked an eyebrow and grinned at her.

She glared. "Keep it up and I'll paint you with a set of horns and cloven hooves."

"Like that would matter. Any painting by the famous and reclusive Tamara Turner would still be a hit and you know it. Might even enhance my reputation." He wiggled his eyebrows and laughed. "And I noticed you never answered my question."

She set the paintbrush down and shook her head. "I just wish he wasn't so...likable."

"Likable?" Marc shook his head. His voice mocked her gently. "Oh, *cher*... What a horrible thing."

Tamara walked over and sat down in the chair across from him. "Easy for you to say. He's not bringing you flowers every time you turn around or surprising you with tickets to the play you've been dying to see. Or...or kissing you stupid."

Marc's eyes sparkled but he nodded gravely. "No, I can't say he is. I should feel rejected, I suppose."

Tamara barely heard him as she leaned forward. "And...and...he comforted me. I mean...last month when I got a scathing review from that critic? I don't know why, but I called Dominic to whine about it. It was stupid to be so upset. I'm a professional. Criticism is part of the territory and I'm used to it. But some of those comments really got under my skin. Bad. And I vented privately to Dominic. He flew here from New

York. I mean, he just...hopped on a plane, and showed up on my doorstep with ice cream. Chocolate! My favorite!"

Marc nodded. "Unbelievable. He's a fiend."

Tamara knew her voice was getting shrill, but couldn't seem to slow down or shut up. "Exactly! It's—it's—insidious is what it is. He's like ivy! Yeah! Dominic is like ivy! He's spent more time here with me than in New York for the last five months. When he's not here, I somehow end up going there."

She huffed. "I agree to one tiny little twig and he grows all over my life! He just keeps...creeping into more and more of it. I agreed to *date* him, but I never said I wanted a—" She nearly choked, "serious relationship."

Marc openly smiled. "That was five months ago, Tam. You've been dating each other exclusively and heavily since we formed the triad that night. You've known him for years. You've dated him for months. You risked your life to save his brother. Today you're ranting about tickets and kisses and ivy. Don't look now, darlin', but I think it's serious. Either that or you're developing the sudden violent urge to garden. Tough to tell."

"Urges!" She leaned forward and gestured wildly, "That's another thing! He kisses me and kisses me and kisses me, but somehow we never end up in bed. Something happens or he always pulls away just as things are heating up—and then he leaves. Even when I try to seduce *him*, it still ends up somehow not happening. And he does it so charmingly that I can't even get mad!"

She frowned. "I don't *get* it. This is Dominic. You're right. I've known him for years. He usually has a woman in bed with him within days. Sometimes hours. They drop like flies. He's trying to drive me nuts."

Marc said mildly, "Maybe you're not the usual woman."

Tamara suddenly realized just how freaked out she sounded. She sighed miserably. "I'm sorry. I know I sound insane. I just...Marc, he's my friend. I mean...really my friend. I know him. I admire him. And I—" Memories of that night, straddling Dominic,

his cock hard inside her, flashed through her mind and she shifted uncomfortably. "I want him. Dammit."

She brushed her hand over her arm absently and then grimaced when she realized she'd just left a streak of green paint. Even her stupid arm looked like it had ivy growing on it now. "And I'm scared to death that if I go to bed with him again, we'll soul bond. I don't want to love him or anybody. Why can't it be simple? It feels like he's waiting for something. I don't know what. I'm so confused. And I'm so damn hot for him I can't stand it. I *know* he planned this somehow. It's diabolical."

Marc laughed long and hard. "I should come here to DC much more often. I can't wait to meet him for drinks tonight before I leave. This is classic."

"Thanks so much for your help." Tamara glared at him again.

Marc shook his head. "Awww, *cher*, you know what you have to do. Talk to him, not me."

Tamara nodded. "I know, I already know that. I'm planning on doing that tonight. I'll meet you both at the restaurant, but I've had it with this confusion. I'm tired of being scared and mixed up. He's taking me home for hot sex later even if I have to grab him by his damn ear and drag him the whole way there."

She winced as she caught sight of the clock, and then stood up. "Thanks for sitting for me today and listening to my nervous breakdown. I need to shower and get ready. I don't know why I'm blabbing to you about all of this. I guess I thought you could enlighten me somehow about this whole thing. Maybe give me the guy perspective or something. I'm so frustrated."

Marc's forehead creased. "You want the guy perspective?" He nodded very seriously. "Oh, I see. The female viewpoint is complicated by all that ivy and stuff. Ivy, I'm not touchin'. The guy perspective is easy. I can give you that."

Marc stood too and grinned down at her. He drawled, "Fuck scared. You don't need to worry about soul bonding, darlin', because you're already in love with him. Somewhere inside you already know that. Stop flailing around and deal with it."

Tamara could feel her mouth literally drop open in shock. His words went right to her soul and clanged around noisily. She could swear her heart had just leapt into her throat and lodged there permanently. Dammit. He was right.

He laughed and placed a smacking kiss on her forehead. Then he leaned back. "And if you want him, *cher*, then go get him. But I don't think you should drag him home by his ear. Try a little lower this time." He winked at her and walked away. She was still standing there in disbelief when the sound of her closing door finally muffled his laughter.

## **Chapter Twelve**

Marc walked into the Bite To Eatery and searched for Dominic. The gothic-themed restaurant was quite popular in DC and busy on a Friday night. He could feel the energy of several vamps in attendance, but as his gaze skimmed past one black-clad figure after another in the dim lighting, he realized the vamps were primarily on the fringe of the boisterous crowd. He zeroed in on Dominic at one of the back booths and walked to join him.

Dominic spotted Marc and broke into a smile. "Marc. It's good to see you again."

Marc slid in opposite Dominic. "Dominic, how's it going?" He flashed a smile that caught the eye of a brunette waitress two tables away and nearly caused her to spill the tray of drinks in her hand. "Been here long?"

Dominic took a sip of his drink and said, "About ten minutes. The meeting ended sooner than I thought. Brown signed the contract."

Marc nodded. "That's great news." The waitress appeared at his elbow and he looked up.

She smiled overly brightly and chirped out, "What would you like?" Then she turned red as if she'd outright propositioned him.

Even in the dim lighting, Marc could see the blush, not to mention he could hear her rapid heartbeat this close. He laughed. "Well, darlin', let's start with a beer. Whatever's on tap."

She blushed harder and stammered, "Coming up. Be right back," and hurried away.

She was deliciously cute, but he felt...oddly restless and disinterested tonight. He'd been feeling it more and more of late and wondered what the hell was wrong with him.

Shoving the feeling away, Marc turned to Dominic. "I just left Tamara's place not long ago."

Dominic felt his muscles tighten. Jealousy wasn't the cause, however. Marc and Tamara cared about each other as friends, but he knew soul-deep that they had been careful to revert back to their buddy-type relationship after the triad. It had been a little awkward at first, but Marc was so good at charming and teasing and being laid-back that they'd quickly fallen back into familiar patterns. It was a giant relief for all three of them.

No, the tension running through him had nothing to do with jealousy and everything to do with frustration and longing for one impossible woman. He worked at keeping his expression bland. "How'd the sitting go?"

Marc studied his friend thoughtfully for a moment and then said, "It went fine. Your name is certainly on her lips a lot these days."

"Yeah." Dominic picked up his drink again and took a long swallow. His frustration climbed at the thought of those soft lips and he gave up trying to play it cool. He set the glass down with a thunk. "She's driving me crazy, Marc."

Marc laughed, delighted. "I believe the feeling is mutual. You're not gonna talk about creeping ivy now, are you?"

"Ivy? What? Like the plant?"

Marc shrugged and smiled. "Never mind. So what's the problem?"

The problem? Dominic sighed and searched for an acceptable response. The night they'd formed the triad, he known at some elemental level that Tamara was important to him. That brief soul brush had shaken him to his core. The beauty of it still touched him and moved him in a way he couldn't explain even to himself.

At least now he could admit that it had scared the hell out of him too. After he'd lost his father, he hadn't been eager to let anyone else close. He'd kept all but his family and Marc pretty much at a distance. Loving people made you vulnerable to pain. He'd

never expected to love Tamara. In the beginning, he'd just wanted to find out what was between the two of them.

He'd done everything he could to keep from spooking her. He'd kept everything casual and lured her step by step, closer and closer. She was so independent that she'd have fought him if he'd come on too strong. So he had been careful to keep things very unthreatening and light.

As he'd gotten closer to her, he'd discovered a very complex person underneath that quirky exterior. They'd been casual friends a long time, but he found her even more appealing now that he really knew her. It had taken real courage for Tamara to walk away from the safety and familiarity of her vampire family and choose a different path for herself, even if only for a while. And it had taken guts and caring to choose to come back to it.

He admired her work, the way she lived her life, the way she cared about people. They had a lot of common interests and fun together. They disagreed, even fought occasionally. She was stubborn as hell but he wasn't threatened by her strength. He liked that she kept him on his toes.

The night she'd gone to the West Coast to help Paul had been one of the most gut-wrenching nights of his life. He'd thought for a while there that he might lose both of them. That night had brought one more point home to him with sledgehammer finality—he'd been fooling himself. He was in love with her. He'd been so focused on luring her close enough to get to know her that he'd fallen in his own trap.

Tamara was unlike any woman he had ever known. He was attracted to her warmth and her humor and her way of viewing things. He was attracted to her on so many levels that he'd given up trying to figure out them all. He wanted her. All of her. Period.

*That* was the problem. He felt the familiar ache in his groin and nearly groaned, willing it away with effort. She had no idea how strongly she affected him or how much control he had to exercise to keep from just slinging her over his shoulder and stalking



off to the nearest bed. The emotions she aroused in him were primal. He'd never, in any area of his life, had his control tested so severely or for so long.

And every time he'd get too frustrated and decide to just give in to the need and go to bed with her, she did something to trigger this insane tenderness. This blasted need to protect her. He wanted her to *want* a relationship with him. He wanted her to be happy. It might be stupidly old-fashioned of him but in his own way he was trying to woo her.

What the hell kind of word was woo anyway? Even thinking the ridiculous word made him feel embarrassed. Seduction was easy. He'd seduced women many times and everyone, himself included, had enjoyed every second of it. Casual fun. Both sides aware of the rules. Simple affection and easy mutual goodbyes. In the past, he'd avoided the word relationship like death.

And wooing a woman? Never. He'd never even considered it. Thankfully he'd never said the word aloud to anyone either. It sounded like something his very traditional father would say. But oddly it felt like the right word for Tamara. Underneath that casual attitude, she was a romantic at heart. And she was worth the sleepless nights and sweating bullets as he tried to walk that razor-thin line between seducing and not spooking her.

The problem was she was driving him up the wall in the meantime. Getting under his skin. Driving him crazy with lust and tenderness and —

"Dominic? Hello? It's Marc. Remember me? I'm the guy sitting across from you." Marc's voice finally penetrated.

Dominic refocused and realized he'd been silently brooding for way too long. And now Marc was grinning that knowing grin and looking entirely too pleased. Dominic glared at Marc and muttered, "Don't get me started. I don't want to think about her. I don't want to talk about her. Just leave it alone."

Marc laughed again. "Well that will work for now, but she'll be here any minute. I invited her to join us earlier this afternoon when I first got to her house for the sitting. She's coming. And trust me when I say this, the lady is in a mood."

"Oh great." Dominic felt like banging his head on the table. Just what he needed tonight. Keeping his hands off her was getting nearly impossible. He didn't need her pushing him when his control was so shaky. With rising alarm, he asked, "What kind of mood?" but then the door to the bar opened and he caught a major clue. He froze and his breath caught.

Tamara was dressed in a long black coat which gaped open to reveal a short clingy red dress underneath. The dress emphasized every curve. His mouth watered and his hands itched to take it off of her and run his hands over every single one of those curves. Her nipples were visibly hard as she gave a slight shiver from the cold.

As he watched, transfixed, she paused just inside the entranceway, removing her coat completely and hanging it on one of the pegs by the door. Her eyes searched the crowd. Her hair was around her shoulders, loose and wavy, sort of...sexily tumbled, as if she'd just gotten out of bed. He swallowed.

Even in the dim light from this distance, he could see the expression on her face. She looked like a woman who knew what she wanted and planned to get it. A regal huntress on the prowl. Her eyes roved past him and then returned, and their eyes locked.

She stared at him for a long, challenging moment and he wondered what was going through her mind. What was she after tonight? Then she gave him a very slow, inviting smile that screamed SEX in capital letters. Oh. That kind of mood. He went rock-hard in an instant. When she moved toward the table, smiling that bedroom smile, eyes still locked on his, hips swaying, he began to sweat.

"Hi there, Dominic, Marc." She said it way too sweetly and then scooted into the booth next to Dominic, very close. She turned big eyes in his direction and said, "I hope you haven't been hungry and waiting for too long."

Hungry and waiting? He regarded her narrowly and tried to get a handle on his hammering pulse. He knew he ought to answer her but somewhere between the overly innocent eyes and the red-lipstick curve of her mouth his brain seemed to have short-circuited.

Marc leaned back in the booth to enjoy the show, but took pity on his friend. "No, Tam, I think your timing is good as usual."

An hour later, Marc knew it was time to leave. He'd been right. The show had been good. And unless he was off the mark entirely, it was definitely time to let these two have it out. He stood as he said, "I paid the bill already. This one is on me. I hate to leave but I've got a plane to catch later tonight."

Tamara stood up and hugged him hard. "Marc, you shouldn't have done that. But thanks. Are you sure I can't give you a ride to the airport?"

Marc hugged her back. "You're welcome. And yes, I'm sure. I've still got the rental car."

Dominic stood and hugged him, too. "Thanks. Next time you're in town, I'll get the check. And I want a rematch on that pool game, too. Don't forget."

Marc laughed. "Any time, pal, any time. Y'all take care." He took one step before turning. "Much as I've enjoyed the show tonight, try not to maim each other before you land in bed together, okay? I'll see you soon."

Dominic and Tamara stared at each other, the word "bed" hanging heavily in the air between them. Dominic had nearly reached the end of his patience. Tonight hadn't been a show, despite Marc's little joke. It had been more like sexual warfare. Tamara had done everything she could to torment him.

Throughout the meal she'd leaned close, smiling into his eyes, taking advantage of every opportunity to brush her body against his. A small touch here. A seemingly accidental touch there. It was subtle enough that he couldn't really call her on it in front of Marc. But it was driving him out of his mind.

He'd been hard as a rock for the last hour and he had barely tasted the food. All he could taste and see and hear was Tamara. The woman was pushing him to the brink of madness. And he knew damn well that it was deliberate. She was pushing his control, testing how far she could tease him.

She leaned forward with another flirtatious smile and started to say something but he stopped her with one hard word. "Don't."

Tamara was shocked at the steel in that word. She studied the hungry warning in Dominic's eyes with satisfaction. Marc was gone. The kid gloves were coming off now. So far the seduction was proceeding exactly as she'd planned. Dominic was close to the edge. She could feel the coiled tension in him. She smiled again and said, "What? I was only going to say that I want you. Inside me. Right now."

Dominic leaned back in the booth, closed his eyes and tried to think. Why in hell was he holding back? Oh yeah. He had been trying to give her time. To ease her into a relationship that would last. Well her time was about up.

He opened his eyes and attempted one last shot at reason. He bit out with effort, "Tamara, you'd better be sure of what you're doing here. Very sure. Once you let me in your bed again, I'm not leaving. And if you put your hand on my thigh one more time, you'll get the fuck of your life. I've been patient. And I've been trying to give you time. I've enjoyed our little game tonight. But I'm done playing."

Tamara felt a brief skitter of nerves. The implacable look in his eyes made her hesitate a split second. But she couldn't resist the urge to push. She wanted him. And by gawd she was going to get him. She challenged huskily, "The fuck of my life? Is that a promise?" She moved her hand to his thigh with slow deliberation and felt the muscles tense.

He reached under the tablecloth in an instant, found her thigh and slid his hand under her short dress. It made her gasp, but could tell by the stunned look on his face that what he found rocked him more. She wasn't wearing panties. And she was incredibly wet.

Dominic slid one strong finger into the vulnerable softness of her sex and her slick walls tightened around his finger. She gasped at that probing touch and tried to catch her breath. Her face suddenly felt too hot. She stifled a moan.

He looked straight into her eyes. His finger slid back a teasing distance and then forward slowly, deeply, stopping only when it was inside her to the hilt. His remaining fingers curled possessively around her sex. "No, babe, that's a fact."

She gulped. Wow. Okay. He meant what he said. He certainly knew how to make a point. When her brain reconnected again, she was going to think of something to say. Soon. Hazily, she had the fleeting thought that a bed would be good right now. For the two of them. Right now. And as she stared into his eyes, blankly wondering how to suggest that, he smiled. His wet thumb lazily circled her sensitive clit. The wild pleasure sent all remaining thought right out of her head. She did moan then.

He said harshly, "That's it. My hotel room or your bedroom. You'd better decide fast or I'm going to forget about all these nice people and fuck you right on this table in front of them. Let's go."

He withdrew his hand and she blinked hard, stunned at the loss of contact. She felt empty. And aching. And suddenly very aware of the other people in the restaurant. She looked around but everyone seemed to be oblivious to the two of them. She managed to say faintly, "My house."

He stood up and waited for her to do the same. She hoped her shaky legs would hold her. They did, but it was a near miss. He gestured for her to walk in front of him and placed his hand firmly on her back. Her heart pounded. Dominic's legendary self-control was gone. She'd finally managed to unleash the tiger. Now it was time to pay.

## **Chapter Thirteen**

The night air held a slight chill as they stepped out of the restaurant, but Tamara barely felt the cold. They had both parked in the public lot across the street. As Tamara headed toward her car, Dominic's hand on her back stopped her and he turned her gently toward him. "Don't worry about your car. We'll pick it up in the morning."

Tamara nodded. The truth was she could have cared less about the car at this point. Her body was aching and her brain was filled with images of Dominic in her bedroom at home. She didn't want any more interruptions or distractions. She wanted Dominic. Now. Dom opened the passenger door for her and held it. Tamara shrugged out of her coat and tossed it into the backseat. As she fastened her seat belt, she was surprised that her hands shook a little.

Now she wasn't sure exactly what to say. A tense silence stretched out between them. Finally she cleared her dry throat. "The parkway is faster this time of night. Probably."

Dominic glanced at her briefly. "Okay. Thanks."

He sure wasn't talking much. Then again, neither was she. More silence. In spite of the ache between her legs, she felt a fresh surge of nerves. This was exactly what she wanted but the wait was killing her. She'd wanted Dom for so long that she felt like she could barely breathe from the anticipation. She searched for something, anything to say.

Dominic beat her to it. "Having second thoughts?" He took his eyes from the road for a moment to search her face. Whatever he saw there made him smile. "Suddenly feeling nervous, Tam?"

She shrugged and tried to gloss it over a little. "No, not exactly. And no real second thoughts either. I just hate waiting." She laid a trembling hand on his hard thigh. His

muscles tensed and she saw his hands clench on the steering wheel for a split second. She smiled. "I have a great idea of how to distract myself though."

She ran her hand over his thigh, kneading the tense muscles. She saw his jaw clench but otherwise his expression remained the same. Dominic had phenomenal concentration and control. It wouldn't hurt to tease him a little. She let her fingers brush against his hard cock. Even through the fabric of his pants, she could feel the length of him under her fingertips. Her heart pounded as her fingers encircled his erection and she remembered the feel of his cock pushing deep inside her the night of the power lock. She wanted to feel it right now, warm and hard in her hand. She fumbled for his zipper.

Suddenly Dominic's hand closed around her wrist. He flashed her a rueful warning look. "Much as I like what you're doing, keep it up and we won't make it to your house."

She matched his smirk with one of her own and then leaned back away from him. She let her head flop back against the headrest and groaned. "Are we there yet?"

He laughed and shook his head. "Not yet." His voice, already husky, dropped lower yet. "I can think of another way to ease the wait though."

There was something in his voice that sent a little jolt of excitement through her. "Yeah? What way is that?"

He flashed her another glance. "Lift your skirt."

"What?"

He smiled darkly. "We're in the car. It's dark. There's not a lot of traffic. You enjoy teasing me. Lift your skirt for me, Tam. Do it now."

The tone of his voice held part temptation, part dare, part domination. Tamara moved her hand to the bottom of her dress. The fabric felt silky in her fingers. She smiled as she lifted the hem a teasing inch or so. "Like this?"

"Higher."

She lifted her skirt until the tops of her stockings showed and then ran the finger of her other hand along the top edge.

“Keep going.”

When would he reach out and touch her? She was so wet. Her heart was pounding hard now. Really hard. She lifted her skirt all the way up until the curly blonde triangle of her sex showed. “How’s this?”

She actually saw him swallow and then jerk his eyes back to the road. His face looked hard and hungry in the dim light. “Beautiful. Now touch yourself.”

That wasn’t what she’d expected. At all. She blinked. “What?”

“I want you to touch yourself for me. Run your fingers through your curls. Lightly. Tease. I want you to tease yourself like you’ve been teasing me.” His voice grew thick. “Take your time. Draw it out, *cara*. Make it feel good.”

Tamara swallowed and tried to process his words. She glanced around but traffic was light tonight. There were cars in the distance both in front of and behind them, but no one really close. And a passing motorist probably couldn’t see anything in the dark anyway. Right? Right. Even as she thought it, she couldn’t escape the idea that somehow, some way she’d get caught and be exposed. It was thrilling and a little terrifying at the same time. She swallowed again and then her hand reluctantly crept to her sex. She ran her fingers through the wet, springy hair and lightly traced her lips.

Dominic said, “That’s it.”

Tamara touched and teased, extremely conscious of Dominic there beside her. He was still focused on driving, but his eyes drifted back to her again and again. He was definitely watching her fingers. And judging by the death grip he had on the steering wheel and that ever-enticing bulge in his pants, her play was getting to him as much as it was to her.

She let out a little moan and let her head fall back against the headrest, giving in and just going with the moment. Her fingers stroked and teased, each light touch



bringing sweet heavy pleasure. She bit her lip a little and circled her swollen clit with a wet slippery finger.

Dominic said gruffly, "Yessss. Play with your clit. Tease, baby. Lean back and let go."

She was breathing hard now, her breath coming in gasps. His words, the tone of his voice, the feel of her own fingers—all of it was too much. She let out a strangled moan and her hips began to rise and fall in a desperate search for satisfaction. She pressed harder, her fingers stroking and pressing, eager for more wild pleasure. The wet slide of her fingers sounded loud to her own ears. She could feel Dom's eyes on her, moving back and forth between the road and her. She moaned and closed her eyes. She grew wetter and wetter. *So good. More.* She was close to coming.

Suddenly, his hand clamped around her wrist again. She jerked in surprise and opened her eyes. It suddenly dawned on her that Dominic had brought the car to a stop and was turned, facing her. She felt like screaming in frustration, but she sat upright and looked around. They were in her driveway.

Dominic's face was hard with arousal and urgency, but his voice was gentle and soothing. "I know you're close. The first time will be fast, I promise you. Very fast. I couldn't slow down now, even if I wanted to. Damn, but you're beautiful. I want to eat you alive."

His hand was still wrapped around her wrist. He brought her hand to his face but his eyes stayed locked on hers. She stared at him uncomprehendingly as he kissed the tips of her wet fingers. Still looking deep into her eyes, his tongue swept warm and soft, lingering against one fingertip. It occurred to her that he could taste her and she sucked in a breath.

His eyes darkened. He said simply, "Run."

Tamara shook her head. "Huh?"

Dominic was obviously past all reason and control. Tamara's head slowly cleared and she realized that she was facing one very frustrated, very aggressive, very highly aroused male vampire. Her eyes widened. He said again through gritted fangs, "Run."

Tamara swallowed hard. His earlier arousal at the restaurant was nothing compared to what his face and actions were conveying now. Some ancient feminine instinct kicked in and she yanked her hand from his, unhooked her seatbelt, grabbed her keys and almost tumbled out of the car in her haste to move fast. She ran on shaky legs to her front door.

She barely made it to the door of her house. As she fumbled with the key, Dominic took it from her hand and opened the door. She got four steps inside the house and he was on her. He kicked the door closed, spun her around and yanked her into his arms. His mouth came down on hers with such hot need that she felt like she was drowning in it, in him. His tongue stroked hers, his lips hard and devouring. She moaned under the onslaught and grabbed for balance, her arms reaching around his neck.

Her knees felt weak and she leaned into him. When her breasts touched his chest, without thought she moved her hips, instinctively trying to align her sex with his cock. She felt the length of it against her stomach and moaned, going up on tiptoe, wanting to rub that hardness against her clit. Needing it.

Without warning, Dominic broke the kiss and muttered, "Bed. Right now." He picked her up in his arms. She was surprised by the move and let out a small gasp. He stalked through the house until he reached her bedroom and then set her down on her feet. His hands were everywhere, stroking, stealing touches, one pleasure barely registering before his hands or mouth moved and caused another. It was like standing in a hurricane. Wild and hot and incredible.

She blinked, trying to get her bearings, but he already had both of their clothes off, without her even realizing it. The man was good. Then she was on her back on the bed, his naked body covering hers, and she arched into the hard heat of him. She wanted his cock. She wanted him to fill her. She wanted to feel him sliding deep inside.

He reared back, his face taut with tension and said, "Oh no you don't. Not yet. I want it all."

He licked her left nipple, circling the tight nub and then sucking it hard into his mouth. He tortured her for endless moments, his mouth greedy and skilled. She cried out, shaking now, her hands going to his head to hold him there. It was unbelievable. The pleasure ran through her veins like a drug. He moved to the other breast and she moaned and moaned, overwhelmed.

Then he released her nipple and his greedy mouth headed south. His tongue rasped the delicate skin of her stomach as he scooted lower, hands moving her thighs apart without asking permission or needing it. He was taking her. Just as he'd promised. And the sheer pleasure and excitement of it made her quake. She'd wanted this. Oh how she'd wanted this.

In her most forbidden fantasies about Dominic, she'd longed to push him until he took her without thought, without reason. Without the bonds of what was civilized or controlled. She'd ached to feel that kind of primal joining. She wanted to know what it was like when all restraint was stripped away from both of them. When nothing mattered but sheer need. And now she knew.

Tamara managed to look down at that dark head settling between her legs and she went lax. It was too much. Too overwhelming. She couldn't think. Could barely breathe. His hands held her thighs wide open to him, gripping her firmly, keeping her legs spread. She couldn't close her legs if she tried. The vulnerability felt so intensely personal.

He lifted his head, held her gaze with dark burning eyes, and said one word. "Mine."

Then his head lowered to her sex, his wet tongue seeking and finding her clit. And the pleasure exploded. She cried out, "Dom! Ohgawd, Dom!"

Tamara tried to hold onto her control, but it was too late. Her power broke free and she realized she was glowing. Her fangs were out. She moved her hips helplessly,

arching into his mouth, beyond all coherent thought. As he licked and sucked her clit, she suppressed a scream. Her power flared and found his, the two energies crashing together and pushing apart, like two magnets confused as to whether they were meant to attract or repel.

He raised his head and she saw the glint of his fangs in the dim light of the room. For another endless moment his gaze held hers as he paused, then his teeth sank into her inner thigh. She cried out again, pain mixing with the pleasure. He drank from her for a few minutes, sucking hard, and she shook from the pull of his mouth.

Eventually, he raised his head and licked a drop of her blood from his lips. Then he moved upward until his hips covered hers. He held her gaze as his cock slid deep into her sex without warning. It slammed into her and pushed deep. She moaned, bucking and digging her nails into his back. Tamara heard Dominic moan low as he reared back and plunged into her again. Her hips answered in kind, pushing upward, trying to take more of him. She wanted it all.

He gave her more, thrusting harder, moving in and out faster. Again and again they slammed into each other, riding the need and the pleasure, straining for release. And then he went still, his neck exposed, his cock sunk deep within her, and muttered a guttural, "Now..."

She sank her fangs deep, the hunger a living thing, and tasted the salty tang of Dominic's blood as it burst into her mouth. She drank with naked greed, too hungry to be careful, too far gone with need to do more than suck and gulp it down.

He moaned, body shaking, and she felt his cock throbbing in time with each suck. And then she felt the tremendous jolt of his power against her own. She reared back from his neck abruptly, licking the blood from her lips. His power poured into her, just as hers poured into him. This time their powers mingled, building the pleasure even higher. And then she felt Dominic, the essence of him, of his soul, touching against her own.

Dominic said thickly, "*Cara...*"

She hesitated for a split second. A soul touch. It was what she had feared and craved for so long. But the joy of it was impossible to resist. This was Dominic. The real Dominic. And the profound beauty of him astounded her. Something within her let go and she opened to him.

Her soul embraced his. And for one brief shining moment, their souls entwined and danced with an intimacy that went beyond anything she had ever imagined. They became a part of each other not just in body but in soul. They were inside each other. And the pleasure was almost unbearable. It built until she thought she couldn't stand another second of it. She blinked back tears as she struggled to contain the joy. Then finally she screamed and came in wave after wave of hot pleasure, while tears poured down her cheeks.

Dominic shouted, "Tamara!" She felt his warm, wet semen spill inside her and squeezed his cock tightly, wanting to milk every last drop.

When it was over, they both lay there in a collapsed, tangled heap. Tamara sucked air into her lungs, clinging to him tightly. Dominic rolled over, holding her closely, and shifted until she was lying on top of him. She rested her head on his chest.

In the long silence that followed, Tamara searched for something to say. She finally gave up on being witty or flip or even coherent. When she could finally speak, she said simply, "I can't believe I was afraid of that. That was...incredible. Why the hell did we wait so long?"

Paul had been right about soul bonding. Dominic ran his hands gently over her back. What was she saying? He felt utterly destroyed. How could she even form words yet? His voice was sleepy as he mumbled, "Iwaswooiingyou."

Had she heard him right? Tamara raised her head. "You were what?" She watched in amazement as dark color flushed his cheeks. His hands abruptly stopped moving and he seemed to come awake a little more.

Dominic cleared his throat. Oh great. He'd said the word aloud. It was totally unfair for a woman to ask questions after sex. It was like shooting fish in a barrel. There

should be a damn law against it. He stumbled for words. "I was...ah hell....wooing you. You know. Giving you time. I didn't want you to be scared. I wanted you to be...happy...never mind."

Happy indeed. Tamara felt her heart swell in her chest, truly touched. How sweet. Her big, strong, unemotional vampire had a romantic streak a mile long. And it was for her. She loved that. Absolutely loved it. She grinned at him. "Thank you. I mean it. You drove me *crazy*, you big lug, but that's so sweet. Now say it."

Dominic shifted again uneasily, but kept his arms around her. "I'm not sweet. I'm never sweet. I don't know what you mean."

She laughed. "Oh yes you do. *Say* it."

Dominic looked down at her. She looked so eager and hopeful, and there was so much love in her eyes. It moved him. Joy ran threw him like a song. He relaxed and smiled tenderly at her. He'd never said it to a woman. The words, which before had seemed so hard, came easily now. "I love you, *cara*."

Tamara could have shouted with joy. She scooted up and leaned her face close to his. She kissed him tenderly, a butterfly-soft kiss. "I love you, too."

His arms squeezed her tightly. For a moment they just held each other. Tamara inwardly smiled. She knew that things were complicated. There were bound to be conflicts between them. No couple ever managed to love each other without fighting at times. And then there was the triad. There would be challenges ahead regarding that. But as she basked in the warmth of Dominic's loving arms, she knew that ultimately they would face those challenges and be okay. Better than okay. Truly happy. They would see to it. Together.

Dominic's warm hand drifted from her back over her butt and then to her thighs. She lifted her head from his chest, smiled, and said, "Hold that thought. I need to get some water. I'm dying of thirst. Would you like something too while I'm at it?"

He chuckled. "No water for me. I'm fine. The only thing I'm dying of thirst for is you. Hurry back."

She reluctantly left the bed and pulled his shirt over her head. He was watching her lazily. When she turned to leave the room, he called out, "No sense in putting that on. I'm just going to take it off you again. Four minutes. You have four minutes or I'm coming in there and dragging you back."

She was still laughing as she reached the kitchen. She flipped on the light and stopped dead in her tracks.

Sitting at her table, casually sipping a glass of her best wine, was Coir.

## **Chapter Fourteen**

Tamara hadn't been sure how she would feel if she ever saw him again. Now she knew. She felt annoyed. She took a step forward and said quietly, "Dominic is in my bedroom. He's not a very happy camper when it comes to you. We didn't sense you in here so you must have just beamed yourself in. But he's bound to sense you now. He doesn't like you very much."

Coir took another sip and shrugged. "Few do. Don't worry about Dominic. He's sleeping. A short spell and harmless. He'll wake when we're done."

Tamara sighed and went to the cabinet. She opened it and reached for a glass.

Coir said from behind her, "I've come to make you an offer."

Tamara turned around with the glass in her hand. "Yeah? The answer is no."

He smiled. "You might want to hear it first." He put his wineglass down and gestured for her to sit. "I can make you human."

Tamara nearly dropped the glass but managed to hold onto it. "What? What did you say?"

His smile widened. "I can make you human. You would no longer be a vampire. You would no longer be part of a triad. You can have the life you've always dreamed about. No more vampire politics."

Tamara walked to the table and sat down in the chair across from him. She put the glass very carefully on the table. She stared at him and let the idea roll through her mind for an endless moment. Then she said slowly, "That's not what I want anymore. I like who I am even if there are times when things are crazy and complicated. I like my life even though it's not exactly perfect. You're really offering to let me become someone else. And I don't want to be someone else anymore. The answer is no."



Coir raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure then?"

She nodded. "I'm positive."

He shrugged and picked up the wineglass. "I can't really make you human anyway. But it's good that you know the answer to that question now."

She rolled her eyes as she stood up. Freaking faeries. Sheesh. She said, "Well, smart guy, I've done some thinking and have figured out a lot of things lately."

He took a sip of wine and then grinned at her. "Have you now?"

She made fun of his accent. "Indeed I have." She glared at him. "For instance your name. For a long time I was thrown off because every time I did an internet search on the word Coir I got a bunch of information about the inside of coconuts."

He laughed in obvious delight at his little internet trickery, but she wasn't finished. She said, "Then I got the idea to go to a Gaelic language site. It took me a few times to guess at the spelling. When I got it right, imagine my surprise. Coir, huh? It means justice."

Coir nodded in approval. "One of my names I like best."

Tamara went to the drawer by the sink and rummaged. After a minute she pulled out the talisman and tossed it onto the tabletop. Coir instantly moved back from it. Tamara smiled. "And then there's this. You can have your rock back."

He looked surprised. "Careful with that. It's iron ore. It can drain faery magic on contact. It's not mine—I can't even touch it."

Tamara shook her head. "Sell that crap somewhere else. I went to Perry Chandler to return his talisman. He didn't know anything about it. Thought I was a little nuts, as a matter of fact, for trying to give him back a rock. And he doesn't have a son. He has two grown daughters. The vampire who gave me the talisman was working for you. You gave Vanessa all that power. And then you gave me the talisman to drain it away. Why?"

Coir laughed. "All's well that end's well."

"All's well that ends well? Are you kidding me? Paul was kidnapped and beaten. I was nearly killed. Three people are dead. All's well that ends well?" Dangerous faery or not, she was two seconds away from punching him in the nose.

The laughter drained from his face and he said in warning, "Careful with that temper, my girl. You didn't die, did you? And you've certainly learned a lot. As for Paul, well, he's learned to be less careless now. Vampires lead a secret and sometimes dangerous life. He needed a bit more caution. He's safer now."

Tamara looked him in the eye. "And Vanessa? Phil? Carlos?"

He gave her a hard look. "Everyone has the power of choice. Including you. Including them. You get back what you give in this life. They learned that in the end."

Tamara sighed. "I'm still not real thrilled with you. What do you do? Go around mucking in people's lives on a whim?"

He shrugged. "I'm a faery. What do you expect? There's a purpose to all things. Even me."

Tamara gritted her teeth. "Unbelievable."

He stood and stretched. "Time for me to go. I have things to do. And your man will be coming in here shortly anyway. I've had him frozen this whole time. I don't want to keep him immobile for too long."

Tamara said, "What—I thought you said he was asleep?"

He looked at her with pure mischief and said. "I must have lied. Imagine that."

She groaned but gave up for the moment. "Whatever. Fine. Look. About the talisman. I'm not sure if I should thank you or tell you to fuck off. Are you evil or good? I still can't decide."

He laughed loudly. "Perhaps neither. Perhaps a bit of both." He sobered and stared down at her a moment. He smiled. "I'm glad you found love for both yourself and for someone else. I wish you happy. Best of luck to you in all things, Tamara Turner." There was a brilliant white light and he was gone.

Tamara blinked several times and muttered. "Freaking tricky faery. You should work on your blasted exit. That light thing is blinding as hell, you know."

The phone rang as if in response to her complaint and the noise made her jump. Oh good grief. She eyed it suspiciously. What now? Tamara thought of ignoring it, but finally reached over before the machine could pick up and said, "Hello. This better be good."

Marc's voice laughed in her ear, "No. I'm *bad*, darlin', not good. Sorry for the interruption, Tam, but I need to speak with Dominic for just a second. He's not answering his cell phone. Is he there? Did your plan for this evening work?"

Did it work? She heard a muttered Italian curse that ended in the word faery from the bedroom and then running footsteps. Suddenly Dominic wrapped his arms around her from behind. She leaned into him and savored the feeling of joy and love. Tamara knew she had the goofiest smile on her face. "Oh yeah, you could say that. Been there, bit that. Got the happy ending to prove it."

## About the Author

Award-winning author Marly Chance lives with her husband and young son in a small Tennessee town where truth is always stranger than fiction. She believes firmly in happy endings, chocolate, family, and good friends. When not writing, she stays busy persuading her toddler that the coffee table was not actually designed to be a trampoline or a teething toy. Her hobbies include reading, bowling, and playing poker.

Please stop by her website. Any comments, gifts of chocolate, or new friendships are always welcome.

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

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