



# Moonlight Healing

Marilyn Lee

Changeling Press

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## **Moonlight Healing**

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**One beautiful, addictive woman. Two warring brothers prepared to fight to the death for her love.**

**There is no more compelling force in a vampire's life than that of bloodlust. During a difficult and prolonged Feast of Indulgence, vampire/shifter Etienne Gautier has found his perfect mate, his bloodlust, Raven Monclaire. But in order to claim her, he'll have to wrest her from the clutches of his twin brother, Acier. Etienne is determined to have Raven -- even if he has to kill Acier to get her.**

**The only peace and joy Acier has known during the last few years is finding his bloodlust, the beautiful but unpredictable Raven Monclaire. After a lifetime of subjugating his needs to ensure his twin, Etienne, has everything he desires, Acier learns Etienne is now demanding he relinquish Raven. A furious Acier comes to the painful realization that Etienne must die.**

**Only Raven can save them from themselves. But who'll rescue her?**

## Chapter One

Raven Monclaire stood near the doors of the large ballroom in the prestigious Four Seasons Hotel. Dancing couples, arrayed in dark suits and beautiful dresses, swayed in rhythm with the pulse pounding music. An hour earlier, the music had been soft, the dancing slow and the couples close together. Her mood had been much lighter -- until she'd shared a last slow dance with her fiancé, Acier Gautier.

After that dance, Acier and his identical twin brother, Etienne, left the reception. Recalling the intimate way Etienne danced with the bride, Treena, grinding his groin against her while he palmed her ass, Raven closed her eyes briefly. She'd prevailed upon Acier to insist Etienne leave with him when Acier headed back to Arizona. If her father had seen that scandalous dance... or if Derek had...

In the past Raven had always been delighted to see Etienne, or Tee, as she'd always called him, but he'd changed over the course of the previous months. So had Acier. Part vampire and part wolf-shifter, Acier and Tee had recently undergone a vampire ritual called the Feast of Indulgence.

This Feast of Indulgence, during which a vampire went from a latent or half-blood status to full-blood status, could be a dangerous time for any human who loved such a person -- as she loved Acier.

She frowned. Not that she was completely human. Although her father was human, her mother had been a Willoni Priestess. Like vampires and wolf-shifters, the Willoni were an ancient race from the Aeolian planetary system. Unlike the other two groups, skillful Willoni could see and sometimes even shape the future.

Raven had discovered that the ability to see the future could be as much a curse as it was a blessing. Her recent visions disturbed and frightened her. If they proved true, there were grim and painful times ahead for her and those she loved most.

At the moment she had more pressing matters to consider than worrying about a future she might or might not have seen or interpreted correctly. The Goddess willing, the weeks and months ahead would not be as frightening as those that had gone before. During Acier's feast, she'd done what was necessary for Acier to work out his sexual aggression and hunger without harming her or being unfaithful. Acier had recovered from the near madness into which the Feast of Indulgence inevitably plunged a vampire.

The feast still held Tee firmly in its grip. Prior to his unexpected appearance at the church that morning, neither she nor Acier had seen Tee in weeks. The brothers who had once been so close were now emotionally worlds apart. She knew Acier worried about Tee's mental state. After that indecent dance with the newly married Treena, she knew Acier's fears were well founded.

But Tee was gone, and she should enjoy the rest of the reception without worrying about what he might do with Treena. She glanced at the large diamond engagement ring on the third finger of her left hand. If things continued to go well for her and Acier, the next time her family gathered for a wedding reception, it would be to celebrate her marriage to the big, handsome Acier.

Then she would be the one looking as if she were floating on air as she danced with their father. She narrowed her gaze and blinked. That wasn't Treena dancing with their father. It was her other sister, Kiki. So where was Treena?

"Hey, hon, can you do me a favor?"

The man in front of her was tall, well built, and extremely handsome. Small wonder Treena had taken one look at this Boris Kodjoe look-alike and fallen into lust and then in love with Derek. Raven slipped her arm through his. "Of course. What do you need?"

"Treena went to change nearly an hour ago. She made me promise not to follow her. Will you go and tell her to get the lead out?" He glanced at his watch. "I'm going to change in my parents' room and I'd like to get away in another hour. Tell her if she's not here by then I'm coming to get her."

The night before, Treena had told Raven and Kiki that she'd stopped sleeping with Derek six weeks earlier so he'd be hungry for her on their wedding night. Raven arched a brow and looked up at him. "What's the rush?"

"I'm eager to start the honeymoon. If she doesn't hurry up, we'll be starting it right here instead of tonight. Get her for me?"

"Of course. You know I've always wanted a big brother."

"And I've always wanted a gorgeous younger sister."

She kissed his cheek and left the ballroom. As she waited at the elevator bank, she smiled, remembering Acier's goodbye kisses. They had been deep, sweet, and scorching hot. Feeling his long, thick cock pressed against her as he held her had really aroused her. By the Goddess, she loved him. If her father had seen the passion she and Acier shared, he'd have insisted they get married immediately.

Her smile vanished as she recalled the look in Tee's eyes when Acier finally released her. Tee's gray eyes had turned that distinct gold, as they did when he was in what Acier had called prowl heat. Casting a quick look downward, she'd noted the clear outline of Tee's hardened cock against his thigh.

Flushing, she looked away from the raw sexual hunger in Tee's eyes to find Acier's gaze on her. Part of Acier and Tee's vampire heritage made it acceptable for brothers or sisters to sleep with their siblings' bloodlusts, or perfect mates. Since Acier had finally accepted his vampiric blood, they both knew she and Tee would eventually make love.

Despite her deep feelings for Acier, Raven shivered with desire at the thought of sleeping with his identical twin. She and Tee had always been close. She thought of his big, warm hands caressing her bare body... a body Acier had only recently introduced to the absolute joys of sex with a well hung, skillful lover. What would sex with Tee be like? Aside from their hair, which Tee wore short and Acier wore in a long, dark curtain that fell past his broad shoulders, the two were physically identical. However, they had very different personalities. What would Tee be like as a lover? What --

The elevator doors opened and she stepped inside, pushed the button for the twelfth floor, and tried to clear her head. She and Acier would be apart for at least four weeks while he prepared to move his shifter dens from Arizona to the Greater Philadelphia area.

Acier had told her Pen would be mating with Emmanuel, one of the few female warrior class Keddi on Earth. Acier's other Keddi, Drei, would be there as back up, in case Pen and Emmanuel didn't like each other. Her smile widened at the thought of Pen, a diminutive shifter whose natural form was that of a gray wolf, fathering the next generation of earthbound Keddi. Drei, the younger of the two, had been driving everyone insane lately with his incessant crowing that he was the step-father to Acier's young twin sisters.

Raven wanted to meet this Emmanuel, but the decision to remain in the Greater Philadelphia area had been easy once she'd seen how old and fragile her father looked. While she would miss Acier and their daily lovemaking, she wanted to spend some time with her father.

Her spiritual guide, Abby Valentine, had warned her most Willoni could not accurately see their own future. Nevertheless, her recent visions involving herself, Acier, and Etienne, and her father's imminent death, disturbed and frightened her. At a time when she needed her most, Abby had disappeared. She would have to discover what, if anything, could be done to help her father before she went searching for Abby.

She left the elevator on the twelfth floor. Halfway down the corridor she stopped outside the door to the suite where she and her sisters had spent the previous night. It was the first time the three of them had been together for an overnigher in months. They'd stayed up until after two a.m. exchanging news and gossip. Treena and Kiki had exclaimed over the size of Raven's engagement ring, exhibited good-natured envy that she had done what neither of them had been able to do -- reel in Acier. All three sisters had spent years scheming to spend at least one night with either of the Gautier brothers.

Smiling, she remembered how grumpy they'd been when the alarm clock, followed by the wake up call, roused them. Treena was probably taking a quick nap.



Raven glanced at her watch. Derek was impatient, but another fifteen or twenty minutes wouldn't make much difference. She swiped her keycard. Easing the door open, she slipped inside, closing it quietly.

Her eyes widened as she stared across the room. A naked Treena's lean, dark body was held against the wall opposite the door by the weight of the equally naked Tee's tanned, muscular one. From the way Tee's tight buns were clenching and unclenching, Raven knew he was already inside Treena -- fucking her on her wedding day.

Raven could see Treena's long nails digging into Tee's broad shoulders. Her eyes were closed, her lips parted with her tongue peeking out. Each time Tee rotated his hips and thrust his cock into her, Treena moaned, her body shuddering.

After one particularly deep thrust, Treena gasped, raking her nails down Tee's back to clutch his ass. "Oh, God, Etienne. Your cock is so huge and delicious. So hard. Give it to me! Give me every hot, wonderful inch! Fuck me!"

Tee responded by widening his stance, pulling his powerful hips back, and then shooting them forward.

"Oh! Oh, shit! Oh, shit, Etienne, your cock feels so good. Fuck me harder! Harder! Dear God, I want every inch pounding into me until I come again! I need every inch of cock slamming deep into me!"

Tee wrapped his arms around Treena and swung them around with his back against the wall. He stared straight into Raven's startled gaze. A smile spreading across his face, he cupped Treena's bare cheeks and fucked her hard and deep. Raven couldn't look away from his intense gaze. She pressed a hand against her racing heart.

Treena moaned, tossed her head back, and ground her hips against his, clearly loving the relentless pounding he was giving her. "Oh, God. Oh, God, this is the sweetest cock in the world. Fuck me until I'm raw and full of your lovely cum!"

Keeping his gaze locked with Raven's, Tee linked Treena's arms around his neck, and lifted her off her feet. She wrapped her legs around him, impaled on his cock. He

turned sideways, so Raven could clearly see his cock moving in and out of Treena's pussy. Treena's juices covered his pubic hair and the base of his shaft.

Raven bit her lip, feeling her pussy flex in response to the sight of Tee's big, slick length tunneling in and out of Treena. Tee kept his movements slow and measured, his gaze locked on Raven.

"Oh, yes! So good!" Treena tightened her arms and began bouncing on his shaft. "Harder! Deeper! Please. Almost there! Harder!"

He gripped her thighs and sliced his shaft in and out, his thrusts short and rough. Within seconds, Treena cried out as her entire body shuddered.

Tee groaned and kept pounding her pussy, his lids fluttering. Raven knew he was coming too. Tearing her gaze away from his, she looked down. A steady stream of their combined fluids trickled down from Treena's pussy to his pubic hair.

Raven caught her breath. By the Goddess, he was fucking Treena on her wedding day without a condom? Oh, no! The lustful spell broken, the muscles of her throat unlocked. "Etienne! How dare you!"

Treena gave a startled cry and tried to scramble off the cock still impaling her. "Stop! Oh, my God, Etienne, you have to stop! We've been caught!"

Easily overcoming Treena's efforts to be free, Tee maintained his grip on her thighs and leisurely shot his dick in and out of her pussy several more times. Despite her efforts to dismount him, Treena gasped, and shuddered. Tee continued fucking her, groaning softly as he thrust up into her, digging his cock in hard and deep.

"Oh, God!" Treena moaned and came again. Only after he'd clearly ejaculated inside her again did Tee lower her to her feet. Even then, he remained inside her.

Raven, feeling a combination of anger and jealousy coursing through her, stalked across the room, grabbed Tee's left shoulder, and tugged at it. "Get the hell away from her!"

With a deep-chested growl Etienne finally withdrew his cock. He turned to face Raven. "Ah, there's my jealous little *petite*. What's the matter, honey, afraid there won't be any cock left for you?"

Heat flooded Raven's cheeks. Ignoring him, she looked at Treena. "Derek's a good man. How could you?"

Treena pressed a hand between her legs and over her breasts. Sobbing, she rushed into the bedroom, closing the door. Raven turned to glare at Tee. He stood in front of her, making no effort to cover himself. Despite her anger, her heartbeat raced as she looked at him. He had a beautiful, tanned body with wide shoulders, a nice chest covered with a sprinkling of dark hair, washboard abs, long, muscular legs, and a long, thick erection that was every bit as breathtaking as Acier's. By the Goddess, what a big, beautiful cock!

She shook her head and sucked in an angry breath. "How could you do this to her?"

He leaned back against the wall, locking his gaze with hers. "Did it look as if I was raping her to you? I just gave her what she's been wanting for years."

She tossed her head angrily, sending her hair cascading around her shoulders. "You bastard! Have you no shame or sense of decency? It's her wedding day."

He grinned. "Those fucks were my wedding present."

Fucks? They'd done it more than once? Oh, no! A sense of dread filled her. He'd done it more than once in her visions with disastrous results. "The least you could have done was use a condom!" She bit her lip. "What if she gets pregnant?"

His smile vanished. "That's not too damn likely."

"It's not?" The Goddess willing, maybe she had interpreted her visions incorrectly. "You mean because she's on birth control?"

"I mean because I'm a hybrid. Do you really think a half-vampire, half-shifter male can impregnate anyone?"

Her visions had included a few of herself pregnant and strangely unhappy. "Yes, I do."

"You do? Didn't you pay attention in biology, *petite*?"

"Do you mean Acier and I... what *do* you mean?"

"Hybrids are almost always sterile."

Dare she believe him? She wasn't certain. Before Acier had first made love to her, his fear of sending her home pregnant had been real. "But Acier and I... I thought... he never said he couldn't get me pregnant." She touched her stomach. "In fact, he was worried that he would and then have to face Dad."

Etienne touched her cheek. "Biology was never Sei's favorite subject, *petite*. You two clearly have that in common."

He sounded as if he liked the idea of her and Acier being unable to have a child. She slapped his hand away. "Don't touch me!"

He narrowed his gaze. "Don't touch you?" He curled the fingers of one hand in her hair and slid an arm around her waist. "I'm going to do more than touch you, *petite*. I'm going to fuck you until you're walking bowlegged." He pressed his lips against her neck and raked his incisors along her skin.

A rush of moisture pooled between her legs where his erection pressed against her. She swallowed hard, trying to keep her desire under control. The sexual tension between her and Tee had been high since her eighteenth birthday four years earlier. Although she'd once come close to allowing him to make love to her, her fear of Acier's reaction had stopped her.

She loved having Acier ingest her blood as they made love. His huge cock often brought tingles of pain with the waves of pleasure. Thinking of Tee pleasuring and hurting her as Acier did sent a jolt of desire through her. She curled her fingers in the soft hair on Tee's bare chest. It would be heaven to wind her arms around his neck, part her legs, and have him love her against the same wall where he'd just fucked Treena.

He reached between their bodies and rubbed his cock against her. She shuddered, feeling the heat and hardness of it through her clothing. By the Goddess she wanted him... needed him.

She gave herself a mental shake. Now was not the time to surrender to her hunger for Tee. She turned her head to avoid kissing the warm, caressing lips moving against her neck. "Get away from me and put on your clothes before Kiki or Derek walk in."

He gave her a cold look. "If Kiki comes in, I'll give her what she's been wanting for years."

She flushed and glared at him.

"If Derek walks in, his life expectancy will --"

She pressed her fingers against his lips. "No! Don't you dare threaten him. Right now, he's worth two of you."

He growled softly. "You little --"

"If you dare call me a name, I'll slap you so hard your ears will ring for weeks!"

"You do that and I'll fuck you so hard up that big, dark ass of yours you won't be able to sit down for weeks."

She narrowed her gaze. "Don't threaten me, you half-crazy bastard! You put your clothes on and you do it now, damn it, Etienne, or hell will freeze over before I allow you to touch me."

He curled his hands into fists. "I don't require your permission to take what is rightfully mine -- you!"

During Acier's feast, she had used her command of Bentia, a living barrier spirit, to help keep Acier in check. Bentia had been driven from her during a dangerous ritual she'd had to undergo after Acier's feast. While she no longer commanded Bentia, she sensed it would be unwise to show fear with Tee.

She lifted her chin. "I didn't allow Acier to take me against my will and I sure as hell will not allow you to do so."

"You won't dictate to me as you do to him. I'm going to get what I want and need from you -- with or without your permission!"

She sucked in an angry breath. "Don't forget who and what I am." She leaned close and glared up at him. "I am the daughter of a Willoni Priestess and no damn male, no matter how crazy he is, takes me against my will. I know you're not yourself, but if you ever threaten me again, you're going to be one very sorry shifter." She stepped away from him. "Now dress and get the hell out of here before Derek shows up!"

Staring into his angry gaze, she knew he was very close to committing rape. Why hadn't Acier taken Etienne with him? Where the hell were all the friends and relatives who were supposed to be watching him to make sure he didn't do anything he shouldn't? Thinking of his best friend, full-blood vampire Damon duPre, she curled her lip. So much for his help. She was on her own. If she didn't back Tee down, he would rape her.

Raven compressed her lips and held his gaze. He swore softly, snatched up his clothes, dressed quickly, and then he was gone in a blur of movement. Closing her eyes, Raven leaned against the wall. She toyed with the idea of calling Acier, but decided against it. It would be a cold day in hell when she couldn't handle one half-crazy male. Besides, if her visions were true, such a call to Acier would only increase the chances of one of the brothers killing the other.

"You're not going to tell Derek, are you?"

Raven opened her eyes and straightened. Treena, dressed in a silk trouser suit, stood in the doorway of the living room, looking chastened and remorseful. Even if she hadn't expressed regret, there was no way Raven would betray her. "Of course not!" She pushed herself away from the wall and crossed the room.

The sisters embraced briefly before Treena shook her head. "I don't know what came over me, Rae. I didn't mean to sleep... to cheat with him, but when we were dancing, he made sure I could feel his erection. Derek has a very nice, satisfying shaft, but hell, Rae, I've never felt such a big, thick, long cock. I just had to have him. When he said he had to have me... I couldn't say no." She bit her lip. "I love Derek so much... I can't believe what I just did with Etienne."

"Just consider it a last crazy fling." Raven caressed Treena's cheek. "There's no need for Derek to know what happened. Go to him and have a great honeymoon."

Treena bit her lip. "Are you sure no one noticed?"

She wasn't, but she nodded anyway. The only person Treena needed to be concerned about was Derek and he hadn't given any evidence he'd seen that almost obscene dance between Treena and Tee. "Yes."

Treena sighed. "That was such a stupid mistake. God, I hope it doesn't come back to haunt me."

Recalling one of her more disturbing visions, Raven suppressed a shudder. "Derek's waiting."

With a troubled look in her dark eyes, Treena nodded slowly. "I better get back downstairs." She picked up her suitcase, and headed for the door. "Are you coming?"

"In a minute. I just want to call Abby."

"I expected to see her at the wedding."

"I know, but she hasn't been herself lately."

"Why not? What's going on with her?"

There was only so much Raven could share with Treena, who had no idea that neither Raven nor Abby were fully human. Abby hadn't returned any of the numerous calls Raven had placed during the last week. "I think she's lonely."

"She doesn't need to be. She's a beautiful woman."

She was a beautiful woman whose faith prohibited her enjoying carnal pleasure while she acted as guide to a Willoni acolyte. "Hopefully I'll be able to contact her soon."

Treena nodded. "I'll see you downstairs before we leave?"

Raven smiled. "Of course."

Alone in the suite, Raven sat on the chair by the window and took her cell phone from her shoulder bag. She felt a tingling sensation along the back of her neck and bolted to her feet, staring toward the door.

A man stood inside the closed door.

She'd thought Acier and Tee and their cousin Xavier Depardieu were handsome, but this man left her breathless. He was tall and muscular with long dark hair that fell around very broad shoulders. His eyes were more silver than gray. His skin had a reddish bronze tint. His dark, clearly tailor-made suit clung to his big body like the proverbial second skin. He exuded an air of sensuality that was almost palpable.

She immediately knew two things. He wasn't human, and she didn't need to fear him. Meeting his amazing silver gaze, she experienced a shock of recognition. They had never met, yet she knew his identity. Inclining her head slightly, she rose. She hesitated, then, moved by an instinct she didn't quite understand, she bowed briefly. "You're the one Acier said would help Tee."

He nodded. "I am Enola Cheyenne."

He had the most incredible smile she'd ever seen. It was at once reassuring, sexy, confident, and majestic. She had been right to bow to this Enola Cheyenne, whom she suspected commanded his people's allegiance.

"And you are the Willoni who will help me rescue Etienne's sanity."

"You just missed him."

He shook his head. "I sent him away so we could talk."

That explained Tee's sudden exit.

He extended his hand. "Come, little Willoni. We'll discuss how to rescue Etienne."

She shook her head. "I don't know what to do to help him."

"I do. Come." She crossed the room and he took her hand in his. "How much do you want to help him?"

"More than I can say, but right now I'm also worried about my father. He's sick and I need to be here with him."

"I have seen your father."

"You're a healer. Will you help him?"

"Although I have some small ability to heal physical maladies, your father's condition is beyond my capability. I am primarily a healer of the spirit or soul."

Tears filled her eyes. "You mean he's going to die?"

"What do his doctors say?"

She blinked hard. "That it's just a matter of time."

He hesitated. "I know someone who is a healer of the body. His father is a renowned healer."



She squeezed his hand. "What's his name? What's his fee? If I can't raise it, I know Acier will help."

"He doesn't heal for monetary reward and you won't have heard of him. He's from the planet Telmira."

"Will he help my father? Can he help him?"

"I'm sure he'd be willing, but I cannot guarantee that he will actually be able to help. Your father's condition --"

"Will you ask him? Please. I know Dad is human and he's not going to live forever, but I'm not ready to lose him yet."

"The healer's name is Eros. I will ask him to come see your father. Please don't get too hopeful -- unless Eros gives you reason."

She nodded. "I understand."

"Before I contact Eros, we need to discuss Etienne and how much you are willing to endure to help restore his sanity."

## Chapter Two

Adona stood in the dark shadows across from the hotel watching Etienne leave. Her eyes narrowed and she clenched her hands into fists. He'd been with her -- with Adona's rival for his affection.

If the skinny, scheming, vampire-stealing bitch thought for one moment that Adona would stand by and allow her to sleep with her male, she would soon see how mistaken she was! There was only one way to deal with a Willoni who didn't know her place. Adona was just the female to give Ravanni Monclaire what she deserved.

She frowned. Ravanni wasn't alone. Adona had seen the tall, handsome, silver-eyed male enter the hotel room. Although Adona feared no one, she sensed a level of power in the male with which she wasn't prepared to deal.

The time would come when she would give the Willoni an all or nothing alternative. Either she stopped using her wiles to bewitch Etienne or she would pay with her life.

Casting a last look at the hotel, Adona turned and walked into the shadows.

\* \* \*

Etienne, with his Keddi, Karol, perched on his shoulder, paced the length of his hotel suite, trying to control the fury building in his gut. Two full-blood male vampires, both tall with dark hair, one with gray eyes, and one with brown, sat on the sofa, watching him.

He stopped pacing and turned to glare at them. The presence of his so-called uncles, Mikhel and Serge Dumont, annoyed the hell out of him. It was bad enough having Mikhel issuing orders. Mikhel was some twenty years his senior. He turned his attention to the younger vampire with the gray eyes. At forty-two, Serge was only a year or so older than Etienne. There was no way he would obey Serge. He'd had

enough of that shit from Acier to last him a lifetime. "I don't want or need either of you here. Get out and stop following me!"

Serge laughed. "Why don't you try putting us out?"

Mikhel frowned. "Serge --"

"I'm sick and tired of his whining, Mikhel! Instead of being home with Derri, I'm stuck watching over his ungrateful ass. I've had about all his shit I intend to take!" Serge leveled a finger at Etienne. "It's time you remembered we're your uncles or risk getting your ass kicked all over this suite."

"You and what army?"

"The day I need help kicking your sorry ass will be the day I stop calling myself a full-blood. Don't let your two- or three-inch height advantage go to your head. I'll kick your ass all the way to Boston and back if that's what you want."

Karol, in his natural form of a miniature gray wolf, flew off Etienne's shoulder. In battle mode, he revealed his three-inch incisors and four-inch claws.

Mikhel's lips tightened. "Tell him to stand down, Etienne."

Etienne shook his head. "You're going to be surprised at how much damage a warrior class Keddi can inflict -- even on a full-blood vampire."

Mikhel shook his head. "Call him off, Etienne, or I'll kill him."

The threat to Karol increased Etienne's rage. "Hurt him and I'll rip your throat out! On second thought, I'll rip it out anyway!" Etienne flashed across the room toward Mikhel.

With a growl of his own, Serge exploded off the sofa and charged to meet Etienne. Karol flew at Serge. To Etienne's surprise, Mikhel growled. Flashing across the room, he leapt into the air, catching Karol in his hand.

Etienne only had time to see Karol sink his incisors into the surprised Mikhel's hand before he felt a powerful blow against his face that sent him spinning across the room.

When Etienne's head cleared, Serge stood over him -- his incisors bared, his right hand clenched into a fist. "Call off your Keddi or he'll be killed and then I'll finish kicking your ass."

"Not while I'm here you won't," another voice intruded.

Serge swung around, allowing Etienne to bolt to his feet. Mikhel, trying to pry Karol's incisors out of his hand, flashed forward to stand by Serge.

Etienne watched the tall full-blood with auburn hair and green eyes stroll across the room to stand by his side, his incisors bared. Mikhel had his fist clenched, about to smash into Karol's small body.

"Karol, stand down," Damon ordered. He looked at Mikhel. "Release him."

"Who the fuck are you?" Serge demanded. "Never mind. Let me guess. You're Damon duPre. Etienne's so-called friend."

Damon looked at Mikhel again. "Release the Keddi unharmed."

Mikhel stepped in front of Serge and stared at Damon. "We're his blood relatives. Don't stick your nose into the middle of a family dispute."

"Do you know who I am? Who my brothers are?"

"Ask me if I care." Mikhel grabbed Karol by the scruff of his neck and pried his incisors out of his hand. He flung Karol across the room.

Roaring, Etienne leapt into the air and caught Karol before he could hit the opposite wall. When he dropped to his feet, he bared his incisors at Mikhel. "If you've hurt him --"

Mikhel swore and stalked across the room toward Etienne. When Damon stepped in his path, Mikhel backhanded him out of the way. Damon flashed after Mikhel and found Serge standing in his path.

Damon shook his head. "Get out of my way, pup, or I'll go through you."

"Pup? Don't let my age fool you, duPre. While you were depending on your nutty brothers to back you up, I was out killing a full-blood while still a latent. Unlike you, I've never needed my big brothers in a fight. But like you, I have big brothers in

addition to Mikhel here," Serge warned. "You might have heard of them. Aleksei and Vladimir Madison and Andrei Forester."

"What the fuck is going on here?"

An overwhelming sense of relief filled Etienne as a tall full-blood with bronze-colored skin, blue eyes, and long locks appeared in the room. Etienne's second Keddi, Slayer, perched on his shoulder. "Father."

Slayer flew across the room to hover in front of Karol. *Karol hurt?*

Etienne watched as his father, Vladimir Madison, stalked across the room to face Mikhel. "You hit him?"

Serge frowned. "Actually, I'm the one who --"

Mikhel cast Serge a quick warning look before turning his attention back to Vladimir. "What if I did?"

Mikhel's response surprised Etienne. Mikhel seemed prepared to take the blame and the consequences for something Serge had done, much as Acier would have done for him. Etienne frowned. Like Acier, Mikhel clearly suffered from the delusion that he needed to protect a younger brother who required no such protection. Older brothers were pains in the asses.

Vladimir's nostrils flared. He clenched his right hand. "Why?"

"He needed it. Now get the hell out of my face with your attitude."

"You hit my son and then tell me to get out of your face?"

"Yes!"

Vladimir's eyes glowed. "Who the hell do you think you're talking to, pup?"

"I'm talking to you, Vladimir!"

Etienne smiled. Both his "uncles" were about to get their uptight asses kicked.

"Not for long you're not. I'm going to --"

Serge pushed past Damon, grabbed Vlad's shoulder, and swung him around to face him. "Don't you start any shit with Mikhel! That brat of yours had it coming. He has no right to disrespect us."

Etienne, half expecting Vladimir to backhand Serge across the room, watched in annoyance as Serge raged on. "We're his uncles here doing our best to keep his sorry ass out of trouble! Etienne didn't get anything Aleksei wouldn't have given him in our place and you know it. You get that brat of yours to toe the line and there won't be any more trouble. Let him think he can continue to disrespect his uncles and he'll just have to get his ass kicked until he learns his damned place in the family order."

Aware of the tension between his father and Mikhel, Etienne waited. After that rant, the ass kicking was about to begin big time. Once it was over, he wouldn't have to worry about his "uncles" dogging him.

After several long, tense moments, Vladimir jerked away from Serge. Instead of backhanding Mikhel, he reached past him and closed his hand on Etienne's shoulder. "Come with me."

Etienne stared at him. "What?"

Vladimir pushed him into the adjoining bedroom, slammed the door, and turned to face him. He spoke in a low, barely controlled voice. "What happened?"

"All you need to know is that they attacked me!"

He watched his father's Adam's apple bob up and down as he made a visible effort to control himself. "Answer my question."

"To hell with your question!"

"What?"

"I said to hell with your question!" Etienne bared his incisors. "I want them off my back -- now! Get them off my back or else!"

"Or else what?"

Slayer and Karol hovered around Etienne, their small bodies tense.

*Father angry.*

*Don't make Father angry,* Karol pleaded.

Etienne turned to look at Karol. "Fuck Fa..."

That's as far as he got before he found himself lying against the far wall. He pressed a hand against his mouth. Blood. He stared at Vlad. "You struck me!"

Vladimir stared at him in silence, his incisors bared.

Enraged, Etienne rushed across the room with Slayer and Karol flashing around him.

*No!*

*Don't make Father angry again!*

He ignored them and stopped in front of Vladimir. "You sorry bastard! You've never been around when I needed you and now when I could use your help, you side with them and attack me?" He sucked in an angry, painful breath. "Don't you ever again dare to call yourself my father. I have no father!"

He had the satisfaction of seeing a look of devastation in Vladimir's eyes before he stormed from the room. Avoiding the gazes of Mikhel and Serge, he flashed through the adjoining room and out the door with Damon and his Keddi at his side.

In the hallway, he came to an abrupt halt. A small, slender woman with dark hair appeared in his path. Damn, this day kept getting worse. The last thing he needed was his father's mother getting in his way. He knew enough about her not to yield to the urge to order her out of his way.

Damon sent him a brief message. *Oh, shit. I'll catch you later.*

Great. Damon was scared of his grandmother.

Palea Dumont looked up into his eyes. *Not afraid. Respectful, as you should be, my angry little one.*

*Call it what you want, Etienne,* Damon replied. *I'm out of here.* He turned and fled in the opposite direction.

The suite door opened. Mikhel and Serge joined them in the corridor.

Etienne stood in silent resentment as his uncles greeted their mother. Serge then turned to give him a long stare. "The next time we meet, you'd better have learned your place or I'll kick your shifter ass from here to Arizona."

Etienne bared his incisors. "I'll ask you again. You and what army?"

To his annoyance, Serge laughed, slapped his cheek, and walked down the hall to the elevator. Etienne overcame the urge to rush after the arrogant vampire and rip his throat open. One down. Two to go.

Mikhel arched a brow before turning to his mother. "What brings you here, Mother?"

"I've come to see Vladimir, but it appears I need to see Etienne first."

Mikhel's nostrils flared. "This young ingrate has been very disrespectful. Vladimir needs to see you."

Etienne found two pairs of dark eyes focused on him. He didn't care what Mikhel thought, but the disappointed look in Palea's eyes unnerved him.

"What of this little one who doesn't know his place?"

Mikhel narrowed his gaze. "Go see Vladimir. I'll deal with Etienne."

Nodding, she took Etienne's hand and drew him close. *I know this is a difficult time for you, my angry little one. But you and Acier are now part of a large, extended family. No matter how dark things might seem, one or more of us will be with you... in spirit if not in the flesh. The blood of the Walker-Dumont line runs through your veins. Whether a Walker, a Dumont, a Madison, a Forester, or a Gautier, we are all one family. We will do our best to give you all the love and sense of family you lost with the death of your mother.*

She stroked his cheek with her free hand. *And when you are more yourself, you will tell me of your mother. Yes?*

He hadn't experienced maternal affection since his mother's death thirty-one years earlier. The feeling of warmth and belonging her words spread through him made holding tears at bay difficult. She tugged at his hand. Obedient to the silent command and an inner need he'd long denied, he bent his head. Her soft, cool lips brushed against his cheek. *You are deeply loved... son of my most cherished child. You are dearer to me than you can possibly know, my precious and beloved Etienne.*

Moved despite himself, he gulped in a deep, aching breath.

Smiling, she released him and entered his suite. The moment the door closed behind her, Mikhel grabbed him by his collar and slammed him against the wall. "Now,



Etienne, let's understand something very clearly. We all know you're having a difficult feast, but that's no excuse for disrespecting your father. In this family, we accord our parents and elder relatives the respect their positions deserve."

"Vladimir deserves nothing!"

Mikhel tightened his fingers around his neck. "He's your father and in my presence, you will show him the respect he deserves or face the consequences."

He glared at Mikhel. "Take your hands off me or --"

Mikhel tightened his grip. "Shut your mouth, boy, or I'll shut it for you! Vladimir may be prepared to take your shit, but I assure you, none of the rest of us will."

Etienne shoved Mikhel away and swung a fist at him.

Mikhel blocked it and slammed Etienne against the wall again. "Unless you try harder to fit into your proper place in the family, you're going to find yourself slapped around a lot during the next few weeks. Do I make myself clear, Etienne?"

He fought hard to control the rage building in him. "I have a long memory, Dumont!"

In response to the thinly veiled threat, Mikhel drove a fist into his stomach. "You'll call me Uncle Mikhel. If you ever use that disrespectful tone with me again, I'll slap your ass up and down this hallway until you develop some manners. Is that clear?"

Etienne swallowed hard in an attempt to overcome the urge to shift to his natural form and rip Mikhel's throat out. The time would come when this arrogant vampire learned not to fuck with him. For now, wary of being slapped again, he inclined his head slightly.

To his amazement, Mikhel suddenly smiled and put an arm around his shoulders. "Good. Now, boy, let's go see what kind of shit we can get into."

He pulled away. "What? You're not going to try and stop me from having a good time?"

Mikhel shook his head. "If you're lucky, you'll only feast once. It can be a difficult time, but it can also be one of the most intensely pleasurable times in a

vampire's life. So, unless you do something that's completely off the charts, I won't interfere."

Etienne stared at him in silence for several moments. Just minutes earlier, he and Serge had been all over him for doing what he wanted. "Are you serious?"

Mikhel nodded. "Though my feast started badly and was painful for my bloodlust to watch, I enjoyed it. I had my fill of women and blood. I plan to do my best to see that you enjoy what's left of yours."

"You're serious."

Mikhel palmed the back of his neck. "Of course I am."

Etienne sighed. "In that case, I need several drinks and some pussy."

"I know a place where you can get both without any worries."

"Where the hell is that?"

Mikhel grinned. "One of the perks of being part of such a large family is our extended reach. Andrei owns numerous nightclubs across the country. He has two clubs in the area that cater to humans and vampires alike -- Midnight Shadows and Eternity." He glanced at the closed door of the suite.

Etienne tensed, certain Mikhel was about to insist he apologize to Vladimir before they left.

Mikhel arched a brow and shook his head. "Not this time, but if you remember what I said about giving him the respect he deserves, you and I won't have any issues with each other."

Etienne nodded.

\* \* \*

Five hours later, Etienne sat on a chair in one of the back rooms of Andrei's club. A beautiful, naked fem with long, dark hair ground herself on his cock as he ingested her blood. She had already come twice. The clenching of her tight vaginal muscles combined with the sweetness of her blood finally drove him to his fifth climax. Grasping her ass, he held her body still while he quickly drove his exploding cock deep into her wet pussy.

Buried in her pussy with his eyes closed, her blood flowing over his tongue and into his throat, he could pretend he was with Raven. That made his release all the sweeter. It was only when he lifted his head from her neck and met her blue gaze that the power of the illusion vanished -- leaving him longing for Raven.

Giving him a sensual smile, the woman rubbed her large, firm breasts against his chest. "Everything I've heard about that big cock of yours is true." She stroked her fingers through his hair. "I know you're not bloodlusted, but are you otherwise taken?"

"Yes."

"Pity." Kissing him, she rose and stood over him with her legs on either side of his. Cum trickled from her pussy onto his pubic hair. She laughed, squatted over him, and parted the folds of her cunt. A tiny flood of their fluids gushed from her pussy onto his cock and pubic hair. She kissed him again and, straightening, stepped away from him. "Whenever you want another quickie, just think of me and I'll find you."

He'd enjoyed the two hours he'd spent with her, but there was something about her that unnerved him. Even as he smiled and nodded, he suspected she, like Adona, was not really a true fem and it would be unwise to have anything else to do with her.

She blew him a kiss, and without bothering to dress, she opened the door, and left the room -- stark naked.

Etienne showered and, forty minutes later, joined Mikhel at a corner table in Eternity. Although his sexual hunger had been somewhat assuaged, his inner hunger and rage continued to gnaw at him. In addition, he feared he would regret that last fuck.

Mikhel arched a brow. "Is something wrong?"

The time spent in Mikhel's company had provided a surprising measure of comfort. Perhaps uncles weren't totally useless after all. He shook his head. "No."

He watched a pretty blond fem sink onto Mikhel's lap and link her arms around his neck. "There's an empty bed in the back."

Mikhel shook his head and rose, dumping the fem unceremoniously onto her ass. "Thanks, but I'm very happily bloodlusted and married."

The fem shot to her feet and tossed her long hair around her shoulders. "Your loss."

Etienne tilted his head. "Aren't you going to indulge?"

"In wine?" Mikhel lifted his glass and nodded. "Absolutely." He glanced briefly around the dimly lit club, filled with beautiful females. "I don't cheat."

Etienne sipped his wine before replying. "What about Derri?"

Mikhel shrugged. "She's Serge's bloodlust."

"But everyone says you're in love with her."

Mikhel arched a brow. "Who is everyone?"

"Are you in love with her?"

"Why should my feelings for Derri concern you?"

Etienne raked a hand through his hair. "I have the same problem."

"Problem? Who says my relationship with Derri is a problem?"

"You're in love with Serge's bloodlust. That sounds like a problem to me."

"Neither Erica nor Serge has a problem with our relationship. Why should you?"

"Because I ache for her."

Mikhel tensed. "Acier's Raven?"

"Yes."

Mikhel sighed. "It's like that for you?"

"Just like that."

Mikhel shrugged. "Your feelings for her are perfectly acceptable in our culture."

"Is that what you do with Derri? Make love rather than fuck her?"

He watched Mikhel's jaw clench and unclench before he responded. "I make no apologies for how I feel about Derri. There's an invisible line between loving her and feeling something more compelling for her."

"Have you ever crossed that line?"

Mikhel's lids swept down, concealing his expression before he met Etienne's gaze again. "Derri will always be Serge's bloodlust. Erica will always be mine. Bloodlust trumps love every time. Erica is the mother of my son and I love her now

more than I did when we first met. What I feel for Derri is powerful, but if I had to choose between saving her or Erica, I'd save Erica."

"You'd allow Derri to die?"

He watched a pained expression flicker across Mikhel's face. "I wouldn't risk Erica's life or safety for anyone -- not even Derri."

Etienne sighed. "Then I guess I'm in worse shape than you because I can't think of a single person whose safety I would put before Raven's."

"Not even Acier's?"

"Not even his, but then he'd want it that way as well."

"Have you made love to her yet?"

"No."

"Why not?"

Etienne curled his lip. "Acier hasn't wanted it."

"So? It's your right."

"That's what everyone keeps telling me, but no one understands how close we used to be." He raked his hands through his hair. "I want her so badly that lately I've found myself wishing..."

"Wishing what?"

Etienne hesitated. He hadn't even told Damon how deeply his feelings for Raven ran. "Have you ever wished Serge was out of the way?"

Mikhel shook his head. "No! Erica would still be my bloodlust, the first woman I ever loved, and the mother of my son. Even if Derri weren't Serge's, I'd still be with Erica."

"Then Derri doesn't mean nearly as much to you as Raven means to me. Lately, I've even considered killing him."

Mikhel swore softly and reached across the table to clamp a hand over his. "The hell you have!"

He jerked his hand away. "Why shouldn't I? His feelings for her pale in comparison to mine. He wants her. I love, need, ache, and hunger for her. He doesn't deserve her."

"That's your feast talking."

Etienne shook his head. "I could easily kill him and take Raven. He's unfairly reaped the benefits of the seeds I've sowed over the last ten years. He ignored her for years while I kept in touch. If he had half a heart, he wouldn't have touched her!" He balled a hand into a fist and shook it at Mikhel. "Why should I allow him to come between us?"

"It's time for you to sleep with her and dispel some of your aggression."

"That won't change anything. I nearly ripped his throat out at the reception."

Mikhel's gaze narrowed. "What stopped you?"

"Raven wouldn't have forgiven me."

"And that's the only reason you didn't go after him?"

Powerful memories assailed his senses. Acier had always had his back. In college, Acier had worked two jobs while he'd had none. Acier had always provided comfort when he needed it most, putting Etienne's needs ahead of his own. Acier had never done anything to hurt him -- until he took Raven. He swallowed a knot of rage and pain. "She should be mine."

Mikhel shook his head. "If your feelings for her run as deeply as you say they do, you'll learn to accept the role in her life and affections fate has given you. You can make love to her... love her... lust for her, but you can never allow yourself to forget that she belongs to Acier. You can never let your emotional guard down long enough to wish Acier harm just so you can have what is rightfully his. Learn to deal with your feelings for her, Etienne."

"Is that what you do with yours for Derri?"

"I've already told you I love her, but I would never place her above Erica. Everyone -- except Dimitri -- comes after Erica. Once Dimitri is an adult and able to protect himself, he too will come after Erica."

"What if Raven is my bloodlust as well as Acier's? Who says two vampires can't bloodlust with the same woman? Are you in bloodlust with Erica and Derri?"

"I'll readily admit that I care more for Derri than I should, but I am not in bloodlust with her. Would I be in bloodlust with her had I met her before I met Erica? I don't know. All I know is that aside from Dimitri, Erica is the most important person in my life."

"That's how I feel about Raven! Can you honestly tell me she's not my bloodlust?"

"Only you can decide that, but you're going to have to deal with her belonging to Acier."

"So I'm supposed to be satisfied with making love to her when Acier allows it?"

Mikhel's eyes blazed at him. "Yes, Etienne, you are."

"That's not good enough!"

"It'll have to be."

He slammed his fist down onto the table. "I'm going to have her!"

"Yes, but you are not allowed to forget she belongs to Acier and you sure as hell are not allowed to wish him dead so your selfish, egotistical ass can have his bloodlust."

Etienne swallowed hard. The need to leap over the table and strangle Mikhel was difficult to overcome. "I expose my deepest emotions to you and you call me selfish and egotistical?"

"Yes. You've admitted he's always put your wants and needs first -- until he fell in bloodlust. Instead of rejoicing with him, you selfishly want him to continue to put you first." Mikhel leaned across the table and grabbed him by his collar. "Do you know what it is to ask a vampire to give up his or her bloodlust? You selfish bastard! When is it your turn to put him first? When do you start giving him an ounce of the consideration he's always given you? What makes you so damned special that he's supposed to devote his entire life and happiness to your well-being at the expense of his own? Who the fuck do you think you are, Etienne, that he should continue to put your silly ass first?"

The rage engulfed him. He clenched his hand into a fist and shot it out -- straight toward Mikhel's hateful face. It connected with enough force to snap Mikhel's head back. Before he could follow through with a second blow, a tall biracial full-blood with medium dark skin, short dark hair, and blue eyes appeared at their table and casually put out a palm to intercept Etienne's fist. "Don't start any shit you can't finish, Etienne."

Andrei Forester. Great. Just what he needed -- another damned interfering uncle! Etienne snatched his hand away and shot to his feet. Mikhel rose slowly, fingering his jaw, his gaze narrowed. Etienne tensed, expecting to be knocked on his ass.

Instead, Mikhel shook his head. "It's okay, Andrei. Etienne and I were just testing boundaries."

Andrei nodded. "Fine -- but you've done all the testing in here of that kind you're going to do. Understood?"

Mikhel nodded.

Andrei considered Etienne in silence for several moments. He palmed the back of Etienne's neck. "I understand what you're going through, Etienne. I know how it feels to hunger for a woman who belongs to someone else. I know it makes you want to strike out in anger and rage at everyone -- especially those closest to you. In this family, surrounded as you are by vampires far older and stronger than you, all that will get you is a perpetual ass kicking."

Andrei slapped his cheek. "At least the woman you want is available for you." He sighed. "Which is more than I can say."

Etienne curled his lip. "If you want her so much, why don't you take her?"

"She's pregnant by another male she's determined to marry."

"She can't marry him if you kill him, can she?"

"Etienne!"

He ignored Mikhel's warning voice. Sensing that Andrei walked close to the edge of a dangerous precipice, he decided to try and push him over it. "She can't marry a dead man."

Andrei inclined his head slowly. "No, she can't."



"Kill him and take her."

"Shut the fuck up, Etienne!" Mikhel backhanded him, knocking him on his ass before he spun around to face his brother. "Don't listen to him, Andrei. He's bitter and full of rage. You can't kill the man she loves."

Andrei stared at Mikhel. "Why can't I?"

Pleased, Etienne got to his feet. Mindful of a warning look from Mikhel, he remained silent. Mikhel sighed. "Andrei, she'd never forgive you. I know you could coerce her, but if you did that, she wouldn't be the woman you want."

"But you'd have her!" Etienne pointed out and quickly stepped backwards as Mikhel swung around to glare at him.

"So I would."

"Andrei --"

Andrei looked at Mikhel. "I'll make my own decisions, little brother."

"Fine, but don't make any based on suggestions from a young, nearly insane nephew."

"Why not? He has a valid point."

"Andrei, he doesn't!"

"Yes, Mikhel. He does." Andrei nodded curtly and walked away.

Mikhel swore and turned to face him. "I've taken all the shit I intend to take from you, Etienne. Any more talk of killing Acier or anyone else who doesn't need or deserve killing, and I'm going to beat you to within an inch of your miserable, selfish life!" Mikhel grabbed him by his jacket and jerked him close to stare in his eyes. "Do I make myself perfectly clear?"

Such talk from anyone else, including Acier and Vladimir, would have infuriated him. Strangely, despite having struck and threatened him, Etienne felt close to the arrogant, holier-than-thou vampire. "Crystal."

Mikhel sucked in an angry breath. "Good. Now let's go find Raven."

"She wasn't pleased to see me the last time we met."

Mikhel shrugged. "Then you'll just have to charm her into your arms."

## Chapter Three

Within moments of waking in the darkened bedroom of Acier's custom built luxury RV, Raven knew she was no longer alone. She lay with her eyes closed, trying to determine what had roused her. Abruptly she smiled and sat up, her eyes flying open. "Acier!"

But the dark, unseen presence did not belong to Acier. She bolted out of bed. The bedroom was at the back of the RV. Without turning on the lights, she reached for the sweatshirt Acier had worn the night before and slipped it over her nude body.

She opened the bedroom doors and made her way through the RV. Etienne, naked and gloriously aroused, stood beyond the living room area, by the closed entrance door. Standing there staring at her with glowing, golden eyes, he reminded Raven of a large, beautiful, majestic gray wolf.

Sensing his barely leashed fury, she knew the coming hours would not be pleasant. The morning would find her sore and battered -- much as she'd been when Acier made love to her during his feast. Made love? Acier had fucked her without any concern for her feelings or pleasure -- just as Tee was about to do.

While part of her rebelled at the thought of submitting to such treatment from Etienne, another part of her recalled all the good times they'd shared. When Acier had forgotten she existed, Tee had continued to visit. He'd always remembered her birthdays -- something Acier had not done. His presence at her sixteenth birthday party had gone a long way in mitigating the hurt of Acier's continued absence. Under all the rage was the Tee who'd always made her feel special.

Tee pushed himself away from the door and brought one hand from behind his back. "For you, *petite*."

The sight of the dozen red roses sent a wave of warmth through her. Even in the midst of his uncontrolled lust, he remembered how much she loved red roses. She accepted them. "They're beautiful, Etienne, but --"

He pressed a finger against her lips. "I can't wait any longer, *petite*."

She'd known for weeks this moment would come. Still, she was afraid. She shook her head. "Etienne, I don't think I'm ready --"

"It's going to happen tonight, *petite*."

"I'm not ready!"

"I've waited as long as I can." He caressed her cheek. "Please don't make me take you by force."

Even as his barely concealed hunger excited her, it also sent a measure of fear and anger through her. How dare he try to intimidate her into sleeping with him less than two days after she'd caught him with her sister! She lifted her chin. As the daughter of a Willoni Priestess, she had no need to subjugate herself to any male.

She balled her right hand into a fist and stepped back. While she no longer wielded the power of a living barrier spirit, she felt a sudden sense of empowerment. Calm reassurance replaced her remaining fear.

Enola.

*Have no fear, little Willoni. The coming hours will not be as you might have wished, but I will ensure he retains a measure of self-control.*

Wonderful. Tee would hurt her while Enola watched.

*If you are not ready to help him start the healing process, I will force him to retreat. The choice is yours and yours alone, little Willoni.*

*He's going to hurt me.*

*Yes, he is. Decide how much you can bear and we will proceed accordingly.*

Knowing the choice was hers made the decision to submit to Etienne easier. She opened her right hand and relaxed her shoulders. Seeming to sense her surrender, Etienne took the roses from her, tossed them aside, and slipped his arm around her waist. For several moments, he held her close. His lips moved against the side of her

neck with a feverish desperation that provided an insight into the depth of his feelings for her.

He abruptly drew away from her, his golden gaze narrowing. "I can smell him on you."

Hearing the near hatred in his voice as he spoke of Acier distressed her. She shrugged. "It's his sweatshirt."

"Not anymore!" He grabbed the top of the shirt and ripped it off her. Then lifting her in his arms, he stalked through the RV. In the bedroom, he tossed her across the bed and stood staring down at her.

As her gaze moved down his big, sculpted body to his fully erect shaft, her heartbeat quickened. Once his long, thick cock was buried deep inside her, she would experience that sexy stuffed feeling she so loved with Acier.

There was nothing in the world as wonderful as being impaled on a cock big, thick, and hard enough to make her fear it would poke a hole in her. With a knot of desire tightening in her belly, she raised her gaze to his. "Let's go back into the living room."

"Why?"

She sat up. "I don't want to sleep with you in the bed Acier and I share."

"Too damned bad!" He pushed her onto her back. Before she could react, he lay between her thighs with his cock pressed against her belly. He rubbed his balls against her pussy.

She looked into his eyes. He wanted her to struggle. Determined not to give him that satisfaction, she relaxed, closing her eyes. Her seeming acquiescence appeared to infuriate him. She felt the fury building in him. Muttering in French, he rubbed his shaft roughly along her slit. She trembled. "You want it. Don't you? Tell me you want my cock."

She sucked in a breath. She wouldn't beg to be brutalized.

"Playing hard to get, Raven?"

She compressed her lips and kept her eyes closed.

"No matter. I'll soon have you begging for it and me."

She tensed as he positioned his cock at her entrance. He curled his fingers in her hair, jerked her head back, lifted his hips, and slammed them back onto hers. The movement sent his hard, thick erection plowing into her. She wasn't quite ready for him. A wave of pain sliced through her. She gasped, gritted her teeth, and curled her hands into fists as he forced himself deep inside her.

Without giving her time to acclimate herself to him, he locked his arms around her. Bringing his mouth down on hers, he kept his thrusts short and fierce. He rutted into her with a superhuman speed that kept her gasping for breath and sent waves of pain crashing over her.

When she and Acier had rough sex, there was always a sweet undercurrent of pleasure just below the surface of the pain. Even at his roughest, during his Feast of Indulgence, Acier had never been as brutal with her as Etienne was now.

He ravished her with no regard for her feelings or pleasure. Each whimper of pain resulted in an increase in brutality. Angry, she raked her nails down his back. He retaliated by stabbing his cock deep into her with a ruthlessness that made her entire body shudder.

He bit her lips, pawed at her breasts and thighs, and curled his fingers into her ass cheeks. Each time she attempted to draw away from him, he growled and raked his incisors along her throat.

Alarmed, she gasped, and opened her eyes. He bared his incisors and slowly began to shift. "No," she whispered. She didn't want to have sex with Etienne in his natural form.

Even as she protested, she felt his pelt on her belly and thighs.

"No!"

Gripping her hips in his hands, he pressed his knot against the lips of her pussy.

"Don't!"

She felt Enola's calming presence. *If you want me to stop him, Raven, I will, but he needs this.*

Enola would only let him go so far. She bit her lip and clenched her hands into fists. She could get through this to help him.

Holding her still, Etienne shoved his hips forward. Tears filled her eyes as he forced his knot between the lips of her slit and into her pussy -- something Acier had never done, even when they made love in his shifted form.

Since surrendering her virginity to Acier two months earlier, she'd developed a taste for rough sex, but what Etienne was doing to her went beyond rough. She could feel him feeding on her discomfort.

His violent lovemaking overwhelmed her senses and injured the warm feeling she had always held for him. Sensing none of the tenderness he'd always displayed with her and fearful of the knot of anger and hate igniting in her belly, she released her grip on consciousness.

But even that provided little relief. As she fell through a dark void, she was aware of Etienne ejaculating into her sore pussy. He remained hard after coming and within seconds was rutting into her again.

She shuddered and sobbed. Suddenly, she was aware of a light in the dark void. Gentle hands lifted her... soft, reassuring words washed over her. *You've done all you can for now, little Willoni. Sleep. I will watch over you as you sleep and recuperate.*

\* \* \*

The sound of soft, incessant sobbing roused Raven. After she woke, she lay on her side with her eyes closed, orienting herself. She ached all over and was aware that her vagina throbbed in an unpleasant way. She knew she was naked under the light sheet that covered her body.

It took a few moments before she realized where she was and what had happened to her -- at Etienne's hands -- in the bed she and Acier shared.

With consciousness came the return of her anger. She could feel him lying in the bed behind her. She'd swing around and rake her nails down his face. The satisfaction of making a temporary mess of his handsome face just might help ease some of the fury consuming her.

She opened her eyes and turned onto her side. Etienne lay on his back. Her rage dissipated as she noted the tears streaming down his cheeks from his closed lids. Recalling their shared good times, she reached down to touch his face.

His eyes fluttered and opened. They were gray again. "*Petite,*" he whispered in a low, broken voice. The timbre of his voice and the misery in his gaze spoke to her of his remorse.

His one act of brutality paled in comparison to his years of tender affection. She stretched out beside him and drew his body against hers. He trembled in her arms as he pressed his face against her neck. "Shhh." She kissed his hair while stroking his shaking shoulders. "It's all right."

He lifted his head and met her gaze. "Can you forgive me?"

Much of the uncontrolled rage he'd let loose on her the previous night seemed to have dissipated. He still wasn't the Tee she'd always known and loved, but, for the moment at least, she no longer feared him. She wanted to help this Tee. Nevertheless, she wanted to make it clear she wouldn't forgive such behavior again.

*I know it's difficult, but he needs you more now than he's ever needed anyone, little Willoni.*

Raven stiffened. *So you're still here, Enola? I thought you said you'd keep him from getting too out of control. Why did you allow him to brutalize me as he did last night?*

*Had I not been here, it would have been worse. As unpleasant as it was for you, you are Willoni. You have the power to heal yourself. He needed that interlude with you -- just as it was -- to even begin the healing process. That fact notwithstanding, he still has a long way to go before he can resume a semblance of normalcy. That the process has started at all is a testament to you. Because of your generous spirit he has a measure of peace this morning. How much is that worth to you, little Willoni?*

Put like that her lingering resentment seemed downright churlish. *I don't know how much more of this I can take.*

*Take only as much as you can bear, Raven. If we are lucky, it will be enough.*

*I thought you were the one who was supposed to save him. Not me!*

*I am committed to helping him, but I can only do so much without harming him.*

*Harming him? I thought you could control him.*

*His level of rage would require I bend his will to mine. Because of the danger involved, I'll only do that as a last resort.*

*Why a last resort?*

*Because there's a danger that some of who he is would be forever lost.*

*"Petite?"*

Etienne's tense voice interrupted her silent conversation with Enola. "I'll do my best."

He stroked her face, then trailed his fingers down her body to her breasts. They were sore and tender. She winced and he gentled his touch. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Oh, yes, you did and you enjoyed it."

She saw a flicker of excitement in his gaze. Not only had he enjoyed hurting her, but the assurance that he had increased his excitement level. Enola was right. The Tee she had known and loved would never have treated her as this familiar stranger had.

Her nickname for Etienne, Tee, was as dead as Steele -- the nickname she'd used for Acier for years. Tee was dead. In his place was an Etienne she wasn't sure she liked.

He gently traced the outside of her lips with his tongue. As he explored the contours of her mouth, he cupped, stroked, and caressed her breasts.

She sucked in a quick breath as he rolled her nipples between his fingers. They quickly pebbled. Great. Her body was about to betray her.

Pulling his lips away from hers, he nibbled his way down from her neck to her breasts. "Hello," he said softly.

Raven smiled. He'd been known to call her breasts "bad girls" and "tasting tits." She usually objected to such nicknames, but she liked his obvious reverence for her body.



He dragged his tongue along the undersides of her breasts several times before he sucked her right nipple into his mouth. She shivered and cupped her hands over his head.

The movement of his warm, moist tongue against her nipples stirred her passions as only one other man had -- Acier. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the delicious eddies forming in her belly. He skillfully made love to her breasts, tenderly tasting, nibbling, licking, and sucking them. Waves of delight buffeted her body, leaving her trembling with need.

He lifted his head. "*Petite?*"

She opened her eyes, meeting his lovely, sensual golden gaze. She stroked his cheek. He eased her onto her back and lay on top of her. The feel of his big cock pulsing against her belly sent a rush of moisture between her trembling thighs. Her body's reaction annoyed her. Numerous bruises covered her. She didn't want to respond so wantonly to him, which might give him the impression that she was a slave to her body's desires. Thank God she wouldn't see Acier until after her various hickies and telltale signs of rough sex had vanished.

Cupping her face between his palms, Etienne bent his head. His warm, persuasive lips moved slowly over hers, infusing his gentle kisses with all the tender affection she had longed for the previous night.

He rolled over onto his back, taking her with him, and continued kissing her, coercing her lips apart. She heard him whisper something soft and sweet against her mouth. It was in French, but she knew the words well. *I love you. I've always loved you. I always will love you, Petit Corbeau.*

*Petit Corbeau.* Little Raven. She had cherished the sweet nickname since Etienne and Acier had given it to her years earlier. Neither had used it recently. Hearing it on Etienne's lips coupled with a promise of eternal love touched her deepest, innermost feelings and desires. The eddies in her belly ignited. She had the Tee she had always known and loved back. Her eyes welled with tears. "I love you too," she whispered.

He rolled them over again so that she lay on her back with him sprawled between her thighs. "Do you? Do you really love me, *petite*?"

She heard the need for assurance in his voice. She caressed his cheek. "Yes. Oh, yes."

"Even after last night?"

Oh, boy, he was pushing it. She decided now was not the time to warn him against future displays of sexual aggression. "Yes. Even after last night."

He rolled off her and reached between her legs. His fingers parted her wet folds. She shivered and eased her legs apart, offering silent encouragement. He traced the entire outline of her slit before he slipped his fingers inside her. He stroked and probed gently, stirring her passions. She closed her eyes and moistened her lips. Nice. Very nice.

He gently finger fucked her for several moments, getting her wet and hot before withdrawing his fingers and pressing his thumb against her clit. She moaned softly and rotated her hips. More. She wanted so much more.

He removed his fingers. Leaning down, he pressed a moist kiss against her slit. The tip of his tongue slid against her clit. "Oh!" She shivered with need.

He laid his cheek against her lower belly, inhaling deeply. "I love the aroma of your pussy. You're wet."

And ready for him. She reached for him. He lay between her legs, supporting most of his weight with his arms. She trembled with need as his cock pulsed against her.

He brushed his lips against her neck. "I need you."

At the moment she needed him too. "I'm here for you. Take me."

He lifted his hips from hers. "Show me you forgive me for last night."

She frowned. "How?"

"You know what I want and need."

Yes. She did. His need matched hers. Reaching between their bodies, she closed her fingers around his cock. A tingle danced up her arm at the contact with his hard,

warm flesh. Despite her love and desire for Acier, she'd always cherished a secret yen for Tee. Finally, he was going to make love to her. A surge of anticipation shook her body. Eager to have him love her, she brought his cock to rest against her entrance. Moistening her lips, she lifted her gaze to his.

He stared down at her in silence for several moments before he spoke. "I'm sorry about last night, *petite*. I know I hurt you, but I was out of my mind and I couldn't stop myself. A part of me wanted to stop and be gentle with you, but there was another part of me that wouldn't allow it."

She wasn't sure she believed that.

"I never envisioned our first time together being anything but loving and tender," he told her.

That she did believe. She smiled up at him and caressed his shoulders. "I know."

"I didn't want it to be like last night."

She slid her fingers down his back to his ass. "Make love to me and chase away the memories of last night."

"As you wish, *petite*." He gently lowered his hips. The big head of the shaft which had angrily sliced into her the night before gently parted her wet folds. He eased his hips forward. Several inches of hard shaft slid gently into her body.

She closed her eyes. "Oh... oh." Yes. Yes! This is how their first time together should have been. *Yes! At last!*

He stiffened on her. "Am I hurting you? Do you want me to stop?"

She'd burst with frustration if he stopped. "No! I don't want you to stop." She slipped her arms around him, lifting her hips off the bed. "I want you inside of me. Now."

He resumed his downward motion, driving her butt back onto the bed. Within moments she felt his pubic hair brushing against hers. *Yes. Oh, yes.*

He lay on top of her in silence for several moments, seemingly content to hold his cock still inside her.

She wanted and needed more. Slipping her hands up to his shoulders, she rotated her hips and quickly rocked them against his. "Love me."

He groaned against her ear. "I do. I do. I always have."

Just as she'd always loved him. She turned her head, touching the tip of her tongue against his lips. "Oh... Etienne..."

"Oh, God, Raven, I love you so much!"

"Show me," she encouraged, stroking her hands down his back to cup his tight buns. "Make love to me."

Brushing his warm lips against hers, he obeyed with a slow, sweet deliberation that threatened to make her melt into him until they were two parts of one, finally completed, whole. Each touch of his tongue and mouth against her lips, neck, and breasts felt like a tender promise of an eternal love as old as time. His big, caressing hands created tiny fires wherever they touched. Each stroke of his big, hard cock sent an electric shock of desire and pleasure surging all the way from her stuffed pussy down to her curled toes. Even more wonderful was the sensation of drowning in an emotional bliss. His tender lovemaking erased her anguish from the previous night and created a new, urgent need for him.

Every move, touch, and kiss filled her with delight. She felt worshipped, cherished, loved, and adored. She clung to him, lost in a world of bliss and mindless pleasure. Under the long, endless kisses was a voracious passion and hunger for her that she'd never experienced with anyone else. Not even Acier had wanted or needed her with the endless depth that she felt with Etienne.

The intensity of his desire for her shook her... encompassed her... bound her to him in a way she had never wanted or expected. She felt a need in him that, if encouraged or allowed to continue, would infringe on her relationship with Acier. That was the last thing she wanted. Nevertheless, his deeply held feelings heightened her pleasure even as they frightened and threatened to overwhelm her.

The ball of fire in her belly roared to life and raced down her body, setting her pussy ablaze. She sobbed, shuddered, raked her nails over his ass, and exploded into a thousand mindlessly happy pieces.

He held her close, whispering softly to her in French and gently fucking her, as she luxuriated in a long, very satisfying orgasm. As the last shiver of pleasure shook her, he cupped her ass in his palms and pushed his cock in and out of her with a deep, slow deliberation that brought her close to a second climax before he groaned, held her body still, and exploded deep inside her pussy.

His entire body shook with his orgasm. She ground her hips wildly against his in a fury until he rotated his hips in response. His pubic hair brushed roughly against her clit.

"Oh, yes! Yes!" she moaned through a second climax.

Clinging to each other, they collapsed together, rolled over onto their sides, and lay shaking for several long, sweet moments.

Then he pulled the sheet over their bodies and stroked her breasts. "*Petite?*"

Feeling sexually sated and happy, she kept her eyes closed. She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. "Hmmm?"

He stroked her breasts again. "I love you."

She smiled. "I love you too."

"No." He lifted her left hand in his. "I mean I really love you."

"I know," she said sleepily. "And I really love you too."

"You mean that."

"Of course I do."

She felt his fingers moving against her left hand. Her smile vanished. She bolted up in bed and snatched her hand away -- too late. He'd already removed her engagement ring and leapt out of bed with it.

She stretched out her hand. "Give it back."

He shook his head. "No."

She took a deep, calming breath before she spoke. "Why not?"

He raised his gaze to hers. "Because you have no business wearing his ring."

Seeing the rage in his gaze, she sighed. Admitting the depth of her feelings had probably been a mistake. This was going to get messy. "We're engaged, Etienne."

He bared his incisors and leaned down to glare at her. "Well, you shouldn't be."

"We're in love."

"I can see why he loves you." His gaze softened and he caressed her cheeks with his free hand. He straightened abruptly. "But give me one damn reason why you love him and not me?"

*Oh, God.* "I love you both."

"You shouldn't! What has he ever done to deserve your love? Name one damned thing he's done. Did he keep his word to stay in touch with you? Hell, no! But I did. I was the one who made an effort to be there for your important days. I was there for your sweet sixteen party. Not him. I was there for every birthday after that until..." He paused and swallowed slowly, closing his hand over her ring. "You had to chase him down! Is that what made him so irresistible to you when you should be mine?"

Raven sat on the side of the bed, her heart racing. "Yours?"

"Yes! Mine, damn it!" He reached down and closed his fingers in her long hair. "And you know what? Hell will freeze over in August before I allow him to have what's mine -- you!"

A wall of hate for Acier emanated from him and slammed over her, nearly drowning her. Fear seized her... not for herself but for him and Acier. There was no way he could get better while harboring that vitriol. The thought of what it would do to Acier if he knew how Etienne really felt about him added to her fear and horror.

She knew Etienne would not return her ring, no matter how much she begged or pleaded. She'd need to have another one made before she saw Acier. The worry of where the money would come from would have to wait until after she'd found a way to calm Etienne down. She reached up to touch the wrist of the hand gripping her hair. "Come back to bed."

He released her hair, but instead of returning to bed, he flashed from the bedroom. Moments later he returned and opened his hand. A diamond solitaire, similar in size to the one Acier had given her, rested in his palm.

She looked up at Etienne. "What... what's that?"

"It's an engagement ring." He shrugged. "I've been carrying it around since your nineteenth birthday."

Oh, no.

"I've been waiting for the right moment to give it to you and ask you to marry me."

She gasped, feeling as if one of her lungs had collapsed. "Marry you?"

He dropped to one knee. "I've known since you were sixteen that I wanted to marry you. I stopped seeing you when you were nineteen because being around you was becoming too difficult. I was afraid I'd pressure you into sex before you were ready. I thought I'd wait until you were twenty-two or -three before I told you how I felt. And what the hell did I get for trying to do the right thing by you? Kicked in the ass by my own brother! You should be wearing my ring. Not his."

*Enola! Aren't you supposed to be helping? Where the hell are you?*

*You're doing fine, little Willoni.*

He was starting to piss her off. *Is that what you thought last night while you stood around and allowed him to brutalize me?*

*He needed last night. You knew that or you would have called out to me and I would have intervened.*

He had an answer for every damned thing.

*If I had, I would be more popular at home, little Raven.*

*Whatever!* She turned her attention back to Etienne. "Come back to bed."

"After you put on my ring."

How could she possibly put it on in place of Acier's ring?

"Put it on, Raven."

When she sat staring at it in silence, he took her left hand in his and slid the ring onto her third finger. Then he slipped into bed and drew her into his arms. After a moment of resistance, she relaxed in his embrace. She'd remove it the moment he fell asleep.

He kissed her forehead and drew her closer. "I love you so much it hurts."

For the first time she understood why his feast was so difficult. He'd considered her his and had been fighting against his natural inclination since he learned she was in love with Acier. When she'd been certain Acier was indifferent to her, instead of reinforcing her belief and trying to steer her away from Acier, Etienne had gone out of his way to portray Acier in the best light possible.

Etienne had been a loyal brother to Acier -- at the cost of his own happiness, peace of mind, and sanity. Now he was going to need the understanding, love, and support of both her and Acier. "I know, Etienne. I know."

He lifted his head. "But I don't just love you. I have to have you. You know why. Don't you?"

*Oh, no, Etienne. Not that. Please. Not that. That would make this whole situation untenable.*

He tipped up her chin. "Look at me."

She sighed and opened her eyes.

"I love you."

"I... I love you too."

He caressed her breasts. "I've known since you were sixteen who and what you are."

She swallowed slowly. *Please, Tee. Don't. Anything but that.* "A Willoni?"

He bent his head and gently brushed his lips against hers. "My bloodlust... the one being who completes me like no other ever could... and for whom I have an overwhelming need for sex and blood." He licked her lips with a sensuality that made her toes curl. "Now I need to taste your blood."



Even as a little voice urged her to resist, she tilted her head. She made a small sound of pleasure as his incisors pierced her skin. *Yes. Yes.* She arched her back, cupped her hands over his head, and experienced one of the sweetest, most delicious climaxes of her life. It was all the sweeter for having been entirely blood induced.

Afterwards, they lay facing each other, exchanging long, lingering kisses. Finally, feeling content, Raven fell asleep with the sound of Tee's deep voice whispering how much he loved her... his bloodlust.

## Chapter Four

When Raven woke, it was dark in the RV. She lay on her side with a warm, naked body curled spoon-fashion behind hers and a firm arm across her waist. Recalling remnants of a chilling dream-vision, she shivered. "Acier," she whispered.

He moved behind her.

She froze. She shared the bed with Etienne, not Acier. His admission that he considered her his bloodlust sent a chill of fear through her. She couldn't be his bloodlust. She was Acier's bloodlust. Her visions could not come true. She belonged to and with Acier.

Acier. Driven by the need to see Acier, she eased from under Tee's arm and slipped from the bed. She dressed quickly and left the bedroom. In the living room area, she was annoyed to find Mikhel and Enola sitting over a drink. Her world was falling apart and they sat around drinking?

Both males rose. Mikhel frowned. "Raven? Are you all right?"

She gulped in a breath. He opened his arms and she rushed into them. He held her as she sobbed. She tried to calm down, but she started to shake uncontrollably.

Enola approached and placed a hand on her back. *It's all right, Raven. You'll be all right. You're afraid. Go to the man you love for comfort.*

She lifted her head from Mikhel's shoulder and looked at Enola through a rush of tears. "But Acier's in Arizona and I need to stay here in the Philadelphia area to be near my father in case he needs me."

"Eros has your father in a deep, healing trance from which he won't emerge for at least a week. Eros will remain with your father and if anything changes, he'll be in touch. Go to Acier."

She glanced back toward the bedroom. "I... I don't think Etienne will allow me to leave."

Enola arched a brow. "He can't stop you if he's asleep."

"He's a light sleeper. I'm surprised he hasn't already awakened."

"I'll put him into a deep slumber."

"What?" Mikhel released her and swirled around to face Enola. "No, you won't."

Enola placed a hand on Mikhel's shoulder. "If your family trusts me with his mind, surely you can trust me with his body. I promise you I won't hurt him. I'll put him in a deep sleep for a few hours and then see Raven safely to Acier."

Mikhel stalked away and paced the length of the living room area twice before he turned to face Enola. "I have your word that he won't be harmed?"

"Of course you do. I have a number of... duties, but the one that is more a part of me than any other is that of healer. I attempt to live by the oldest healer creed -- to do no harm."

Mikhel sighed. "Okay."

Enola turned her back into Mikhel's arms before he walked toward the bedroom. She stood with her hands balled into fists pressed against Mikhel's chest. It seemed to take an inordinately long time for Enola to return. When he did, he had her suitcase. "Are you ready?"

She nodded. "Yes... I think so."

Mikhel wiped her face with his handkerchief and kissed her cheek. "You'll be fine and so will Etienne."

She clutched Mikhel's jacket. "He's full of hate for Acier..."

"I know, but under it all, he loves Acier."

Remembering her visions, she shook her head. "I'm not so sure about that."

"I am. Go visit Acier."

\* \* \*

After Raven and Enola left, Mikhel went into the bedroom. Etienne slept deeply. Mikhel returned to the living room area of the RV as his cell phone rang. He pulled it

from his waist clip, and noted the incoming phone number. He lifted it to his ear. "Hi, sweetheart," he said, a smile spreading across his face.

"Mik, I didn't want to bother you, but Dimitri has been crying for you. I know Etienne needs watching, but Dimitri isn't eating and he's not sleeping. He just keeps crying and asking for his dada. I called Serge and he said he'd come take your place so you could come home and spend a few hours with Dimitri."

Serge and Etienne alone together? That was a sure formula for disaster. Both were hot headed, liked their own way and weren't particular about who they had to backhand aside to get it. On the other hand, Etienne was in a deep sleep. Maybe he could spend a few hours with Dimitri and be back before Etienne woke. "I'll be home in a few hours."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm positive."

"We'll see you then. We love you."

"And I love you both."

"See you soon, love."

"Soon," he echoed and ended the call.

He called Serge. Serge answered his cell phone almost immediately. "Mik? I'm on my way, but there's fog here in Boston so it's going to take me a few hours."

"Okay. I'll see you then." He paused. "How's Derri?"

"She's preparing for a big case so she's a little on edge."

"I'm sure she'll win."

"So am I. I'll be there soon."

Ten minutes later Damon duPre arrived. About to send him away, Mikhel changed his mind. Etienne would sleep for a number of hours, but it would be better if Damon was there along with Serge when Etienne woke.

Damon's nostrils flared when he realized he couldn't wake Etienne. "What did you allow that damned weirdo to do to him?"

Mikhel arched a brow. "If I had the time, I'd slap your happy ass all around this room, but my son is missing me. Etienne will be in a healing sleep for a number of hours. I'm leaving now. Take better care of him than you've been doing."

Damon bared his incisors.

Mikhel laughed and left the RV, eager to reassure Dimitri and to see Erica.

\* \* \*

After several failed attempts to awaken Etienne, Damon sat in Acier's bedroom, watching him sleep. Although having Etienne in such a state unnerved him, he hoped the sleep would accomplish its purpose. Over the course of the last few months, he'd been forced to watch Etienne slowly spiral out of control into near insanity because of Etienne's misguided loyalty to his supercilious and self-righteous twin. As far as Damon was concerned, Acier was undeserving of all the anxiety Etienne had suffered on his behalf. He was delighted that Etienne had finally fucked Raven. Hopefully that, along with this healing sleep, would allow him to get through the rest of his feast without any more angst.

Two hours later, Damon's cell phone vibrated. He rose to his feet and left the bedroom. Closing the doors, he moved down the hall. "Shaun?"

"Where are you, Junior?"

"With Etienne."

"Who else is there?"

"Just the two of us."

"Damn! Where the hell are all his useless relatives? What the hell are they good for if none of them are available to watch over his useless ass?"

Damon frowned. "I'm just relieving Mikhel for a while. What's wrong? Do you need me?"

"It's Brett."

Damon tensed at the mention of his other brother's name. "What about him?"

"The Brotherhood has snatched him."

Damon clenched his hand into a fist. The brotherhood in question was the Defense League of the Brotherhood, a group of powerful vampires dedicated to seeing vampires retain their superiority and ability to prey on humans at will. "Why?"

"I don't know why. I just know we have to get him back. I need you with me, Damon."

Damon's heart raced. He'd never heard fear in either of his older brothers' voices. If Shaun was afraid, Brett must be in real danger. If he left, he'd be leaving the sleeping Etienne defenseless. If he didn't, he'd have to allow Shaun to face the Brotherhood alone. Brett might be killed, or worse, they might both be killed.

"Damon? Can we count on you?"

He glanced back at the bedroom where Etienne slept. Etienne had no real enemies. Serge Dumont was on his way. Etienne would be fine until then. "Yes. Tell me where you want to meet and I'll be there ASAP."

He ended his call with Shaun, checked on Etienne, and quickly left the RV.

\* \* \*

As Damon duPre's SUV sped out of Acier Gautier's second parking space, several figures emerged from the surrounding darkness. The most striking of the four was a tall vampire with dark skin, short, straight salt and pepper hair, and light brown eyes. He carried himself with the air of one used to wielding authority.

The lone female, tall, with dark skin, smiled. "I told you my plan would work, Vitali."

He nodded. "So you did."

"And now I get to fuck him?"

The vampire shrugged. "Why not? You've earned it, Adona. But only once. We have plans for him and not much time to set them in motion."

"Then I'd better go fuck him!"

\* \* \*

Acier sat at the head of the table in the conference room of his Arizona ranch house. On his left sat a tall woman with brown eyes and dark skin the color of cocoa. At

forty-five, Anais Toussaint had the distinction of being the only female in pack history to lead a den that included adult males. Aime Gautier, the Alpha Supreme of their pack had stunned both the den members of his pack and those of rival Pack LeMay when he had allowed Anais to battle a male of her late brother's den for leadership.

To everyone's dismay, Anais had won the death battle and had followed her father and brother as the leader of Den Toussaint. Whereas a human woman would have either had plastic surgery or kept her damaged skin covered, Anais had been known to proudly display the scars of that historic battle on her shoulder and taut belly.

Next to Anais sat a tall shifter with short dark hair and gray eyes. Although most of the available females in Pack Gautier had made a play for the thirty-year-old ex-model, Antoine Chenault's gaze was so often turned in Anais's direction that Acier suspected Anais's second was in love with her.

On Acier's left sat two tall, surly shifters with silver hair, thin moustaches, and dark, scowling eyes. Arnaud LeMay and his second in command, Gabriel Neville, from Pack LeMay.

Looking at the two shifters who did their best to ensure Aime's last days as Supreme Alpha were unpleasant, Acier was hard pressed not to leap across the table and tear out both their throats.

Acier glanced at his watch. "Perhaps we could get to the point of this meeting some time tonight?"

Arnaud LeMay glanced around the room before looking at him with clear disrespect in his gaze. "Where is Gautier?"

Acier attempted to mask his annoyance at the lack of respect in LeMay's voice when he spoke. "Alpha Supreme has pressing business elsewhere."

"Then call him here now because I don't deal with underlings."

Acier watched both Anais and Antoine tense. He shook his head and turned his attention back to LeMay. "As the Alpha-in-waiting of the oldest and most revered Pack on this side of the Atlantic, I can hardly be called an underling. As you know, LeMay, Pack Gautier is several generations older than your little pack."

LeMay's second exploded to his feet and found himself facing Anais and Antoine. Neville bared his incisors. "Out of my way, female."

At roughly 5' 10" Anais had a few inches on Neville. Although he was far more muscular, the male shifter she had defeated and killed to win the chance to lead Den Toussaint had been of a similar build.

When Antoine would have objected to Neville's tone, Anais held up a hand to silence him. "Perhaps you'd care to try to remove me from your face."

Acier decided this was not the time for a showdown between Packs Gautier and LeMay. He met Anais's gaze. Without a word, she inclined her head and she and Antoine returned to their seats.

Neville remained standing until LeMay jerked his head.

"Now, as I said, LeMay, anything you have to say to the Supreme Alpha you can say to me."

"Fine, Gautier. It's time Pack Gautier was reined in with all its firsts before it weakens all other Packs -- even those with much higher standards."

Acier arched a brow but remained silent.

LeMay went on. "This Gautier you speak so highly of has a lot to answer for. He's allowed too many firsts and the rest of the packs will not permit any more firsts."

"Too many firsts?" Acier shrugged. "I'm sure I'm on the negative side of your list."

"You're damned right you are! In fact, his allowing you, a non-purebred, to lead a den was bad enough. But to choose you to succeed him was an outrage over which the other packs are still disgusted." LeMay turned his cold gaze on Anais. "Then he compounded that gross error in judgment by allowing this female to lead a den which contains adult males." He cast a quick, dismissive glance at Antoine. "It's unthinkable that any shifter male worth the name would serve under such conditions!"

Acier narrowed his gaze. Normally, he would accord LeMay the respect Aime had taught his pack all Alpha Supremes deserved. However, Acier was not in the best of moods. Etienne was still close to insanity, Acier missed Raven, the den he had



inherited when he'd dispatched his arch rival Leon de la Rocque was filled with a bunch of surly shifters he couldn't trust, and Aime was pressing him to finally assume the position of Supreme Alpha of Pack Gautier. In addition he was still struggling to deal with his lingering resentment for Aleksei Madison, the vampire father he'd only recently met. Their relationship was complicated by the fact that Aleksei's bloodlust had recently given birth to two twin girls on whom Aleksei doted. Aleksei and his new family had accompanied Acier to Arizona from Pennsylvania.

While Acier adored his delightful new sisters, he found it difficult to conceal his dislike of Aleksei's bloodlust, Dani. Aleksei showered her with all the love, care, and attention Acier's mother had never received. His mother had struggled to raise him and Etienne on her own.

He had to release his pent-up rage on someone. Who better than the despised LeMay? He stared at LeMay. "This female? Anais is a den alpha -- just as you once were. And even you would have to admit that she earned the right to her present position. Nothing was given to her. She battled to the death and won. She's earned the right to be respected and while you're in my house you'll show her the respect she's earned or you'll regret it!"

LeMay laughed. "Do you know how many LeMay shifters I can summon to my defense, Gautier? Unlike you, with your divided pack, Pack LeMay is united. I doubt very much that you can count on those from Den de la Rocque whereas I command the respect and loyalty of each member of each den within my pack."

Acier bared his incisors. "Pack Gautier is ready and able to defeat all those foolish enough to challenge us. Do so at your own risk, LeMay. Now I think I've extended you as much courtesy as I can stomach." He rose. "Leave now while I'm still inclined to allow you and your second to depart in one piece."

LeMay shot to his feet. "This isn't the last you've heard from us, Gautier. You'll learn the hard way that I have a long memory and that I never leave my enemies behind. When you least expect it and are least able to defend against it, there'll be hell to pay."

Acier glanced at Anais. "Den Alpha Toussaint and her very able second will see you out."

"So be it, Gautier. The next time we meet, one of us will not be leaving alive."

"Then I'd advise you to say goodbye to your loved ones before we meet again, LeMay. Now get out of my sight!"

When Acier was alone in the room, he sighed and sank back against his seat. A tall vampire with bronze-colored skin, long locks, and blue eyes entered the room. The full-blood sat in the seat Anais had occupied. "Difficult meeting?"

Acier shrugged. "Nothing I couldn't handle."

Aleksei inclined his head. "Of that I'm sure. How are you?"

"I'm okay."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

The sincerity behind the question, coupled with the look of love Acier saw in his father's eyes, dispersed some of his anger. It continued to annoy and amaze him how easily a vampire he'd spent the first forty years of his life hating could handle him. "Not at the moment, but... it helps to have you here."

Aleksei gave a deep sigh, as if a burden had been lifted off his shoulders. "I know that's not an admission you make easily. I can't tell you how much it means to me to hear you say that."

During the ensuing silence, Acier felt a level of affection and love he hadn't known since his mother's death. It was impossible to continue to hate or resent a male so capable of making him feel as if he were worth dying for -- and all without speaking a single damned word. Even as he wanted to hate Aleksei, he loved him more with each passing moment -- damn the over-confident bastard.

Aleksei arched a brow.

Acier frowned, certain that despite all his warnings, Aleksei had read his mind again.

Aleksei smiled suddenly. "You have a visitor."

Acier sighed. "I'm not in the mood."

"I think you'll want to see this visitor."

Acier tensed. "Why? Is it Etienne?"

"No. It's me."

At the sound of the soft, sultry voice, Acier shot to his feet. He raced to the door to enclose Raven in a bear hug. "*Petite!* I didn't expect to see you for several weeks! What a wonderful surprise." He tipped up her chin and hungrily devoured her sweet lips. It took him several moments to realize her trembling wasn't desire induced.

He lifted his mouth from hers. Her dark eyes glistened with tears. "You've been crying." He cupped her face. "Oh, honey, has Mo taken a turn for the worst?"

She shook her head, gulped in a breath, and burrowed into his arms.

He released a relieved breath. Raven's father, Maurice Williams, was a twenty-year friend and Acier's literary agent. It seemed an age since Acier had had the freedom or drive to work on his overdue next adventure serial.

"Mr. Williams is still in the healing trance into which Eros placed him. Raven needed to see you so I accompanied her here."

Acier glanced over Raven's shoulder at Enola Cheyenne. He frowned. "Thanks for accompanying her, but who's with Etienne?"

"He's in a brief healing trance with his uncle Mikhel watching over him. I didn't come here just to accompany Raven. You and I need to talk -- after you and Raven have spent some time together." He turned to look at Aleksei. "A word with you?"

Aleksei nodded. He and Enola left Acier alone with Raven.

Acier lifted Raven in his arms and carried her down a long hallway with doors on both sides. At the end of the corridor, he opened the door that led to his personal suite. He closed the door and carried Raven over to a dark leather loveseat, where he sat down with her sprawled across his lap. He brushed the long, dark hair away from her beautiful face. "What's wrong?"

She pressed her cheek against his shoulder. "I needed to see you."

The more he embraced his vampire heritage, the more in tune he became with her. One of these days the ability to read thoughts wouldn't be all on her side. For now

he sensed her fear. He lifted her chin. "I know something's wrong. Are your sisters okay?"

"Yes."

That left Etienne. He hesitated before he spoke again. "Have you seen Etienne?"

She nodded and lowered her eyelids.

"No, Raven. Look at me."

She sighed before she raised her lids to meet his gaze.

"Have you seen Etienne?"

A flash of guilt danced in her eyes. He swallowed slowly, in an attempt to control the feeling of rage knotting his gut. "I can see that you have." His nostrils flared. He could smell Etienne's scent on her. "You've been with him."

"I... I... yes."

He took a deep breath. "I see." Just days earlier, she'd insisted he force Etienne to leave the reception with him. Yet she'd now slept with Etienne while Acier had been celibate.

He'd always known she and Etienne were close -- far closer than he and she had ever been. How close were the two of them now that they'd become lovers? He sat her on her feet and rose.

She touched his hand. "Acier?"

He shook his head but turned to face her. "Did you enjoy sleeping with him?"

She bit her lip. "Acier... please..."

"Please what?"

"Please understand that he needed me."

"Oh. I see. So you only slept with him because he needed you? Does that mean you didn't enjoy it? Is that what you want or expect me to believe?"

She closed her eyes briefly and sighed. "You gave us your permission."

He knew Etienne had needed her and God knew he wanted Etienne well again. Furthermore, her sleeping with Etienne was part of the vampire heritage he'd recently accepted. He had given them his permission to sleep together. Nevertheless, he felt

betrayed by the two people closest to him. He glared at her, fighting hard to control his fury. "When did you two arrange this?"

She blinked at him. "Arrange what?"

"Sleeping together -- or should I say fucking?"

"We didn't arrange it! It just happened."

"How the hell do you just happen to sleep with someone?"

Her gaze narrowed. "I was at the RV so I could be near Dad. When I woke in the middle of the night he was there."

"And so naturally you felt obliged to drop your thong and spread your legs wide for him!"

"Damn you, Acier!" Her eyes shot off sparks. She swung her right hand.

He caught her wrist before she could slap him. "Oh, no, you don't!"

"I'm not in the mood for any of your jealous shit, Acier! I'm going to sleep in the guestroom. When you're feeling more reasonable and can hear me out, let me know. If that doesn't happen before tomorrow, I'm going back to Philly." She jerked free of him. As she did, the evening sun reflected off her engagement ring.

He turned her to face him.

"Let me go!"

He jerked up her left hand. "What the hell is this?"

"What is what?"

He resisted the urge to shake her with difficulty. "Where the hell is the ring I gave you?"

"What do you mean..." She followed his gaze to her left hand. A look of horror flashed in her eyes. "Oh, my God!" She pressed her free hand against her chest. "Acier! I can explain."

Some of the rage he'd felt during his Feast of Indulgence returned. He released her wrist and stepped away from her. "You have about two seconds to explain why you're wearing that instead of my ring."

"Oh, Acier!"

"Answer me, Raven, or I promise you there's going to be a problem between us."

Her nostrils flared. "Fine. Tee gave it to me."

He blinked. "What the fuck? It's an engagement ring."

"I know."

"Are you telling me you're engaged to him instead of me?"

"No!" She moved forward.

He shook his head and held up a hand. "Stay away from me, Raven."

"I can explain, Acier!"

"Where is my ring?"

"I don't know."

He clenched his right hand into a fist. "What?"

"I... Tee took it."

Despite his efforts to retain a measure of control, Acier's incisors descended. "He took it? Took implies he used force." He stepped close so he could stare down into her eyes. "Did you give it to him?"

She took a deep breath. "No, but I need to explain --"

"There's nothing to explain! I'm going to kill him!"

"Wh-what?"

"I said I'm going to kill him!" He swung around and started toward the door.

"No! Acier!" She ran after him and wrapped her arms around his waist. "No! Acier, please don't hurt him!"

The panic in her voice on Etienne's behalf only increased his wrath. He pulled away so he could face her. "I'm not going to hurt him. I'm going to kill him and there's nothing you can say or do to stop me."

She lifted her chin and met his gaze. "I wouldn't be too sure about that, if I were you."

"Well, you're not me, sweetie, and I'm very sure about it."

"I'm not going to allow you to hurt him."

Her words hit him with the force of a stake driven into his heart. There was only one explanation for her desire to protect the man who'd forcefully taken her engagement ring. That reason did not bode well for his relationship with her. The one thing he'd feared most had obviously happened. He'd lost his bloodlust to Etienne.

Despite her earlier denial, she'd clearly come to Arizona to tell him she'd thrown him over for his own brother. Hell would freeze over before he allowed the ungrateful Etienne to be happy at his expense. "I'd like to see you or anyone else stop me!"

Her expression softened. "Acier... please. You've misunderstood everything. I love you, and --"

"Fuck off, Raven!"

"You jealous bastard!" She rushed past him and ran from his suite.

## Chapter Five

Crossing the room to sit on the loveseat, Acier covered his face. Moments later he felt a calming presence. He knew without looking up Aleksei was there. He offered no resistance when Aleksei sat beside him and put an arm around his shoulders. Even as he told himself it was unbecoming of a male about to take command of an entire pack of powerful shifters to collapse in his father's arms, he clung to Aleksei.

Cool lips touched his forehead. Soft, reassuring words permeated his mind. *There's no need to grieve, Acier. You've misunderstood her. She doesn't want to leave you for Etienne.*

*She's wearing his ring!*

*Not by choice, Acier.*

*But she wants to protect him by choice!*

*And well she should. He's not himself. If your heart weren't involved and you were comfortable with who you've become, you'd want to protect him too. When she needed reassurance, she came running to you.*

Acier frowned. So she had. He lifted his head and met his father's blue gaze. "Women have always preferred him to me."

Aleksei shrugged. "There's no accounting for taste, but the only woman who matters ran away from him right to you."

Acier smiled. "So she did. You know, when I remember how much Etienne and I needed a father when we were growing up, I hate you so much I can't bear it."

"I know and I understand."

"On the other hand, I don't know what I'd do if you hadn't found us."

Aleksei sighed. "I feel as if I've waited a lifetime to hear you say that."



"Don't let it go to your head." Acier shrugged. "I'm just glad to have you here now and in my life."

Aleksei's eyes welled with tears. He clasped a hand over the back of Acier's neck. "I would gladly walk through the fires of hell a thousand times to hear you say that once. I'm so sorry I wasn't there for you when you needed me most."

"I know that now."

"Do you know why I feel that way, Acier?"

"Yes, I do, but..." He shrugged. "I'd like to hear you say it anyway."

"I love you."

Acier closed his eyes. He let the words flow over him like a healing balm. He blew out a breath before he met Aleksei's gaze. "The thing is... I..."

"I know, Acier, I know."

"Good. So I don't have to say it."

Aleksei slapped his cheek. "We need to discuss Etienne."

"I despise him!"

"Believe me, Acier, I know the feeling. I've long since lost track of the number of times I felt as if I hated Vladimir and yet had anyone dared to pluck a single dread from his head, I would have killed them without hesitation. There's a special bond between vampire identical twins that only another set of vampire identical twins can truly understand. Venting your feelings for him will come soon enough."

"You think I should go after him?"

"Things will soon work out for you and Etienne. Right now you should go comfort your woman."

"I don't think she wants to see me."

Aleksei shook his head. "You know, boy, there's only one thing more pitiful and fragile than a vampire in love and that's one in bloodlust. She's part of an ancient clan who have the ability to read minds. She'll forgive you."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. You love her. She's your bloodlust. She can read your mind so she knows how you feel. Nevertheless she's female and they can be unpredictable at the best of times. Go make things right with her."

He rose.

"Acier?"

He turned at the door. "Yes?"

"I know you love her very much, but you're going to have to learn to share her with Etienne -- just as I've had to learn to share with Vladimir. I never had a problem doing that until I met Dani. If you need help with that, I'm here, but the master at sharing a beloved and cherished bloodlust is your uncle Serge. You should talk to him. Go make sweet music with your *petite*."

He nodded.

\* \* \*

Raven sat at the vanity in one of the guestrooms in Acier's ranch house staring at her reflection. Her eyes had changed from brown to green. Abby had told her most Willoni had green eyes at some point in their long lives. The angry spark that had been in her eyes earlier had been replaced by pain and confusion. Why was Acier so unreasonable? Why was he so ready to assume she wanted Tee more than she did him?

If she had half a brain, she'd prove him right and go back to Tee. She'd do that in a second -- if she didn't love Acier so much. The more irrationally he behaved, the more she loved him -- fool that she was.

She looked down at the top of the vanity where she'd placed Etienne's ring. She'd been in such a fever to see Acier, she'd forgotten to remove it. Small wonder Acier had lost it. If she'd given him a ring and then found him wearing a ring given to him by another woman, she'd have lost it as well.

She had to find a way to dispel Acier's belief that she and Etienne were colluding against him. If she could forgive Etienne, she could be more understanding with Acier. Besides, she hadn't come all the way from the Philly suburbs to sleep alone in a guestroom.

She rose and moved across the room. She opened the door. Acier stood on the other side of the door. They stared at each other in silence. Then she smiled and took his hand. "Hi, sweetie."

*"Petite, I --"*

She pressed her fingers against his lips. "Me first." She urged him into the bedroom and shut the door. She held up her bare left hand. "Before you say another word I need to make something perfectly clear to you -- once and for all."

He nodded but she noted the wary look in his eyes. Even now he wasn't sure of her or her feelings for him. She placed her hands on his chest and looked up at him. "I've adored you since the moment we met when I was a child. I can still remember how much I looked forward to your visits."

"Just mine?"

She shook her head. "No. I looked forward to seeing Tee, too, but I always felt cheated if he showed up without you." She smiled. "I've loved you since I was a teenager."

"That's a strong word to use for a teen's feelings."

"I don't mean a sexual love. That came later. I'm not exactly sure when, but by the time I was sixteen, I knew you were the man I was going to belong to one day. I knew I loved you with all my heart. That hasn't changed. That won't ever change." She slipped her right hand up his chest to his cheek. "It may sound like a cliché, but I love you more each day. I love you, Acier. I always will."

She stroked her fingers through the long, dark hair that fell just below his broad shoulders. "Sleeping with Etienne won't change how I feel about you." She leaned against him. "I do love Etienne. But you?" She looked into his eyes. "Etienne means a lot to me. He always will, but you mean the world to me. I'd be very unhappy if I never saw him again, but I'd be devastated and inconsolable if I had to try and live without you in my life."

"What are you saying, Raven?"

"That I love you more than I do my own life. I am not one of those women who prefer him over you." She watched his gray gaze turn that lovely golden shade she loved. "Now what did you want to say?"

He sighed. "I've been an idiot for jumping to conclusions and --"

"Oh, no. No one gets to call the man I love and adore an idiot. A hothead? Absolutely, but a very sexy hothead."

He rubbed his nose against hers. "I'm so sorry, *petite*."

"So am I. If our positions had been reversed, I'd have been angry too."

"Yes?"

She recalled her feelings of jealousy, anger, and pain when she'd discovered Tee with Treena. Those feelings would have been off the chart had she discovered Acier with her sister. "Yes."

He frowned.

She tilted her head. "What? What's that wary look in your eyes?"

"That's it? You're forgiving me that easily?"

Lord, what a hard male he was to convince. "Yes!"

"Why?"

She laughed. "Suspicious to the very end, huh? How very vampire of you."

His nostrils flared. "Does that bother you, Raven?"

"Does what bother me?"

"That I've decided to accept that I am part vampire?"

"No. It doesn't bother me."

"Why not? That's not what you expected when you came after me."

"Hey, sweetie, don't forget who you're talking to. I'm Willoni. I can see the future. What makes you think I didn't know you were part vampire?"

"So that's okay with you?"

"I love you, Acier, and I'll happily be your woman, your bloodlust -- just as you are." She nibbled his lips. "Now tell me what would possibly make you think I'd choose any other man over you?"

She watched a flicker of fear in his gaze. "Most women who have expressed a preference between us have preferred him."

"Maybe so, but --"

"And when I wanted to go after him, you sounded so protective, I thought --"

"You were the one I chased down. You were the one I saved my virginity for. You're the one I have to have."

She saw the beginning of distrust in his gaze. "Just me?"

"Let's not have any more misunderstandings, Acier. I love Tee and I want him, but I don't have to have him." She rubbed her palms over his chest. "You I have to have -- regardless of the cost. I've never left you to go to him, but I did leave him to come to you because I needed to be with you. I want, need, and love you more than I know how to explain. Is that clear enough?"

He nodded, a small smile curving his lips upward. "Yes."

She linked her arms around his neck. She tugged gently. "Now you get to show me how much you love me."

\* \* \*

Etienne was lost in a world of sensual delight. Warm, lush lips caressed his. Soft, eager palms stroked over his shoulders and chest. A tight, slick pussy slid up and down his cock. Jolts of pleasure buffeted his body. His stomach muscles tightened. He was close to coming. He struggled to prolong one of the sweetest, most erotic fucks he'd ever had.

*Don't struggle so, my handsome Etienne. Come. Come for me. Fill me with your seed, my love. Brand me. I'm already yours, but I want to be branded so everyone who looks at me will know I'm yours and will always, always be yours.*

The tender, seductive words echoed deep in his mind. They seeped into his heart... softening his rage. They made him feel wanted, needed, and loved as no woman ever had before. There was no need to hurt or ache when he had the devotion and love of this giving woman.

She lifted her hips until only the head of his cock remained inside her. Just as he hungered to feel her hot tunnel encasing him again, she eased her hips down, slowly impaling herself on his full length. *Oh, yes! Yes!* She fit around him as if her pussy had been made for that one purpose. Sex didn't get any better than this.

He slid his hands around her body to cup her ass. It was big and round, like a woman's ass should be. He stroked her cheeks as she rode him. Soft, gasping sounds of pleasure escaped her lips. He liked the sounds. He was so close to coming, but he wanted her to come before he did.

*It's all right, my love. Come. Come for me, my handsome Etienne.* She tightened herself around him. *Come for me.*

Unable to hold back the tide of the orgasm building in him, he exploded, shooting his seed inside her. He hadn't come so long or hard since he was a teenager. Finally, he slumped back against the bed. Oh, damn, what a climax.

She rode him hard, bracing her hands against his shoulders. Her nails dug into his flesh. He thrust his hips upward, sending his cock shooting into her. She moaned, and he reached around her body and eased a finger into her ass.

"Oh, yes! Yes, Etienne!" She shuddered, her pussy tightening around him as she came.

Etienne snapped awake. A pair of dark eyes stared down at him from a pale face. Large, naked breasts pressed against his bare chest. A tight, clingy cunt covered his erect cock with slick bodily fluids. Her climax was long and the contractions of her pussy so intense, his cock erupted again.

There was only one woman he'd tolerate fucking him without his permission -- and it was not this woman. He growled, bared his incisors, and tossed the woman off. Before the startled woman landed in a heap on the other side of the small bedroom, Etienne jumped from the bed, landing in a crouch.

Sensing he and the woman were not alone in the RV, Etienne responded instinctively, shifting into a large gray wolf. He sniffed the air and padded slowly toward the open bedroom door.

Three males stood there, all vampires, crowded beyond the door. *What are you doing here and what do you want?*

A tall vampire with salt and pepper hair stepped forward. "I'm Vitali Bourcaro and I assure you that you have no need to be on the defensive with us. We, and Adona, who's lying unconscious on the other side of the room, are here to help you."

Adona? She was the only female who had been capable of helping him forget Raven for even a short period of time. The woman he'd tossed off him was not Adona. But at the moment he had more pressing concerns. He'd heard of the Defense League of the Brotherhood and Vitali Bourcaro. What he didn't know was where the hell Raven was and what the Brotherhood wanted with him.

Etienne shifted back to his human form and crossed the room to examine the crumpled form. The naked, pale body of a mildly attractive woman with short, dark curly hair did not belong to Adona.

"What the hell." When he kneeled to press two fingers against the side of the woman's neck, he received another surprise. She was unconscious, but alive. He caressed her cheek. *Forgive me.*

Sighing, he lifted her into his arms and carried her to the bed. He laid her on her back, covering her naked body before he faced Bourcaro. "What do you want?"

"To talk."

"Where is Raven?"

Bourcaro shrugged. "Probably with Acier."

That Raven had fled to Acier the moment he fell asleep annoyed the hell out of him. His nostrils flared. "That still doesn't explain what you're doing here and why you stood by while that... female used me like a damned sex toy."

"We have more important things to discuss than sex."

"Such as?"

"We've been watching you for some time. You're strong, intelligent, and fierce -- all qualities I look for in those I invite to join the Brotherhood."

He knew both his father and his uncles had issues with the Brotherhood. Normally that would have been enough to ensure he kept his distance from the vampire group. But why should he dismiss the opportunities the Brotherhood could provide just because his father's family didn't like them? He cared nothing for his father and even less for his family. "Why would I want to join an organization that stands in opposition to my family?"

"Because you deserve more than your short-sighted family has given you. Why should a male with your abilities take a backseat to Acier? Why should he have the woman you deserve?"

Why indeed? He narrowed his gaze. "What do you suggest I do about Acier?"

Bourcaro shrugged. "What can you do -- except kill him? Do that and she'll come running back to you for comfort."

"He's my brother."

"He's a brother who has no problem hogging the family spotlight and taking the love of a woman he doesn't deserve. What brother worth the name would expect you to stand idly by while he robs you of your bloodlust? You owe him nothing -- except a quick, painless death!"

Etienne nodded slowly. With Acier gone Raven would have no reason not to rush back into his arms, his heart, and his bed.

Bourcaro placed a hand on his shoulder. "If I were you, I'd call Acier and tell him to prepare for a battle to the death for Raven."

The idea, which once would have been unthinkable for him, now held undeniable appeal. "He won't come alone." Etienne's lip curled. "He'll probably bring Aleksei."

"Afraid to face you alone?" Bourcaro shrugged. "You won't be alone either. We will accompany you to ensure it's a fair fight."

\* \* \*

Acier swept Raven's long, dark curtain of hair aside. He cupped his hands over her cheeks. She was one of the sexiest, most seductive females he'd ever met. He knew



she could have any man she wanted. Luckily she loved and wanted him. He saw that assurance in the vibrant green eyes gazing up at him... encouraging him to stake his ownership of her anew.

"I love you more than I love anything or anyone else, Acier."

He pressed her against the door and devoured her soft, sweet, willing lips. The feel of her large, firm breasts crushed against his chest sent his desire spiraling out of control. His need and hunger for her consumed him.

Sweeping his tongue into her mouth, he lifted his right knee and nudged her thighs. She parted her long, lovely legs for him. He shifted his body so that she could feel his cock. "Oh, yes, my Acier."

He loved how quickly she was ready for him. He kissed her, sucking her tongue into his mouth. She responded to his intimate kiss with a warmth that delighted and aroused him. His nostrils flared. The intoxicating aroma of her pussy signaled her readiness for him. He had to have her immediately.

Slipping her hands between their bodies, she quickly unzipped his pants and hers. Moaning against his lips, she drew his cock from his pants and briefs. His ability to control his desire vanished. He pulled her blouse open, sending the buttons scattering over the carpet. With her help, he pushed her panties and jeans over her hips and below her big, round ass. Then, groaning against her lips, he shot his hips forward and drove his cock into her tight, hot, luscious pussy. She gasped and arched her body into his, encouraging him.

Her pussy fit around him as if it had been custom-made to accommodate his cock. Buried deep inside her, he experienced an almost immediate climax. With her he enjoyed both a physical and an emotional satisfaction he had never known with anyone else. His need for her frightened him.

*It doesn't need to be scary, Steele, because I have the same hunger for you.*

Steele. She hadn't used the English word for his French name since his feast -- when he had done his best to hurt and frighten her.

*You'll always be my Steele.*

Somehow her use of her nickname for him released a knot of tension in his gut. In turn some of the hate and anger he felt for Etienne evaporated. This was the time to satisfy his need for her while assuring himself of her love. He eased in and out of her slowly. He loved the way her vaginal muscles clung to his cock, trying to impede each withdrawal, but then opened to welcome him as he slid back inside her... deep inside her wet, tight channel. This is why he'd been born -- to love and worship this sweet, beautiful, giving female. He'd had more explosive sex, but only with her did he feel as if he was where he belonged... where he'd always belong.

He slid his hands below her waist. Cupping her ass, he drilled her slowly... loving each second of each slow slide into her wonderful warmth.

*Oh, Steele. That's very nice.*

*You like it?*

*Yes, I do, but what I'd like even more is to be fucked.*

Pressing his face against her cleavage, he gripped her hips. *My pleasure, petite.* He thrust hard and deep in her warm, slick tunnel. Ripples of pleasure splashed over him in a series of endless waves. His ability to do anything but feel was compromised... impaired... immobilized. He shuddered and tried to hold back the explosion threatening to swallow him. She wasn't ready and he wasn't going to come before he'd pleased her.

*But I want you to.*

No. He eased his hips backwards until only the tip of his cock remained inside her.

She tightened herself around him. *Yes. Yes, Steele. Let go. Come. Come for me, sweetie.* She pushed her hips forward, impaling herself on his cock. He shuddered and gritted his teeth. Wrapping her legs around him, she humped herself on his cock, squeezing and massaging it until he thought he'd lose his mind. *Let yourself go, Steele. Fill me up with your seed!*

*Oh, hell, petite!* He released the slender thread of his control. Sinking his incisors into the side of her neck, he thrust his cock in and out of her tight, clinging pussy in rapid succession.

*Oh, yes. Yes, Steele. Feed on me... consume me...*

He groaned as she pressed a finger against his asshole. Moaning, she pushed her finger past his tight, protesting hole, and into his ass. He shuddered, slammed his cock into her, hurting her. He ejaculated into her, shooting jet after jet into her hot channel. Her finger inside his ass intensified and prolonged his climax.

*Yes, my Steele... the love of my life... come for me... come in me... feed on me.* She held him close while he continued to ingest her addictive blood long after she'd eased her finger out of him and he'd finally stopped coming. The taste, scent, and rush of her blood onto his tongue created a unique feeling of satisfaction in him.

After the last rush of pleasure had crashed over him, he drew her down to the carpet. Holding her in his arms, he continued to feed on her until the bliss was almost a pain. Only then did he lift his head and embrace her.

She clung to him. *You are the love of my life, Steele. You... only you.*

Only him. That's the way it should be with a vampire-shifter and his bloodlust. They lay in silence until she slipped her hands down his back to cup his ass. He wanted her again, but not against the wall and not on the floor. He rose and lifted her to her feet. "Let's go to bed."

She shook her head and fixed her clothes. "Let's do that later. I haven't seen the girls yet. How are they?"

She watched his face light up. "As gorgeous as ever."

"Your father is very lucky."

He drew his trousers over his hips and zipped them up. "He's very proud of them."

"He's proud of you too."

His immediate nod and slight smile pleased her. "I know."

She pushed her breasts into her bra cups and sighed at the state of her blouse. Only two buttons remained. Oh, well. She looked up at him. "What about you, Steele? Do you want kids?"

"Yes."

"Good, because I'd very much like to have your babies -- as soon as possible."

"But?"

Flashes of her conversation with Etienne and of her visions sent a shiver through her. "Etienne said the chance of our being able to have a baby together is practically nonexistent. He said hybrids are usually sterile. Do you know any that aren't?"

He swore. "Etienne talks too damned much!"

"I'd really like to have your baby."

"Just maybe Etienne doesn't know everything he thinks he does." He hugged her. "Now let's go get you into another blouse and then we'll go see Pali and Lexie."

After spending an hour with the twins, she and Steele had dinner in the large dining room. The table had been custom made to seat forty-two people to allow as many shifters as possible to share meals with Acier when he was at the complex.

After a walk in the moonlight, she and Acier took a bottle of wine and went to his suite. In the living room, they listened to soft jazz and sipped wine while enjoying the moonlight shining in through the floor to ceiling glass wall.

Halfway through the second drink, Acier rose suddenly, urged her to her feet, and moving with supernatural speed, he stripped her. He stepped back to survey her. The smile on his face vanished.

"What?"

He swore at length in French.

She frowned. "Steele? What's wrong?"

"Lights!"

The lights in the room came on. She followed his gaze downward and saw the remnants of the many bruises covering her body. Oh, no! She reached down to pick up her blouse. As she struggled to put it on, he snatched it from her and tossed it aside.

"He brutalized you."

"He... he didn't mean to."

"I'm going to kill him!"

She closed her eyes briefly. How could she make him understand? "He's going through his feast, Steele. Please don't forget that. You can't expect him to be anything but centered on his own pleasure. I know it looks bad, but I'm not hurt." She stepped closer to him and put her arms around him.

He shuddered against her, his fingers digging into her flesh. They would create new bruises. The depth of his pent-up fury frightened her. The brothers who had once been so close would probably attack each other the moment they met again. "Let's go to bed, Steele. Please. I'm afraid and I need you to hold me."

"You have no need to fear him. If he dares lay another hand on you --"

She pressed her fingers against his lips. "I'm not afraid of him. I'm afraid of what's happening to the two of you. You used to be so close. Now you're both talking about hurting each other. I never wanted or expected to come between you two."

"You haven't."

"I have. It's because of me you're both filled with such anger."

"It's not because of you. There'd be no problem between us if he got off of his lazy ass and found his own bloodlust instead of expecting me to allow him to take mine."

Therein lay the problem. "What if he thinks he's found his bloodlust?"

"Then he should stay the fuck away from you! If..." He trailed off and stared at her. "Is he so delusional he thinks you're his bloodlust?"

"He's confused, Steele."

"If he doesn't get a grip, he'll be dead!"

"You don't mean that."

"The hell I don't!"

"Well, then you'd better rethink your position."

"What?"

"Get this straight, Acier. I will not stay with you if you hurt him."

"Well, I sure as hell have no plans to let him hurt me -- even if that is your personal preference."

About to snap at him, she took several deep, calming breaths before she spoke. "If that were my preference, I'd be with him begging him not to hurt you."

"The day --"

"Enough of this shit, Acier! My father is in Philadelphia fighting for his life. My best friend has disappeared. I'm still trying to deal with who I am. I'm not in the mood for any more shit from you. Give me what I want or I'm leaving."

He curled his fingers in her hair and tugged her head back. "Who the fuck do you think you're talking to? It's time you realized the way this relationship is going to work. I love you and you're my bloodlust, but I don't take orders from you or anyone else. Get this straight, Raven. You are not leaving -- unless I allow it. And I guarantee I am not allowing you to leave here just so you can run straight to him."

"I don't require your permission to leave." She peeled his fingers from her hair and stormed toward the door.

He pushed the door closed as she pulled it open. Using the weight of his body, he pressed her against the door. She felt his lips brushing against her left ear. "Don't..."

"Don't what, Acier?"

"Don't... go."

"I think I should."

He turned her around and tipped up her chin. "There's a lot going on in my life right now. Some of those things I'm not sure of, but I'm very sure that I need you."

"Oh, Steele." She linked her arms around his neck. "I need you too. Hold me."

He swept her off her feet. Moments later as she lay in his arms with him whispering to her in French, she shivered. She knew he was still determined to confront Tee. He tightened his embrace, drawing her closer.

She closed her eyes. If the tension between the brothers remained high, she'd need to do something drastic.

## Chapter Six

As soon as Raven fell asleep, Acier left his suite. Walking through the dark, quiet, L-shaped house, he paused outside the guest suite. Before he could lift a hand to knock, the door opened. Aleksei, holding Pali, stepped into the hallway.

Acier sighed. "I need to talk."

"I need to listen."

He glanced at Pali, sleeping peacefully against Aleksei's shoulder. He stroked her cheek. "She's... they're both so beautiful."

To his surprise, Aleksei cupped a palm against his cheek. "So are you. Where would you like to talk?"

Acier glanced at Pali again. She wore a fuzzy pink outfit. A pair of pink socks covered her feet. "Can we sit in the moonlight? Would she be warm enough?"

"Yes."

They left the house and sat on the back terrace. Acier listened to Aleksei cooing softly to Pali. Each time he did, Pali made a soft, pleased sound in her sleep. Acier sighed. If Etienne was right, and he usually was, this was a pleasure Acier would never know. He glanced at Pali. "May I..."

Aleksei smiled. "Of course." He kissed Pali's cheek before he gently placed her in Acier's arms.

Pali opened her dark eyes, smiled up at Acier, and immediately wrapped her tiny fingers around the one he stroked against her cheek. "I think I'm going to have to kill Etienne."

"No, you won't. Enola tells me that both you and Etienne have deep-seated resentments of each other you need to work out physically. I have no doubt you'll kick

his over-privileged ass, but we're not going to entertain any talk of killing him." Aleksei clamped a hand over the back of his neck. "That is out of the question."

Acier shook off the hand. "He took the engagement ring I gave Raven and made her wear one he'd bought her. He's not going to leave us in peace."

"I'll say this just once more, Acier. I don't care what he's done, you are not going to kill him. Is that clear?"

"He says she's his bloodlust!"

"Perhaps she is."

Acier blinked. "What? How can she be his when she's mine?"

Aleksei shrugged. "And who says a female can't be the bloodlust of more than one vampire at the same time?"

"You mean... it's possible?"

"I've heard of a few cases."

"How did the cases you've heard of turn out?"

Aleksei sighed. "Badly."

"What happened?"

"In each case, the older, stronger vampire killed the younger one. The women, feeling as if they were the cause of the death of their soulmates, killed themselves."

Acier sucked in a breath.

"But that won't happen with you, Etienne, and Raven."

"She's not his bloodlust."

"Enola believes she is."

Acier felt his incisors descending. "Maybe Enola doesn't know everything."

"I'm sure he doesn't, but I wouldn't bet on his being wrong about this, Acier. He's very old and very skilled at what he does. He's probed Etienne's mind on more than one occasion. If he says it's true, I think you're going to have to accept that it is."

"No! She's mine."

Aleksei sighed again, placing a hand on his arm. "There are difficult times ahead of us as a family, Acier, but we are strong and we will survive."



"But --" Acier's cell phone rang. Handing Pali to Aleksei, he lifted his cell phone from his waist. Noting the number on the Caller ID he frowned and took the call. "You've got a lot to answer for, pup."

"Where is she, Acier?" Etienne demanded.

"Where is who?"

"Raven! She belongs to me."

"The hell she does."

"If she's with you, send her back."

"Why the hell would I do that?"

"Because I'll have to come get her if you don't."

A knot of rage formed in Acier's gut. "I wouldn't advise that, pup, unless you want your ass kicked all over the desert."

"Don't you call me pup in that condescending voice. You'd better send her back, Acier, or so help me, you'll be sorry."

Acier laughed. "The night I fear you is the night I'll be dead."

"Which is exactly what you'll be if you don't send her back where she belongs -- to me."

"Why don't you come here and give taking her from me your best shot? But I warn you, pup, the fact that we're brothers won't stop me from ripping you a new one."

Aleksei shook his head. *It might not be wise to have a confrontation with him here in front of the pack. Go to him.*

He was loath to leave the den again, but decided Aleksei was right. "Better yet, I'll come to you."

"You do that, Acier. I'll be waiting for you in the Pine Barrens." Etienne abruptly ended the call.

Acier turned to look at Aleksei. "I'm going to ki --"

Aleksei stared into his eyes. "Not only are you not going to kill him, you're going to allow him to kick your ass."

Acier jerked away. "Why would I do that?"

"Because he's your younger brother. He's feeling sick, alone, and afraid. He's in bloodlust with a female he thinks he has to kill you to have. I know how you feel. Not only can I read your troubled thoughts, but I've been in similar positions with Vladimir more times than I care to remember. I know you've spent most of your life doing your best to protect and take care of him. I've done the same thing with his father."

Aleksei sighed. "Sometimes... often it seemed an endless proposition with Vladimir. Before I met Dani, there was a woman I loved and wanted to be with, but I had to allow her to leave because of family obligations. Subjugating your own needs and desires for the good of your younger siblings is a large part of being the eldest sibling."

"How many more times am I expected to do that for him? When we left the pack against Aime's wishes, I worked two jobs while going to school full time so he wouldn't have to work at all. While I spent four years getting barely four hours of sleep a night, he was out partying and whoring all over town! I paid back the majority of his student loans! I walked to classes while he drove around in the secondhand car I saved to buy! How much more am I supposed to do for him? When does he start doing something for me?"

Aleksei nodded. "I understand you feel you've done enough for him, but he's never needed you more than he does now. He needs you to do this one more thing for him. When you meet him, put up a good fight, but let him get the upper hand."

"If I do that, he'll kill me."

"Take that chance."

"Why should I risk allowing him to kill me?"

"Because I ask you to and because I'll be there. Do you really think I'd allow anyone to kill you while I'm alive?"

Acier shook his head. "No, but --"

"No buts, Acier. We have to rescue him now or risk losing him. Do you really want to spend any more time alienated from him?"

About to snap that he didn't care, Acier swallowed slowly. After their mother had died, knowing that Etienne always had his back had made their love-starved life much more bearable. He did miss the close relationship he and Etienne had once shared. "No."

"Then we'll do what's necessary to help rescue him." Aleksei smiled and held Pali out to him. "Now give your sister a good night kiss. I have to put her to bed and go call Vladimir."

Acier kissed Pali's cheek and smiled when she gave him a big, gummy smile. He stroked a finger down her cheek. "I love you," he said softly.

She rewarded him with another smile.

He looked up at Aleksei. "Why are you calling Vladimir?"

"He's Etienne's father. He'll be there."

Acier tensed. "He'll expect me to allow Etienne to beat me senseless or --"

Aleksei frowned. "He's my brother and I love him more than I love my own life, but you, Acier, are flesh of my flesh, my son. I will not allow him to slap you around. Understood?"

He nodded. "Yes... Father."

Aleksei smiled. "Yes. I am your father. Now, you'd better go prepare your dens for your departure. The sooner we get this over and done with, the sooner we can welcome Etienne back to sanity."

\* \* \*

"Don't go, Steele. Please."

Standing in his bedroom watching a naked Raven slip out of bed, Acier longed to spend the rest of the week lying between her thighs. But that would have to wait. "If I don't go, he'll come here. I'm having enough problems with Leon's den without having them witness Etienne and I battling each other."

Crossing the room to gaze up at him, she placed her hands on his chest. "If you go, I'm afraid one of you will end up dead."

"Why?" He saw the fear in her green gaze. "What have you seen?"

"One of you dead -- over me -- and I can't allow that, Steele!"

He sucked in a breath. "Which one of us?"

"I don't know."

"Raven, his hair is a lot shorter than mine. Surely you can tell us apart."

She shook her head. "In the vision, both of you had short hair. I couldn't tell who was dead. All I know is that I don't want either of you killed!"

He caressed her cheek. "You told me yourself Willoni often can't foresee their own future."

"If you face him and one of you is killed --"

"It wouldn't be your fault."

"It would be because I came between you two!"

"Aleksi and Vladimir will be there, along with Enola to ensure neither of us gets seriously hurt."

She gripped his shirt. "Don't go, Steele. Please."

"I have to face him. Enola says it's something he and I both need." He gave her a small smile. "As you might have guessed by now, I too have some unresolved and until now unacknowledged issues with Etienne. Both he and I need this cleansing."

"Cleansing? How is beating each other physically going to cleanse either of you?"

He shrugged. "If it'll make you feel better about this, I promise I won't kill him."

She stepped away from him, compressing her lips. "And what if he kills you?"

"Despite what he thinks, I'm physically stronger and far more driven than he's ever been. He's not going to kill me."

"You wouldn't be so certain of that if you knew the level of his resentment. If you go to face him, don't expect me to be here waiting when you return."

His incisors descended. "I have too much going on now for you to start this shit with me, Raven! I'm going to face him because I have to."

"You're going because you *want* to!" She leveled a finger at him. "Well, I'm not some object you and he can beat each other senseless over. Go if you must, Acier, but just understand that the spoils don't always go to the victor."

He clenched his hands into fists. "Are you implying that when I give him the ass kicking he's needed for a long time now, you'll leave me for him?"

Her green eyes flashed at him. "Perhaps I'll decide I don't need or want either of you!"

"Really? And just maybe I'll decide I don't need or want a woman who sleeps with my brother the moment I turn my back, Raven!"

She sucked in a breath. "I won't be here when you return."

Even as he felt as if she were driving a sharp knife through his heart, he shrugged. "That's your choice, Raven."

"That's all you have to say to me?"

"No, it isn't. If you're not here when I return, I won't come looking for you. And should you change your mind and return, you just might find that I've changed mine about wanting you."

He watched a look of hurt dismay spread across her face before he turned and stalked out of the bedroom. It would be a cold damned day in hell when he allowed a twenty-two-year-old to jerk the chain to his heart again. If she was there when he returned, he'd mend fences with her. If she wasn't, even with his heart ripped out, he'd get on with his life. He would not chase her or beg her to return to him. If she wanted him, she'd have to prove it and understand he wasn't going to be held hostage by threats of her leaving whenever they had a disagreement.

\* \* \*

Etienne's thoughts kept returning to Raven. He hungered for her with an intensity he feared would consume him. He had to have her -- even if it meant killing Acier. For a brief moment the thought of Acier's death sent a streak of dread through him. He shook it off. He would lose his mind without Raven. Without her, he would have no reason to live.

He felt a warm, familiar presence and glanced up. Adona, naked, with her dark, beautiful skin glistening from a shower, walked into the living room. "Are you all right?"

She shook her head.

He saw tears in her dark eyes. Damn. This was a fine time for her to turn feminine on him. "I'm sorry," he told her. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

Her lips trembled. "I know you hunger for her, but she's not here. I am." She lifted her arms. "Love me, Wyatt."

Etienne frowned. He made a living acting in adult films under the name Wyatt Diamond. Clearly Adona, or whoever this woman was, had seen his movies. However, during their previous encounters she'd always called him Etienne. Within minutes of meeting her weeks earlier, he'd known she wasn't the vampire fem she purported to be. After her incredible change earlier in the bedroom, he had no idea who or what she was.

He was certain of one thing -- her ability to ease his hunger for Raven deserved a measure of consideration. He stared down at her. "Who are you?"

She wrapped her arms around herself. "Someone who shouldn't, but can't help wanting and loving you."

"Why shouldn't you want me?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. I just know it's wrong for me to want you, but I do. Hold me, please? I need you."

The need he saw in her dark gaze mirrored what he felt for Raven. No one should suffer that level of deprivation when such a basic, overriding need went unmet. He picked her up.

She linked her arms around his neck, laying her cheek against his shoulder. "I need you."

"You're going to get me." He carried her through the RV to the bedroom.

He tore off his clothes while she played with her breasts and fingered herself. "I'm getting nice and wet for you, Etienne."

The aroma of her pussy intoxicated his senses. She was so sweet. He couldn't wait to slip back inside her.

"Then don't." She leaned against the wall and smiled at him over her shoulder. "You look hard. I'm wet and ready. What are we waiting for? Take me, my handsome Etienne. Put your mark on me. Brand me as yours." She reached back and parted her cheeks. "Take me."

She was so lovely with her dark flesh still glistening with moisture. He moved to brush his lips against her lovely neck. Her skin was soft and warm. She turned her head, and the look in her eyes shook him. No one had ever looked at him with such unconditional adoration. He kissed her, rubbing his groin against her round ass. *Damn, what a nice ass.*

*Fuck it!* she invited, sliding her tongue along his.

He pulled away from her lips and kissed his way down her body, over her lush, beautiful skin. Dropping to his knees, he nibbled at her ass cheeks, loving the feel of her warm flesh. Reaching around, he slipped two fingers inside her. She was wet. Withdrawing his fingers, he rose, and parted her cheeks. He slid his cock along her crack before he positioned it at her rear entrance.

*Fuck my ass. Please.*

The beauty of non-human women was their ability to take a hard shaft up their asses without lube. He eased his hips forward. The head of his dick pierced her tight hole.

"Oh! Yes!"

"Hell, yeah!" He thrust forward, sliding his entire length into her tight rear. "Oh, damn! You have a sweet ass."

She ground herself against his groin, tightening her muscles as she did. "It's sweet because it was made for your fucking pleasure alone, my handsome hunk. So fuck it -- as hard as you like."

"Oh, baby, you know how to get me hot!" He gripped her waist. He fucked her with long, slow strokes. Pounding her would offer a quick, sweet release, but he didn't want to come before her. Within a few slow strokes his passion rose.

*Don't worry about me. If you're satisfied, I'll be satisfied. I want you to come. Come! Come! Come!*

He closed his eyes and struggled to hold back his impending climax. She made that harder by slamming her hips back at him, forcing his cock balls deep in her ass again and again until he trembled with the effort to keep from coming.

*Come! Come! Come for me... come in me, Etienne. Please. Brand me with your seed!*

He surrendered to her persuasive words. Wrapping his arms around her waist, he sank his incisors into the side of her neck. As he fed on her, he fucked her with a hard, furious motion. Within minutes, he groaned, rutted into her tight ass, and exploded, jetting his seed in her.

*Oh, damn! That was incredible.* With his cock still in her ass, he slipped the fingers of one hand into her pussy. He rubbed the thumb of his other hand along her clit. He sighed with relief when she gasped and came. *Oh, yeah.*

Cupping his hands over her breasts, he continued to feed on her until she stopped trembling. He removed his incisors from her neck and eased his cock out of her ass. Then he lifted her into his arms and carried her to the bed. They cuddled together in silence.

She lay with her cheek resting against his shoulder. The sex between them had been very satisfying. As before, while inside her, he had been able to forget Raven. He stroked her hair and tensed. Adona was gone -- again. In her place was the pale woman. He lifted her off his body and rolled away from her.

She reached for him. "Wyatt? Please stay with me."

He shook off her hand and slipped out of bed. "The name's Etienne, not Wyatt. And I can't stay. I have a date with brother dearest shortly."

"To fight him over her? What does she have that I don't?"

Her tone when speaking of Raven annoyed him. "She's my bloodlust."



"What am I?"

He sat on the side of the bed, surprised by the urge to soften the coming blow. "It's been a long time since I've met a woman half as exciting as you are."

"But?"

Women. They were never satisfied until they'd wrung a confession from a man -- and then they still weren't satisfied. He rose and moved away from the bed. "But you're not my bloodlust."

She slipped out of bed and pressed her breasts against his chest. "I could be."

Sometimes when he was with her he almost believed that. It was only when he was away from her that his hunger for Raven overshadowed his feelings for her. "You're very sexy, but I don't even know who or what you are." He stroked her cheek. "And frankly, honey, I prefer women with darker skin and a bigger butt."

Her cheeks reddened. Her eyes welled. He immediately regretted his hurtful, tacky outburst. There was no need to hurt her just because she wasn't Raven.

"I love you far more than she ever could. Give me a chance to help you forget her."

"If forgetting her was easy, she wouldn't be my bloodlust."

"I can help you forget."

"I don't want to forget her."

She clutched his hand. "I could make you far happier than she ever could."

He withdrew his hand from hers. "I'm going to shower, get dressed, and leave."

"I'll wait for you."

"Don't." He sighed. "If you feel half of what you say you do, you deserve far better than what I can give you."

"I don't want better. I want you. If she were gone, would that increase my chances with you?"

He bared his incisors. "She's not gone, so don't get any ideas. Is that clear?"

"Very."

He gave her a cool look. "It would be better if you're not here when I return."

She gasped. "Wyatt --"

"How the hell do you expect me to want a relationship with you when you don't even know who I am? My name's Etienne." He turned and left the room. He heard her sob and stopped. She was the only woman who had given him a measure of peace in months. What difference did it make what she was or what color her skin was? She was willing to accept him just as he was. Why couldn't he do the same with her?

He returned to the bedroom.

She had thrown herself across the bed where she lay sobbing. She was Adona again. He sat on the side of the bed and lifted her. When she turned into his arms, he felt a rush of emotion. He wrapped his arms around her and crushed his lips down on hers. He made love to her slowly, ensuring she came before he allowed himself to enjoy the sweet release of coming inside her.

Later, as she slept, he eased from the bed. He bent over and kissed her dark cheek. He was aware of a sudden desire to remain with her, but he ignored it. After dressing quickly and quietly, he left the room. He had a date with Acier.

As he unlocked the doors of his SUV, Vladimir slipped into the passenger's side. Etienne was surprisingly glad to see him. He started the engine before he turned to look over at him. "I didn't expect to see you again."

He watched Vladimir's jaw clench. "Didn't you? You're my son. Did you think I'd allow you to face Aleksei's brat alone?"

Etienne hesitated before he spoke again. "I'm going to kill him."

"As much as it pains me to say this, we don't kill our siblings, Etienne."

"It's the only way I can have Raven, and I have to have her. She should be mine, not his! And if I have to kill him to get her, so be it." He shifted the engine into gear and pulled out of the parking space.

"She's Willoni. It's up to her to choose who has mastered her soul song. If she's chosen him, you'll have to learn to deal with having her when you can."

He shook his head, tightening his hands on the steering wheel. "It's not enough."

"Even if we would allow it, killing him would not change how she felt. You'd just ensure she loved him all the more. Possession of her body alone would be small comfort if her heart continued to belong to him."

"I'll take my chances," he snapped. "If you're going to try and talk me out of what I'm determined to do, get out."

"And leave you to face him alone?"

"No. The Brotherhood will be there."

"The hell they will!" Without warning, Vladimir's hand shot out and grabbed the steering wheel. The SUV veered sharply to the shoulder.

Etienne slammed on the brakes. He cut the engine and turned to glare at Vladimir. "What the hell is your problem?"

The words had barely left his mouth before a backhand blow from Vladimir sent him sprawling against the driver's side door. Vladimir leaned close and stared into his eyes. "My problem is having a son who doesn't know his place! I've taken all the disrespect I intend to take from you, boy. I am your father and I expect you to act like it! I'm not taking any more shit or backtalk from you. Do I make myself clear?"

He bared his incisors. "Get away from me."

Vladimir grabbed his collar and jerked on it. "Do I make myself clear, Etienne?"

There was a resolve in Vladimir's voice he'd never heard. It matched the steel in his angry, blue gaze. The tone and the look said one thing clearly: *I am not the vampire to keep pissing off, boy!*

"Crystal."

"Good. And if I were you, I would not expect the Brotherhood to show up."

"Why not?"

"Because they have better sense than to show up any place where Aleksei and I will be together... especially after they've clearly been stirring up trouble between you and Acier." Vladimir released his shirt and returned to his seat.

Etienne sucked in a deep breath before he started the engine again. "Where are Slayer and Karol?"

"They're with Mother."

Great. Just great.

They made the rest of the drive in silence.

\* \* \*

The ringing of her cell phone interrupted Raven's pacing. She glanced at the Caller ID and gasped in relief as she answered the call. "Abby! Abby, where have you been?"

"Ravanni, I've... I'm in trouble. I need help. Will you help me?"

"Of course I will! Just tell me where you are and I'll be there as soon as possible."

"I'm in Philadelphia. Can you meet me at my hotel? It's just outside the city limits."

"I'll get on a flight and be there as soon as I can."

"I'll be waiting for you, Ravanni."

Raven ended the call and went in search of Acier's cousin, Xavier Depardieu, who led the dens in Acier's absence. She found the tall, handsome, blue-eyed blond relaxing in an easy chair in the communal living room. He rose as she entered the room, a smile spreading across his face. "Raven, what can I do for you?"

"I need to get back to Philly. Can you help me?"

"How soon do you need to arrive?"

"As soon as possible."

"Perhaps Alpha Supreme will make his private jet available."

Raven shook her head. "Oh, no! I couldn't presume to even consider asking him that. He'll think I have awful nerve."

"You are the life mate of the Alpha-in-waiting. If Alpha Supreme has no pressing plans for his jet, I'm certain he'd be delighted to put it at your disposal."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm positive." He gestured toward the chair he'd vacated at her entrance. "Make yourself comfortable while I go see Alpha."

Two hours later, accompanied by two shifters from Den Gautier, Raven sat aboard Aime Gautier's private jet on her way back to Pennsylvania. Her thoughts were in turmoil. Fear overwhelmed her. Acier and Etienne would soon be trying to kill each other because they both wanted her.

Many hours later, Raven and the two shifters Xavier had insisted accompany her stood outside the airport. "I'll be fine making my way to the hotel." She extended her hand. "Thanks for accompanying me this far."

The taller of the two smiled and placed a hand under her elbow. "Alpha Xavier insisted we see you safely to your destination."

Certain that they would follow her regardless of her protests, she smiled. "Thank you."

At Abby's hotel room door, she thanked them again, and offered her hand.

The taller shifter took her hand in his and inclined his head. "No thanks are required. You are the life mate of our Alpha. It was an honor to accompany you, ma'am."

If only she felt certain she was still Acier's life mate. They hadn't parted on the best of terms. She smiled and turned to look at the second shifter. He inclined his head, but remained silent. "Thank you both very much."

She knocked on the door.

"It's open," Abby's voice called. "Come in."

Raven opened the door and stepped inside.

Candlelight lit the interior of the suite. Raven looked around the living room. "Abby?"

"In here."

Abby's voice came from the open door on the other side of the room. Raven walked across the living room and into the bedroom.

Even though Abby looked pale and shaken, it was a relief to see her unharmed. She smiled and crossed the room. "Oh, Abby! I'm so happy to see you. I've been so worried about you."

It was only as she embraced Abby that a chill of apprehension ran down her spine. She released Abby. "Abby? What's wrong?"

Abby's lids lowered, concealing her expression. "I sensed you needed me so I called you."

Raven frowned and stepped away from Abby. "Where have you been? Why haven't you answered any of my calls?"

Abby sighed. "I've been having a very difficult time. I know I haven't done my duty by you and I'm so sorry." She curtsied. "Forgive me."

Raven hesitated. Where was the warmth and eagerness to help Abby usually exuded? Why did she avoid eye contact?

"Forgive me, Ravanni." Abby curtsied again, deeper this time. When she lifted her head, there was a smile on her face. The warmth had returned to her gaze.

Raven relaxed and smiled. "There's nothing to forgive." She extended her hand. "I'm just glad you're okay."

Abby took Raven's hand in hers and squeezed it. "I can feel your agitation. Let me give you something to relax you and then we'll sing the Willoni creed song together."

She did need to relax, but she would not be singing the Willoni creed song which celebrated the Willoni's vow to forsake all physical pleasure in pursuit of higher goals. "I'm not ready to sing, Abby."

"But you are ready to relax?"

She nodded and sat on the side of the bed. "Yes. I have so much I need to discuss with you."

Abby smiled and nodded. She moved across the room to an open door which Raven guessed led to the bathroom. She returned moments later with two white pills and a glass of water. Raven took the pills and drank the water.

Abby's eyes gleamed with satisfaction as she took the glass from Raven. "Lie down on the bed and as soon as you're feeling relaxed, we'll begin."

Raven removed her shoes and lay on the bed. Instead of relaxation, she experienced a sense of agitation and fear. She closed her eyes and attempted to rock side to side to enhance her ability to focus her senses. She hummed softly. An abrupt sense of danger shot through her.

She attempted to bolt into a sitting position, but she couldn't move. Her eyes snapped open. A tall, dark woman with a malevolent smile on her face stood over her. "Yes, bitch, you're in trouble all right."

Raven attempted to speak, but her throat muscles were locked. She pushed back a wave of panic. *What are you doing, Abby? Why are you doing this?*

"Abby is gone. I'm Adona, and you have something I want."

*What do I have that you want, Abby?*

"I told you Abby is gone! My name is Adona, and Etienne is mine."

Raven struggled to regain control of her limbs. *I'm Acier's bloodlust, not Etienne's.*

"You think I don't know you've been with my man? I smelled your scent on him when we fucked!"

This was getting worse by the minute. Abby had clearly undergone the forbidden ceremony called the Progression of the Talisman that had enabled Raven to change her appearance so she'd had the ability to become any woman Acier desired during his Feast of Indulgence. That would account for her drastically changed appearance, but the woman calling herself Adona was definitely Abby.

*That was necessary to begin his healing process.*

"Lying bitch! Once you're dead he'll turn to me for comfort and pleasure." Abby grimaced and moved toward the bed.

Raven noted the large knife in her right hand. *Abby! I know you're in there somewhere. Listen to me. You can't do this. You are my spiritual guide. You can't do this!*

"Oh, but you are so very sadly mistaken, Raven. That speech might work on Abby. But that sorry Willoni who would stand by and allow you to take her man isn't here. You're dealing with Adona, and no one takes Adona's man."

Abby climbed onto the bed and straddled Raven's body. She smiled as she placed the sharp edge of the knife against Raven's throat. "I'm going to do this slowly and as painfully as possible. If you somehow survive, you'll know better than to try and steal any other man."

Looking up into the hate-filled eyes, Raven knew no amount of heartfelt appeal would help. In order to avoid death at the hands of the person chosen to guide her, she would have to help herself.

She closed her eyes and began a silent chant that her mother had taught her as a lullaby. *A Willoni is mistress of her own destiny. None can enslave a Willoni who accepts her destiny. None can enslave a Willoni who accepts her destiny.*

As the words flowed over and through her, she felt the telltale tingling sensation which signaled the return of blood circulating in her body. *None can enslave a Willoni who accepts her destiny. I accept my destiny and thus am mistress of my own fate.* The painful sensation of blood returning to her limbs spread from the fingers of her right hand up her arm. She needed more time before she had a hope of defending herself.

"Open your eyes, Raven!"

She kept her eyes closed and continued the silent chant. *None can enslave a Willoni who accepts her destiny. None can enslave a Willoni who accepts her destiny. I accept my destiny and thus am mistress of my own fate.* The fingers of her left hand tingled. *None can enslave a Willoni who accepts her destiny. I accept my destiny and thus am mistress of my own fate.* The muscles of her left arm burned with the return of circulating blood.

The knife was removed from her neck. "Open your eyes or die with them closed like the coward you are!"

Sensing Abby was about to stab her, she opened her eyes. A fine sheen covered Abby's face. The hand clutching the knife over Raven's body shook. What she was about to do went against everything she believed. If only Raven could reach her. *This is not the Willoni way, Abby. You can't do this. You've spent seventeen years watching over me. To do this would dishonor everything Willoni believe.*



"I am not Willoni and I'm not Abby! I'm Adona and you have something I want. If you have to die -- so be it."

Raven tried again -- appealing to Abby using her clan name. *Abigail Valanti, as the daughter of High Priestess Deliah, I demand you stop!*

Abby tensed on top of her, but only for a moment. She shook her head, as if shaking away momentary weakness. "Demand all you like, Willoni. I don't owe you or your mother any loyalty." Abby smiled as she drove the knife down toward Raven's chest.

Raven forced her hands up from her sides. Her fingers closed around Abby's wrist with the knife just inches from its target. She closed her eyes as they struggled, focused her energies on keeping the knife away from her body. Raven was slowly forcing the knife further away from her chest when Abby suddenly drove an elbow into her side.

Raven gasped in pain as she felt the blade pierce her chest.

## Chapter Seven

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I'm sure, but I can't afford to have this information traced back to me."

"Understood." Serge Dumont ended the call on his cell phone and started one of the SUVs the Dumonts kept at the airport. As he sped away from the airport, Serge made another call. Moments later he heard his older sister's voice. "Serge?"

"Tat, I just got a call from Deotra. She's learned the Brotherhood has maneuvered everyone away from Etienne. Mik had to return to Boston and I'm on my way to Acier's RV. I have no idea where Aleksei or Vladimir are."

"Are you sure you can trust the information from Deotra? I thought she'd made a break from the Brotherhood."

"She has, but her lover, Tucker Falcone, is still aligned with them. The information came from him."

"The last I heard Falcone had no love for our family."

"He doesn't, but he seems to have some for Deotra and she and Mikhel have declared a truce."

"So you're certain the information is reliable?"

"Yes."

She swore softly. "Damn Bourcaro. I'll contact Andrei and we'll meet you at the RV with Jace."

Serge frowned at Tat's mention of her vampire-hunting lover, Jace Makefield. "Is it necessary to bring Makefield?"

She swore again. "Now is not the time to start any shit with me about Jace, Serge. He's my bloodlust and as you might know, he's made a habit of killing vampires and

staying alive for the last fifty years. If we're going to face the Brotherhood, we'll need all the help we can get."

But the help of a vampire hunter who had once sought to kill Vladimir? Damn, he'd like to put his size twelve foot all the way up Makefield's ass. "Fine. I'll see you at the RV."

Forty-five minutes later he arrived at Acier's RV, located in an RV park outside of Philadelphia. Tat, her twin Andrei, and a tall, dark man with dark hair arrived moments later. Serge gave Makefield a cool look before turning to face Tat. "Etienne's not here."

She frowned. "Damn! How did this happen?" She shook her head. "Never mind. We'll figure that out after we find Etienne."

Serge took out his cell phone and tried Vladimir's number. This time Vladimir answered. "This had better be important, pup."

"I'm at Acier's RV with Tatiana, Andrei, and Makefield. Etienne, who was supposed to be here, isn't."

"He's with me."

Serge sighed in relief. "Then he's okay?"

"As okay as he can be under the circumstances."

"What circumstances are those?"

"We're on our way to a beat down with Acier."

Serge frowned. "They're going to fight each other? Let me guess. Over Raven?"

"Yes. Imagine two brothers wanting to kill each other over a woman."

Serge arched a brow. Having experienced similar emotions, he understood the fury between Acier and Etienne. "A few women are worth it."

"Not in this life they aren't."

Serge smiled. He'd expect such a sentiment from a vampire with a male bloodlust. "Do you want us to come?"

"No. Aleksei will be there with Acier and we don't really need an audience for this nonsense. When things have been settled, we'll call."

"Okay."

"Aren't you going to wish Etienne luck?"

When hell froze over. Instead of being satisfied with the mores of their culture which allowed him to sleep with Raven on certain occasions, the ungrateful bastard wanted Acier's bloodlust for his own. Imagining his own rage if Mikhel tried to take Derri from him, Serge knew Etienne was going to need all the luck he could get. Besides, as far as Serge was concerned, Etienne needed a good ass kicking. "They're both my nephews," he said and ended the call.

Tat swore when Serge repeated the conversation he'd had with Vladimir. "Will this family's problems ever end?"

Andrei grinned. "I don't think this is such a bad thing. Acier looks as if he's needed his uptight ass kicked for a long time."

Serge laughed. "It'll be a cold day in hell when Etienne can take Acier."

Andrei arched a brow. "Oh, come on, Serge. Surely you don't think Acier can take Etienne?"

"Any day of the week."

"Really? Are you interested in backing that opinion up with a small, brotherly wager?"

Serge shrugged. "Sure. What did you have in mind?"

Tat glared at them. "Are you two out of your minds? You are *not* going to bet on which of our nephews is going to win a fight that should never happen in the first place." She paced the living room. "I can't imagine what Aleksei is thinking."

Serge grinned. "He's probably thinking it's time that Etienne got the ass whipping he's needed for years."

Tat snarled at him.

Serge shrugged, his lips twitching. When he looked at Andrei, he saw clear amusement in his older brother's blue gaze. He turned his attention to Makefield, who'd been silent since his arrival. The hunter glanced quickly away, but not before

Serge noted the gleam in his eyes. Moments later, the sound of the three males' uncontrollable laughter filled the RV.

"All three of your asses are mine!" Tat's angry promise only increased their mirth.

\* \* \*

Acier stood in the Pine Barrens staring up into the night sky. The full moon had once sent him into prowl heat. In that state, he'd been incapable of thinking of anything beyond shifting and spending the night having sex with a series of women who meant nothing to him.

Since his transfusion of vampire blood, which had saved his life, and his Feast of Indulgence, the moon no longer held the unique majesty and beauty for him it once had. While he was not indifferent to the full moon, he felt no pressing need to shift into what he'd always considered his natural form -- that of a big gray wolf.

The last time he'd been in these woods, it had been to face his ex-friend, Leon de la Rocque. That confrontation had ended in Leon's death. Little had Acier known he'd be back within weeks facing Etienne in what the other thought would be a fight to the death.

He looked to the shadows of the tall pines where Aleksei and Enola Cheyenne stood. On the flight from Arizona, he'd been eager to arrive and accept Etienne's challenge. Now memories of all he and Etienne had been through together assailed him. How could he fight the brother whose welfare and safety he had spent most of his life protecting? He raked a hand through his hair. "I don't think I can do this."

"I understand this is going to be difficult for you. It's not something I would ordinarily recommend or suggest. In this case, it's necessary for the completion of your own healing and for the start of Etienne's," Enola told him.

"I'm fine," he objected, turning his gaze to Aleksei's.

Aleksei shook his head. "Our conversation at your complex says differently, Acier."

"I was upset. I didn't mean those things."

“Yes, Acier, you did mean them. It’s time to get everything out in the open. We’ll deal with the situation between you and Etienne now and be done with it. When we leave here, we’ll leave all angers and resentments behind and start fresh.”

“I can’t hurt him.”

“He’ll do his best to hurt you, Acier,” Aleksei pointed out. “While I insist you don’t get carried away, I don’t expect you to allow him to use you as a punching bag. I expect you to defend yourself.”

He swung away from the two males who seemed determined to force him to fight Etienne. “Fine, but let’s do it some other time.”

“The healing process will be most beneficial for you both under the auspices of the full moon.”

Acier glanced up at the moon again. “It doesn’t mean as much to me as it used to.”

“I’m aware of that, Acier, but there is a part of you that will always respond to the call of the moon.”

In the distance Acier heard the approach of a vehicle. He tensed. “It’s Etienne.”

Aleksei nodded. “And Vladimir. Like you, I can always sense when my twin is near.”

Minutes later Etienne and Vladimir appeared at the edge of the trees, stopping next to Aleksei and Enola. At the sight of Etienne, a sudden, powerful rage filled Acier. His incisors descended. His eyes glowed. This ungrateful bastard dared to think he could take Raven? She was his! He barely overcame the urge to flash across the clearing to attack Etienne.

Rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet, Acier watched Vladimir speak to Aleksei. “Are you sure this is a good idea, Aleksei? I’d hate to have any bad feelings between us when Acier gets his ass kicked.”

Although infuriated by the comment, Acier remained silent.

Aleksei arched a brow and smiled. “Vladimir, as much as it’s going to pain me to watch, I’m afraid your pampered, selfish, over-privileged boy is in for the ass whipping

of his life. Acier has promised not to kill him, but I'll be damned if he won't defend himself."

Vladimir bared his incisors. "Pampered, selfish, and over-privileged? What the hell are you talking about, Sei? Have you forgotten how he struggled growing up?"

Acier watched his father cast a quick look at Etienne. "Vladimir, I know he's your son and you feel compelled to defend his sorry ass, but Acier is the one who did all the struggling. It was Acier who worked two jobs so his lazy ass brother could spend all his time whoring with anything with a pussy! Hell, Acier probably did his damned homework for him as well! Everything he has he owes to Acier's struggles. He wouldn't know how to struggle or share if his miserable life depended on it!"

Listening to Aleksei, Acier's rage increased.

"Watch what you're saying, Aleksei," Vladimir warned.

"What's the matter, Vladimir? Can't stand the damned truth? Acier has done everything possible, but is that selfish brat of yours ever satisfied? Hell, no! Now the ungrateful pup has the nerve to think Acier should relinquish his bloodlust to him." With his eyes glowing, Aleksei bared his incisors. He moved around Vladimir to face Etienne. "Just when are you going to do something for Acier? Like find your own god-damned bloodlust and leave him and Raven in peace?"

Faced with the unexpected anger of the powerful, centuries-old vampire, Etienne stepped backward. Vladimir pulled Etienne behind him and faced Aleksei. "Stay out of his face, Sei! If you have issues with me, don't think for one goddamned minute I'll allow you to take them out on my son. Nor will I allow you to place that supercilious brat of yours on a pedestal at Etienne's expense."

Aleksei snarled and Acier could feel his father's rage across the distance separating them. "Are you challenging me, Vladimir?"

Before Vladimir could respond, Enola pulled Aleksei back and stepped between the two brothers. "Clearly, you two have some issues that need to be settled as well, but this is neither the time nor the place for that. This is about Etienne." He placed a hand on each brother's shoulder. "Calm down, both of you. Please."

Vladimir shook Enola's hand off his shoulder. He leveled a finger at Aleksei. "There was no need for you to disrespect Etienne or to get in his face as you've done. Acier has a face as well."

"Yes he does, and you'd do well to stay out of it, Vladimir. He has enough on his shoulders without any shit from you."

"I won't forgive this, Sei."

"Ask me if I care!"

"Enough!" Enola snapped. He swung around to face Aleksei. "You are the elder twin, Aleksei. It's your place to set the proper example. Do you really think this display of temper and emotion between you two is good for either of your sons? Do you want them trying to kill each other to please you two?"

Aleksei sucked in a deep breath before he shook his head. He turned to look at Acier. *Don't kill him, but kick his ass.*

Instead of fueling his anger, this time Aleksei's command diminished it. He and Etienne had always been close. No one had ever come between them before. They both wanted Raven, but she didn't want them at each other's throats on her behalf. He would not fight Etienne.

He half turned away.

"Acier!"

At the warning from Aleksei, Acier glanced over his shoulder. Etienne, shifted into his natural form, charged him. He barely had time to step back before Etienne slammed into him, knocking him on his back. Etienne lunged at his throat. Acier wrapped his hands around Etienne's neck and held him off.

*Steele. Steele, I love you. I always have and I always will.*

The desperate words projected directly into his mind startled Acier. He froze. *Raven? Raven?*

Etienne took advantage of his distraction, and Acier found himself pinned to the ground with Etienne's paws on his shoulders. Etienne's gaping jaws were inches from his exposed throat. His brother's rage-filled golden eyes stared down at him.



\* \* \*

Raven overcame a wave of panic. She redoubled her efforts to force Abby's hand away, but couldn't stop the blade from sinking further into her chest. Feeling blood on her blouse, Raven feared she was about to die. She reached out to the most important person in her life. *Steele. Steele. I love you. I always have and always will.*

Raven felt a strange sensation in the room and then heard a commanding female voice call out. "Willoni! Stop!"

"Abigail! No!"

Raven opened her eyes. Two females stepped from a widening circle of light in the middle of the room. She recognized the bronze-skinned woman in the cream-colored dancer's tunic as Abby's sister, Belladonna. The woman next to her was beautiful -- tall, with smooth, dark skin and eyes, and a regal bearing that led Raven to believe she was at the very least a Willoni High Priestess.

While Belladonna rushed across the room to the bed, the other woman lifted her right hand. Abby froze and the downward movement of the knife stopped. Belladonna pulled Abby off Raven.

Raven grabbed the knife, which was still embedded in her chest. The other woman quickly crossed the room and eased the blade from Raven's chest. Raven gasped and then sobbed as she felt her blood quickly soaking her blouse.

"It's all right, Raven." Speaking in a soft, consoling voice, the woman grasped Raven's hand in hers and placed her other palm over the wound. "Close your eyes and together, we will heal you."

Raven squeezed her hand. "I... I can't... breathe... I can't breathe."

"The worst is over. Close your eyes, Willoni." *Feel the wound... feel it closing... feel it. Feel it.*

She closed her eyes. *Feel it closing. Feel our combined strength willing it to close, Willoni.* Raven felt the blood stop flowing and the wound slowly closing. She lay still for several minutes, clutching the woman's hand. Finally she became aware of Abby, sobbing hysterically, and Belladonna's soft, insistent chanting.

"Are you feeling better, Raven?"

Raven opened her eyes and looked up at the woman. She nodded. "Yes. Thank you. I owe you so much and I don't even know who you are."

"I am Venus Amisha."

Raven sat up slowly, her lips parted in surprise. "Venus Amisha of the Golden Hills Clan?"

"Yes, Willoni."

"Goddess Ascendant of Bliss?"

Venus smiled. "I see you know something of our history, Raven."

Memories of tales her mother told her years earlier surfaced. Hadn't her mother talked of Venus in the past tense as if she no longer existed? Perhaps the memory was faulty. She would probe her memories later. There was something more pressing she needed to do. She struggled to get off the bed and knelt in front of Venus. "Goddess."

Venus reached down and lifted her to her feet. "Those days are long gone, Willoni. These days I am simply Venus Ryan. You're still weak. Lie on the bed while I help Bella attend to Abby."

Raven sat on the side of the bed while Belladonna clutched the sobbing Abby in her arms. She still had dark skin, but Raven sensed this really was Abby rather than Adona. Venus knelt next to them and placed her palm on Abby's cheek. "Be at peace, Willoni." She looked over her shoulder and met Raven's gaze.

Raven nodded. "Yes, Goddess."

Venus smiled and turned back to Abby. "Ravanni Monclaire, born of Deliah, High Priestess of Modidsha, is as gracious as her mother. She freely absolves you of all blame."

Abby shook her head and pulled out of Belladonna's arms. She sat against the wall and hugged herself, her dark gaze trained on Raven's face. "I... she... I tried to kill the Willoni I was charged with guiding. There can be no forgiveness for that, Goddess."

Venus turned to look at Raven again.

Raven slipped off the bed and knelt in front of Abby. "It was Adona who attacked me, Abby, not you. I don't hold you responsible for what she did."

Abby touched the large bloodstain on her blouse. "She... I would have killed you."

"But you didn't." Ignoring the dull ache in her chest, Raven smiled. "And I know you would never have hurt me."

"But she only exists because of my many mistakes."

Raven pressed a finger against her trembling lips. "I freely forgive you, Abby. I just want you well again."

Abby drew back, closing her eyes and rocking from side to side. As they watched, her skin tone grew lighter until it was pale. Several long minutes later her Adona persona had vanished and Abby was herself again.

"Abby! You're back!" Raven stretched out a hand.

Abby shook her head and drew away again. "Raven..." she whispered, and collapsed.

Belladonna dropped to her knees beside her sister and felt for a pulse. Raven shivered with fear. Belladonna gazed up at them with a stricken look in her eyes. "She has no pulse. Goddess, she's gone! She's gone!"

\* \* \*

Etienne lowered his head, sinking his teeth into Acier's throat. Acier grabbed Etienne's ears and forced his jaws away. Etienne responded by dropping his weight onto Acier's chest, impeding his ability to breathe. Then he sank his teeth into Acier's throat again.

Before that call from Raven, Acier had intended to follow Aleksei's earlier advice and allow Etienne to have the upper hand -- at least as long as his life was in no danger. He could no longer afford to do that. He needed to end this quickly so he could make sure Raven was all right.

Acier jammed his open hand up against Etienne's nose. Etienne roared in pain and jerked his head back. Acier wrestled Etienne onto his back, exposed his throat, and sank his incisors into Etienne's neck.

*Steele. Steele. I love you.* The desperation he'd felt in her earlier declaration of love had disappeared. He closed his eyes and sighed in relief. Thank God she was all right.

He couldn't afford to lose his concentration. Etienne raked his teeth against Acier's cheek before sinking them deep into his shoulder, ripping and tearing in a near-mad frenzy. Roaring in pain, Acier curled his hands into fists and slammed them against Etienne's ears.

Etienne shuddered and tore into his shoulder again.

Acier hammered his fists against Etienne's ears with increasing fury until Etienne released his grip on his shoulder and bounded away. With blood pouring from his damaged shoulder, Acier staggered to his feet.

Without warning, Etienne growled and sprang at him again, knocking him onto his back. Within seconds Acier felt Etienne's incisors sinking into his throat. Oh, shit. How the hell was it going to look if Aleksei had to pull Etienne off him? He'd let that happen when hell froze over. He'd had enough. He grabbed Etienne's ears and pressed his knee against Tee's ball sac. *Don't make me neuter you, pup!*

\* \* \*

With Acier lying helpless under him, Etienne experienced a surge of triumph. Even if Acier kneed him in the balls, he could still rip Acier's jugular open. There would be nothing the prowling Aleksei could do to stop him. Within seconds, he could put Acier out of the running for Raven's heart. With Acier dead, there would be no one standing between him and Raven.

On the other hand, with Acier dead, he'd lose what he'd always considered the best part of himself. Acier had always gone out of his way to ensure life ran as easily and as smoothly as possible for him -- until they both fell for Raven. He could kill Acier. But what would that accomplish?

Raven had left him and fled to Acier. As painful as the revelation was, it was time he accepted that simple fact. She had run to Acier. She'd made her choice. Killing Acier wouldn't change her preference. It would just ensure she despised him.

If, by some miracle, she was able to forgive him, the last thing he wanted was to kill Acier. That would be like committing suicide. It would also make him as ungrateful and selfish as both Mikhel and Aleksei had accused him of being. Acier had never denied him anything he wanted -- except Raven. How could he rightly expect Acier to give up his bloodlust?

Yet, if he gave up his fight for Raven, he'd have no reason to live.

He looked down at Acier. *Forgive me, Sei. I surrender. She's yours.*

Withdrawing his incisors from Acier's neck, he rose, turning in time to see both Vladimir and Aleksei racing toward them. Shifting, he extended a hand to Vladimir. As Aleksei flashed past him to kneel beside Acier, Etienne's knees shook. Vladimir placed a hand on his shoulder, a concerned look in his eyes. "Etienne?"

"Fa... Fa..." His knees buckled and he collapsed, falling to the ground. His body rolled and rolled -- toward a cliff. He could hear voices, Vladimir, Acier, Aleksei, calling to him. He fell off the cliff. Encouraged by the voice ringing in his head, he reached out to catch the edge of the cliff -- breaking his fall.

He looked down into the dark pit over which he dangled.

*Etienne! Pup. Hold on.*

*Give me your hand, son.*

He looked up toward the edge of the cliff. Both Vladimir and Acier knelt there, each imploring him to give them his hand so they could pull him to safety.

*Give me your hand, pup. It'll be all right. We'll work things out with Raven. We'll share her. It won't be a problem because she loves us both. You know she loves you too. Give me your hand.*

*I can't live without her, Sei.*

*You won't have to. I promise. We'll work things out. Just give me your hand.*

Lifting his head, he saw desperation in Vladimir's and Acier's gazes. Aleksei extended his hand. *Forgive me, Etienne.*

*Etienne, my love, I need you.*

At the sound of the soft, sultry voice, Etienne glanced down into the pit. Raven stood at the bottom, naked and smiling. *Come to me, Etienne. I made a mistake in leaving you for Acier. I've come to my senses and come back to you, my love. Release your grip and come to me.*

*No, pup, no! Give me your hand.*

*Your hand, Etienne. Now. Give it to me.*

Despite Acier and Vladimir's pleas, the lure of what Raven promised was more than he could resist. He released one hand.

*Etienne, no!*

*No, pup, no! Please.*

*Come to me, my Tee. Come to me. Release your grip and we can be together forever.*

"Raven. *Petite*. I'm coming. I'm coming." He released his grip on the cliff. He tumbled through the cold, black depths. It was only as he hit the bottom of the dark pit that he realized Raven wouldn't have asked this of him.

Lying crumpled at the bottom of the void, he heard cold, triumphant laughter that did not belong to Raven. He'd made a huge mistake and was now going to pay with his life. He could hear Acier, Vladimir, and Aleksei calling out to him, begging him to hold on. But he couldn't -- not when the darkness was so close and offered an end to his physical and mental anguish.

A small circle appeared, quickly widening. A large male with long dark hair and silver eyes stepped from the circle. The man easily moved through the darkness, bringing the light with him. With his hand extended, he knelt beside Etienne. "Etienne Gautier, I am Enola Cheyenne."

"Go away."

Enola's silver eyes stared down into his. He felt his mind being probed. Ashamed of the secrets he'd allowed to consume him, Etienne tried to erect a mental barrier.

"No, Etienne. Don't struggle. The burden you carry is too heavy. Release it and I will bear it for you."

"Get out of my head and let me die in peace!"

"Die?" He felt a warm sensation brushing against his mind. "No, Etienne. There are too many who love and need you alive and well to allow that. The burden you carry is too cumbersome for one of your tender years. Release it to me."

"I don't deserve to live. I've betrayed the one person who has been in my corner for my entire life. I tried to kill him! All he's ever done is sacrifice so I could have things he didn't get to enjoy himself, and I repaid him by trying to kill him. I don't deserve to live."

"And yet he's here, pleading for you to hang on. He forgives you."

"I don't deserve his forgiveness. He's always been worth ten of me and I've never done anything but use him. Let me die so he can be happy with his bloodlust."

"Without you, a large part of who he is would no longer exist. Take my hand and let me bear your burden."

"I don't want to live without Raven. She's my bloodlust too."

Enola reached out and grabbed his hand. "I know she is. Acier realizes that now too. He will make allowances, but you need to hold on."

Etienne jerked his hand away. "No. I've tried to kill him. I've created problems between my father and his twin where none existed. I've done nothing but bring the family grief. Everyone will be better off without me."

*No, Etienne!*

*No, pup! Don't you leave me, Etienne!*

He felt two anguished cries echo in his mind. Acier and Vladimir.

*Please! Come back to us, Etienne. If you do, I promise things will be better between us. I won't begrudge you time with Raven. I swear it. I know she's your bloodlust too. I know you*

*need her as much as I do. Don't leave me, Etienne. If you do, part of me will die with you. Part of her will die as well. You know she loves you.*

*Etienne, please, give Enola your hand. Let him guide you back to us. I've just found you. I couldn't bear to lose you now. Live, solnyshko moy. Live.*

Solnyshko moy. *My sun.* Moved by the pleas of the two males who meant so much to him, Etienne extended his hand. Both of Enola's hands closed over his.

*"Let go of your pain, Etienne. Release it to me. I will bear it for you."*

Etienne gasped, shuddered, and surrendered. He felt a warm, healing touch spreading out from the hand Enola held. It slowly moved along his body, with the power of healing moonlight. It consumed the pain, guilt, and darkness that had overwhelmed him for weeks. Light and hope surfaced in its wake.

Hope. Light. No more darkness. No more shame and guilt for his unjust feelings toward Acier. No more pain.

*No more pain, pup. You are a vital part of who I am. Come back to us. Come back to me.*

He felt moisture on his face and opened his eyes. Enola cradled him in his arms. Vladimir and Acier knelt beside him, each holding one of his hands, each crying. Behind them Aleksei knelt with a hand on his brother's and nephew's shoulders.

With Enola's help, Etienne sat up and turned to Acier. Seeing the blood and wounds he'd inflicted, he sobbed. "Oh, Sei, forgive me! Please!"

*"For anything, Etienne. For anything."*

Acier reached out for him. They embraced, hugging one another with a feverish intensity. As they clung together, Etienne felt the special bond they'd always shared returning. "I'm so sorry I hurt you, Sei. I wasn't myself."

Acier drew away from him and cupped his face between his palms. "I know that. What happened here is over. You're back and that's all that matters. You're back." He kissed Etienne's cheek and released him.

Vladimir took Acier's place and drew him into his arms. Etienne clung to him, pressing his cheek against his shoulder. He whispered one word -- "Father."



Vladimir froze, then his body shook. He sobbed. Within moments Aleksei and Acier were kneeling next to them and the four of them clung together, whispering words of love and forgiveness. They huddled close, reinforcing the special bond that only identical vampire twins could fully understand or appreciate.

Three pairs of arms touched him. Three hearts beat in relief at his redemption and return from near insanity. He was where he wanted to be... where he belonged -- surrounded by those who loved him most... those he loved most.

His thoughts turned to Adona. His desire for her and hers for him would help alleviate his need for Raven. Her affection would lessen his hunger. Hopefully, that would be enough for her -- at least until he could feel more for her.

He closed his eyes and reached out to her. *Adona. I'm coming for you. Wait for me, Adona.*

## Chapter Eight

Venus leaned over Abby. Placing both hands on either side of Abby's head, she closed her eyes and chanted softly in what should have been a strange language. Raven was surprised to find that she understood the words.

*Abigail Valanti. Hear me and let the healing begin. All is forgiven. All is forgiven. Come back to the clan that waits to welcome you. Return to guide Ravanni Monclaire, who still needs your instruction. All is forgiven. Return to us. Return to us, Willoni.*

Unbidden, Raven joined the chant. *Abby. It's Rae. I've been so lost without your guidance these last weeks. There's so much I don't know about our people. I need you to instruct and guide me. Please come back.*

Venus and Raven fell silent. The only sound in the room was that of Belladonna's sobs. Venus waited a few moments and began the chant again. *Abigail Valanti. She of the Golden Hills Clan...*

Abby stirred and slowly opened her eyes.

Belladonna gasped and wrapped her arms around Abby. Abby shook in her embrace, pressing her face against Belladonna's breasts. Raven stroked her hand over Abby's hair. "Welcome back, Abby."

Abby reached out and clutched her hand. "Forgive me, Rae?"

She squeezed Abby's hand. "Of course I forgive you."

Venus rose. "Let's get her on the bed to rest. Then we will begin the ritual to reverse the progression."

Belladonna sucked in a breath. "She's so weak, Venus."

"I know. We'll take all the precautions necessary, but we must begin soon or lose the small window of opportunity we have to perform the ritual successfully."

They helped Abby onto the bed. As she rested, Raven went into the living room and called Acier's cell phone. Acier answered on the second ring. "Raven! *Petite*. Are you all right?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure? I felt you call out to me. You seemed to be in danger."

"I was, but I'm fine now."

"Where are you? I'll come and get you."

"I'm with friends and I'm safe." She bit her lip. "Steele... are you all right?"

"I have a few more battle scars, but yes. I'm all right."

She took a deep breath. "And... Etienne? Is he all right?"

"Yes. You'll be very pleased to hear he's hardly scratched at all."

A long silence ensued.

"Steele? What's wrong?"

"You're his bloodlust too, Raven."

"I know. That's why I was so afraid for you both."

He sighed. "We're going to need to work things out between us... that is, if you're still interested."

"Still interested? I love you both. You know that, but you're the love of my life."

"We're going to need to share you. Can you handle that, *petite*?"

She knew how difficult accepting the knowledge that she was both of their bloodlust had been for him. "I love you both," she said. "It might not be easy, but we'll work things out, Steele."

"Where are you? I need to see you." He paused before he sighed. "We both need to see you."

"And I want to see you both, but right now I'm with Abby. She's sick. I want to make sure she's all right and then I'll come to you. Will you be returning to Arizona?"

"I'll be staying at the RV for a few days. Can you meet us there when you can? I don't want to return to Arizona until after the three of us have... seen each other."

"Okay. I need to get back to Abby. Steele, I love you."

"I love you too."

"Tell Tee that I... love him too."

"I already have."

"I'll see you as soon as I can."

"We'll be waiting for you, *petite*."

Raven ended the call and returned to the bedroom where Venus and Belladonna sat on either side of the bed, chanting over Abby. Raven moved to the window and watched in silence. One day, she would need to know all things Willoni, to prepare for the time when she would serve at temple.

She wrapped her arms around her body. That would require leaving Acier, Etienne, her family, and the child she carried.

\* \* \*

Two days later, after ending a call to Steele, Raven looked up to find Abby emerging from the bedroom. Venus and Belladonna followed. Raven saw no trace of Adona in Abby's gaze.

Raven rose, a smile spreading across her face. "Abby! Welcome back!" She crossed the room and clasped Abby's hand. "How are you feeling?"

Abby sighed. "Ashamed that I allowed my obsession with Etienne to drive me insane. I'm so sorry for hurting you."

She shook her head. "It's forgiven, Abby. We don't need to talk about it again." She released Abby's hand and led her over to the sofa where they sat. Venus and Belladonna shared the loveseat.

"You're very gracious, Ravanni --"

"Please. We've been through so much together. Call me Raven."

Abby nodded. "Raven. As the final step in the healing process I need to explain why this all happened... why Adona was... created."

"Okay."

"Willoni guides have one purpose -- to successfully guide and instruct earthbound Willoni in the ways of our people. While we are acting as guides, we have

to follow the Willoni creed that requires us to forsake all carnal pleasure and devote ourselves exclusively to the instruction of the acolyte. This is particularly true in the case of a future High Priestess -- such as your mother, Deliah, whom I successfully instructed in our ways. After she entered temple service, I was free to pursue personal pleasure. When she was granted leave to have a child, I was put on notice that I would have five years of carnal freedom after you were born. On your fifth birthday, I would have to return to the creed code and watch over you until such time as I deemed you were ready to learn who you were.

"While I watched over you, I was supposed to refrain from all carnal pleasure." She glanced at the loveseat. "Such as my sister did as she watched over the Goddess." Abby pulsed, balling a hand into a fist. "I did that... until I got lonely one night and went into an adult movie. I saw Etienne in a movie. At the time I just thought he was Wyatt Diamond. I tried to forget him, but I couldn't.

"I told myself there was no harm in watching his movies. I bought them all and then I got sex toys to pleasure myself as I watched his movies and pretended I was with him. At first that worked. Then I wanted more. I had to have more. I knew I couldn't and yet I had to. So I secretly underwent the Ritual of the Talisman that allowed me to change my appearance -- and Adona was created.

"Willoni are sexual creatures with healthy sex drives. Once I had created Adona, I lost my ability to control mine. The more I became her, the more I wanted sex. The more I had sex, the sicker I became until she started to dominate me. Then... one night at a bar, I finally met Etienne -- the man of my dreams. I'm very old and I've had countless lovers, but I've never needed one as I did him.

"When I -- Adona realized he was in love with you, she decided you had to die. You know the rest of the story."

Venus rose. "What you do not know, Raven, is that Caldera, the enchantress who took my rightful place as Goddess of the Willoni through treachery, perverted the Willoni creed. It was never intended to drive a faithful guide such as Abigail to despair

because she was forbidden to seek the love of the man who had mastered her soul song. Much of what has happened to Abby can be laid at the feet of Caldera."

Abby shook her head. "You are ever gracious, Goddess, but I was weak."

Venus's eyes flashed. "You were driven to despair by a vengeful enchantress intent on ensuring all Willoni were as miserable as she was!" Venus took a deep breath. "If you're all right, I have a personal matter I need to attend to."

Abby rose and bowed. "Thank you for your graciousness, Goddess."

"Rise, Abigail. As I've said, those days are past." She turned to smile at Raven. "When you've seen those you love, go see Belladonna. She'll guide you to a portal that will allow you to visit someone who's very interested in seeing you again."

"Who?"

"Your mother."

Raven caught her breath. "My... is that possible?"

"Yes. Tend to your loved ones here first and then Belladonna will arrange a meeting."

Abby blanched. "I can do that, Goddess."

"Call me Venus. I want you to concentrate on getting well. That means spending time pursuing your handsome Etienne."

Abby blushed. "He's in bloodlust with Raven."

"True enough, but I have it on good authority that he cares deeply for you as well." Venus smiled. "Who is to say that he will always be in bloodlust with our lovely Raven alone? Or that he may not have dual bloodlusts, one of them being you? Or that you may not meet someone else who has an even greater mastery of your soul song?"

"Goddess!" Abby caught her breath. "You've foreseen..."

"I've foreseen a great many things. Your faithful service will not go unrewarded." She turned her attention to Raven. "The road ahead might not be as smooth as you would have liked it to be, Ravanni, but things will be well..." Her gaze drifted down toward Raven's stomach. "Fear not."

Raven bit her lip. "But I'm afraid of who's --"

"I know of your fear."

"Is it well founded?"

"Who is to say for sure? Now, I must go."

They all rose and then bowed as Venus left the room.

Raven turned to Abby. "If you're feeling better, I need to see Acier."

Abby nodded. "Bella will be with me for a few days. Go."

They embraced before Raven left the suite. Forty-minutes later she was at the RV being kissed breathless by Acier.

\* \* \*

Etienne watched Acier ravish Raven for several minutes before he cleared his throat. "I should go and leave you two to say hello without an audience."

Raven pulled away from Acier and turned to look at him. "How are you?"

"Better." He raked a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry, *petite*... for everything."

She hesitated, glanced at Acier, who inclined his head slightly, and then crossed the living room area of the RV to smile at Etienne. "I'm so happy that you're well and you and Acier are close again."

He stared down at her and felt his cock hardening. God, he wanted her as much as he ever had. "I don't deserve it, but Sei's forgiven me."

"So have I." She linked her arms around his neck and lifted her chin.

He tensed and glanced at Acier. *Sei*?

Acier nodded. "Give me the keys to your SUV so I can take a ride in the country while you and Raven get reacquainted."

He took his keys from his jacket pocket. "Are you sure, Sei? I know this is difficult for you."

"It will be an adjustment for us all." Acier walked over to him and took the keys from his hand. He bent and kissed Raven's cheek. "I'll see you tomorrow."

She nodded and kissed Acier's lips. "I love you."

"I love you too, *petite*." Acier left the RV, closing the door behind him.

When they were alone, Raven slipped her arms around his neck. "I love you too, Tee."

He wrapped his arms around her waist. "I love you too, *petite*."

She stroked her fingers through the hair at his nape. "Show me how much."

He lifted her into his arms. She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder as he carried her through the RV to the bedroom. He took his time undressing her, delighting in slowly exposing her dark, beautiful body.

She lay naked on her side, watching as he pulled off his clothes. When he was nude, she rolled onto her stomach, parting her long, lovely legs for him. Damn, she was beautiful with a nice ass. It was almost as nice as Adona's large, brown bottom.

Eager to love her, he lay on top of her, holding her hips as he slid his cock balls deep in her hot, tight ass.

"Oh... Tee..." She ground her ass against his groin.

He shuddered. When she did that he could feel every inch of her tight anal tunnel along his hard cock.

He slipped his hands under her body to cup her large, lovely breasts. "You are so beautiful."

"Love me," she whispered.

"This will be our last time together for a while. I want to go slow and make it last."

"I'm on fire, Tee. I don't want sweet and gentle. I want to be fucked."

The tightening of her muscles around his cock made retaining his control difficult. Nevertheless, this time he would not come before his partner. He slapped the side of her thigh. "Stop trying to make me come now!"

She laughed, but relaxed her ass muscles. He made slow love to her luscious ass, enjoying the leisurely build up of both their passions. When the tension in her body signaled her coming orgasm, he rolled them onto their sides and found her clit. He scraped his thumbnail over the hard bud until she let out a low, gasping moan, and came. Only then did he ejaculate inside her warm ass.



He eased out of her ass and she turned into his arms and kissed him. He held her until he drifted to sleep. A few hours later, he slipped out of bed and picked up his pants.

"Tee? Come back to bed."

He retrieved a box from his pants pocket before he slipped into bed beside her. He turned on the light. "I have something for you."

She sat up. "What?"

He opened his hand and revealed a small jeweler's box. Noting the wary look in her eyes, he shook his head. "Take it."

She shook her head, pulling the blanket up to cover her breasts. "I thought you understood that I'm going to marry Acier, Tee."

"Open it."

She bit her lip.

"Please."

She took a deep breath before she took the box. She moistened her lips before she opened it. When she had, she gave a happy scream. "It's my ring! It's the ring Acier gave me!" She slipped it on her finger and threw her arms around his neck. "Oh, Tee, thank you so much! I thought you'd thrown it away."

He hugged her. "I couldn't. A part of me knew it meant too much to both of you."

She drew back and caressed his cheek. "Thank you."

He shook his head. "Don't thank me. I should never have taken it from you."

"You've returned it and that's all that matters now." She lay on the bed and parted her legs. "Come love me again."

He stroked her pussy. "That's a tempting invitation, *petite*, but there's someone I need to find."

She sat up. "Abby?"

"No. Adona. Does that bother you?"

"Bother me?" She shook her head. "No! I'm delighted. She loves you so much."

"I know."

"How do you feel about her?"

"She's the only woman who has been able to help me assuage my hunger for you and her feelings for me are so real and so deep... it's difficult not to want to reciprocate."

"Oh, Tee, if you could love her half as much as she loves you, you'll be a very happy vampire."

"Actually, you know, these days I'm feeling more like a shifter than I have in years."

"Vampire or shifter or delicious hybrid, she'll make you very happy."

"I'll do my best to make her happy too."

"I know you will. Do you know where to find her?"

"No."

She gave him Abby's cell number and told him where he could find her.

"Thanks, *petite*." He slipped out of bed and dressed quickly, eager to see Adona again.

"Before you go, there's something I need to tell you about her. If it matters, don't go. If it doesn't, please go reassure her."

He listened in silence as she told him about Adona and Abby. He frowned, his jaw clenching. "She tried to kill you?"

"She couldn't help herself. Don't hold that against her."

"How can I when Sei has forgiven my own murderous behavior?" He stroked her cheek. "And when you've forgiven me for raping you?"

She shook her head and pressed her fingers against his lips. "Oh, no, Tee! It was rough and not very nice, but it wasn't rape. I didn't have the physical strength to stop you, but Enola was there willing to intercede the moment I wanted him to. I didn't ask him to stop you because I knew you needed it. Please don't ever think of it as rape."

"You said no, Raven."

She nodded. "I know, but Enola was there to enforce that no had I really wanted you to stop. So don't ever think of it as rape again."

"You're as forgiving as you are beautiful. You are a worthy bloodlust for Sei who is equally as forgiving."

"And we both love you."

"And I love you both."

"And Abby?"

He shrugged. "Adona was very exciting, but I wasn't in love with her."

"So it..."

He recalled the incredible climax and sense of joy and wonder he'd felt when he awakened from Enola's healing sleep to find Abby making love to him. "It doesn't matter."

"Thank the Goddess!"

He smiled and kissed her lips before he left the RV. His SUV was parked several spaces away. Acier sat inside with his eyes closed.

Etienne tapped on the driver's side window. "Sei?"

Acier sat up. "Why are you dressed? The moon won't rise for another few hours."

"I'm eager to see Abby."

"You are?"

He nodded, smiling. "I can see you're surprised, and to be honest, so am I."

"I'd like to meet her."

Etienne nodded. "You will. Now if I could get started."

Acier got out of the SUV. Etienne got in and started the engine.

"Oh, there's something you should know, pup."

"What?"

Acier grinned. "I'm looking forward to getting to know your Abby -- in the biblical sense."

Etienne stared at him. "What?"

"You heard me, pup."

"But what about Raven?"

"What about her? She knows I'm far more vampire than shifter these days. She'll expect me to sleep with your Abby."

"Maybe she will, but I'm feeling more like a shifter these days and I won't!"

He drove off with the sound of Acier's amused laughter annoying the hell out of him. This vampire shit was overrated. He drove home and took a quick nap before he showered and dressed. As he headed back to the SUV his phone rang again. Noting the number on his Caller ID, he lifted the phone to his ear.

"Etienne! Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Damon. Where the hell have you been?" Listening to Damon's tale of how the Brotherhood had tricked him into thinking they'd kidnapped Brett, Etienne realized he'd had a lucky escape from Vitali Bourcaro's clutches. "And it wasn't Shaun who called you?"

"No, but damned if it didn't sound like him. Brett and Shaun had gone to Vegas for the weekend. Somehow the Brotherhood got a hold of Shaun's cell, but he was never actually in any danger from them."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"So things are okay with you and Raven?"

"Yes. I'm on my way to see Abby."

"And who the hell is Abby?"

"Someone very special. I'll tell you about her when we see each other again."

"And when will that be?"

"I want to spend some time with her. I'll call you."

"I'm delighted to hear you're all right."

"I know. I'll talk to you in a few days."

While he was driving the SUV to Abby's hotel, Mikhel called. "I'm fine, Uncle Mikhel. I'm on my way to see someone very special. If it's all right with you, I'd like to

fly out to Boston in a week or so. I have to pick up Slayer and Karol from Nana and I thought you and I might be able to spend some time together while I'm there."

"I'll look forward to that, pup."

Pup. He supposed he was going to have to get used to being called pup by everyone.

\* \* \*

Etienne stood watching the tall, pale woman cross the hotel lobby toward him. His cock tingled with each step she took. Not only was he happy to see her, but he was also eager to fuck her.

She paused a foot from him, an uncertain smile playing over her lips. He took her hand and drew her close. She turned a dark, troubled gaze up to his. "I'm so happy to see you, Etienne. Once you found out about... I didn't think I'd ever see you again."

"We need to talk. Let's go up to your suite."

She nodded.

He held her hand on the short walk to the elevator. In her suite, when he would have taken her into his arms, she shook her head and stepped away from him. "We need to talk. You need to know..." She compressed her lips. "I know you were attracted to Adona."

He caressed her cheek. "What's your point?"

Her eyes welled with tears. "I... I can't change into her anymore. If you're interested in me... it has to be me as I am now."

The desperation in her voice matched his when he'd awakened to find Raven had fled from him straight to Acier's arms. He cupped his hands over her cheeks. "I knew you couldn't change anymore before I came."

"You did?"

"Yes. Raven told me."

"And you came anyway."

"What does that tell you, Abby?"

"That you... that there might be a chance for us? I know how you feel about Raven."

"Is that going to be a problem for you?"

The tears spilled down her cheeks. "I wish you didn't love her, but I know you do and I'll work hard not to be a pain when you need her."

He wiped away her tears. "I'll do my best to make those times as painless for you as possible. Having said that you should know that one of the most incredible, sensual feelings I've ever experienced was with you, just as you are now, in Acier's RV before I went to face him."

"But... you were furious when you woke. You tossed me across the room and I lost consciousness."

He sighed. "I'm so sorry about that. I was confused and half-mad. But even in that condition, while you made love to me, I didn't think of Raven once. I thought only of you and how natural being with you felt."

She sucked in a breath. "You're serious."

He nodded. "Yes. I am." He bent his head and kissed her lips before lifting her off her feet. "Now let's go to bed and you can tell me what you like."

She linked her arms around his neck. "You. I like... I love you so much I ache with it, Etienne."

The emotion in her voice, the love in her gaze overwhelmed his senses. As he sank into her arms while slowly sliding his cock into her sweet, addictive pussy, he suspected his hunger for Raven would not be nearly as debilitating as he'd feared. The lovely woman under him, surrounding him with a longing and love he could almost taste, would see to that. In turn, he would do his best to keep her happy and content -- just as he knew she'd do for him.

## Marilyn Lee

Marilyn Lee lives, works, and writes on the East Coast. In addition to thoroughly enjoying writing erotic romances, she enjoys roller-skating, spending time with her large, extended family, and rooting for all her hometown sports teams. Her other interests include collecting Doc Savage pulp novels from the thirties and forties and collecting Marvel comics from the seventies and eighties (particularly *Thor* and *The Avengers*).

Her favorite TV shows are forensic shows, westerns (*Gunsmoke* and *Have Gun, Will Travel* are particular favorites), mysteries (She loves the old Charlie Chan mysteries. Her all time favorite mystery movie is probably *Dead, Again.*), and nearly every vampire movie or television show ever made (*Forever Knight* and *Count Yorga, Vampire* are favorites).

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