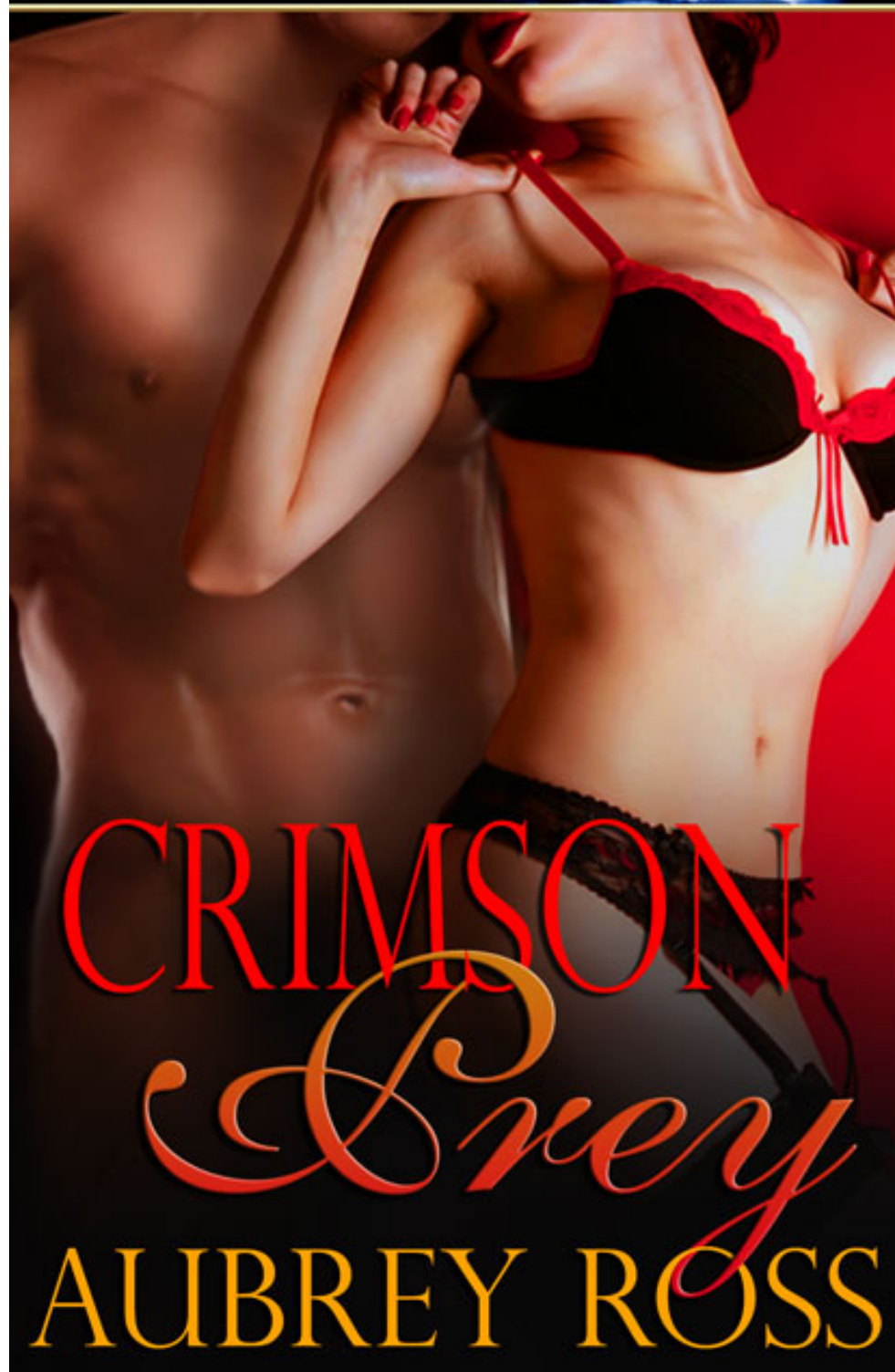


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



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Crimson Prey

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CRIMSON PREY

Aubrey Ross

Prologue

Rome, 1328

Moving through the shadows like a wraith, Antonio Giovanni kept his mind squarely focused on his goal. *Serafina*. Never in his two hundred years had a woman ignited his senses with such obsessive intensity. His emotions had been in turmoil since he first laid eyes on her. She haunted his thoughts and captivated his body. He could think of nothing else. There was only one treatment for his malady and that was Serafina.

He crept through the manicured garden in the center of the villa, scanning the darkness as he went. Lorcan, Serafina's guardian, had traveled to Spain for the yearly meeting of the Council of Ancients. Minimal staff and a handful of guards were all that stood between Antonio and his heart's desire.

Wide arched doors had been propped open, admitting the cool night air. He ducked in through the bathhouse and Serafina's scent brought him up short. Combined with spices and almond oil, her unique fragrance was all the more alluring. He inhaled deeply. His nose tingled and his fangs ached. Soon she would be his for all time. No more slinking around like a criminal.

Her voice drifted to him then, muffled yet unmistakable. Following the sound, he spied an alcove across the room from where he stood. He moved with silent precision, attuned to the night. Moonlight shimmered on the misty water and her scent grew stronger with each step.

"That's enough, Beata. Wait for me in my room."

"But, Mistress—"

"You know I prefer to bathe alone. Don't argue."

Antonio couldn't suppress a smile. She'd obviously sensed him as easily as he'd located her. Hunger stirred, an intoxicating combination of lust and the craving for blood. He blinked repeatedly as he struggled to suppress transformation. He could feel his eyes begin to glow, a subtle foreshadowing of the changes to come.

He pictured her soft body and the warmth of her smile. Making love to her was dangerous enough, taking her blood would pose an even greater risk. Lorcan would immediately sense a blood bond and Antonio had no doubt a bond would form the first time he fed from her slender throat.

A door opened and closed with a bang then Serafina emerged from the alcove wrapped in a sheet of linen. "Have you gone mad?" Her tone was hushed and worry creased her brow. "We cannot risk being seen together until I'm certain I carry your child."

He closed the space between them with two long strides and pulled her into his arms. "That's exactly what I've come to discuss." She didn't resist his kiss, nor did she respond. "This is ridiculous. We're not children. Lorcan isn't even your father."

"I'm his ward and so are my sisters. I cannot openly defy him until our position is more secure."

Cupping her cheek with his palm, he brushed his lips over hers. "Then let's make it more secure." He rained light kisses over her delicate features before returning to her mouth. "A blood bond will announce to the world that you're mine whether that bastard approves or not."

"He'll kill you." She clutched the front of his tunic, her dark eyes wide and luminous.

"My bloodline is nearly as ancient as his. Let him try!"

"No." She arched away, turning her head to the side. Mahogany hair swished forward, obscuring her face from view. "Unrest between the clans is counterproductive to our goals," she persisted. "We must abandon these petty squabbles or we will still be hiding from humanity a thousand years from now."

He wrapped his arms around her and pressed his face against her unbound hair. Her scent washed over him in soothing waves. There was wisdom in her words. The council was determined to unify the clans. Humanity multiplied like vermin while organic vampires struggled to reproduce. Soon the ratio would be so disproportionate vampires would be doomed to obscurity for all time.

"I want to be with you more than anything, my love." Her voice penetrated the mental tangent. "But we have to find a way to obtain Lorcan's blessing, even if it is given begrudgingly.

"For two hundred years I have waited for a woman who would awaken these feelings in me. I had given up hope of ever finding my mate until I saw you."

She gazed into his eyes, revealing the depths of her affection. "Our strategy is sound. As often as we make love, your seed is sure to take root soon. We must be patient a little longer."

"My nature doesn't lend itself to patience, but I'll try."

"Let me send Beata away then we'll continue working toward our goal."

Sera slipped out of Antonio's embrace before he could kiss her again. If he touched her while her emotions were so turbulent it was likely they wouldn't make it to her bedroom. She donned a simple tunic and covered it with an ankle-length robe.

Antonio shielded his physical body as soon as she moved out of reach. She could no longer see him, but she could feel his gaze upon her, caressing and arousing her. She'd been courted before. No organic female made it to maturity without knowing a lover's touch. The survival of their species depended on females finding compatible mates.

Even so, her reaction to Antonio had been unusual. Their first kiss had quickly developed into a far more intimate exchange than she'd meant to allow. He was rash and arrogant, demanding and fierce, all the things she'd tried to avoid in a potential mate. A particularly strong sensation unfurled within her belly. Had he heard her criticism or was he simply anxious to begin?

Beata stood as Sera entered the chamber. She had set out the implements needed to dress Sera's hair. "You didn't linger in your bath. Are you feeling all right?"

That excuse was as good as any. "Actually, no. I woke with a headache and it's growing progressively worse." She shrugged out of the robe and handed it to Beata. "I thought I'd lie down for a couple of hours."

"Shall I have Cook mix you a potion? Perhaps you need to feed."

"A short rest should ease the pain. If I feel no better when I awaken, I'll send for you." She made a sweeping gesture toward the door, her meaning unmistakable.

The servant folded the robe and placed it on a nearby stool. "If you're ill, I should watch over you. Master Lorcan will punish me if you're not properly attended."

"I will rest better without any distractions. I assure you, Beata, this is what I need."

Lorcan controlled all his servants with a blood bond, but Beata seemed genuinely enamored of her master. She offered her neck to any vampire in need while her body she shared only with Lorcan. Sera had no doubt Beata had been assigned to her because of the human's absolute loyalty to her master. Lorcan didn't trust Sera. Ironically, it had only been in the past few weeks that she'd given him reason for concern.

Beata hesitated a moment longer then offered Sera a stiff bow. "Rest well. I'll check back after a while."

Retreating footfalls assured Sera the human had departed. She barred the door as an added precaution and pulled the shutters closed over the windows. Lamplight wavered across the detailed landscape depicted on her wall. She wished she could step into the tranquil setting with Antonio. They would revel in mutual pleasure and think only of each other.

He wrapped his arms around her from behind. "Is she suspicious by nature or can she sense our kind?"

"Lorcan has instructed her not to let me out of her sight."

“Why does he care what you do? You have completed your first century. Even by the council’s standards you’re mature.”

She turned to face him within the circle of his arms. “I don’t want to talk about Lorcan. I want to focus on you and me and the child we intend to create.”

His mouth covered hers, demonstrating his wholehearted agreement. She circled his neck with her arms as he picked her up and carried her to the bed. The kiss was slow and tender. They shared their breath with the sensual stroking of their tongues.

Her fingers combed through his dark hair, luxuriating in the wavy mass. He placed her in the middle of the bed and reluctantly separated. Kicking off his shoes and tugging his tunic off over his head, he undressed with obvious haste. She relaxed against the bedding and enjoyed his hurried display.

Stark definition rather than bulk shaped his body. His features too were sharp and angular. Only his beautiful blue eyes kept him from looking ominous. She only caught a glimpse of his erection before he moved onto the bed. He crawled toward her, ravenous demand controlling his expression and she reassessed her conclusion. The sapphire brilliance didn’t prevent a hint of menace from shining through.

“Offer me your mouth.” He held himself above her and the light in his eyes intensified.

“Antonio, you cannot take my blood. Promise me you will control your hunger.”

His pupils narrowed then reshaped, becoming ebony slashes spanning incandescent blue. Fear tumbled into her belly. He often transformed when he released his seed, but she’d never seen him lose control this soon.

He grabbed her hands and pinned them to the bed over her head. She tugged against his hold and writhed beneath him, instinctively testing his strength. No female tolerated a male who couldn’t overpower her. Her struggles only parted her thighs and rubbed her lower body against his.

“Open for me now.” He didn’t give her time to protest. His mouth covered hers, his tongue immediately pushing against the seam of her lips.

Her body pulsed to life, responding to his nearness and aggression. Her breasts felt heavy and tender while heat pooled between her thighs. Of their own volition, her lips parted and her tongue curled around his. He rubbed against her and pressed into her, his cock an unmistakable presence between them.

Shifting her wrists to one hand, he freed the other to roam. He stroked her face and shoulders, grazed her breasts before descending along her abdomen. Finally he touched her thigh. Within seconds he found the hem of her tunic and dragged it to her waist.

His mouth released hers and she inhaled sharply. "Slow down, love, or this will be over before it's begun."

He growled, displaying his fangs, the threat both sensual and thrilling. His features had just begun to transform. The angled ridges on his forehead were shadowed promises of their full prominence and his cheekbones had grown unusually sharp. Once they were mated, feeding would become part of sex. His fangs would pierce her flesh as his cock moved in her. But they were not yet mated!

Hunger burst within her, scattering her objections. The sudden brilliance of her eyes cast his face into high relief. Her fangs extended, pricking her tongue with their instantaneous transition.

He paused and sniffed, scenting blood on her breath. With another growl, he kissed her again, deeper now, his tongue sweeping across hers again and again. His hand eased between her thighs as his tongue explored her mouth. He gently traced her feminine crease, his fingers parting her a bit more with each pass.

She angled her head and returned his kiss. His fingers circled her opening, drawing her attention to the emptiness inside her. A whimper escaped around their questing tongues. She wanted him there, now and forever!

His long fingers pushed into her core as his thumb brushed over her nub. She trembled, her inner muscles tightening around his fingers.

"Do you ache for me, sweet? As I ache for you?" he whispered the words against her kiss-swollen lips.

"Yes, oh God, yes!"

"Then hold back your legs. Offer me everything."

He released her hands so she could obey. She grasped the backs of her knees and held herself open while he rocked back onto his heels. He paused to look at her, his breath hissing. "So beautiful."

His head dipped between her thighs and he adored her with his mouth. His tongue followed the trail his fingers had blazed, first tracing then circling her most sensitive flesh. Pleasure washed over her and bubbled up through her, her body greedy for his attention. He caressed her secret bud, drawing the sensations tighter within her core.

"Fight back your peak."

She groaned at the throaty command. Already her senses teetered on the brink of release. As if sensing her struggle, he moved his tongue, pushing directly into her creamy passage. He lapped and sucked, using her essence to ward off his hunger.

He didn't stop until she was tense and trembling. Then he lowered her bottom to the bed and guided his cock to her entrance. "You are mine, Serafina. You will always be mine." He thrust his full length into her and captured her gasp with a searing kiss.

She tasted her pleasure on his lips and hunger stabbed into her belly. She raised her legs high against his sides as he filled her over and over. Sound roared through her ears and a scarlet haze shimmered before her eyes.

He threw back his head, his hips maintaining a steady rhythm. Her gaze focused on the pulse throbbing in the side of his throat, strong and steady, just like his thrusting. She licked her lips, mesmerized by the subtle pounding.

With sudden aggression he draped her legs over his arms and pulled her hips up off the bed. Each forceful drive jostled her breasts and stoked the flames inside her. Harder and deeper, he moved.

She tossed her head and tightened her inner muscles. Her blood boiled and her cheekbones jutted. His erection increased, stretching her even tighter. She could smell his blood and imagine the evocative taste filling her mouth.

Doubting her own control for the first time in her life, she pressed her forehead against his shoulder and breathed through her nose. He pounded into her, demanding her surrender. She rolled her hips and his shaft dragged across her nub.

Pleasure exploded with staggering force. She screamed, arching into his next thrust. Bloodlust burst through her desire and she tangled her hands in his hair, turning his head as she lunged for his throat. Her fangs stabbed into his flesh as he released his seed deep inside her.

She fed deeply, his cock echoing the persistent rhythm of her mouth. Pleasure mixed with pain, desire blended with hunger. Their bodies trembled and their souls groaned as a tangible bond connected their beings. Hot, copper-sweet blood coated her tongue. The essence of life, vibrant and —

The sharp crack of a whip snapped her from her stupor. The lash wrapped around Antonio's throat and drove her back with its cruel sting. He was dragged off her by two of Lorcan's personal guards. She cried out, reaching frantically for her lover.

The sting remained and she touched her cheek, shocked to find her skin blistered. Lamplight caught on the silver flecks woven in with the leather. Surrounded by silver, Antonio was unable to disperse his physical form.

"Let him go!" She glared at Lorcan, but his angry gaze was fixed on Antonio.

"You useless whelp." Careful to touch only the solid leather handle, Lorcan wrapped the whip around Antonio's chest. "I should kill you for this!"

"We've done nothing wrong," she cried, covering her nudity with a blanket as she crawled off the side of the bed. "You have no right to interfere!"

"I will deal with you later," he snapped without taking his attention off his captive. Antonio's throat was vividly welted. Pain contorted his features and glazed his eyes. "The only reason you're still breathing is because she bit you. If you had instigated the

link it would have cost you your life.” Sera tugged on Lorcan’s arm, determined to dislodge the whip. He shoved her back so forcefully she sprawled on the cold stone floor. He passed the whip to one of the guards as they dragged Antonio to his feet. “Get him out of here. You know where to take him.”

Sera struggled to her feet. “Why are you doing this?” Darting past Lorcan, she lunged for the nearest guard. Lorcan grabbed her from behind, spinning her about and tossing her onto the bed. Fear and frustration dragged another scream from her lungs. The harsh sound trailing off into a whimper.

“I knew you had a lover, but I expected you to have better taste. The Giovanni clan is filled with worthless reprobates. Too many Demarko sons have fallen prey to Giovanni whores. I will not allow any more of their blood to taint my descendants!” His gaze swept her disheveled form then he sneered. “Perhaps your choice was more natural than I care to admit.”

“What do you want?” The newly formed bond assured her Antonio was still alive. She could sense his fury and pain, but his life force was strong.

“Sever the link right now before it takes hold permanently.”

“Never!”

His fist grasped her throat cutting off her air. “*Now.*”

Her only reaction was a mutinous glare.

“If I don’t feel the link sever before you pass out, I will give your sisters to my men.”

Ordinarily she would have laughed at the threat, but she saw lethal determination in his cold stare. She clasped his wrist with both hands and his hold eased, allowing breath past the constriction. “Why are you doing this?”

“Sever the link and I’ll explain.”

The bond could always be formed again. Lorcan didn’t dare murder the heir to one of the ancient clans. It was forbidden by the Charter. She sent a wave of encouragement

and affection across the link then carefully pinched off the connection. Tears sprang to her eyes and her lips trembled. They had only been bonded for a matter of moments. How could she miss him so desperately already?

"A soul bond?" He shoved her away, his hand finally releasing her neck. "I can't believe you would even consider binding yourself to the likes of him for all eternity." He paced beside the bed, his expression thunderous.

She hadn't intentionally formed a soul bond. The connection had more or less happened spontaneously. Still, she wasn't going to defend herself to Lorcan. He had no right to know the specifics of her relationship with Antonio.

"As soon as we're certain you do not carry Giovanni's child, you will mate with Ivor, head of Cardoc clan."

"I will not!"

He slapped her, the force toppling her sideways across the bed. "I have tolerated your insolence for the last time. You will do as you're told and that's final."

She didn't argue. Let him think she'd capitulated then she'd make sure her sisters and Antonio were safely out of his reach.

"Clan Cardoc is a bit barbaric, but it's beneficial to establish ties across the sea. There are too many clans fighting for supremacy on the continent. I'm seriously thinking about relocating."

She didn't care what his intentions were. She would take her petition directly to the council.

"The council won't help you, Serafina." He spoke with absolute certainty and her heart sank to the pit of her stomach. "They already sanctioned the match."

"Did they also sanction your threats and abuse?"

"Don't be so naïve. You're not the first woman who has required motivation and I doubt you'll be the last."

"I have already found my mate. I didn't even realize what that meant until I tasted his blood." She couldn't give in without a fight. There had to be something she could do to foil Lorcan's plans. "Fate herself chose Antonio for me. You have no right to stand in our way."

"I was given the right—no the responsibility—when my brother neglected to find you a suitable match before he died."

"You cannot force me to submit to a stranger."

A calculated gleam came into his eyes. "If Ivor were to learn of your recent behavior he might demand a less promiscuous bride. How old is your sister? Fourteen? She's a bit young, but she's rather shapely. I suspect he wouldn't mind."

"You bastard." Her thoughts ground to a halt. She had nothing with which to fight him, nothing that would counter his threat. She was a mature woman, equal to Ivor's demands. Her sister was still a child, not yet prepared for the carnal touch of a man. Her stomach tightened painfully as she asked, "Will you release Antonio?"

"After you've submitted yourself to Ivor. He is scheduled to arrive within the week. The faster you accept him, the faster your lover goes free. How soon can you be sure you're not breeding?"

The question left her cold. Most vampires could sense the moment of conception. It was her only hope to stop this downward spiral, and yet she felt no spark of life within her womb.

"I'll know in the next day or two." She wrapped her arms around herself as her heart began to break. "I want proof that Antonio is unharmed."

He agreed with a stiff nod, a cruel smile curving the corners of his mouth. "Prepare yourself for your husband and put Giovanni out of your mind."

Chapter One

Upstate New York, Present Day

"I'm not asking you to decide tonight." Chad brushed Eden's hair back from her face, his gaze warm and caressing. "Transformation is permanent. You must be absolutely certain it's what you want."

Antonio watched the young lovers in silence, feeling the past six centuries with acute clarity. He generally reveled in the power garnered through longevity. Tonight he just felt old.

"I understand why you would want me transformed. We can't truly be together until we're both vampires, but why would Antonio be willing to transform me?" She turned her head and looked at him, expectation clear in her light brown eyes.

"My motivation is not the issue," he said calmly. They stood on the wooden deck of the Demarko lake house. A playful breeze skipped across the surface of Cayuga, distorting the verdant trees reflected on the rippling water. "This is perhaps the most important decision you will ever make. You must take time to weigh every element."

"The Council of Ancients denied Chad's request to transform me. Won't they object if you do it for him?"

"Antonio is organic, like my father. He doesn't need the council's permission to transform someone."

That was true, but it didn't answer Eden's question. "When a governing council continually accommodates the wishes of one person, they lose credibility." He gazed out over the water while the past tugged at his mind.

"You're talking about Lorcan." The human was perceptive and beautiful. Chad had chosen well.

Pressing against her back, Chad wrapped his arms around her waist. "Antonio isn't the only one frustrated by Father's hold over the council."

"He's just the only one willing to take a stand?"

Antonio turned toward the young couple with a careless shrug. "Don't make me sound noble. I have selfish reasons for everything I do."

"And those reasons are?"

Her persistence made him smile. "Lorcan and I have been enemies for well over six hundred years."

"That's one hell of a grudge."

"There is more to this than pissing off my father," Chad reminded.

Antonio nodded. The night wind played through his hair and called him to the sky, away from conflicts and enemies. "Lorcan is determined to mate Chad with an organic female. This violates the Charter and cannot be allowed."

"Organic vampires only mate with other organic vampires?"

"We select consorts and occasionally have children outside our race. But it's imperative that we maintain the integrity of our bloodlines."

"Why do you hate him so much?"

He thought he'd sidestepped her curiosity. "That's a long story."

"I've got plenty of time."

"Not unless you let me transform you."

She smiled and snuggled into Chad's embrace. Antonio glanced away. Their happiness was more than he could take in his current state of mind.

"Who does he want you to marry?" she asked in a whisper-soft voice. "Has your father picked out your bride?"

"There have been several, but each family rejected his proposal."

"His proposal? Shouldn't it have been your proposal?" She sounded annoyed yet intrigued.

Antonio interacted very little with humans. He spent his time tracking down renegades for the Council of Ancients. The Charter was succinct and specific, and anyone not abiding by its statutes was dealt with harshly.

It was easy to forget how different the vampire world was from modern human society. Organic vampires were bound by principles established thousands of years ago. The reasons for the principles had escalated not decreased, so the rules remained.

"It's not uncommon for the head of a clan to arrange matches," Chad told her. "The council has even proposed various marriages down through the years. Genetic compatibility is often more important than personal preference."

"Is reproduction the only reason organic vampires mate?"

"Don't confuse mating with having sex," Antonio cautioned. "They are two very different things to my kind."

"Father's most recent choice was Serafina Cardoc."

Chad's casual announcement punched into Antonio like a prizefighter's fist. His head snapped around and he glared into Chad's unsuspecting gaze. "Ivor has been dead less than a year. She's still in mourning."

"She told him she had no intention of ever taking another mate."

Antonio studied Chad's expression. Did he know about those long-ago events? It was unlikely, but why had he mentioned her by name? Sera's image appeared within his mind, vivid, beautiful, yet unwelcome. He saw her smile and the velvet darkness of her thick-lashed eyes. Her lips parted as he bent to claim her mouth...

"Who is Serafina Cardoc?" Eden wanted to know. "You said her name as if it were significant."

"According to Chantel, who is far more attuned to gossip than I am, Serafina is at the heart of the conflict between Antonio and my father."

Six centuries should have been enough time to rid his heart of the pain, yet her memory lingered still. An ever-present specter who promised paradise and delivered disappointment and isolation. "Don't believe everything your sister tells you."

"You weren't in love with Serafina at some point in time?"

"The past cannot be changed," he said emphatically. "Leave it alone."

Eden gave Chad a conspirator's smile. "Obviously, we're going to have to get the details from Chantel."

"Obviously." Chad returned her smile, but Antonio read compassion in his eyes.

Pity was the last thing he wanted, especially from someone so young. He turned back to the human. "Think about my offer. Lorcan will not stop until he has what he wants and his current obsession is finding your lover a mate."

"Chad already has a mate," Eden insisted.

"I'm not the one you need to convince." Without further comment, he dispersed his physical body and melded with the wind. It had taken centuries to master this skill. Most vampires could cloak their presence from others, but it was just an illusion. Only the oldest and most powerful could transform matter into energy or completely alter their shape.

His consciousness sped through the night, beyond physical sensation, propelled by thought. His destination was automatic. Turbulent emotions and hard decisions always led him to Kenton Thorne. They were both firstborn sons of prominent clans and they'd been thrown together frequently during their formative years.

Nestled in a pristine valley deep in the Rocky Mountains, Lone Tree Estates had been a secluded haven for select members of Thorne clan for the past hundred years. Antonio paused high above the massive complex and scanned the area for his friend. Fourteen separate buildings were situated beneath a dome of psychic energy. No one interacted with the Thorne clan without an invitation.

Antonio? Is that you? It's been ages.

May I enter?

The door is always open for you.

Pinpointing Kenton's location, Antonio passed through the small break Kenton had just opened in the shield. He gathered energy as he flew. Through the perimeter forest and across manicured lawns, Antonio focused on the stately mansion in the center of the complex.

He landed near the front entrance in a swirl of mist. Sensation returned as his corporeal body solidified. His skin tingled and his eyes burned. He rolled his shoulders and shook his hands, clenching and unclenching his fingers.

The front door opened before Antonio could ring the bell. "Master Thorne is expecting you," the doorman said.

"Thank you." He stepped past the man and entered an elegant foyer. After closing the door, the servant led him down the corridor on his right. Kenton sat at the table in the library, looking over artist renditions of an elaborate ballroom.

"It's times like this I wish I had a sister." He motioned Antonio forward and pointed to the drawings. "Which do you prefer?"

"It makes no difference to me. I have no intention of attending the Crimson Serenade."

"I had no idea it would be this much work when I agreed to host the event this year. Have you ever been to one?"

"Of course. We were both there back in '62."

"I suppose we were." He pushed the drawings aside and stood. "It all begins to blur after a while. So what brings you to my neck of the woods?"

"I'm not sure. I was just enjoying the breeze and ended up here."

Kenton's brow arched in silent challenge, but he didn't voice his doubts. "Are you hungry? Hoping for entertainment? What can I offer you?"

"When is the last time you saw Serafina?" The question escaped before Antonio could think of something else to say.

"Serafina?" Kenton chuckled and speculation narrowed his gaze. "Are you still hung up on her?"

"I try to convince myself we went our separate ways lifetimes ago. Then someone mentions her name and it's as if she never left me."

"She didn't leave you. She was dragged away kicking and screaming."

"She didn't trust me to protect her. I would have found a way."

"That's easy to say now, but I'm the one who found you after Lorcan left you for dead. It took you years to regain your strength."

"Why can't I get over her?"

"It's not for lack of trying." Kenton paused for a moment before adding, "Maybe you're not meant to get over her."

Antonio shook his head then raked his hair with his fingers. "How would I even approach her after all this time?"

"Enjoy the breeze again and see where it takes you or pick up the telephone!"

"Calling her isn't an option. I need to see her face." Anxiety sped his pulse and compounded his restlessness.

"So, ring her doorbell. I suspect you know where she lives."

"I'm not sure how she'll react."

"There's only one way to find out."

* * * * *

Sera watched her apprentice with familial pride. The young woman had flourished over the past few weeks and knowing she was a direct descendant of Sera's younger sister made her progress especially sweet.

Melissa's innate talent was remarkable. Control was her biggest challenge. "All right," Sera said, "try it again and make the motion smoother." Melissa stared at the pen resting on the table between them, her brow knitted with concentration. "Let your power flow through you. Don't force it." The pen rotated in a slow circle pointing at Sera then back at Melissa. "Wonderful. Now, very slowly, command it to rise." The girl narrowed her gaze and the pen catapulted into the air. Serafina ducked as the pen flew past her head and imbedded in the wall.

Melissa groaned and rubbed her temples. "I almost had it that time."

"You're doing really well." Sera pushed back her chair and stood. "The concentration exercises have helped you focus. Your hard work is starting to pay off."

"I don't know what's wrong with me. My mother didn't need a tutor to help her use her abilities."

"Nothing is wrong with you. Some people are just more distractible than others and that's where I come in. There is no shame in wanting to achieve your full potential. We've been working together for less than a month. Give yourself a break."

Melissa smiled and followed her into the front room where her mother patiently waited for the lesson to end.

"She's making remarkable progress," Sera told her niece. "Make sure she does her concentration exercises every day. They're tedious, but they're already helping."

"She'll do them." Melissa made a face at her mother's imperious tone. "Thanks for taking her on, Aunt Sera. I know you made room for her."

"She has incredible potential. I would have taken her even if she wasn't a blood relation." They scheduled dates for the following week and Sera saw them to the door. "Tell your mother to call me. It's been weeks since I talked to her."

"Will do."

The night was cool and clear. Sera stepped out onto the porch as Melissa and her mother drove away. She inhaled deep, enjoying the scent of freshly mowed grass and impending rain.

"Serafina."

A tingle skittered down her spine and she searched the shadows beyond the porch. "Hello? Who's out there?" A quick mental scan revealed the presence of another vampire. She pushed deeper and her hand flew to her chest. Why would *he* be here? "Antonio?"

Separating himself from the shadows, Antonio moved into the moonlight. His dark hair was tousled and shaggy, and his clothes seemed a bit rumpled. How long had he been prowling around outside her house? With starkly handsome features and expressive eyes, he still attracted her more than any man she'd ever met. She stared at him in stunned silence, too confounded to speak.

"Hello, Sera."

She couldn't breathe, could barely think past the ringing in her ears. Why would he... What did he... "What are you doing here?"

His brows drew together and blue sparks ignited in his eyes. "I wasn't expecting a red carpet, but can I at least come inside?"

"I'm not sure what to say." She crossed her arms over her chest as a familiar emptiness erupted between her thighs. This couldn't be real. She had banished him to the realm of memories long ago. He'd been part of another lifetime, a blissful blip in her past.

"Your reaction says it all. I shouldn't have come. I'm sorry I upset you."

"Antonio, wait." He paused but didn't turn around. "You caught me off guard. I haven't seen you in over six hundred years." That wasn't exactly true. She'd seen him from time to time and immediately turned in the opposite direction. Just a glimpse of his face left her restless and needy, longing for a life that had never come to pass. "Please, come in."

Another moment ticked away before he turned around. Each step he took tightened the knot in her belly and expanded the ache in her heart. She'd fought long and hard to resolve these feelings, to accept life without him.

He brushed past her and entered her house, the modest refuge she'd purchased shortly after her husband died. This was the orderly world she'd longed for all her life, a world where she controlled every facet of her existence. And she'd only just achieved it.

"Relax." He flashed the sexy smile that had haunted her dreams. "I just want to talk." The hunger burning in his eyes belied the claim.

"Why now?" Despite her effort to remain calm, her voice broke and her hands trembled. "We both made our choice a long time ago."

"Choice?" He stalked toward her with loose-limbed grace. Her body warmed and melted, craving his touch. God, he was gorgeous. She had almost forgotten how easily she succumbed to his savage appeal. "You might have had a choice, but I was imprisoned and tortured for nearly a year."

"What are you talking about?" She took a step back and then another. He advanced, maintaining the distance between their bodies. "Lorcan held you captive to make sure you didn't interfere, but you weren't harmed. I made sure you weren't abused."

"Really?" The wall pressed against her back and he caged her with his arms. "How did you ensure my well-being?"

"You know what I did and why I did it. Why are you angry with me?"

He stared into her eyes for a long, silent moment. "I'm not angry with you. I'm frustrated by the forces that kept us apart. I've waited over six hundred years for my life to begin."

His posture relaxed and common sense told her to let it go, but the inconsistency wouldn't let her. "I saw you and spoke with you several times before I agreed to join with Ivor. You were angry and hostile, but you didn't look as if you'd been tortured."

"It wasn't me, Serafina. He tricked you."

"But Lorcan can't create illusions. I know that for a fact."

"Then he had an accomplice or used a shapeshifter. I can't explain what you saw. I only know it wasn't me."

She covered her mouth with her hand and reminded herself to breathe. It had been for nothing. She had sacrificed their future and it hadn't meant a thing. Tears blurred her vision and her throat grew so tight she couldn't swallow. No, her sisters had been protected by her actions. They had flourished within the security she purchased with her personal happiness. That had to mean something.

"Did you escape or did he release you?" Her voice sounded as shaky as she felt.

"He starved me until I was so weak I couldn't lift my head. Then he used animal claws to shred my flesh. He dumped me in the forest, fully expecting my clan to find my dead body."

Sickened by the image he painted, she was almost afraid to ask, "Who found you?"

"Kenton Thorne."

He pushed off the wall and moved away. She raised her hand, needing to touch him, longing to comfort him with her affection and her body. Her body *knew* him, was ready to resume their affair as if nothing had happened. But much *had* happened since Rome. She wasn't sure they could recapture the perfection of those long-ago weeks and was even less convinced they should try.

"By the time I recovered, you were carrying Ivor's child."

"I'm so sorry." The words seemed insignificant in the face of his pain. "I honestly thought I'd protected you."

"It wasn't your place to protect me!" He spun around and pulled her into his arms, his gaze boring into hers. "I would have protected you. I would have fought my way back from the gates of hell to secure our future."

"But I—"

He cut off her words with his mouth, the kiss hot and hungry. His scent filled her nose and muddled her mind. This was real. He was here, holding her, wanting her as only her true mate could. Euphoria expanded within her, carried by the frantic pounding of her heart.

She clutched his shoulders and tilted her head, unprepared for the staggering emotions. The past was swept away by the force of their passion. There was no tomorrow and no yesteryear. She stroked her tongue over his and impatiently tugged his shirt up, reacquainting herself with the feel of his body.

His hands were every bit as insistent, cupping her breasts through her blouse then ripping it open in his haste to reach bare skin. He unfastened her bra and shoved her garments out of the way as he bent to suckle.

She tangled her fingers in his hair, pressing against him. Her breathing sped and her senses soared. She couldn't get close enough. His lips worked her nipples, firmly, urgently. Sensations launched from her chest and buried in her pussy, intensifying the ache already building there.

Dreams couldn't begin to equal the reality of his embrace. She'd fantasized about him, secretly longing for what could have been. She frantically unzipped his jeans and he hers. He went down on his knees as he peeled her pants and panties down her legs. His hands clasped her bottom and he pressed his face against the juncture of her thighs.

He inhaled deep, his face nuzzling her sex. Excitement spiked and her legs trembled. "I've dreamed of this for so long," he whispered, his breath teasing her damp curls.

For a long time he didn't move. He held her and breathed in her scent. Her pants bunched around her ankles, but she couldn't lift her feet free with his arms wrapped around her hips. His tongue pushed into her feminine crease, gently stroking her clit. She ran her fingers through his hair, lost in the pleasure.

"I missed you," he murmured. "Oh God, how I missed you."

With frantic urgency, she kicked off her shoes. He freed her from the tangle of her clothing then shot to his feet. Pushing his jeans past his hips, he wrapped her legs around his waist and positioned himself at her entrance. His cock surged into her, filling her completely in one powerful thrust.

She cried out, ripples of sensation spreading through her entire body. His mouth settled over hers, his tongue every bit as demanding as his shaft. She returned his kiss with equal fervor, savoring the faint taste of her essence. He rocked between her thighs, filling her deeper and deeper. Her nails bit into his back and his thrusts grew more aggressive.

Pleasure rushed up to meet them. She tore her mouth away from his, desperate to hold back the storm. Harder and faster. Her head tossed against the wall. It was too soon, much too soon.

Ignoring her mind's determination to savor the moment, her body went up in flames. She wrapped herself around him and surrendered to the overwhelming sensations. Her body squeezed his with deep spasms of release.

He bared his fangs and the heat of his gaze caressed her face.

"No!" She covered his mouth with her hand and he snarled.

His fingers bit into her hips and he buried himself to the hilt, coming in hot, rhythmic waves. Struggling for breath, he pinned her to the wall with his cock and his ravenous gaze. "Why did you stop me?"

The question made her tense and extinguished the languid afterglow. "Let me down." She pushed against his chest.

"Why?" He ignored her wiggling.

"I don't want to be bound to anyone. I'm in control of my life for the first time ever and I like it this way."

His eye narrowed. "Then why did you let me fuck you? You know I'll never be satisfied with sex."

"What did you expect? Our attraction has always been combustible." She sighed and softened her tone. "I'm not the same person I was six hundred years ago. Are you?"

"Basically." He separated their bodies and pulled up his jeans. "My life has been on hold since Rome."

She quickly dressed before she responded. "That's where we're different. I had a husband and we have four children. How can I just—"

"They should have been mine! I should have been by your side all those years. You should have carried my sons and daughters."

"We can't rewrite the past no matter how unfair it was."

"I know that." He heaved an audible sigh and pushed his hair out of his eyes.

"What do you want from me?"

"Everything." Without another word, he vanished from sight.

Chapter Two

"I'm going to declare a Bride Hunt," Antonio told Kenton the following night.

"Things went that well?" Kenton turned his head, but not before Antonio saw his smirk. They sat facing each other in the front salon at Lone Tree Estates. A cozy fire burned behind a glass protector, sharing its light and warmth without the possibility of exposure to its lethal flames.

"She knows she's my mate," Antonio insisted. "Our attraction is still alive and burning bright."

"You're not with her now, so what's the problem?"

"She's contracted a bad case of independence." He could still feel her fingernails raking his back as he thrust between her thighs. Her body remembered where she belonged even if her mind had forgotten.

"The rules of a Bride Hunt were established hundreds of years ago to prevent clans from warring over females. Is Sera even aware of the practice?"

"She's not that much younger than I am. I'm sure she understands the rules."

"I wouldn't be so sure. When is the last time you heard of anyone enacting a Bride Hunt?"

"It doesn't matter. If she isn't aware of the rules, I'll explain them to her. The ordinance was never purged from the Charter, so the practice is still valid. She needs to have some say in the path her future takes, but I've waited centuries to be with my mate. This will accomplish both."

"So will spending time with her." Kenton extended his legs toward the fire, crossing them at the ankle. "You buried your head in the sand as soon as you found out she was married. I saw it in your eyes, you just shut down."

He wasn't saying anything Antonio didn't know, but it was annoying to hear the criticism on someone else's lips. "Your point being?"

"You've sequestered yourself and ignored the passage of time, but the world is a very different place."

"Not for organic vampires. We're still obligated to consider the needs of our clan and our species when we choose our mates. If we're very lucky we also have strong feelings for the person we're expected to choose. I've found that with Serafina. There is no power in the world that will keep me from claiming her this time."

"Not even Serafina herself?"

He pushed to his feet with a frustrated sigh. "If she had been cold and unfeeling last night, I might have considered your objection. But she was anything but indifferent to me."

"I'm not suggesting you abandon your goal, but a Bride Hunt? I can't even imagine such an antiquated concept in today's... Why are you laughing?"

"This is coming from the current host of the Crimson Serenade? How do you stand the hypocrisy?"

Kenton grinned and folded his hands behind his head. "I suppose you're right. If I'm going to play Prince Charming at Cinderella's ball, you have every right to hunt down your bride."

Antonio scrubbed his jaw with his hand as his mind rushed on to preparations. "Do you really think there's a possibility she's never heard of a Bride Hunt?"

"Slim, but yes. Technically, the declaration should be presented to the head of her clan, but I presume you don't want Lorcan involved."

"She was freed from his authority when she married."

"And her children free her from the interference of the council. She's already met her obligation to vampire society."

"This is between me and Sera."

"Would you like me to deliver the declaration? I can answer any questions she might have."

"That would be perfect."

"Well then, let's make this look official."

* * * * *

Sera sat on the sofa in her living room staring at the television with unseeing eyes. This was her refuge, her peaceful corner of the world where no one bothered her and nothing happened without her express permission. Or it had been until Antonio burst back into her life.

The first few years without him had been bleak and turbulent. Ivor wasn't as horrible as she'd feared, but he wasn't Antonio. The birth of their first child had given her purpose and helped her work through the pain. Decades passed and she fell into a comfortable routine.

Ivor had been remarkably patient, and eventually her appreciation turned to affection and affection deepened into love. He was extremely involved in clan politics, which didn't interest her in the least. She knew he took lovers both human and vampire, but that was almost expected with a marriage of obligation.

She'd often imagined Antonio's return until the fantasies became too painful to bear. Regardless of how busy she kept herself, there were always quiet moments when his image would surface and her heart would bleed.

With a weary sigh, she flipped off the television and tossed the remote aside. For better or worse, he was back in her life. Her heart gave a rebellious flutter. Hadn't she always known their lives would intersect again?

The doorbell rang and she hesitated. Her children always greeted her telepathically and her lessons were finished for the week. Following the principles she taught her students, she scanned the visitor with only as much power as she needed to ascertain

their identity. It was a man, or rather a male vampire, but that was as far as she got before she slammed into the densest shielding she'd ever encountered.

"How odd," she murmured as she crossed the room. Pausing to peek out the narrow window beside the door, she found a tall, dark-haired man on the front porch. His back was turned and his long coat concealed most of his body. *Criminals don't ring the doorbell. Get over yourself.*

She pulled the door open and her visitor turned around. "Good evening." His voice was deep and softly accented, not unlike Antonio's. There was something familiar about his classically handsome features.

"Have we met?"

"A time or two." He smiled and his dark eyes shimmered. "Kenton Thorne, at your service." He executed a sweeping bow and her heart lost its rhythm. The firstborn son of Thorne clan was on her front porch? What the hell was going on?

"What can I do for you, Mr. Thorne?" Despite her surprise she sounded remarkably calm. "Would you like to come in?"

"That won't be necessary." He slipped his hand into the pocket of his coat and handed her an old-fashioned parchment message, complete with an intricate wax seal.

"What is this?"

"Open it."

She snapped the wax in half and freed the folded page. After reading the beautifully scripted message twice, she looked back at the messenger. "If this is a joke, I don't think it's funny."

"Antonio Giovanni has declared a Bride Hunt. Do you know what that means?"

"It means he's finally lost his mind." She tried to hand the message back to Kenton, but he put his hands in his pockets and offered a lazy smile. "This is the twenty-first century. He needs to accept the fact."

"Are you acquainted with the rules of a Bride Hunt?"

"It doesn't matter. I have no intention of participating in some obsolete ritual."

"Hunters seldom ask permission of their prey." His smile became a smirk, and it was all she could do not to slap him. He was Antonio's closest friend. Of course he would find this amusing. "The declaration is customarily given to the bride's father or the head of her clan. I'm sure you understand the reason for his deviation. You have one hour before the hunt begins. If you successfully elude capture for the next three nights, you will be declared the victor and Antonio will retreat. If you are captured the ceremony proceeds to the next phase, which is combat."

"Combat? I can't win a physical contest against Antonio. I'm skilled enough to defend myself against most humans, but I'm not a warrior."

"You are allowed to choose a champion to fight on your behalf."

"This is ridiculous."

He didn't argue, he just continued reciting the rules. "Combat consists of three rounds. If you or your champion wins two out of the three, you are released. If Antonio is the victor, the last phase is the claiming."

"Capture, combat, claim." She scoffed. "What about chattel? Shouldn't that be in there somewhere?"

He bowed again then paused to look at her. "All you have to do to end this at any point is surrender to your mate. You have one hour."

She slammed the door then leaned against it, the declaration slipping from her numb fingertips. Antonio intended to hunt her down and "claim" her, whether she wanted to be his bride or not. Her pulse raced and her thoughts spun off in different directions, none of them leading to an acceptable conclusion.

Fighting him wasn't an option. She had to end this during the hunt. Could she hide, avoid and outwit him for three days? He could teleport effortlessly while she was exhausted by one jump. Think! There had to be a chink in his armor, some weakness she could exploit.

Predictability. He thought he knew her, had likely anticipated every move he believed she would make. So she had to do the unexpected and... "Damn it, woman, think! Where is the last place he will look for you?"

An image appeared within her mind and she shuddered. Cold green eyes and a cruel smile. She would die before she asked Lorcan for help, but the face gave her an idea.

She took the stairs two at a time and rushed into her bedroom. Her mobile phone was in the front pocket of her purse. She slid it open and thumbed through the address book. Telepathic communication would have to be avoided. Antonio was much too good at tracing psychic signals.

Lorcan had brought his daughter Chantel to her six years before. Ivor only allowed Sera to tutor the children of Cardoc clan, but Lorcan seemed to be the exception to every rule. Chantel had completed the training program without much effort and they had hardly seen each other since. They were little more than acquaintances, which would work to her advantage.

The line connected and Sera paced beside the bed. "Pick up. Come on, pick up."

"Hi, Ms. Cardoc, what's going on?"

"I really need your help, but I don't have a lot of time for explanations."

"Are you all right? You sound frazzled."

"I need a place to stay for a few days with the sort of security your father utilizes."

"Do you want to come here? Our house has the best security money can buy."

"I'd rather not explain myself to your father."

Chantel's soft chuckle came across the line. "I understand that. How about my apartment in the city? Father claims the shields are impenetrable even to the strongest minds."

"I presume you mean New York, but Manhattan is a big island."

"Upper west side. I'll text you the address and tell the doorman to expect you."

"That would be fantastic. I owe you big time for this."

"No worries. Do you need anything else? I can have someone from our security team meet you there if you think that would help. They're really good at what they do."

"I appreciate the offer, but the fewer people who know where I am, the better. I need to disappear."

"You are going to explain this to me once things settle down, aren't you?"

"Absolutely."

She ended the call and waited impatiently for the text message. An address wouldn't allow her to access the destination. She needed visual clues. The address brought up a map on her computer, however, and the virtual driver showed her a 360-degree visual of the street. She could teleport into the alley beside the apartment building without too much risk of being seen.

Energized by her plan, she hurried back downstairs and locked up the house. Teleportation would prevent her from taking anything with her except the clothes on her back. She dug out her driver's license, credit cards and all the cash she could find and stuffed them in her pockets. The hour had nearly elapsed. Was Antonio outside, watching to see where she went?

She still had another few minutes, so she decided to make a false trail. Carefully watching the clock on the dashboard of her car, she drove out the last few minutes. She pulled into the parking lot of a convenience store and turned off the car. If the car was towed, so be it. There was only so much she could control. After checking to make sure no one was paying attention, she focused on her true destination and released her corporeal form.

* * * * *

Savoring the predator thrill surging through his body, Antonio strolled from room to room. Sera was gone, yet her presence lingered in the air. He could sense echoes of her vibrant energy. She'd accepted his challenge as he knew she would, but she was

hampered by a twenty-first century mentality. Remaining insulated from the modern world had its benefits. Tracking down fleeing felons didn't hurt his instincts either. He had powers at his command most vampires had forgotten about. Technology made people lazy, and vampires were no exception.

He kicked off his shoes and lay down on her bed, surrounding himself with her scent. *Serafina*. Forming her image within his mind, he recreated her face in minute detail. From the silky fall of her mahogany hair to the slant of her bright green eyes, he pictured her.

With her image emblazoned on his mind, he projected his being outward. He scanned, searching meticulously through energy patterns and emotional spikes. The metaphysical plane stretched before him, endless and overwhelming. He thought only of her, allowing instinct to guide him.

Time passed without meaning, minutes or hours, he couldn't say. Waves and eddies tried to drag him under. He used her image like a beacon, a buoy in the raging storm. He anchored himself with the energy imprinted on her bedding and reached farther than he'd ever gone before.

A tingle danced down his spine and he smiled. Despite her attempt to shield her presence, he sensed the psychic connection she shared with others of her clan. There was just enough Giovanni "taint" in her ancestry to give him access to her familial bond.

Serafina. He sent her name across the psychic strand, revealing his presence by degrees.

Awareness swelled, followed by her frantic struggle to reinforce her mental shields.

Too late for that, my love. Show me where you are so we can be together as we were meant to be.

I'm not your anything. Now get out of my mind!

He increased the intensity of their link, flowing smoothly into her mind.

Stop it! It's against the Charter to invade the mind of another vampire without their permission.

Had she just quoted the Charter? She must be feeling especially vulnerable. He backed off a bit, enjoying the intimacy of sharing her thoughts. Kenton had encouraged him to spend time with her, to get to know the person she was now.

Are you certain you're safe?

Except for the lunatic hunting me, I'm peachy.

He didn't like the brittle edge to her thoughts. Was he pushing her too hard? Expecting too much too soon? A smile quirked his lips. He'd waited six hundred and eighty years to claim her. How much more patient could he be?

Where are you, Sera? I want your taste in my mouth and your scent all over my body when my solar trance finally claims me. I want your face to be the first thing I see when I wake up tomorrow and every night for the rest of our lives.

I'm well aware of what you want. She sounded less anxious.

And what do you want?

I want control of my life.

At least she hadn't said she wanted him out of her life or something equally snide. *I would never try to control you.* She laughed, and an odd splashing sound rippled through his mind. *Are you in a bathtub?* Her mental silence was all the answer he needed. *Show me where you are and I'll wash your hair. I remember how much you enjoyed that in Rome.*

I already washed my hair.

Listen to my voice and imagine my hands sliding over your body. He waited a moment for the image to take root. I'll rub your shoulders and stroke your arms. I'll cup your breasts and your nipples will tighten, poking right through the suds. Where are we, love?

He saw the world-famous clutter of Manhattan, but she pinched off the thought before he could discern more.

This isn't fair. You're supposed to chase me, follow clues and unravel possibilities.

Isn't that what I'm doing?

No. You're seducing my mind and using my desire against me. Is this how you track down your bounties?

I don't technically work for bounties, but I had no idea you'd kept tabs on me? I'm flattered.

Don't be. I just heard someone mention that you've been working for the council. Would they approve of your recent behavior?

All's fair in love and war.

Are we at war? This sure as hell doesn't feel like love.

That's entirely up to you.

She was silent for a long time. He couldn't sense her emotions without deepening the link and he didn't want to invade her privacy any more than he'd done already. I know you're in New York. All I have to do is start checking out every building I'm not able to scan. There won't be that many. Only an ancient can erect a shield I can't penetrate and most of them still live in Europe.

Then we fight?

Combat is next, unless you surrender.

I've been doing some research since I arrived. This Bride Hunt is a lot more complicated than I realized. It's my right to name a champion or to accept the challenge myself.

Do you have someone in mind?

I thought about naming Kenton Thorne. He'd have a good chance of kicking your ass and he was much too entertained by his role as messenger. Unfortunately, he's your best friend and I can't count on him to give it his all.

I'll tell him you said so.

I played with the idea of siccing one of my sons on you, but that's liable to start another clan war and I really don't want that.

Your eldest son is head of Cardoc clan now. I hadn't thought about that.

You hadn't thought about a lot of things. The rules say I can choose the weapon and the duration for round one. The same privilege is awarded to the victor of each of the following rounds.

You've given this a lot of thought. Does that mean you've given up on eluding me?

I don't see it as giving up. This was my best chance and it took you ten minutes to find me. I'll admit it when I'm outclassed. I want to save my strength for the actual battle. I'll tell you where I am tomorrow at dusk.

This was too damn easy. She was up to something. Swear on the lives of your children that you'll give me an accurate location.

I swear.

Chapter Three

One night down, two to go. Sera smiled as she awoke the next evening. She might be outclassed, but she was far from outwitted. After a quick shower, she strolled through Chantel's amazing walk-in closet, debating what to borrow. Part of her strategy was to attract as much attention as possible. The Charter forbade vampires from any action that intentionally risked the exposure of their race, so the more eyes on her tonight, the better.

She decided on black leather pants, a bright red sweater and black riding boots. If all went as planned Antonio would be little more than a spectator. Still, she needed to be able to run if he ignored the Charter.

Not wanting to squander her energy, she took a cab to Times Square. Traffic slowed to a crawl and massive billboards loomed all around her. She chose her position carefully then dug cash out of her front pocket and dismissed the cabbie.

The atmosphere pulsed with energy and excitement. People rushed past in a continual stream of humanity. Deep within her being the predator stirred. Like many modern vampires, Sera had stopped hunting humans centuries before. Nowadays, private blood banks supplied her nutrition in neat plastic pouches, but that didn't erase the memory of what it felt like to feed.

With a stubborn shove, she forced the intoxicating temptation to the back of her mind and focused on the task at hand.

I know you're awake, Serafina. Now keep your end of the bargain.

It always curled her toes when Antonio used her full name. It rolled off his tongue with a throaty purr that was downright cruel. She carefully positioned herself before she replied to his mental prompting.

I'm on Broadway just past Forty-Fourth Street.

What the fuck are you doing in Times Square?

She just smiled and waited for the electrification of her senses that would signal his arrival. He couldn't flash onto the scene in plain sight. He'd have to find a secluded corner and... Heat spiraled to the pit of her stomach and her nipples tingled. There he was.

He stepped into view on the opposite side of the traffic-cluttered street and she gave him a friendly wave.

I'm glad you're having fun. Now get your ass over here.

This is your hunt, big boy. Come and get me. His glare was hot enough to penetrate the distance between them. After a frustrated glance at the throng surrounding him, he headed for the nearest corner.

Confident that he was tied up for the moment, she walked up to the traffic cop she'd spotted as she arrived. "If I punch you in the face, will you arrest me?"

He just rolled his eyes and returned to his manic routine.

She took a deep breath, clenched her fist and sucker-punched the cop right in the face. Blood spewed from his nose and a stream of profanity flowed from his mouth. He clasped her upper arm with one hand and cupped his wounded nose with the other.

"Are you out of your goddamn mind?" he shouted once he'd run out of obscene phrases.

The cloying scent of blood engulfed her. Hunger clawed to the surface, threatening her composure and challenging her self-control. She bit back a groan and dragged her gaze away from a fresh rivulet of blood trailing across his chin. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea.

"I need you to arrest me," she spoke carefully around her distended fangs.

They were drawing quite a crowd, which was at the heart of her strategy. The cop called for backup and tourists snapped pictures. Antonio stood near the back of the mob, a silent, brooding presence.

Hiding behind humans? This is the best you could do?

She didn't respond to the provocation, concentrating instead on retracting her fangs. She would make sure the police didn't release her until this hunt nonsense was finished. If she had to deal with legal ramifications later, it was a small price to pay. Besides, she knew the Council of Ancients had people who took care of this sort of thing. Vampires answered to their own. They weren't bound by human laws.

Antonio couldn't decide whether to laugh or strangle his rebellious mate. There was a twisted creativity to her scheme. Human surveillance had become annoyingly invasive. They put their cameras everywhere. And, contrary to superstition, digital technology had no trouble capturing the image of a vampire.

If she made it to the station house, or wherever the hell they took unruly women, there would be serious complications. A medic jogged up from one of the side streets. Antonio didn't see the ambulance, but he'd heard the sirens. What a fucking circus!

The wounded officer had Sera on the sidewalk with her hands clasped behind her head. Two additional officers pushed through the crowd and took charge of Sera as the medic examined the traffic cop's nose.

Antonio growled softly as one of them patted her down. No one touched Serafina but him!

He needed to intercept them before they locked her in a cell. Pulling back from the crowd, Antonio blended with the shadows and dispersed his physical form. A rush of energy swelled through him, generated by the rowdy spectators. He greedily absorbed the bounty, thankful for the unexpected offering. He let the wind take him higher, floating above the street.

One of the cops led Sera, none too gently, to a waiting squad car. He helped her into the backseat then climbed into the passenger side in front of her. Antonio couldn't see the driver from this angle, but the car pulled away from the curb.

Unsure of their destination, he carefully tailed the car. He had to act fast and decisively. Gathering energy around him, he saturated his levels, preparing for an abrupt expenditure. He focused on Sera then propelled himself with violent force. She gasped as he burst through the side of the car and triggered her transformation. The humans saw only a blur of color as he wrapped himself around her and shot through the roof of the car.

His energy encapsulated hers, controlling and protecting her. He could sense her chaotic thoughts, but didn't pause to reassure her. She deserved to be rattled and a whole lot more for the stunt she'd just pulled.

She's afraid. A gentler part of his nature cautioned. *She's stubborn!* His temper shot back. She had lived too long in the human world. Life was more black and white for organic vampires. They were predatory and possessive. Human mores might influence their behavior, like training a wild animal. The animal adapted civilized behaviors for a time, but beneath the surface the animal remained.

Instinct guided him toward their destination, deep in the Cascade Mountains. The remote hunting lodge could only be reached on foot or from the sky. He slowed and focused, locating the modest structure nestled in an endless panorama of jutting peaks and towering pine trees.

She stirred, restless and anxious, sensing the change as he prepared to land. They passed through the steep roof of the cabin and materialized in the center of the main room. He held her snug within the circle of his arms as he ignited lanterns on the ground floor of the lodge.

For just a moment, she clutched the front of his shirt, unsteady and dazed. Then her spirit returned in a flurry of emotion. She shoved against his chest and twisted, momentarily escaping his hold.

"You should forfeit the hunt! That was a clear violation of the Charter." Her jewel-bright gaze darted away from his face as if she were searching for a weapon.

"You didn't really expect me to play fair, did you?"

She stared back at him in silent defiance, her cheeks flushed, lips gently parted. He could hear the frantic pounding of her pulse and his heart echoed the steady rhythm. Her breasts heaved beneath the clingy material of her blood-red sweater. Was she wearing a bra? She didn't need one. Her breasts were high and round, their shape perfect for filling his palms.

Sleek leather pants followed the curve of her hips and accented the shape of her thighs, and still he couldn't wait to remove them. He wanted her naked and begging for his cock...and his fangs. He would strip away her civilized veneer and watch her revel in her true nature.

"When's the last time you fed?" He moved toward her, pleased when she held her ground. "You look pale."

"Let's get this over with."

"Do you even remember what it's like to feed, to feel someone's life force flowing into you?"

"I don't want your blood and I'm not willing to give you mine."

"Then we fight." He crossed his arms over his chest to keep from touching her. "Choose a weapon and state the duration of round one."

"What's the point? You're older and more powerful than I am. I can't win a physical confrontation with you."

"Then name your champion."

With a frustrated hiss, she turned away, presenting him with her stunning profile. "I'm not dragging anyone else into this foolishness. This is between you and me."

"May I suggest a contest that is far more mental than physical?"

Her eyes narrowed to glistening slits. "I'm listening."

"Self-control. We each desire the other. Let's use pleasure as our weapon. Whoever comes first loses each round."

"Again there's no contest. We both know I come faster than you do."

He'd expected her to object to the concept, not just the way they'd keep score. Perhaps he was closer to ending this conflict than he realized. "I'm willing to negotiate a ratio. Two to one? Three to one? What will make this fair?"

"None of this is fair." She finger combed her hair out of her eyes and glared at him again. "I've been manipulated by men my entire life. Foolishly, I expected more from you."

The barb found its way past his determination and lodged in his heart. He wasn't manipulating her. He was freeing her from humanity's taint. She had forgotten what it meant to be a vampire, forgotten what it meant to be his mate.

"Accept my challenge or define your own."

Sera glanced around the lodge, looking anywhere but at Antonio. He was too damn gorgeous, far too tempting for her peace of mind. If they fucked again she wasn't sure she could resist him. Her body was his ally in this battle of wills.

And yet, a careful negotiation might better her chances of emerging the victor. "Three to one."

"Agreed."

"And I must instigate each new level of intimacy."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't touch me until I touch you. You can't use your mouth unless I've used mine first and so on."

"Whatever you want."

His confidence annoyed her and refreshed her motivation. "And if by some miracle neither of us has come by sunrise, the hunt is over and you let me go."

"I doubt that will be a problem."

So did she, but she wasn't about to admit the fact to him. "Even so, do you agree?"

"I agree, but I have a condition of my own. There can be no doubt when I come, but it's possible for you to come without my knowing it."

"It's highly unlikely."

"So you say. I want a way to be certain you don't cheat."

It was a reasonable request. Still, she couldn't help wondering if he had an ulterior motive. "Explain."

"Allow me into your mind. I'll establish an empathic link and we can—"

"You'll use the link to guide your actions. I don't think so. You have too many advantages already."

He didn't deny it. "I'll forgo the stipulation for round one. If I suspect you're trying to hide what you're feeling as opposed to controlling it, we'll renegotiate."

"Agreed."

The next move was hers. She smoothed her hands over her hips and glanced at the bedrooms visible across a raised gallery. The interior of the lodge was rustic, stripped logs and exposed beams. She decided to remain on the main level. A less intimate setting was to her advantage. A large rug spread before the empty fireplace, a patchwork of animal fur. She pictured them wrestling naked, the soft fur caressing her back while Antonio caressed her front. Definitely not. Instead, she walked to the kitchen table and pulled out two of the chairs. She turned them to face each other and sat down without explanation.

He simply followed her lead. Lowering his tall form into the other chair, he waited for her next move. She pulled off her boots and tucked her stockings inside the footwear. He did the same as his gaze caressed her face.

Setting her boots under the table, she focused on his lips. Soon enough they would be sliding against hers, stealing her breath and muddling her mind. His kiss had always had the power to release her inhibitions. Why should tonight be any different? So she wouldn't let him kiss her, at least not yet.

She took the hem of her sweater and pulled it off over her head. He waited until she folded the garment and set it on the table before he mirrored the action. His chest rippled and the muscles in his arms bunched. Her mouth went dry and heat pooled between her legs. How was she supposed to keep from coming when her entire body ached for him?

He stared into her eyes, the intensity of his gaze giving her hope. He wanted her every bit as badly as she wanted him. She took a deep breath and he looked at her breasts. His pupils transformed, expanding to span the brilliant blue of his irises.

Emboldened by the subtle transformation, she traced the upper edge of her bra, following the scalloped edge from one ivory mound to the other. Her nipples crested beneath the sheer material. She paused to encourage the reaction, circling each peak until they stood high and hard.

“Show me.” His voice rasped with urgency and his fangs began to lengthen.

She lowered the lace cups, tucking them beneath the fullness of her breasts. He licked his lips and clenched his fists, obviously anxious to touch. She spread her legs and slid her hands from her knees to the juncture of her thighs. Black leather still covered her pussy, but the motion made him groan.

Rather than touch her sex, she arched her back and returned to her nipples. This had to last until dawn or he had to lose control three times. This wasn't going to be easy. She rolled the sensitive tips as she pulled against them, not stopping until they were flushed scarlet and pebble hard.

He remained in his chair, silently enjoying her display. His tongue traced the bottom edge of his teeth, repeatedly outlining his fangs. Did they ache? Desire often stirred hunger and vice versa.

“I'll let you suck on them if you promise that's all you'll do. You can't kiss me or put your mouth anywhere but on my breasts.”

A sexy smile bowed his mouth and he looked into her eyes. “Bring them here.”

She stood and he spread his legs so she could stand between them. Resting her hands on his wide shoulders, she guided his mouth to her breast. His lips fastened on one tender bud, drawing it deep into his mouth. Pleasure spiked from her nipple to her clit, dragging a soft moan from her throat.

It felt so good to touch him and be touched by him. Sensations flowed through her, focusing her attention on the pressure building between her thighs. He suckled one and then the other. His tongue teased the very tip. His hands cupped her bottom, warm and strong even through the leather. She squeezed his shoulders and arched her neck, her hair swishing against her bare back.

His tongue never stopped moving. He traced her areolas and nuzzled the upper fullness. His hair brushed her bare skin, nearly as sensual as his wandering lips. With growing urgency, his mouth pulled. He trapped her nipple between his teeth and she yelped. The momentary sting only accented the blissful rush when he eased his grip and blood flowed back into the straining peak.

"Take off your pants so I can take off mine," he whispered against her damp skin. "I'm dying here."

She moved away and found a massive bulge distorting the front of his jeans. "Oh my, that does look uncomfortable." With a mischievous smile, she slid her chair back then faced him again. "You have to wait until I'm finished."

"That's the plan," he growled out the words.

Listening to the teasing click of the zipper, she unfastened the leather pants. His gaze followed her hands and his lips pressed together. Tight and intense, there was no other word for his expression but *lust*. She eased the pants over her hips then along her thighs, letting the fall of her hair obscure his view as she kicked them aside. With an undulating pivot, she turned around and bent over the chair, displaying her ass and her long, toned legs.

"More."

The word was a breathless plea. She moved her feet apart and rolled her hips, showing him her dusky anus and the pouty crease of her pussy. Her flesh tingled as she imagined his ravenous stare and his struggle to remain in his chair.

"Are you finished?" He sounded disappointingly composed. She looked over her shoulder and smiled. His face was flushed and blue flickers sparked within his eyes. "I really need to get out of these pants."

"It's only fair." She sat in her chair and rested her hands lightly on her knees, careful to leave plenty of room between her thighs.

He shucked his jeans so fast his body blurred. She chuckled at his antics then he imitated her posture and her amusement evaporated. Long and thick, his shaft arched from his groin to his navel, more than ready to fill her, to thrust inside and detonate her senses.

"I'm really hard."

"I noticed."

"Would you like to touch me? I'd love to touch you."

Chapter Four

Sera advanced with mesmerizing grace. Antonio pushed to his feet and slid his chair out of the way with his foot, never shifting his gaze from his lover, his mate. Rather than answer his question with words, she skimmed her hands from his waist to his shoulders.

Heat trailed in the wake of her light caress and his lungs refused to function. Anticipation expanded within him, tensing muscles and speeding his pulse. He savored the moment, using the heavy, surreal pause to focus his mind.

Her hands continued to wander, gliding down his arms and across his back. He traced her collarbone with his index finger and she fidgeted beneath his touch. She swayed toward him then pressed against him from chest to knees.

He'd allowed her to play long enough, his dominant nature demanded action. Tangling his fingers in her hair, he tilted her head back, exposing her neck and parting her lips. He lowered his head toward hers.

"I haven't kissed you yet."

Her breathless reminder felt like a slap. He growled and pivoted to the side, urging her forward. She braced her hands against the tabletop as he wrapped his arms around her torso. "Fine," he whispered in her ear. "We won't kiss. But you touched me, so I can touch you."

He cupped her breasts and rubbed his cock against the small of her back. She held perfectly still. Was she fighting for control or relishing each sensation? Her round little ass nestled warm and snug into the curve of his body and he couldn't resist the temptation. Going down on one knee, he stroked the velvety globes, marveling in their softness and the firm resilience of her flesh.

Her scent filled the air, summoning his hunger as well as his desire. He wanted to pull her up and tilt her hips so he could reach her cream-slicked pussy. He'd explore her gently with his tongue and then his fingers. He'd –

“My mouth hasn't touched you yet!”

With another growl, he pushed her legs apart and found her clit with his fingertips. She yelped and jerked, but he gave no quarter. He rolled the ultrasensitive bud between his fingers and thumb, feeling the tiny nerve cluster pulse. She tried to twist away, but he wrapped his arm around her thighs and held her steady.

“Come for me, sweetheart. You get three. Why torture yourself any longer?”

She moaned and dropped her head back on her shoulders. Her clit twitched between his fingers and her body shook. “Damn it,” she muttered when the last tremor passed. He released her clit and pushed two fingers into her soaked passage. “Wait!” She reached back and tried to dislodge his hand, but he wouldn't budge.

Pushing to his feet, he wrapped his arm around her waist as he finger-fucked her hard. Her inner muscles tightened – warm, wet and snug. “I know this feels good, but think how much better my cock will feel. Are you ready for me to show you, or do we continue tormenting each other?”

“I want you in my mouth.”

Her bold statement dragged a groan from the back of his throat. If she used her mouth on him, it allowed him to use his mouth on her! Not yet. As aroused as he was already, she was likely to end their battle with her clever tongue.

He moved in and out with strong, even strokes. Her essence ran over his hand and trailed across his wrist. His fangs lengthened and burned. Bloodlust screamed through his being, incinerating every thought but possessing her body and joining with her mind. He'd been a fool to believe he could suppress his ravenous hunger. He'd been without her for far too long.

Turning her to face him, he lifted her to the table and urged her back across the smooth surface. Her breasts quivered and fear sparked within her eyes. "My tongue or my fangs. Decide now while I'm still able to offer you a choice."

She spread her arms wide, spanning the narrow table. Then she bent her knees and opened her thighs. Her hesitant surrender pleased him, soothed him, allowed him to reassemble his fragmented control.

He pressed his lips against her damp sex, inhaling her scent while he stroked her inner thighs. Her heat penetrated his lips and the unique rhythm of her energy vibrated all around him. He opened his mouth and licked her slowly from opening to clit. Her folds caressed his tongue, coating him with her cream. Pushing deeper, he explored her core and filled his mouth with her taste.

Squirming beneath him, she wiggled and arched. He couldn't tell if she was trying to escape or bring his tongue farther into her passage. His thumbs stroked her folds and ventured down toward the soft curve of her ass cheeks. She was hot and slick, her arousal having overflowed her pussy.

Intrigued, he followed the silky trail with his fingers. Her bottom was nearly as wet as her feminine crease. He circled her anus with his index finger and she whimpered, her abdominal muscles tense and trembling.

He licked his way to her clit while his fingers played over her other opening. They hadn't explored anal pleasures in Rome, but his savage nature demanded he do so now. He breached her sphincter as he circled her clit with his tongue and she came in fast, almost violent spasms. She ground herself against his mouth and tightened around his finger as he slowly pulled out.

Before the sensations receded completely, he draped her legs over his arms and dragged her hips to the edge of the table. His cock found her core without assistance and he filled her completely with one sustained drive. Her pussy throbbed around him, hot and welcoming. He closed his eyes and savored the perfection of being deep inside her.

"Move." She bucked against him, anxious and demanding.

He pulled back, dragging his shaft nearly out of her. "Like this?" Slowly he pushed back in. She moaned and shivered. He repeated the slow rotation again and again.

"Faster. Harder."

Shifting her knees higher on his arms, he grasped her bottom and increased his tempo. Her flesh clung to his, stroking his entire length as he moved inside her. She closed her eyes and tossed her head against the table, her hair fanned out around her flushed face.

"Look at me. Open your eyes."

Her lashes fluttered then opened and her gaze blazed into his. Her pupils transformed and her irises glowed. She was as close to transformation as he was. Pain rippled across his forehead as his skull reshaped. Maybe he was closer, after all.

She tightened her inner muscles. "Come before you change."

He didn't want to. He wanted to penetrate her throat with his fangs and pin her to the table. He wanted her blood on his tongue as he released his seed at the mouth of her womb.

"Come or pull out." She shoved against his chest. "You do not have permission to bite me!"

He howled in frustration and drove himself to a fast, hollow climax. Pleasure burst within his body, but his predatory nature still ached for release. Anger surged on the heels of his orgasm. Why was she persisting in this nonsense? She was a vampire and she was his mate. Did that no longer mean anything to her?

Sera lay on the table, weak and trembling. Her body had surrendered to their mutual desire, exploding with powerful bursts of pleasure, but her mind refused to give in. He'd hovered on the edge of her consciousness, blazing with savage intensity. She remembered what it felt like to meld with that power, to lose herself in his

overwhelming strength. It was awesome and terrifying, and nothing in her life could begin to compare.

He hadn't moved. His cock was still buried inside her and her legs hooked over his arms. The fierce burning in his gaze began to abate, but her refusal intruded on the afterglow.

She'd won this round. The realization brought her no comfort. "We need to talk, really talk. Can we step outside the hunt long enough to resolve what I'm feeling?"

He pulled out with a heavy sigh and helped her down from the table. "I'm listening."

"Put on your pants at least. I can't think when you're naked."

"That's encouraging." He snatched his pants off the floor and stepped into them while she retrieved her garments.

She didn't speak again until she'd dressed, wishing all the while that she'd chosen something less provocative. Her hair was a hopeless mess, but she tried to work out the worst of the tangles with her fingers. "I want you in my life. I admit I've really missed you."

"But?" Defensiveness made the word snap, driving her back and protecting what was left of his dignity.

"But I can't pretend the last six hundred plus years didn't happen."

"I'm not asking you to."

"Yes you are. You want to continue on as if we were never parted."

He stared at her for a long moment, his expression tense and thoughtful. "Have your feelings for me changed that much?"

"*Everything* has changed." She was hurting him with every word she uttered, but ignoring the truth would only make things more difficult in the end. "I'm not the same person I was in Rome, so how can my feeling possibly be unchanged? I've matured and

evolved. I have great-grandchildren, for heaven's sake. The wide-eyed innocent you loved has grown up. I'm not even sure you'll like the woman I've become."

"What do you think I'll find objectionable? Your descendents are all mature and settled into lives of their own. Even if they weren't, I would never begrudge you your children."

"Even if they remind you of their father?"

"Hating Ivor is pointless. I never blamed him for taking you from me. He was acting on good faith and in the best interest of his clan. We both know who's to blame for our separation."

Tears blurred, swam behind her lashes until she blinked them away. He wasn't making this easy. She'd expected him to be more territorial, more unreasonable. "I'm relieved to hear that because Ivor never treated me with anything but respect. His children are proud of him and I will not allow anyone to malign his memory."

"Go on. What other points of contention do you anticipate?"

She smiled. Despite his apparent calm, the formality of his speech revealed his discomfort. He clasped his hands behind his back and squared his shoulders as he waited for her next volley.

"Most organic females are heavily guarded and sequestered from all but their immediate families."

"That's an exaggeration, but I understand your point. The continuation of our race depends on the safety of organic females, so they are protected at all costs."

"I have already contributed to the continuation of our race. I will live the rest of my life without the interference of the council or anyone."

He crossed his arms over his chest, his smile a bit sardonic. "Unless your activities put you in danger, we shouldn't have a problem."

"I won't give up my students."

"Why would I want you to give them up?"

"They take time and attention, and they invade our privacy."

"I think more fledglings would benefit from a strong mentor. I have no problem with your students."

Ivor had been reluctant to let her tutor Cardoc students. He wouldn't even consider letting her interact with adolescents from other clans. It had only been after his death that her dream had been fully realized.

Either Antonio was telling her what she wanted to hear or their obstacles weren't as challenging as she'd thought.

"I'm willing to explore new roles," he told her, "as long as you don't shut me out." His hands clenched at his sides and grief blazed through his expression. "I will not lose you again."

Moved by his unexpected vulnerability, she closed the distance between them and pressed her hand to his cheek. His whiskers prickled her palm and his lips parted beneath her stoking thumb. "I need time and so do you. If we're going to spend eternity together it has to be more than sexual."

"But it can be sexual?" Mischief twinkled in his gaze, sweeping away his momentary sadness.

She smiled. "I want no other lover, but a soul bond has to wait until we're both ready."

A hint of disappointment overshadowed his merriment as he turned and kissed the center of her palm.

* * * * *

Time passed in a sensual blur. They abandoned themselves to physical pleasure at every opportunity yet carefully avoided the ultimate kiss that would bind their souls together. Antonio wanted nothing more, but Sera was right. Until she longed for the joining as badly as he did, they would have to make do with passion.

They spent time with her descendants and he introduced her to his friends. She was gracious and polite, but he felt as if she were holding herself back. Months had passed since the Bride Hunt and he was growing restless.

She waved goodbye to one of her students on a Friday night and turned to face Antonio. "She has an incredible gift if she can learn to control it."

He leaned his shoulder against the wall and studied her lovely face. "She's learning control from a master. I'm sure she'll do fine."

Her brow arched at the subtle sarcasm in his tone. "Why do I feel as if you've just insulted me?"

"I don't mean to be insulting, but I'm no longer convinced your strategy is in my best interest."

"What are you talking about?" She avoided his lounging figure by going into the living room.

"Time will solve nothing if we don't take active steps toward a lasting relationship."

That brought her back around, hands on her hips. "What have we been doing for the past six months?"

"Avoiding anything that resembled real communication. You've taken me on a tour of your life, but you haven't really let me in."

"You've spent almost every night in my bed. How much more 'in' do you need to be?"

He paused for a moment, refusing to succumb to frustration's lure. If he pushed too hard she'd likely shut down completely, yet patience hadn't accomplished a whole lot more. "What's bothering you, Sera? The Bride Hunt might be over, but you're still running from me."

"That's ridiculous."

"Is it? Look into my eyes and tell me nothing's wrong."

Her gaze collided with his, but she couldn't maintain his stare. "I didn't think seeing you again would drag up all these feelings, but I can't seem to find a balance anymore."

"All what feelings? There should be no subject we can't discuss."

"How can I make you understand what I don't understand myself?" She crossed to the high-backed chair and sat. The motion was more telling than she realized. She was isolated and protected in the oversized chair.

He remained in the archway, shoulder against the decorative molding. "It doesn't have to make sense to me and I sure as hell don't have to agree. Just give me the opportunity to share in what you're going through."

"I thought I was over my anger, my burning need for revenge." She sighed and brushed her hair out of her eyes. "It took years for me to come to terms with the life he forced upon me, but somehow I found peace."

"Are you talking about Ivor or Lorcan?"

"Lorcan. Hating him doesn't hurt anyone but me. I know that. But finding out what he did to you only makes me want to torture him before I kill him. And those feelings are unwelcome in my life. I don't want to waste my energy on hate, but every time I look at you all I can think about is making him pay."

He smiled, despite the conflict in her eyes. "That's not hard to understand at all. And it's certainly nothing we can't deal with."

"Are you planning something?"

"Lorcan's hold over the council is slipping. His refusal to allow his son to transform his mate was the final straw for several of the ancients. I could have killed him long ago, but it would have incited another clan war. I don't think either of us wants that. So I'm going to sit back and let Lorcan hang himself."

"And if he realizes his mistake at the last minute? He's been playing this game for a very long time."

"We can't be directly involved. Any action we take against Lorcan will be seen as a personal vendetta. He must be discredited once and for all."

"How very levelheaded of you."

"You sound disappointed."

She stood and moved slowly toward him. "I'm not disappointed. I know you're right, but part of me wants to feel his blood run through my fingers."

"These violent urges might dissipate if you would feed. I know it's considered unnecessary by modern thinkers, but I disagree. We are predators whether we admit the fact or not. We are meant to hunt and feed."

She shuddered. "I haven't fed directly from a donor...since Rome."

Shocked and confounded, he stared into her eyes for a long, tense moment. She hadn't accompanied him on a hunt in the six months they'd been together, but he had no idea it had been so long. "Why in the world would you deny yourself a fundamental need of every vampire?"

It took her a long time to answer. Her beautiful eyes filled with tears and her lips trembled. "When Lorcan made me sever our link, a part of me died. I knew I would never be whole again, so I avoided the things that most reminded me of you. It was the only way I could survive the pain."

She only stood two paces away, but he could sense the gaping chasm separating them. "That's all in the past now. You don't have to deny your nature any longer." He tried to touch her, to comfort her, but she turned away, retreating into her pseudo-humanity.

"During the first century I would have welcomed this chance. I would have been thrilled to recapture the wonder, but so much has changed." She blinked back the tears and straightened her shoulders. "I'm comfortable with my life. I see no reason to reawaken all those feelings."

She was terrified of being hurt, of devastation, betrayal and loss. His heart ached as he realized the extent of the emotional scars. "Do you trust me?"

"You know I do."

"I know you do with some things." They stood at a crossroads. He couldn't reach her on the road she'd established for herself and she was afraid to return to the road they'd shared so long ago. "You've touched my soul, shared my thoughts and feelings. You know me better than any person on this earth. I need you to trust me unconditionally."

"If you promise not to bite me, I'll trust you implicitly."

He shook his head and pushed off the wall. "That's not good enough. You either trust me or you don't. Period."

"And if I'm not sure?"

"Take as much time as you need. You know where to find me."

Chapter Five

Serafina paced her bedroom anxious and unsure. She'd asked Antonio for time and he'd given her six months of pressure-free companionship. Now he asked for trust and her being rebelled. Antonio had never done anything to deserve her mistrust. She liked to believe Lorcan's treachery hadn't had any lasting effect on her life, but apparently the wounds went deeper than she realized.

Antonio's image appeared in her mind, dark, smoldering and intense. He wasn't ashamed of what he was. He embraced his true nature and reveled in the pleasures only available to vampires. Had she ever been that free?

Unconditional trust. It was a concept that terrified her. She sighed and moved to the wide window, staring out into the night. There had been a time when she gave her heart freely and trusted without reservation.

He never disappointed you. He never betrayed your trust.

Her heart swelled with tenderness and longing. She needed to do this, for herself as much as Antonio. They would never be free of Lorcan's taint until she stopped denying what she was. She shivered, intimidated by the scope of what she contemplated.

Antonio knew she wasn't ready for a permanent bond, and he'd promised never to force her. She either trusted him or she didn't.

Closing her eyes, she searched her mind for the fragmented connection, the precious strand that had once linked her soul to his. Could he sense her thoughts even if he wasn't listening for them? He had found her on the metaphysical plane. Could she find him?

I trust you, Antonio. Unconditionally.

His energy swirled around her and flowed through her, dispersing her physical form. Even having experienced the phenomenon once before it shattered her

composure. He wrapped around her, contained and sheltered her. The momentary panic ebbed, leaving her safe, if a bit shaken.

They sped through the night, existing beyond specific thought or feeling. She let him take her where he would, unafraid and excited. Time passed, but she had no way of gauging how much. The acceleration slowed and sensations returned as her corporeal body materialized.

Her bare feet pressed against cool stone. Darkness engulfed her, velvety yet absolute. A slight pressure across her eyes prevented her lids from opening. Another, more pronounced pressure closed around her wrists and her arms were drawn above her head.

Uncertainty tightened within her, eroding her newfound confidence. Why had he restrained her? Was this the first test of her trust?

“Antonio?”

“I am here, my love.” He spoke Italian, a gentle reminder of all they had shared.

His movement sent currents of air wafting across her bare skin. Far too much bare skin! Was she naked as well as bound?

Pausing for a long, deep breath, she focused her chaotic thoughts. Her lover had responded to her call. Antonio would never hurt her. “Where are we?”

“We’re together. That’s all that matters. Isn’t it?”

“Yes. That’s all that matters.” She would not be afraid. She would demonstrate her trust and surrender herself entirely to his keeping.

“We rely on our sight far too often. I want you to explore your other senses tonight.”

“All right.”

His lips brushed against hers, a gentle press of flesh against flesh. Her skin tingled, anticipating a touch that never came. He wasn’t even kissing her, really, just caressing

her lips with his. She concentrated on the featherlight sensation, enjoying the contact for what it was.

Long moments passed as he enjoyed the softness of her lips. Then he traced her mouth with the tip of his tongue. "Open for me, angel."

She tilted her head and he took the kiss deeper. His hands had yet to make contact with her skin. She swayed toward him, needing an anchor in the darkness. His taste was familiar, an intoxicating mixture of cinnamon and something uniquely his. Their tongues slid over and curled around each other.

"You are so beautiful," he breathed the words against her parted lips and his fingers combed through her hair. The sensual pull was interrupted by the blindfold, but he didn't remove it. He skipped over the barrier and continued downward to the end of her hair.

Despite the solid floor beneath her feet, she felt as if she were floating. His hands skimmed down her sides, brushing the outer swell of her breasts. She savored the warmth of his fingers and the heavy ache of anticipation.

His fingers followed the contours of her body, dipping in at her waist and flaring across her hips. He sneaked back to squeeze her bottom before continuing the languid descent. She could feel his breath against her belly, so he must be on his knees.

Her nipples tingled then the sensation dove through her abdomen and lodged between her thighs. She couldn't touch him, couldn't see him, all she could do was feel. Her fingers folded into tight fists, her nails pressing into her palms.

He stroked her thighs and caressed her knees, moving down one side and up the other. Her belly tensed as his fingers drew closer and closer to her sex. He eased his hand between her thighs. His fingers rubbed against her folds without delving between. She pressed her lips together, fighting back a moan.

One of his hands remained between her legs while the other aroused her nipples. He pressed and rolled the tight buds until the pressure was almost painful. The hand

between her thighs slid back and forth, one of his fingers insinuating itself into her feminine crease.

"You are so fucking wet." His guttural cry was muffled against her tummy. His fingers pushed into her core, swirling gently to collect her essence. Then he lubricated her crease so he could glide from clit to anus. Over and over he slid, focusing a bit more on her back passage with each rotation. He teased a path from her ultrasensitive bud to the naughty pucker awaiting his possession.

His fingers finally settled against the tight opening and pushed. Her sphincter spread and she gasped, the small invasion making her acutely aware of her empty pussy. She felt restless and anxious. She needed his power to consume her inhibitions and drive away the lingering fragments of her fear.

"I saved myself for you," she whispered the confession, unsure if he would believe her. "You were my first before and I wanted you to be my first again."

His throaty growl sent shivers down her spine. He pressed his face against the juncture of her thighs, his breath teasing her damp folds. "Then learn the rhythm. Find pleasure in my caress."

Driving his finger deeper, he waited for her to relax then flicked his tongue over her clit. A searing pulsation erupted beneath his tongue. She only had time to register the feeling before he drew his finger out, pulling the pleasure through her body. He thrust in fast, pushing it back toward his mouth.

"Oh!" She rocked gently, accepting each new sensation with a sense of wonder.

His mouth grew more aggressive as one finger became two. Tiny bursts of light illuminated the darkness. He thrust faster and deeper, paring each motion with a flick of his tongue. Her orgasm broke in rhythmic waves, tightening her body around his fingers. He pulled out slowly, prolonging her climax with his final stroke.

"Answer me honestly. Do you want me to fuck your ass?"

Heat suffused her face as she heard the question. Was she brave enough to say the words out loud? "I want everything with you. I want you to fuck my ass."

He picked her up and wrapped her legs around his waist, kissing her deeply. She explored the moist heat of his mouth, knowing her arousal had left the faintly salty taste. His hands stroked up and down her back, squeezing her bottom, while his tongue moved in her mouth.

"I will deny you nothing. Never hesitate to tell me your desires." He slid her down along his body then moved behind her. He cupped her breasts for a moment, rubbing his thumbs across their pebbled tips. "Your body is a wonder to me. So perfect. So responsive." With one hand still stroking her breast, he covered her mound with the other.

Working in tandem, his fingers rolled her nipples and stimulated her clit until she was squirming and breathless all over again. A fresh rush of arousal blossomed inside her. She pressed back into his groin, rubbing her bottom against his erection. He always filled her feminine core to capacity. How much more intense would it feel to have him stretching her other passage?

His hands left her for a moment then he gently pulled her ass cheeks apart and meticulously lubricated her opening. He slid his fingers in and out, arousing her senses while he prepared her body. She swayed in her bonds, undeniably excited by her helplessness.

"Step back onto my boots. I need a better angle."

She hadn't realized he was still dressed, or at least partly dressed. His chest had been bare against her breasts. She moved her feet on top of his as uncertainty spiraled through her. Did she really want to do this in restraints?

The blunt head of his cock pressed against her, warm and slippery. He grasped her hips and tilted them upward, aligning her body with his. "Push back against me. It will go much easier if you help me."

Her imagination provided a graphic image of his strong, hard body poised to impale her virgin flesh. Emboldened by the secret thrill that accompanied the image, she pushed back and forced herself to relax.

Wider and wider her body stretched around his engorged cock. She gritted her teeth and trembled. Pressure gave way to pain and she cried out sharply. The sensation hovered for a moment, the exquisite pressure too enjoyable to be termed true pain. Her stubborn muscles released and he slid in and in and in, filling her to capacity and beyond. The burning sting gave way to smoldering heat, fueling her restlessness.

He petted her pubic curls and stroked her sopping pussy, swirling his fingertips inside her empty gate. Her pussy clenched in on itself, accenting how much of him was inside her. His fingers moved to her clit and he slowly drew his hips back.

Savage hunger exploded through her mind. His thick flesh created rippling heat as it slid along her inner muscles. He drove inward and used his fingers to keep the sensations building. She tossed her head, fighting back the urge to snarl and struggle.

“Let go,” he coaxed. “I want you *wild*.”

She bared her fangs and twisted her hips, not wanting to dislodge him, but needing to know he was strong enough to control her. His hands grasped her hips and he drove his full length into her ass. She rocked the chains and arched her back, screaming in ecstasy. He increased his speed, claiming her with ferocious passion.

His cock slammed into her over and over. He used her clit just as ruthlessly. She came hard and fast, and still he fucked her, pushing her toward a higher peak. Her breasts jostled with each forceful lunge. Her nipples pulsed in time with her clit. He launched the pleasure with his fingers and elongated each pulse with his cock.

Perspiration dotted her upper lip and trickled into the valley between her breasts. He snarled behind her and thrust hard enough to lift her off her feet. His hot seed burst within her, the distinct jets triggering her final peak.

He wrapped his arms around her and groaned. Her head sagged forward as she struggled to catch her breath. For a long time he just held her, his cock still buried deep. Then he cupped her breast and moved her hair so he could scrape his fangs over the back of her neck.

“You are amazing,” he whispered in her ear.

"Can I please see you now?"

"Do you really want me to pull out?"

"No, but I'm pretty sure it has to happen sooner or later."

With obvious reluctance, he separated their bodies and moved in front of her. He lifted the blindfold and kissed the tip of her nose. "I suppose you've earned a reward."

Her gaze caressed his handsome face before curiosity got the better of her and she looked beyond him. Gray stone and exposed timbers, the round room was either medieval or a faithful recreation of that time period. Torches burned in iron sconces set into the soot-covered walls.

"It's...cozy."

His dark blue eyes shone with desire and tenderness. "It suits my mood way too often."

She hadn't asked to be released, but he unfastened the fur-lined cuffs and lifted her into his arms. He was shirtless, as she'd deduced, but somewhere along the line he'd refastened his solid black pants. "All you need is a jewel-encrusted sword and a massive black charger."

He chuckled. "It's been years since I owned horses, but I'll let you play with my sword again as soon as we clean up."

He carried her down a spiral staircase, his steps sure and purposeful. She snuggled against his chest, content just to be in his arms. The stairs opened onto a long corridor, which was warmed by a plush carpet runner. Electric lights provided illumination and gilt-framed paintings adorned the walls.

"You've accumulated quite a collection over the years." She indicated the somber Rembrandt mounted next to a whimsical Van Gogh.

"I suppose I have."

"Am I allowed to know where we are? I know it's an irrelevant detail, but it will bug me until you confess."

He smiled. "This house and everything in it is an example of a 'bounty'."

"The council pays you in property?"

His steps slowed as he explained, "They award me confiscated property from those who have forfeited the right to their worldly possessions. Generally the very same individuals who I deliver to the august council."

"Is 'delivering' people to the council the only service you provide?"

"No one is terminated without a trial, so I am only dispatched to kill if the person manages to escape after sentencing. That has only happened four times in the past five hundred years."

"I see." She was quiet for a moment then said, "That didn't really answer my question. I asked our location."

"About fifty kilometers from York. We're in merry old England." His steps resumed at an even pace.

"You've allowed technology to taint your bounty, I see." She pointed to a light fixture. "Dare I hope you have running water as well as electricity?"

He laughed and pushed open one of the doors with the toe of his boot. "I don't know of anyone who considers indoor plumbing a taint." He crossed a spacious bedroom and entered the adjoining bathroom.

Much to Sera's pleasure there was a dual-headed shower next to the large sunken tub. "Wow. This is unexpected."

"Actually, it's more in keeping with the rest of the house. The tower room is my secret pleasure, a surreal haven out of time." He set her down beside the shower and turned on the water. "How do you feel? I have an ointment that will ease the sting if you're sore."

"I'm a vampire, just like you. Stop coddling me."

"I enjoy coddling you."

Antonio took a moment to collect his thoughts as he undressed. His heart had nearly leapt right out of his chest when he heard her voice inside his head. He'd been circling her house, letting the night wind soothe him when she called out. Their soul bond might be severed, but the path was imprinted on both their minds. She found the strand with remarkable ease, making him wonder if it was the first time she'd accessed her end of the connection. But why would she have revisited the soul strand if she was as content in her life as she professed?

Encouraged by the mystery, he turned toward the shower. She stood with her back to the spray, neck arched as she rinsed shampoo from her hair. Her hands slid over her gleaming flesh, pushing the suds downward. She skimmed the outside of her breasts and angled across her belly. Transfixed by the sensual beauty of his mate, he paused with his fingers on door handle.

"You literally take my breath away."

She smiled at his softly spoken praise but didn't open her eyes. "Are you coming in? I'm getting restless."

"Well, we can't have that." He pulled the door open and stepped into the enclosure. "Would you like me to wash your back?"

"I'd like you to *lick* my back, but not until you're squeaky clean."

He reached for the soap, determined to dispatch the task in record time. She followed in his wake, her bold caresses counterproductive to his goal. "I'd intended on driving you crazy for hours before I fucked you in the tower." With a playful growl, he pushed her hand away from his rapidly hardening cock. "I will not let you provoke me again." In truth, her unexpected aggression had thrilled him to no end. It was the first glimpse of her true nature he'd seen since Rome.

After rinsing the lather from his skin, he turned off the water and stepped out of the shower. He wrapped a towel around his hips and stalked toward her with another. "Hold your arms out to the side."

"I can dry myself off."

"Do as I say or you'll go back into restraints."

One corner of her mouth quirked. "That's not much of a threat."

He started with her hair, squeezing the silky strands in his towel-covered fist. "I'll chain you in the tower and leave you for an hour or two."

"Better, but what about that?" She touched the tip of his erection with her index finger.

"I've been without you so long, I've almost gotten used to it." He dried her arms and back, unsure he could trust himself with more intimate areas.

With a sensual smile, she took the towel from his hands. "You're not very good at this."

"I've always been better at making things wet."

Her brow arched and she finished drying herself. "That sounds downright arrogant."

"Why don't you put my boast to the test?" He loosened the towel from around his hips and used it to dry his chest. "If I can't make you wet in the next ten minutes, I'll let you chain me in the tower room and do whatever you want for the rest of the night."

Her gaze swept up and down his body then focused on his face. "The offer is extremely tempting. Unfortunately, it would be a foolish bet." She tossed her towel into his face and headed for the door. "I'm wet already," she whispered as she passed him.

Lust shot through his system as he batted her towel aside. His pulse sped and his cock grew even harder. He watched the flex and roll of her rounded ass as she strolled toward the bed. Her playful mood fascinated him. It wasn't often he saw her so lighthearted. But that would change. Once their future was solidified and their past put to rest, they would be able to fully enjoy the present.

She sat on the edge of the bed and patted the mattress beside her. He ignored the invitation and pulled her back to her feet. Her breasts pressed against his chest and she

raised her arms to encircle his neck. All the urgent passion in the world would never replace face-to-face intimacy.

He wrapped one arm around her waist, splaying his fingers against her ribs. Her skin was unusually warm. From the shower or her rising desire, he wasn't sure, but his fingers enjoyed the discovery. His other hand cupped the side of her face. She turned into the light caress and tenderness swelled within his heart.

Her gaze grew dark and dreamy as he traced her lips with his thumb. He eased inside, exploring the softness hidden on the back side of her lips. Her lashes drooped and her breathing sped. Still, he wouldn't be rushed. He combed his fingers through her damp hair and followed the elegant line of her spine.

Unsatisfied with their position, he scooped her up in his arms and sat down on the bed, holding her on his lap. His hand still pressed against the side of her face and his gaze searched hers before he moved in for a kiss.

Her lips were parted and waiting for the bold thrust of his tongue. Instead he licked and nibbled, never venturing between her waiting lips. She tasted so sweet. He inhaled her breath and traced her teeth. His tongue brushed over one of her fangs and caught on the sharp point.

She groaned low in her throat and slid her tongue over his. Her fingers moved into his hair, holding him still while she gently sucked on his tongue. Slow, aching need cascaded through his body. The wound had been an accident, but her reaction was telling.

"Do it again," she whispered, hardly separating their mouths.

The temptation to slice his tongue and fill her mouth with blood scorched his good intentions. He could turn her so she straddled his thighs and thrust up into her waiting cunt while he controlled her with his bite. Then she'd feed from his mouth while he claimed her body once and for all.

He hesitated a moment too long. She pulled away and covered her mouth with her hand, uncertainty rolling back in.

"I'm sorry," he muttered. "That wasn't intentional."

"My fangs must be distended or they wouldn't have cut you."

"Desire can do that to a vampire." He nipped her shoulder and kept his gaze averted. She needed to work through this on her own.

"So can hunger."

"Are you hungry?" He risked a glance into her eyes and found her staring off into nothingness as she traced her fangs with her tongue.

"I thought I was beyond these cravings."

"Passion stirs up bloodlust. Surely this isn't news to you."

"It's not. It's just been a long time since I felt passionately about anything."

He cupped her chin and guided her gaze back to his. "We're both famished. What should we do about it?"

Chapter Six

Antonio had thrown down the gauntlet with his casual question. He thought her restraint was pointless and wasn't afraid to say it to her face. She was a vampire. And it was high time she remembered what that meant. Sera fidgeted on his lap. The taste of his blood lingered in her mouth, beckoning and challenging her.

An image formed within her mind, tantalizing, potent. Him sprawled on his back and she crouched beside him, licking her way from his knees to his neck. Then she threw her leg over his hips and brought herself into position. He thrust into her pussy as she bit into his throat... She ran her hand across his chest and tangled her fingers in his hair.

"I'm going to feed from my mate while he fucks me senseless." His immediate response was a violent shiver. He reached for her waist, but she pushed him over backward and bent to his ear. "Will you behave, or should I rummage through your closet and find something with which to bind you?"

He swung his legs onto the bed and stretched his arms over his head. "Do your damndest – please!"

She smiled and slowly licked her lips. "You're supposed to resist at the beginning, make me feel like I've accomplished something."

"Sorry." His eyes narrowed to slits of blue fire and he sneered. "You can abuse my body, but you'll never touch my heart."

"I don't want your heart." She raked her nails down his thigh, leaving raised welts on the muscular surface. "I want your cock and your blood. Don't ever forget you're nothing but a meal to me."

She pushed his thighs apart and knelt between them, feeling wild and reckless in her role. This might be only a game, but her body didn't seem to mind. Neither did his,

for that matter. His cock lay against his abdomen like some ancient battering ram. Only she would do the ramming this time. She would play with his senses until he screamed in frustration then ride him hard until she was satisfied.

"Bend your arms and entwine your fingers behind your head. You will not move unless I tell you to."

"I understand." He shifted into the position she'd indicated then stared back at her in silent expectation. This was her game. He was waiting from her to make the next move.

She ran her hands up the inside of his thighs, watching his cock buck as she drew closer. "You're body is ready to please me, despite your feeble protests." His balls drew up against his body, almost as if they were trying to avoid her touch. She knew the opposite to be true. Still, the contradiction amused her. She brushed her fingers against his soft scrotum before continuing the featherlight trail along the underside of his shaft.

He was unable to conceal his moan as her fingers curved around his thickness. His hips rocked, pushing his length through the circle of her fingers. She captured the liquid beaded on the tip and spread it with her thumb.

"I wonder how it tastes," she mused out loud, letting her hot gaze wander at will.

His abdomen tensed and his thighs flexed. Was he anticipating the pleasure or dreading her cruelty? She licked her lips, knowing the sight of her fangs would both please and concern him. He'd encouraged her to feed. Let him wonder how she intended to reacquaint herself with blood sport.

Raising his cock as she lowered her head, she brought him to her mouth. Her tongue circled him, memorizing the texture and taste. His knees bent and his heels dug into the mattress, driving his hips upward. She ignored his urgent lunge and sucked just the very tip, her tongue swirling over and around him.

"Deeper!" It was part command and part plea.

She released him with an intentional pop and glared into his eyes. "I told you not to move."

"Serafina, you're killing me."

A staggering wave of lust rolled off him and drove the breath from her lungs. She gasped and shivered then stilled. She was always more aware of him than other people, but it had never felt quite like this.

"Why can I sense you so strongly?" She stroked him with her fingers, unwilling to separate completely.

"My blood," he reminded with a gentle smile.

She hesitated for a moment, her old misgivings rushing to the surface. His gaze bore into hers, alive with longing and tenderness, promising paradise if she would just trust him. The portion of her spirit she'd locked away pounded on the door, demanding freedom at last. She would be whole again, content and fulfilled, and all she had to do was open her heart to this man.

Swinging her legs over his, she carefully straddled his hips. She took his face between her hands and covered his mouth with her lips, sealing their joining with a passionate kiss. His tongue surged into her mouth and she intentionally nicked him, desperate for another taste of his blood. A muffled groan escaped him as she rubbed her tongue over his teeth and mingled her blood with his.

He sat up suddenly and tangled his fingers in her hair, kissing her even more deeply. Their tongues slid and stroked. He sucked on her lips and then her tongue. "Oh God, Serafina, it's been so long!"

"I want you inside me while we feed." She lifted up so he could oblige her. His cock surged in too slowly, so she bent her knees and impaled herself on his hardened flesh. His full length filled her and his hands grasped her bottom, sweeping her beneath him in one abrupt motion. She gasped then groaned as he immediately began to move.

He held himself above her, his arms tense, shoulders flexing as he rocked between her thighs. Electric awareness arced between them, fueled by their mingled blood. She felt him against her and inside her and all through her.

His lips parted in a sensual snarl, a vampire summoning his mate. Her fangs lengthened to razor-sharp points, preventing her from closing her lips. His gaze burned into hers, incandescent and savage. Heat washed across her eyes and along the bridge of her nose as her face rippled with full transformation.

She dug her fingernails into his back, feeling the flesh give beneath the pressure. He slammed into her over and over, his head tossing from side to side. His arms pushed beneath her, trapping her arms against her sides.

His mouth fastened on to her shoulder, the position arching his neck nearly over her mouth. He scraped his fangs against her skin, shooting darts of sensation deep into her chest. She watched his throbbing pulse, tracing its path along the side of his neck and into the hollow at the base of his throat. This was as essential to their kind as breath. Why had she denied herself for so long? His life force called to her, tempting her with his vibrant energy.

He was waiting for her to take the final step and end their vampiric celibacy. If it gave him access to her mind, so be it. If it bound their souls together, it was obviously meant to be. She reared up against him and bit down hard. His arms tightened around her and he returned her kiss, sinking his fangs deep into her shoulder.

Reality narrowed and slowed. Their surroundings fell away, leaving them suspended in velvet tranquil. There was no sound but the beating of their hearts. She saturated her ravenous being with his potent energy. He drank just as deeply, knowing she replaced what he took and more.

She wrapped her legs around his waist as he clasped her to his chest. His cock throbbed within her, taking on the rhythm of their hearts. Unified. Synchronized. Perfect. She was humbled by the beauty of their joining.

The slow, caressing slide of his cock deep inside her drew her back to reality. She unhooked her ankles and pulled her legs up high against his sides. He released her shoulder, but she couldn't bring herself to separate from him. She stopped feeding and just enjoyed the warm embrace of his flesh.

His hands slipped under her bottom, holding her snug as his tempo increased. The swirling pleasure released her mind from the lingering muddle. He shifted to his knees, driving deeper, each thrust more demanding. She finally withdrew her fangs, afraid his forceful motions would tear his skin.

Staring deep into his eyes, she opened her mind to his gentle probing. *Flow through me.* He accented the invitation with a smile. His being pushed into her mind and her body bowed with a sharp, sudden climax. The firm contractions shattered his control and he raised her hips clear off the bed, shuddering violently as he pumped his seed into her.

"That wasn't exactly what I had planned," he whispered, aftershocks making his abdomen tense.

"I'm certainly not complaining." She pulled his face down to hers for a lingering kiss.

He rolled to his side, taking her with him, his breathing still harsh. He brushed her hair back from her damp face and kissed the tip of her nose. "Can you still feel me inside you?"

"You're a little hard to miss." She tightened her inner muscles with a playful smile.

"That's not what I mean, though you're welcome to keep doing that. I wasn't sure I could maintain control, but I'm pretty sure I did."

"What are you talking about? You're coming through loud and clear."

"But the connection is different, more like an intimate blood bond. Our souls have access to each other, but they're not actually bound."

She shook away the lassitude and scanned her mind. "Why did you...hold back?"

"Don't sound disappointed or I'll make it permanent right now. I did this for you. I want you to be absolutely certain before we bind our souls."

Torn between relief and disappointment, words escaped her entirely. He'd loved her enough to wait more than six hundred years and now he was waiting again. She

used their newly formed connection to show him her heart, all the love welling within her, all the tenderness and gratitude.

He caught her tears on the tips of his fingers. "Don't cry. I thought this would make you happy, make you more comfortable with being my mate."

She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him with her whole being. "I will never be more comfortable than I am right now, and I will always be your mate."

About the Author

Aubrey Ross writes an eclectic assortment of erotic fiction. From power struggles between futuristic clans to adventurous mystic guardians, her stories are filled with passion and imagination. Some of her recent awards include an EPPIE finalist, two Passionate Plume finalists, and a CAPA nomination from the Romance Studio.

With a pampered cat curled on the corner of her desk, Aubrey dreams up fascinating words and larger than life adventures – and wouldn't have it any other way!

Aubrey welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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